MAHABHARATA STORIES FOR KIDS

1. Writing the Mahabharata

Many centuries ago, a renowned sage Vyasa *muni* began compiling what was to become the greatest Indian epic called the Mahabharata. He requested the creator of the universe, Brahma, to send someone to write it for him as he narrates the story. Brahma then told him to seek help from Lord Ganapati. After days of meditation, when Ganapati appeared before him, Vyasa requested him to write the epic while he narrates. Ganapati said, “Sage Vyasa, I will write the epic but you must not pause at all.” Vyasa was a smart sage. He replied, “I agree to your condition, Lord Ganesha. But you must first understand what I recite, before you write it down.” Ganapati smiled at Vyasa's cleverness. Vyasa would be able to think while Ganapati understood the verses! Thus began the writing of the Mahabharata!

2. The Beginning of a Dynasty

It’s the story of a dynasty that left scars of blood-shed for several generations to remember. It began many centuries ago with King Puru, when its descendent King Dushyanta of Hastinapura saw Kanva *rishi’s* adopted daughter, Shakuntala while hunting in the forest. In reality, Shakuntala was the daughter of Menaka and Sage Vishwamitra. She was left on the banks of River Malini by Menaka, when Kanva *rishi* found her and decided to bring her up as his daughter. Smitten by Shakuntala’s beauty, Dushyanta married her and gave her a ring with his name on it before leaving for his kingdom. Shakuntala was once lost in thoughts of her husband, when Durvasa *rishi* came to visit Kanva *ashrama.* Her inattentiveness infuriated him and he cursed her, “The person in whose thoughts you are lost will forget you!” She begged for forgiveness, so Durvasa said, “Show him something that belongs to him, and he will remember you!”

3. Hastinapura’s King

Shakuntala left for Hastinapura, but on the way, Dushyanta’s ring fell in the river and a fish swallowed it. As per Durvasa’s curse, Dushyanta refused to recognize her. So, she returned to the *ashrama* and soon gave birth to her son, Bharata. One day, a fisherman found the ring and gave it to the king who then remembered everything. He went to the *ashrama,* and saw Bharata playing with a lion’s cub. He accepted Shakuntala and his son, and Bharata later became the king of Hastinapura. Bharata and his descendents ruled the capital for several years. One of the kings in the lineage was Shantanu. Once, while hunting, Shantanu saw a beautiful woman, Ganga. Introducing himself, he expressed his desire to marry her. Ganga, the river goddess, said, “On one condition. You shall never stop me from doing anything or ask me a question!” Without a second thought, Shantanu agreed and they got married.

4. Truth of Ganga’s Sons

Soon, a son was born to the couple. Strangely, Ganga took her son and drowned him in the river. The king remembered his promise, so he miserably stayed silent. But the same happened to his next six sons too. So, when she took their eighth son to the river, he couldn’t control himself and asked,

“Why do you kill our sons? What kind of mother are you?” Ganga, on seeing the king break his promise, stopped and replied, “Once, eight *vasus* stole sage Vasishtha’s pet cow Nandini, for which they were cursed to be born as human beings. They requested me to free them from this curse by giving birth to them and then drowning them. Seven of them are now in heaven. But this eighth child will have to live. And now, I must go! I will return your son soon. Wait for me.” Saying so, Ganga disappeared with the child.

5. The Eighth Son – Devavrata

After many years, Shantanu once saw a young boy shooting arrows with precision to build a dam across river Ganga. Shantanu was fascinated to see such a handsome boy with great skills. As he watched, Ganga emerged from the river and told him that the young boy was Devavrata, their eighth son. She had placed him in the care of Sage Vasishtha and Shukracharya, so he was a skilled warrior and a learned boy. He was also an expert in matters of statecraft. King Shantanu was delighted to finally have a successor for his kingdom. For many years, King Shantanu lived happily with his son. One day, at the banks of Yamuna, he was drawn to a very sweet fragrance. Soon, he realized that the fragrance came from Satyawati, the daughter of the chief fisherman. He was taken by her beauty, and wanted to marry her.

6. Shantanu Marries Satyawati

Shantanu asked for Satyawati’s hand in marriage from the chief fisherman, who agreed on one condition, “My daughter’s son should become the king of Hastinapura! That’s also written in her destiny!” Shantanu couldn’t accept the condition because he had already promised to crown Devavrata his successor. He sadly returned to his palace, and remained miserable for many days ignoring his duties as the king. This worried Devavrata and his counselors. Devavrata soon found out from the chief fisherman that his father was in love, so he took a vow that he wouldn’t ever get married. The Gods showered flowers from above to applaud Devavrata’s sacrifice. Thereafter, he was called “Bhishma”. Soon, Shantanu got married to Satyawati and they had two sons: Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Chitrangada took the place of Shantanu on the throne. Unfortunately, he died in a battle before he could even get married. So, Vichitravirya was crowned the king.

7. Amba, Ambika and Ambalika

Vichitravirya, a minor, couldn’t rule alone. So, Bhishma acted as a king consort and guided him till he grew up. Once he was old enough, Bhishma began looking for a suitable wife for him. As was the custom, a *swayamvara* was held by the King of Kasi for his three daughters: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Hearing this, Bheeshma went to Kasi to ask for their hands for Vichitravirya. When young kings assembled in the king’s court mocked him, he challenged them on behalf of Vichitravirya and threw across their crowns with one shot from his bow. When the king of Kasi refused to send his daughters with Bhishma, he forcefully took them in his chariot. Ambika and Ambalika agreed to marry Vichitravirya, but

Amba refused because she loved Salva. So, Bhishma honorably sent her to Salva, who then refused to accept her. Vichitravirya also refused to marry her after knowing that she loved another.

8. Story of Amba

Amba then asked Bhishma to marry her since he was the one who forcefully took her from her father's palace. Bhishma firmly denied. She sought Karttikeya's help who gave her a fresh garland, which when worn by somebody would make him Bhishma's enemy. But no one wore it, so Amba hung it on the gate of King Drupada's palace. Frustrated, Amba performed great penance until Lord Shiva agreed to help her. He granted her a boon, according to which she would be able to kill Bhishma in her next life. So Amba gave up her present life and was reborn as Drupada's child, Shikhandin, who would become a table-turner in the Great War. When Shikhandin grew up, she picked the garland from Drupada's gate and wore it. Drupada, for fear of Bhishma's anger, exiled her to the forest. She sat in penance, and soon turned her form into that of a man.

9. Hastinapura's Successor

At Hastinapura, King Vichitravirya also died without leaving a successor. Satyawati began to feel that those unfortunate events had befallen upon her because she had been unjust to Bhishma. She called Bhishma and said, "My child, Hastinapura is soulless without its king, and God has punished me by taking both my sons. I want you to take what was rightfully yours. Marry the two widowed queens, and run Hastinapura's lineage further." Bhishma told her that he was bound by an unbreakable vow, and reminded her of her son Vyasa. So, Satyawati ordered Vyasa to provide an heir for the throne. But he requested for some time from Satyawati, which she denied. So when he went to Ambika, she found him ugliest and closed her eyes. Next, when he went to Ambalika, she turned pale out of fear. And thus, Dhritrashtra was born blind and Pandu was born pale. But both were blessed by Vyasa.

10. The Princes and Vidura

Now Satyavati was worried about the outcome of Ambika closing her eyes and Ambalika turning pale. So she asked Ambalika to go to Vyasa once again, but she sent her maid instead. The maid did not fear the sage, and served him with humility. So, she gave birth to an intelligent son, Vidura. The three boys grew up in the palace, and were taught all essential arts that are required for Princes. While Dhritrashtra was the strongest, Pandu was the best archer and Vidura was wise in matters of the state and politics. When the Princes were young, Bhishma ruled the kingdom on their behalf. When the Princes grew older, Bhishma began looking for suitable brides for them. After consulting with Vidura, Bhishma first went to Gandhara to ask King Subala for his daughter Gandhari's hand in marriage for Dhritrashtra. At first, Gandhari's family, especially her brother, did not agree to this match.

11. Gandhari and Kunti

They knew that Dhritrashtra could not be crowned king due to his blindness. But Gandhari persuaded everyone, and tied her eyes with a band permanently to accompany her husband in his misery. But she was gifted with an inner vision, a much stronger one, using which she often tried to guide her sons but failed. When she got married to Dhritrashtra, her brother Shakuni accompanied her to Hastinapura to protect her and put his evil plans into action. Bhishma had received news about Kunti's *swayamwara* that was to be held by Kuntibhoja who had adopted her from Krishna's grandfather. Kunti, who was earlier Pritha, once impressed sage Durvasa with her humility. He gave her a *mantra* by which she could summon any God. Young and curious, Kunti once tried using the *mantra* and called upon the sun God who gave her Karna, a child born with divine armor and earrings.

12. Kunti and Pandu's Marriage

Kunti, being unmarried, could not keep the child so she placed him in a box and sailed it in the river. Adiratha and his wife Radha found the box. They were childless so they brought up Karna as their own. King Pandu easily charmed Kunti in her *swayamwara,* and soon they got married. Some years later, Pandu also married Madri, who was the sister of King Shalya of Madra. Once, on a getaway in the forest, Pandu mistakenly killed a deer couple who turned out to be a sage couple. The sage cursed him, "You will die the moment you touch either of your wives!" Unhappy by this, Pandu went to the forest to live like an ascetic. But Kunti told him about the *mantra* that sage Durvasa gave her, and shared it with Madri too. Soon, they were blessed with children. Kunti bore Yudhishthira, Bheema, and Arjuna while Madri bore Nakula and Sahadeva.

13. The Pandavas

One day, Pandu, forgetting his curse, embraced his wife Madri and died. Madri became a *sati* and died with him, leaving her sons in Kunti's care. The news of Pandu's death soon reached Hastinapura. Everyone in the palace was grief-stricken. Dhritrashtra, who now became the king, asked for the Pandavas to be brought back to the palace. The boys were kept under the care of Bhishma. Pandu's funeral rites were performed as per custom. Vyasa visited the court and informed Satyawati of a troubled future of Hastinapura that he could oversee. He suggested Satyawati to resort to the forest to live a simple life. She agreed, and took Ambika and Ambalika along too. In the initial years, the Pandavas and the Kauravas grew together, studying under the guidance of Kripacharya. There was a constant rift between Bheema, and Dhritrashtra's eldest son Duryodhana. Even as a child, Duryodhana was envious of the Pandavas.

14. Drona

Since Pandu was the king, Yudhishthra was the rightful heir to the throne. But Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle, never believed it and kept convincing his nephew of the same. Once, Duryodhana tried to drown Bheema by poisoning him, who was bitten by poisonous snakes in the water cancelling out the previous poison residing in his body. He recovered quickly and returned to the palace, which enraged Duryodhana.

Once, the Pandavas came across a great archer who, with the help of a blade of grass and some *mantras,* pulled up a ball for them. When Bhishma heard this incident, he knew that the learned Brahman was Drona, the son of Bharadwaja. He was trained by Parashurama in the art of war. Drupada was also a pupil of Parashurama and a close friend of Drona. An expert in archery, Drona got married to Kripacharya's sister and had a son, Ashwatthama.

15. Dronacharya

As a child, Drupada had promised to give Drona half his kingdom. And when need arose, Drona asked for help from Drupada who rudely refused. So Drona had to stay with his brother-in-law at Hastinapura. Drona was bestowed with much respect by Bhishma at the palace of Hastinapura, and made an instructor for the princes. And thus, he became Dronacharya who would play a major role in the Great War! While teaching the princes, Drona also taught his son Ashwatthama. Arjuna took double lessons from Drona, and soon became an expert in the use of bow and arrow, the sword, mace, spear, and could fight with grace on a horse-led chariot or by foot. Once, to complete one of Drona's tests, Arjuna hit the right eye of a wooden eagle. Before the test, Drona asked each of them what they saw. Some said the tree, some said the sky, but Arjuna said, "I see the eye!"

16. Ekalavya's *Guru Dakshina*

Near Hastinapura, a peace-loving tribe called Nishadha lived. They were not allowed to mix with others. Their chief had a son named Ekalavya who practiced archery. He requested Dronacharya to accept him as a pupil, but Drona refused. However, Ekalavya had considered Drona as his teacher so he built a figurine of Drona with mud, and began to practice archery in front of it. One day, Drona noticed a dog that couldn't bark because his mouth was shut with several arrows. The strange thing was the dog wasn't hurt. Impressed by the archer, Drona began to look for him and found Ekalavya practicing before a figurine that looked like him. Drona then asked for Ekalavya's right hand's thumb as his *guru dakshina*. Ekalavya chopped it off, and gave it to his *guru*. Even without his thumb, Ekalavya learnt the art of shooting with four fingers and became the king of the Nishadhas.

17. Pandavas verses Kauravas

Soon, Pandavas and Kauravas grew into young and strong princes of Hastinapura. So a public display of their expertise was held, wherein each prince was asked to show his skill. When Arjuna displayed his expertise in archery, everyone sat stunned including the envious Duryodhana. Suddenly, someone unknown yet divine-looking entered the arena and challenged Arjuna. This gave Duryodhana some happiness, and he welcomed the mighty man. From afar, Kunti saw the new entrant and fainted for it was her eldest yet forgotten son, Karna. Kripacharya intervened, "Only equals could combat a prince!" So, Duryodhana declared Karna as the King of Anga, a state that belonged to him. Just then, Adiratha told the assembly that Karna was his son, which made Bheema chuckle. Karna felt hurt, so Duryodhana stood up

for him which was perhaps the only good deed in Duryodhana's number of deeds on Earth. But this made Karna a blind devotee of Duryodhana.

18. Capturing King Drupada

When the princes' education was complete, Dronacharya asked for his *guru dakshina* from them. He asked them to capture his old friend-turned-enemy, King Drupada. The Kauravas failed because of their eagerness, but the Pandavas successfully captured Drupada majorly because of Arjuna's skills. Drona took away half of Drupada's kingdom, and settled the old score between them. This infuriated Drupada. On the flip side, the incident made everyone in Hastinapura appreciate the Pandavas' skills in warships. Yudhishthra, the eldest son of Pandu, was declared as the true successor. This news upset Dhritrashtra, who was expecting his eldest son Duryodhana to take the crown. It also outraged Duryodhana, who already abhorred the Pandavas. He deeply envied Yudhishthra's popularity amongst the people of Hastinapura, Arjuna's skills, and Bheema's strength. Blinded in real life and by his love for his son, Dhritrashtra supported his son's plans conjured up out of envy even when he knew they were wrong.

19. Lakshagriha

If Dhritrashtra's support wasn't enough, Shakuni gave his nephew more evil ideas to get rid of his cousins. Duryodhana, with the help of his uncle and Karna, devised a plan to burn the Pandavas in a palace made of lac. He persuaded Yudhishthra to go to Varnavata where he had built a brand-new palace for the Pandavas. And he sent Purochana, his loyal minister, in advance to get the palace ready for the Pandavas. It was fully made of lacquer and materials that could easily catch fire. Meanwhile, Vidura overheard their plan and warned Yudhishthra about it. He also sent a minor to dig an underground passageway for the Pandavas to escape. The Pandavas, however, acted as if they knew nothing. One night, at the palace, Kunti gave a feast. At midnight, the Pandavas escaped underground after lighting up the palace on fire. Purochana, who was sleeping inside, died in the *lakshagriha* along with some others.

20. Demoness Hidimba

Six skeletons were found at the burned palace later, which were misconstrued as Pandavas and their mother's skeletons. When the news reached Hastinapura, a great show of sorrow was made. Meanwhile, disguised as Brahmanas, the Pandavas made their way to Ekachakrapura. The Pandavas rested for a while, as Bheema watched over them. A demon, Hidimb, used to send his sister Hidimba disguised as a beautiful lady to look for victims that could become their meal. Once, while looking for victims, Hidimba saw Bheema and fell in love with him. She approached him with a marriage proposal and told him all about herself and her brother. She also promised to help the Pandavas escape. This enraged Hidimb, and a ferocious battle followed between Hidimba's brother and Bheema. Hidimb was, of course, killed. With Kunti's blessings, Bheema and Hidimba got married and continued living in the forest. Soon, they had a strong son named Ghatotkacha.