

# MAHABHARATA



KRISHNA ON  
THE SWING  
British Museum,  
London

The *Mahabharata* (mə hä' bā' rə tə) is the world's longest epic. Although it was compiled sometime between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200, Indian storytellers who know it by heart still entertain and instruct their village audiences with recitations from this epic poem.

## The Rights to a Kingdom

The myths and tales of the *Mahabharata* are woven into the fabric of its main story: the account of a fight over the rights to a kingdom. Two branches of a family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, are involved in this dispute.

## The Pandavas and the Kauravas

On one side are the Pandavas, five brothers who were brought up by King Pandu. However, the Pandava boys were really fathered by various Hindu gods and are therefore semi-divine themselves.

These five brothers are all married to the same woman, Draupadi—a situation that came about in an unusual way. In ancient India young princes often competed in a contest to win the hand of an eligible princess. Such a contest was held for the princess Draupadi. One of the Pandavas won the right to marry her by defeating his

brothers and the other contestants in sports like wrestling and archery. When the brothers returned home, they proudly announced to their mother that one of them had been victorious. Their mother was distracted at the time and, without looking up to see what the prize was, she told them to share it equally among themselves. Since no virtuous Indian son can refuse to obey his mother, they did what she said and Draupadi became the wife of all five brothers.

The opponents of the Pandavas are the Kauravas, who are the ninety-nine sons of King Pandu's blind brother. (Pandus brother should have been king, but he was blind and therefore disqualified for kingship, according to ancient Indian traditions.) They are led by the eldest brother, Duryodhana, whose name means "Mr. Dirty Fighter." He challenges the eldest of the Pandavas to a gambling match and uses rigged dice to defeat him. The Pandavas lose everything in this dice game, even their own freedom. Duryodhana gives them back their freedom, but he keeps the kingdom and banishes the five Pandavas to the forest.

## Banishment

The banishment or exile of honest rulers by villains is a common theme in world literature. Often the place of banishment, where the hero or heroes must dwell for a time, is uncivilized and primitive but also magical. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (see page 709), this place is an enchanted island. The forest in the *Mahabharata* has a similar magic and mystery. While the Pandavas live there, they meet various characters who tell them instructive and entertaining stories. Sometimes these stories mirror and comment on the plight of the Pandavas. They learn from these tales how to conduct their lives in exile. The theme of such stories, like "Sibi" on the following pages, is that unrighteous behavior leads one astray while righteous behavior will eventually be rewarded.

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## Mahabharata

### Commentary

**The Hindu Concept of Dharma.** In the Hindu tradition, the duties of each individual were determined by the caste, or group, into which he or she was born. As members of the priestly caste, for example, Brahmans were expected to conduct the ritual sacrifices and set a standard of correct behavior. The code of duty also determined one's behavior as a son or daughter, husband or wife. **Dharma**, a Sanskrit term, referred both to the sum of a person's obligations and to the moral law that governed the world. To perform one's duty, no matter how humble, was to contribute to the well-being of the whole universe.

A major obligation for all Hindus was keeping one's word. Once you promised to do something, for instance, you had to stand by that promise even if circumstances changed. If someone failed to keep a pledge, the person who was wronged might sit in the street outside the offender's house and demand justice. This type of nonviolent protest was especially effective when humble people were lied to by the rich and powerful.

Remember these Indian notions of duty as you evaluate the actions of Sibi in the following story. He is above all a man of his word. Although keeping his promise has dire consequences, he knows that breaking his word will lead to an even more terrible punishment when his soul is reborn.

### Writing

Is it ever acceptable to break one's word? Don't answer this question immediately, but take a moment to think of its implications. In responding to this question, cite examples to support your arguments.

### Primary Source

R. K. Narayan describes the typical village storyteller, who knows "by heart all the . . . 100,000 stanzas of the *Mahabharata*," beginning an evening session: ". . . the storyteller will dress himself for the part by smearing sacred ash on his forehead and wrapping himself in a green shawl, while his helpers set up a framed picture of some god on a pedestal in the veranda, decorate it with jasmine garlands, and light incense to it. After these preparations, when the storyteller enters to seat himself in front of the lamps, he looks imperious and in complete control of the situation. He begins the session with a prayer, prolonging it until the others join and the valleys echo with the chants, drowning the cry of jackals."

# from the Mahabharata

## Sibi

adapted by R. K. Narayan

There is a half-moon in the sky today which will disappear shortly after midnight, said the storyteller. I'll select a tale which will end before the moon sets, so that you may all go home when there is still a little light.

The tale concerns a king and two birds. The king was Sibi, who had just performed a holy sacrifice on the banks of the Jumna.<sup>1</sup> The guests were resting in the tree shade after partaking of a feast. The air was charged with the scent of flowers and incense. Sibi went round to make sure that everyone was comfortable. A cool breeze blew from the south, patches of clouds mitigated the severity of the sun in the blue sky, the embers of the holy fire subsided into a soft glow under the ash.

The king, satisfied that all his guests were happy, dismissed his attendants and proceeded to his own corner of the camp to rest under a canopy. He had closed his eyes, half in sleep and half in prayer, when he felt a gust of air hitting him in the face and some object suddenly dropping on his lap. He awoke and noticed a dove, white and soft, nestling in his lap. Its feathers were ruffled in terror and its eyes were shut. It looked so limp that he thought it was dead, but then he noticed a slight flutter of breath. He sat still in order not to frighten away the bird, and looked about for a servant.

Just then a hawk whirled down in pursuit, and perched itself on a low branch of the tree beside

1. **Jumna** (jum' nɑ): A river in northern India, flowing from the Himalayas southwest into the Ganges.

the canopy. The hawk exclaimed, "Ah, at last! What a game of hide and seek!"

"What do you want?" asked the king.

"I am addressing myself to that creature on your lap! Never been so much tricked in my life! If every mouthful of food has to be got after such a trial, a nice outlook indeed for the so-called king of birds! As one king to another, let me tell you, the dove nestling in your lap is mine. Throw it back to me."

The king thought over the statement of the hawk and said, "I am indeed honored by a visit from the king of birds, although I had thought till now that the eagle was the king!"

"I am a hawk, not a kite.<sup>2</sup> Know you that the hawk belongs to the kingly race while the kite is a mere caricature of our family, pursuing a career of deception by seeming no bigger than its victim and then attacking it. How often one mistakes a kite for a dove!"

Sibi wanted to divert the attention of the hawk from the subject of the dove and so said, "The kite also goes out of sight when it flies, so don't be offended if we land-bound creatures imagine that the kite floats in the same heaven as the hawk."

The hawk sharpened his beak on the tree-trunk and lifted one leg to display his talons and

2. **kite**: Any of various birds, including the hawk, that prey on insects, reptiles, and small mammals. The hawk is haughtily distinguishing himself from his smaller, less significant cousins.

said, "I'm sorry to see the mistakes you human beings make. The kite no doubt flies—but not beyond the back of the lowest cloud. And you think that it sports in the heavens itself! The only common element between us is that we both have pointed, curved beaks, that's all; but the kite has a taste for helpless little creatures such as mice and sparrows—creatures which we would not care to notice."

The king realized that the subject was once more drifting towards food and diverted the hawk's attention again by saying, "The general notion is that the eagle is the king of birds."

The hawk chuckled cynically. "Ignorant mankind! How the eagle came to be so much respected, I shall never understand; what is there to commend the eagle? Its wingspread? You people are too easily carried away by appearances! Do you know that the hawk can fly just as high as the eagle? And yet you have no regard for us!"

Sibi said, "You can't blame us, we take things as they seem from here! I now know better."

The hawk looked pleased at this concession and said, "Have you ever seen a mountain eagle walk on the ground? Is there anything more grotesque? Don't you agree that the first requirement for kingliness would be grace of movement? Only we hawks have it."

"True, true," said the king. "When I move from my bed to the bathroom, even if alone at night, I catch myself strutting along as in a parade, I suppose!" The king laughed, to entertain the hawk; he thought it might please the bird to be treated as a fellow king. The hawk looked pleased, and the king hoped that it would take itself off after these pleasantries.

The dove slightly stirred on his lap, and he hastened to draw over it his silk scarf. The hawk noticed this and bluntly said, "King, what is the use of your covering the dove? I will not forget that my food, which I have earned by honest chase, is there, unfairly held by you."

The king said, "This bird has come to me for asylum; it is my duty to protect it."

"I may brave your sword and swoop on my prey, and if I die in the attempt the spirits of my ancestors will bless me. We have known no fear for one thousand generations, what should we fear

when the back of our prime ancestor serves as the vehicle of the great god Vishnu?"<sup>3</sup>

Again the king was on the point of correcting him, that it was a golden eagle that Vishnu rode, not a hawk, but he checked himself.

The bird emphasized his own status again. "You who are reputed to be wise, O king, don't confuse me with the carrion birds wheeling over your head. I know where I stand," said the bird, preening its feathers.

The king felt it was time to say something agreeable himself, secretly worrying that he was

3. **Vishnu** (vish' nōv): The Hindu god known as the Preserver, because he became a human being on nine separate occasions to save humanity from destruction.

A HAWK, FROM AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY A.D. INDIAN PAINTING  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London



reaching the limits of his wit. The dove nestled within the silk scarf. There was an uneasy pause while the king dreaded what might be coming next.

The hawk suddenly said, "All the world speaks of you as one who has the finest discrimination between right and wrong. And so you have a serious responsibility at this moment. You must not do anything that goes contrary to your reputation. Remember, I am in the agonies of hunger, and you refuse me my legitimate diet. By your act you cause me suffering, you injure me every second that you keep your hold on that parcel of meat. You have attained immeasurable spiritual merit by your deeds of perfection; now this single selfish act of yours will drain away all your merit and you will probably go to hell."

"O infinitely wise bird, does it seem to you that I am holding this dove out of selfishness so that I may eat it myself?"

"I am not so simple-minded," said the bird haughtily. "By selfish I meant that you were thinking of your own feelings, totally ignoring my viewpoint."

"When I recollect the terror in its eye as it fell on my lap, I feel nothing ever matters except affording it protection."

"O prince among princes, food is life, out of food all things exist and stir. Between life and death stands what? Food! I am faint with hunger. If you deny me my food any longer I may die. In a cranny of yonder rock my wife has hatched four eggs, the little ones are guarded by their mother, and all of them await my return home. If I die here of hunger, they will keep peeping out for my return home until they perish of the same hunger. And the sin of ending six lives will be on you. O maharaja,<sup>4</sup> consider well whether you want to save one doubtful life, which is probably half gone already, or six lives. Let not the performance of what seems to you a rightful act conflict with bigger issues. You know all this, king, but choose to ignore the issues. And all this talking only fatigues me and takes me nearer to death. So please spare me further argument."

Sibi said, "I notice that you are an extraordinary bird. You talk wisely, knowledgeably; there is

4. maharaja (mā' hō rā' jō): King.

nothing that you do not know. Your mind journeys with ease at subtle heights of thought. But, bird, tell me, how is it that you fail to notice the sheer duty I owe a creature that cries for protection? As a king is it not my duty?"

"I am only asking for food; food is to life what oil is to a lamp."

"Very well. You see all these people lying around, they have all rested after a feast in which nothing was lacking to satisfy the sixfold demands of the palate. Tell me what you want, and I will spread a feast before you in no time."

"King, the nature of food differs with different creatures. What you call a feast seems to me just so much trash. We observe from our heights all the activity that goes on in your royal kitchen and ever wonder why you take all that trouble with spice, salt, and fire to ruin the taste of God-given stuff. King, I do not want to speak at length. I am famished and I feel my eyes dimming. Have consideration for me too."

"If it is flesh you want, I will ask them to get it for you."

The hawk gave an ironical laugh at this. "See where all this leads you! How are you going to get flesh without killing something else? When you interfere with what God has ordained, you complicate everything."

"What is God's plan, actually? Please enlighten me."

"The dove is intended for me; God has no other purpose in creating it and letting it multiply so profusely. Are you not aware of the ancient saying that hawks eat doves?"

The king thought it over and said, "If you spare this dove, I'll guarantee you food every day in my palace all your life."

"I have already told you, my lord, that your food is inedible. Your assurance of daily feeding does not appeal to me. I hunt for food when I want it. I do not see why I should bother about tomorrow. Hoarding for generations ahead is a human failing, a practice unknown to us. I repeat the ancient saying that hawks eat doves."

The king brooded over the words of the hawk for a moment. "Ask for anything, except this little bird on my lap. I won't give it up, whichever way you may argue."



KING SIBI'S SACRIFICE TO THE GOD INDRA  
c. Second century  
British Museum, London

The hawk tilted its head, rolled its eyes, and said, "So be it. I will ask for the next best thing. I want warm flesh, with warm blood dripping, equal in weight to the dove. We are used to eating only fresh meat, we are not carrion<sup>5</sup> birds, let me remind you. You will have to cut it out of your own body, as I know you will not choose to kill another creature for it."

The king brooded over this. "Yes, but I must consider which part of my body will yield the flesh you want without destroying my life. Give me a little time. Bear your hunger for a moment." And he added, "A ruler has no liberty to die. Many depend on him."

"In the same way as my family," said the hawk. The king beckoned to an attendant. "Bring a pair of weighing scales."

The attendant was nonplussed. "Your Majesty, how can we find one here, in this remote place?"

The king repeated, "I want a pair of scales for accurate weighing."

"May I send a messenger to fetch one from the city?"

5. carrion (kar' ē ən) *adj.*: Feeding on the dead.

"How long will he take?" asked the king.

The courtier made a swift reckoning and declared, "If he rides a galloping horse, he should be back tomorrow at dawn."

The king looked at the hawk, who already seemed to droop. He did not want to hear again about his family on the mountain. It was also time to clear up all this situation and feed the refugee on his lap. He said to the courtier, "Construct a balance immediately with whatever is available here. I'll give you ten minutes!"

"Whoever fails will have his head cut off, I suppose?" sneered the hawk. "That would be truly kinglike, but let me tell you straight away that I am not interested in a cut-off head."

"You shall have my flesh and nothing less," said the king.

They bustled about. By now the whole camp was astir, watching this incredible duel between the king and the hawk. They managed to dangle a beam from the branch of a tree. Suspended from either end was a plate from the kitchen; a pointer, also improvised, marked the dead centre of the beam.

The king looked at the hawk and said, "This is the best we can manage."

"I understand. A little fluctuation should not matter in the least. Only I do not want you to lose more flesh than is necessary to balance the dove."

The king did not let the bird finish his sentence, but rose, bearing the dove in his hand. He walked up to the crude scales in order to test them. He addressed the hawk, "Will you step nearer?"

"I can watch quite well from here. Also I can trust you."

The king placed the dove on the right-hand side of the scale pan, which immediately went down, making the king wonder how a little bird which had lain so lightly on his lap could weigh down the balance in this manner.

He wasted no further time in speculation. He sat on the ground, stretched out his leg, and after a brief prayer, incised his thigh with a sharp knife. The courtiers and guests assembled groaned at the sight of the blood. The king gritted his teeth and tore out a handful of flesh and dropped it on the scale.

The pan became bloodstained but the pointer did not move. Someone cursed the dove, "It has the weight of an abandoned corpse. It looks dead, see if it is dead."

Another added, "Just pick it up and fling it to that hawk and be done with it, the miserable creature."

The king was too faint to talk; he gestured to them to stop commenting. He had now only the skin on his right thigh. Still the scales were unbalanced. The king went on to scoop the flesh from his other leg; the pointer was still down.

People averted their eyes from the gory spectacle. The hawk watched him critically.

"O hawk, take all that meat and begone!" they said.

"I have been promised the exact equal weight of the dove," insisted the hawk, at which all those assembled cursed the hawk and drew their swords. The king was faint with pain now, but mustered

the last ounce of his strength to command his followers to keep away.

He beckoned to his chief minister to come nearer. "One has no right to end one's life, but this is unforeseen. Even if this means hell to me, I have to face it," he said. Everyone looked at the dove with distaste. "My brother shall be the regent<sup>6</sup> till the prince comes of age."

With this he struggled onto his feet and stepped on the flesh-filled pan. At once the other pan went up and equalized.

The hawk now flitted nearer and said, "This is more than a mouthful for me and my family. How am I to carry you to the mountain?"

The king mumbled feebly, "I did not think of that problem," and added, "You wouldn't have been able to lift the dove either! So bring your family here."

The hawk flapped its wings and rose in the air and swooped down as if to peck at the king's flesh. People shut their eyes, unable to bear the spectacle. But presently they heard divine instruments filling the skies with music. The hawk was gone, but in its place they found Indra,<sup>7</sup> the god with the dazzling crown, armed with the diamond spear, seizing Sibi's hand and helping him down off the weighing scales. A flame rose where the dove had lain, and from the heart of it emerged the God of Fire.

They said, "O king, we put you to a severe test. We challenged your integrity; and we happily accept defeat. You are indeed blessed, and as long as human beings recollect your tale, they will partake of the spiritual merit that you have yourself acquired"—and vanished. The king recovered his energy in a moment, while the pieces of flesh in the scale pan turned to fragrant flowers.

6. **regent** (rē' jənt) *n.*: A person appointed to rule when the king is too young to rule himself.  
7. **Indra** (in' drə): The chief god of the early Hindu religion, often depicted wielding a thunderbolt.

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**Reader's Response** Was Sibi foolish to keep his promise to the dove regardless of the consequences? Why or why not?

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## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Interpreting

1. In this story it is clear that Sibi is the hero. Is there a villain? Explain.
2. Each of the two main characters in the story has a duty. How do these duties conflict?
3. (a) What is the first strategy that Sibi adopts to resolve the situation? (b) What does this strategy reveal about Sibi's attitude toward the painful sacrifice he later undertakes?
4. Does the help of the god Indra at the end of the story diminish Sibi's achievement? Why or why not?

### Applying

5. (a) What are the attitudes of our society toward keeping one's word? (b) Compare and contrast these with Indian attitudes.
6. The British writer Christopher Marlowe wrote, "Honor is purchased by the deeds we do." Explain how this statement relates to Sibi.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding the Hindu Concept of Dharma

**Dharma** is a Sanskrit term referring to the duties and obligations unique to each person. In the traditional Indian setting, the king was the ultimate protector. Since the king swore to defend all his subjects, an injury to any one of them was a challenge to his integrity. Sibi must therefore fulfill his duty as a king by protecting the dove.

1. Suppose Sibi argued that he could best fulfill his obligations as an Indian king by thinking of the interests of his other subjects and refusing to sacrifice himself for the dove. In your opinion would he be justified? Explain.
2. (a) Describe a recent situation in which a local or national leader has, like Sibi, faced conflicting demands. (b) How did the official resolve the dilemma? (c) Do you agree with his or her solution? Why or why not?
3. In the United States, we do not have kings. How does the United States as an entity take on the role of protecting its citizens?

## UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

### Exploring the Connotations of Synonyms

The **connotations** of a word are the feelings and associations it suggests in addition to its primary meaning. *Chicanery* and *deception* are synonyms, for example, but chicanery connotes some sort of skillful deceit or trick while deception is a more general term for dishonesty.

*Duty* is a word that explains a great deal in "Sibi." *Integrity*, *honesty*, and *faithfulness* are all synonyms relating to the proper performance of one's duty. Explore the different connotations of these three synonyms—look them up in a dictionary but use your own words to express the different feelings and associations they evoke. You can also conduct your own experiments in language to distinguish these synonyms from one another. Using each word, try writing three sentences that clearly show the differences in these words.

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Writing About Sacrifice

Sacrifice involves giving up something important for a goal that is even more important. In this story Sibi is willing to sacrifice his well-being and even his life for his integrity. Describe a sacrifice that someone you have read about, someone you know, or you yourself have undertaken. This sacrifice does not have to involve a life-threatening situation. Remember that physical and mental work can also be forms of sacrifice—in both cases the person is giving up time and energy in order to reach a goal. Begin by recalling the objective for which the person was willing to sacrifice. Freewrite about some of the hardships and difficulties the person encountered. Draw on these notes when you write your description. Imagine that your audience is a group of adults whom you respect. In revising your work, make sure your readers will understand what the person gave up, whether the person reached the goal, and whether the person still believes the sacrifice was justified. Proofread your work and prepare a final draft to share with your classmates.