



## The Mahabharata: the orientation of the Indian way of life

SOMA DEBRAY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

*Mahabharata* has been regarded as the foremost text in the tradition of Sanskrit literature. The text, adhering to the tradition of Sanskrit literature, defines its purpose, category, and theme at the very outset. *Mahabharata* has been said to be *upajivya*, *itihasa*, *akhayana*, *kavya*, *panchamveda*, and *bharatadruma*. These generic and specific terms make up the definition of the epic. In Sanskrit literary theory the *Mahabharata* is considered to be the sourcebook for theories and definitions, as it was composed by a seer, a rishi, and is thus an *adikavya*. An understanding of the categorizations is immensely important to the understanding of the text.

*Mahabharata* is looked up on as *Upajivya*, i.e. something that sustains and enlivens. The text has been compared to the rains without which creation could not have survived. *Mahabharata* is that, which is taken recourse to whenever questions about society, about knowledge arise. It is the steering force of all knowledge, the motivator of self-knowledge. The text sustains society by providing it a concrete knowledge base. It leads society by showing the path, by setting the tradition of life. However, it is also the *upajivya* for future poets and litterateurs; creating a path to be followed. The *Mahabharata* describes the Indian way of life in a complete manner, gives the readers an expansive worldview, and provides a platform for the evolution of literary theory and criticism. This justifies the definition of *Mahabharata* as a source book or *lakshyagrantha*. It was the composition of the text that gave birth to the literary theory to be applied in analyzing itself and future texts. The theory of the greatest of the *rasa*, and the basic *rasa*, the *shantarasa*, was born out of *Mahabharata*.



## The Mahabharata: the orientation of the Indian way of life

SOMA DEBRAY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

The text itself and all commentaries on it suggest that Mahabharata contains everything that is required to sustain life and society. It contains everything that can sustain a nation. We find the *Adiparva* declaring that all that has been said and all that has not been said about the purpose of human life can be found in this text.

*Mahabharata* is also regarded as an *itihasa*, loosely translated as history. *Itihasa* in the tradition of *Bharatvarsha* is something that is eternal, as it is considered to have been born out of the Supreme Being. Not only the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, but also the *puranas*, *gathas*, and the *narasamsi*, were all born of the Supreme Being. The *Upanishads* also credit *itihasa* status at par with the *Vedas*. *Iti* is visualization; *itihasa* is a visualization, or perception, of the past as if happening in the present. *Itihasa* not only talks about the past but also serves as a guide to the future. Thus *itihasa* journeys from the past, through the present, into the future. It talks about past human life and also reveals ways of attaining the highest goals in life. *Mahabharata* is not a mere documentation of past events and incidents, not mere stories of sages and emperors, of prosperity and war, but is a record of all things of value, explains the mysteries of being, and serves as a knowledge bank for future generations. As texts of *itihasa* is a commentary on the goals of life, and thus they attain the stature of scriptural truth. The *Mahabharata* unquestioningly qualifies as *itihasa* abounding in the subtle and the major concepts defining life, incorporating philosophy, and cosmology too; in complete harmony and relevance to all contemporary audience. The theory of Indian aesthetics looks up on the *Mahabharata* as an epic composed by a *rishi* enriched with a



## The Mahabharata: the orientation of the Indian way of life

SOMA DEBRAY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

vision of time in a constant state of flux; a narrative of the destiny that drive a society, a nation.

Mahabharata is essentially a narrative that formed an important part of the traditional Indian academic curriculum, back from the *Oupanishadik* times. The narrative was considered to be a subject that was to be studied along with the *Vedas* and the *Vedangas*. Narratives were considered important for the holistic development of a student; wisdom was born of explorations of the narrative spaces.

Teachings of the narratives were important to the understanding of the *Vedas* and the *Vedangas* that were substantiated by the narratives or the *akhyanas*. The Mahabharata is a narrative within a narrative: the core story is recited by Vyasa to his 5 disciples, including his son. The story we hear is narrated by one of these disciples, Vaisampanya, to Janamejaya, the great-grandson of the Pandavas, along with Vyasa and his son, Suka, as co-listeners of the story. *Akhayana* is invariably linked with the *upakhayana*. *Akhayana* is the grand narrative. When one character of the *akhayana* retells the story to another character for the latter's benefit that becomes the *upakhayana*. The *akhayana* is born of collective memory and is retold multiple times, through generations, subsisting a literary tradition. The *akhayana* was also important for Vedic rituals consisting of the invocation of the divine, followed by a recitation of the *akhyanas*.



## The Mahabharata: the orientation of the Indian way of life

SOMA DEBRAY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

*Mahabharata* is also the embodiment of *shantarasa*. It is a homogenous harmonious narrative, culminating in the realization of *purusartha* or the hallowed goals of life, the life truth. The text traverses the path that leads to *moksha* of the characters concerned. Every *rasa* in the text is a pointer towards the attainment of a *purusartha*. Even the erotic leads to one traversing spaces of *dharma* and *artha*. The dominant *rasa* of the *Mahabharata* is the *santarasa*, a vehicle for the ultimate realization. The disillusionment and ultimate realization of the transience of mortal life and the permanence of *dharma* is born of the *bibhatsarasa* that results from the truth of war (*Kurukshetra*) distilled. There is final liberation of the soul. The appeal of the *Mahabharata* does not rest up on any sense of rapture. This text manifests supreme objectivity. It is a narrative that hovers above times of distress and disturbance. Destruction and horror are used to establish the absolute truth. It deals with man's existence on this planet. It is the deep anguish and disaster that the characters traverse that lead them to the ultimate realization and liberation of the soul. The strong presence of *Sri Krishna*, the eternal element, as a decisive force in *Mahabharata*, makes it a tale of liberation and realization, rather than genocide and tragedy; in this the *Mahabharata* is essentially different from the Greek epics. What pervades the text is a sense of "colossal waste"; human efforts prove useless and the final inclination is that of renunciation.

Readings consulted:



# The Mahabharata: the orientation of the Indian way of life

SOMA DEBRAY  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
NARAJOLE RAJ COLLEGE

1. *The Mahabharata*: tr. and ed. J.A.B. van Buitenen, Volume 1, Book 1, 'The Book of the Beginning', Chicago: Brill, 1975.
2. C. Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, India, 2005.
3. *Bharata, Natyashastra*, tr. Manomohan Ghosh, vol. I, 2nd edn, Calcutta: Granthalaya, 1967.
4. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mahabharata>