

Write a Short Essay (about 500 words) on the following:

6. This is what a famous historian of Indian literature, Maurice Winternitz, wrote about the *Mahabharata*:
“just because the Mahabharata represents more of an entire literature.... and contains so much and so many kinds of things, ... (it) gives(s) us an insight into the most profound depths of the soul of the Indian folk.” Discuss.

Ans. The Mahabharata is a very important epic of ancient India. It influences the Indian life in many-a-ways even today. It gives us a vivid description of almost all the aspects of the contemporary life. While assessing the significance of the Mahabharata, Maurice Winternitz, a well-known historian of Indian literature, writes,

"just because the Mahabharata represents more of an entire literature . . . and contains so much and so many kinds of things...it gives us an insight into the most profound depths of the soul of the Indian folk."

It is worth-mentioning that the Aryan influence had expanded throughout the country by the time of the Mahabharata. Several Aryan kingdoms were established in the nook and the corner of the country. The war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas is a war between the Dharma and the Adharma and the justice and the injustice. The Pandavas represent dharma and justice, whereas the Kauravas are the representatives of adharma and injustice. That is why Shri Krishna, who is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu, extends his support to the Pandavas. The victory of the Pandavas in the war is in fact, the victory of dharma over adharma. The Indian masses have been encouraged to follow the path of dharma by various characters and stories in this war of dharma and adharma. Thus, Gandhari while advising her eldest son Duryodhana not to wage a war with the Pandavas, says, *"By making peace you honour your father and me, as well as your well wishers...it is the wise man in control of his senses who guards his kingdom. Greed and anger drag a man away from his profits: by defeating these two enemies a king conquers the earth...you will happily enjoy the earth, my son, along with the wise and heroic Pandavas...There is no good in war, no law (dharma) and profit (artha), let alone happiness; nor is there (necessarily) victory in the end—don't set your mind on war."* History is a witness that Duryodhana did not listen to the advice of his mother. He waged and lost the war and thus finished himself.

We find Indian civility and politeness in its ideal form in the Mahabharata. Dharmaputra Yudhishtira is a lively instance of Indian civility and politeness as is evident from the following passage. The eldest Pandava Yudhishtira, who came to be known as 'dharmaputra', while addressing Sanjay, says, *"Sanjay, convey my respectful greetings to all the Brahmanas and the chief priest of the house of Dhritarashtra. I bow respectfully to teacher Drona...I hold the feet of our preceptor Kripa...(and) the chief of the Kurus, the great Bhishma. I bow respectfully to the old king (Dhritarashtra). I greet and ask after the health of his son Duryodhana and his younger brothers... Also greet all the young Kuru warriors who are our brothers, sons and grandsons... Greet above all him, who is to us like father and mother, the wise Vidura (born of a slave woman)... I bow to the elderly ladies who are known as our mothers. To those who are our wives you say this, "I hope they are well-protected." ... Our daughters-in-law, born of good families and mothers of children, greet on my behalf. Embrace for me those who are our daughters... The beautiful, fragrant, well-dressed courtesans of ours you should also greet. Greet the slave women and their children, greet the aged, the maimed (and) the helpless . . ."*

In fact, this instance of civility and politeness is unparalleled in itself. It depicts the expression of etiquettes in terms of age, gender, kinship and nobility, amity, beauty, slavery, disability and helplessness as well. Yudhishtira, first of all intended to greet the Brahmanas and the chief priest as they enjoyed the highest rank in the society. Then he intended to bow respectfully to his teacher Dronacharya. After that he held the feet of the preceptor Kripacharya and Bhishma Pitamaha, the chief of the Kurus, respectively because Bhishma was the eldest and the most capable among the Kurus. After expressing his greetings to Bhishma Pitamaha, he intended to bow respectfully to Dhritarashtra, the king of Hastinapur and the father of the Kauravas. Yudhishtira, while putting aside the ill-feelings of Duryodhana, also enquired about the health of the Kauravas and greeted them as well. He even did not forget to greet the young Kuru warriors and he also greeted respectfully the wise Vidura. At last Yudhishtira even greeted slave men, slave women, disabled and helpless persons who were at the lowest rank under Varna system. This passage is the best example of the civility and politeness of Yudhishtira. It also tells us that Yudhishtira always followed the norms set by the Varna system.

In fact, the underlying object of the Mahabharata is to attract Indian society and culture to the basic values of human life. Shrimad Bhagwadgita, the essence of Indian philosophy is the most significant contribution of the Mahabharata. We find a beautiful amalgamation of Jnan, Bhakti and Karma, the three ways of attaining moksha in it.

The Mahabharata is also important from historical point of view. It furnishes us with significant information regarding the social and cultural conditions of some subsequent centuries of the later Vedic period. Undoubtedly, the epic has a deep impact on Indian life from political, social, cultural, moral and spiritual points of view.

✓ 7. Discuss whether the Mahabharata could have been the work of a single author.

Ans. The historians have different views regarding the author and period of the Mahabharata. According to tradition, Vyasa dictated the text to the deity Ganesha. However, in the opinion of the modern historians, the text was neither authored in a specific period nor it was the work of a single author. As has already been discussed, this text originally consisted of 8,800 verses which ultimately were raised to 1,00,000 verses. Naturally, it was not possible for a single person to compose verses in such a large number. Its

accomplishment took around one thousand years that cannot be a life-span of a person in any way. The historians assume that perhaps, charioteer-bards known as sutas were the composer of the original story. The sutas generally accompanied kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and sang their victories and achievements through poems. These compositions circulated orally from one generation to another. The historians opine that it was from the 5th century B.C. that the Brahmans took over the story and started to commit it to writing. We should know that it was the time when the Kurus and the Panchalas (around whom the story of the epic revolves) were gradually developing into kingdoms. Perhaps, the new kings wanted their itihasa to be recorded and preserved in a more systematical way. It is also possible that the replacement of the old social values with that of the new norms (which are reflected in some parts of the story) became imperative because of the upheavals that occurred as a result of the establishment of the new kingdoms.

After making a deep and intense study of both the classifications *i.e.*, the narrative and the didactic of the text, it can be concluded that the epic (the Mahabharata) was not the work of a single author. Author after author went on adding new portions to it because of temptation or in the zeal of idealism. Prof. M.A. Mihindal describes the Mahabharata as a valuable treasure of knowledge. However, the addition of various subjects such as religion, philosophy etc. has pushed its originality behind the curtain. Some historians feel that the variations found in its writing style, language, subject-matter etc. also suggest that this epic (the Mahabharata) was neither the work of a single author nor it was composed under a specific span of time.

The historians suggest that the composition of the Mahabharata remained in process for a longtime. Another phase of its composition began between C. 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. It is worth-mentioning that it was the period when the worship of Vishnu was gaining importance. Thus, Shri Krishna, an important figure of the epic, came to be identified with Vishnu. It is assumed that large didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added to the epic during the period C 200–400 A.D. It was because of these additions that it grew into a large text containing 1,00,000 verses. Thus, as Maurice Winternitz writes, "*The Mahabharata in its present form was neither a work of a single author nor it was penned down during a specific span of time.*"