

Who's Who in the Mahabharata

An Introduction to the Complete Cast of Characters

Sharath Komarraju

Contents

Introduction
Abhimanyu
Agni
Amba
Arjuna
Ashwatthama
Balarama
Bhagadatta
Bhima
Bhishma
Chitrangada the Princess
Chitrangada the Prince
Dhrishtadyumna
Dhritarashtra
Draupadi
Drona
Drupada
Duhsasana
Durvasa
Duryodhana
Ekalavya
Gandhari
Ganga
Ghatotkacha

Indra
Jarasandha
Jayadratha
Karna
Kripa
Krishna
Kritavarma
Kunti
Madri
Nahusha
Nakula
Pandu
Parashara
Parashurama
Sahadeva
Satyaki
Satyawati
Shakuni
Shalya
Shikhandi
Shishupala
Surya
Susharma
Ulupi
Uttara
Vasishtha
Vichitraveerya
Vidura
Vikarna
Vishwamitra
Vyasa
Yama

Yudhishthir

Yuyutsu

Introduction

Welcome to your quick, introductory guide to Mahabharata characters!

Here you will find short biographies of every significant person that appears in the Mahabharata story.

By the end of this book, you should have a working knowledge of who's who in Vyasa's immortal epic.

For easy reference, we've organized the list in alphabetical order.

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Abhimanyu

Abhimanyu is the son of Arjuna – the third Pandava – and Subhadra the sister of Krishna and Balarama. He is the shortest-lived among the famous heroes of the story, dying on the thirteenth day of the Kurukshetra war at the age of sixteen.

It is Abhimanyu and Uttara's son, Parikshit, that succeeds Yudhishtir to the throne of Hastinapur. Thirty six years after the war finishes, the Pandavas decide to renounce their worldly possessions. They make Parikshit king.

All of the other sons of the Pandavas – who may have become heirs – have already died in the war.

Abhimanyu is the avatar of Varchas, the son of Soma (the moon god). When all the gods of the pantheon are pledging their sons as heroes to fight in the name of virtue, Soma says that he loves his son so much that he can only bear to part with him for a short time.

So Brahma decrees that Varchas, the son of Soma, will only live for sixteen years on Earth, but will achieve great things.

As a young man (some say in the womb), Abhimanyu is taught the art of entering a complex battle array called the Chakravyuha – but not that of leaving it.

During the Kurukshetra war, Drona takes advantage of this chink and traps the young man in his Chakravyuha. Abhimanyu dies after a valiant effort deep inside the Kaurava ranks.

This is often considered the turning point of the war, the one incident that persuades Arjuna to fight at his ruthless best.

Abhimanyu sometimes makes an appearance in a folktale in which the primary plot point is his wedding to another sister of Balarama named Sasirekha. Ghatotkacha, the son of Bhima, helps him in this quest.

Sasirekha makes no appearance in the Mahabharata.

Agni

Agni is the god of fire. In the Mahabharata, he makes an appearance in multiple stories. Specifically he touches the main narrative thread in two significant ways:

First, he approaches Krishna and Arjuna shortly after the latter's marriage to Subhadra and asks them for help in devouring the Khandava forest. Krishna and Arjuna agree, and stand guard while the forest burns.

The back story to this is that Agni had been fed plenty of offerings over the course of a hundred years thanks to a king's relentless worship, and had come down with a case of indigestion. When he approaches Brahma with the problem, the creator says, 'Go feast on the plants and animals that make up the Khandava forest!'

However, the snag is that the Khandava is closely guarded by Indra, because Takshaka the king of the Nagas lives there and he is good friends with Indra.

Agni therefore asks Krishna and Arjuna to fight off the army of Indra while he levels the forest and renders it barren.

As a result of this quest, Krishna and Arjuna receive plenty of divine weapons from Agni. Arjuna, in particular, receives the Gandiva, his two inexhaustible quivers of arrows, and an indestructible chariot.

The burning of Khandava is also important from a political point of view. It represents Yudhishtir's expansion of Khandavaprastha into the forest by plundering a huge natural reserve.

The second time Agni appears in the story is during Sahadeva's invasion of Mahishmati during the Digvijaya Parva. Agni happens to be the son-in-law of

Nila, the king of Mahishmati. So when Sahadeva attacks it, Agni turns out in full battle armour to defend it.

Sahadeva, of course, wisely withdraws his challenge and opts for a more diplomatic route.

Amba

Amba is the eldest of three princesses of Kosala whom Bhishma earmarks to become brides of Vichitraveerya, his half-brother and king of Hastinapur.

Bhishma attends the groom-choosing ceremony of the three girls and abducts them. He fights off resistance from all the other assembled suitors, and brings the princesses to Hastinapur.

Amba, however, asks permission from Bhishma and Satyawati to go to a king named Salwa, with whom she has fallen in love and was planning to choose during her swayamvara. Bhishma agrees to let her go.

But Salwa rejects her (on the grounds of honour because she had been won by Bhishma), and on her return, so does Vichitraveerya – who had already married Amba's two sisters, Ambika and Ambalika.

In desperation, Amba asks Bhishma to marry her, but Bhishma also refuses because he cannot forswear his oath of lifelong celibacy.

With nowhere to turn, Amba tries to enlist Parashurama's help to fight her cause. But Parashurama fails to persuade Bhishma in the matter. Amba then goes to propitiate Lord Shiva with the intention of procuring means by which Bhishma can be killed.

Shiva promises Amba that she will be able to kill Bhishma – but only in her next birth.

Amba immediately kills herself. She takes birth as a girl named Shikhandini in the palace of Drupada, king of Panchala. In time, Shikhandini turns into a man named Shikhandi. He kills Bhishma on the tenth day of the Kurukshetra war.

Arjuna

Arjuna is the third of the Pandavas, and Kunti's last biological son. He is said to be fathered by Indra, though characters like Duryodhana and Shakuni always make it a point to question this fact.

In the Mahabharata, Arjuna is often considered the most powerful chariot-archer by some distance. He is aided not only by his natural talent and intense commitment to the art of archery, but also by many divine gifts he is given at various points in his life.

Some of the divine gifts he receives: the Pashupatastra from Shiva, the Gandiva and an indestructible chariot from Agni, the Varunastra from Varuna, the Vajrayudha from Indra – and so on.

In addition to this, Arjuna also enlists the services of Krishna as charioteer for the duration of the war. This makes him invincible.

It is Arjuna who wins Draupadi's hand by completing the archery test assigned by Drupada. He also marries three other women – Ulupi, Chitrangada and Subhadra. He has a son with each of them.

In all, therefore, he has four sons: Iravan (with Ulupi), Babruvahana (with Chitrangada), Abhimanyu (with Subhadra) and Shrutakarma (with Draupadi).

During the Virata Parva, Arjuna dons the garb of a eunuch and takes the name of Brihannala, the dance teacher. He conceals himself deep within the women's chambers of Virata's palace. He emerges during the end of the year to defend Virata's cattle from being stolen by the Kuru army.

In the Kurukshetra war, along with Bhima, he becomes the most important warrior on Yudhishtir's side. It is not a stretch to say that he is the biggest reason that Yudhishtir wins.

Arjuna's death happens on Mount Sumeru, shortly after Nakula dies. He falls to his death as an old man, overcome by fatigue.

Bhima asks Yudhishtir why Arjuna failed to reach heaven in his mortal body. Yudhishtir replies, 'Because he had not succeeded in conquering his pride over his accomplishments.'

Ashwatthama

Ashwatthama is the only son of Drona, the teacher of the Kuru princes. While the overall story serves as a negative comment on Dhritarashtra's blind love for his son Duryodhana, we see a smaller example of the same affliction in Drona.

Ashwatthama is given his name because right after his birth, he neighs like a horse. The word 'Ashwatthama' means 'horse-voiced'.

During his early childhood, Ashwatthama is raised in abject poverty. One day, he is teased for being a pauper by a playmate. Witnessing this incident, Drona resolves to provide more material comforts to his family. He takes them all to Hastinapur.

After Drona becomes preceptor to the Kuru princes, Ashwatthama grows up in the royal palace in the lap of luxury. He finds a natural companion in Duryodhana, though it must be said that he does not participate actively in any hateful plots against the Pandavas.

On one occasion, Duryodhana boasts to his father: 'Drona will side with whomever his son supports, and it is I that has Ashwatthama's friendship!'

During the war, Ashwatthama comes into his own during the night-time battle when Ghatotkacha rages against the Kuru forces. Ashwatthama is the only warrior able to match the son of Bhima.

After Drona's unjust killing, Ashwatthama becomes ruthless in his approach to the war. He uses the Narayanastra in an attempt to destroy the Panchala forces, but the missile is neutralized by Krishna.

Later, even when Duryodhana gives up the war as lost, it is Ashwatthama who promises Duryodhana that the Panchalas will be avenged.

Blessed by Lord Shiva, Ashwatthama goes on a rampage during the dead of the night of the eighteenth day. He kills all the remaining Panchala heroes and soldiers while they're sleeping.

The Pandavas chase after Ashwatthama and seek to avenge the deaths of their sons. In the ensuing fight with Arjuna, Ashwatthama uses the Brahmastra, which he points at the wombs of the Pandava women – thus rendering all of them infertile.

This angers Krishna so much that he curses Ashwatthama with a long, painful stint of immortality on Earth.

Balarama

Balarama is the elder brother of Krishna. He rules a kingdom called Anarta by the western sea. The capital city Anarta is Dwaraka.

At the time of Draupadi's swayamvara, Balarama has already become Anarta's king. His path to this position has been a long and arduous one:

- After being born to Vasudeva and his queen Rohini, Balarama is sent to Vrindavan to be fostered in the house of Nanda and Yashoda – along with his younger brother, Krishna.
- His coming-of-age quest is the liberation of Mathura from the hands of the tyrant Kamsa, which sets him up as the arch-rival of Magadha's king, Jarasandha.
- Jarasandha's relentless military pressure forces Balarama to migrate from Mathura westward, closer to Shurasena and Kunti. Here, he founds the kingdom of Anarta and unites a number of warring Vrishni factions.
- With the help of his brother Krishna, Balarama builds the seaside city of Dwaraka, with the intention of making it an impregnable fortress.

Throughout the Mahabharata, Balarama uses a conciliatory policy toward both the Kauravas and the Pandavas in order to maintain friendly official ties between Anarta and Kuru.

More specifically, he builds a strong friendship with Duryodhana and allows his brother Krishna to favour the Pandavas. No matter who among the two sets of cousins are in the ascendant, Anarta positions itself as an ally to Kuru.

Balarama's masterstroke is definitely the decision to remain neutral in the Kurukshetra war. While the reason he quotes for this stance is that he loves both the Pandavas and Kauravas equally, this is a great political victory for Anarta.

When the entire world is at war, the only victors are those kingdoms that don't fight it.

Balarama steers Anarta in such a way that it becomes the most powerful of the middle kingdoms during his lifetime. It is never invaded, it never fights in a war, and it sees almost a hundred years of uninterrupted peace.

In the end, Anarta destroys itself in a civil war. Balarama gives up his life soon after.

Bhagadatta

Bhagadatta is described as the ruler of the Pragjyotishas. Pragjyotisha is a kingdom that is said to be situated in the far east, close to Anga, Vanga and Pundra. In modern India, we might place Pragjyotisha in the neighbourhood of Assam.

A cursory mention is made of Bhagadatta during the Digvijaya Parva. Arjuna is said to visit Pragjyotisha in order to enlist the support of Bhagadatta as Yudhishtir's ally. Bhagadatta warmly welcomes Arjuna and extends his support to the Pandavas.

In the Kurukshetra war, he fights on Duryodhana's side. Though it is not explicitly mentioned why, at some point during the Pandavas' exile, Bhagadatta – like many other kings – may have thought it prudent to switch his allegiance to Kuru.

Bhishma classified Bhagadatta as one of the atirathas fighting on the Kuru side. What makes him different to most of his colleagues is that he fights from atop an elephant, and he leads a large elephant division.

In fact, his steed, Supratika, is considered a fine specimen of an elephant.

Bhagadatta performs several feats during the Kurukshetra war. For instance:

- On Day 4, there is a spell during which Bhima kills ten thousand elephants singlehandedly. Bhagadatta avenges this by engaging Bhima in single combat, defeating him, and then defeating Ghatotkacha as well who comes up to support his father.

- On Day 8, when Ghatotkacha is tormenting the Kuru army, Bhishma entrusts Bhagadatta with the task of fighting back. Bhagadatta fights the combined force of Bhima and Ghatotkacha.
- On Day 12, Bhagadatta once again clashes with Bhima and defeats him. He then launches a fierce attack at the head of a large elephant army against Yudhishtir's chariots. This happens when Arjuna is away fighting the Samshaptakas.
- Later that same day, Arjuna returns to protect Yudhishtir from Bhagadatta. Bhagadatta uses the Vaishnava weapon against Arjuna, but that missile hits Krishna right in the middle of the forehead without making a dent.

In this duel, Arjuna feels insulted when Krishna intervenes to receive the full brunt of Bhagadatta's Vaishnavastra. He turns his fury on the Pragjyotisha king and eventually kills both Bhagadatta and Supratika.

Bhagadatta is thus one of those rare heroes that we know almost next to nothing about, but still plays a significant role in the Kurukshetra war. He almost succeeds in fulfilling Drona's goal – on Day 12 – of capturing Yudhishtir alive for Duryodhana.

Bhima

Bhima is the second of the Pandavas, the third of Kunti's sons overall, and physically perhaps the strongest man of his time.

He is born of the union between Kunti and Vayu, the god of wind. Pandu explains his pick of Vayu saying that after procuring a son in Yudhishtir that would be virtuous at all times, he wishes to now support Virtue with raw strength.

As an infant, Bhima is once dropped onto a rock by Kunti. When she shrieks in shock and bends over her fallen child, she notes that the rock is broken and Bhima is unhurt.

When he is a child, Bhima becomes victim to a conspiracy by Duryodhana. He gets drugged and thrown into a river. But he finds his way to a Naga kingdom, where the citizens feed him some magical nectar that makes him as strong as 'ten thousand elephants'.

Bhima's characterization usually is as a numbskull who has no taste for intellectual pleasures. But in truth, he is probably the most versatile of the Pandavas: not only is he proficient in many forms of warfare, but he is also present and attentive to Draupadi while being dutiful to Yudhishtir.

Throughout their many travails, it is Bhima who serves as the Pandavas' enforcer. He is their chief protector. Whenever a Rakshasa needs killing, Yudhishtir calls for Bhima.

During the Kurukshetra war, when Bhishma is asked as to who the most powerful warrior of the world is, he rightly answers, 'Arjuna.' But he also cautions Duryodhana that Bhima is the most threatening of all the Pandava warriors because of his adaptability.

‘He is equally skilful with bow and arrow,’ he says, ‘on top of a chariot, riding a horse, with lance or spear, or fighting with bare arms on his two feet. Arjuna will hurt you with arrows alone, but Bhima can defeat you anywhere, anytime!’

Bhima brings the official war to a close when he kills Duryodhana by crushing his thighs with a mace. He also performs the bestial act of tearing open Duhsasana’s chest and drinking his blood to avenge Draupadi’s humiliation.

Bhima is the last of the Pandavas to die, during his attempt to ascend Meru in his physical form.

When he asks Yudhishtir why he had been denied entry into heaven, Yudhishtir replies, ‘Because you’ve never succeeded in mastering your obsession with food.’

Bhishma

Bhishma is the son of Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur, and Ganga the river goddess. As the firstborn, he is actually meant to be the king after Shantanu. But a number of circumstances keep him away from that path.

Ganga leaves Shantanu soon after Bhishma's birth (known as Devavrata or Gangadatta as an infant), and returns sixteen years later to give him back to her husband.

Shantanu does the expected thing and makes Devavrata the heir-apparent to the throne. But soon after this, he falls in love with a fisher-princess named Satyawati on the banks of the Yamuna.

Satyavati's father places a condition that he will accept to the match only if Shantanu can guarantee that *her sons* will become kings – not Devavrata.

Devavrata negotiates with Satyawati's father on Shantanu's behalf. In order to assuage the old man's fears, he takes a vow of lifelong celibacy – so that the probability of his having children is zero.

This vow gives him the name Bhishma.

Bhishma is the guiding force behind every turn that the Kuru dynasty takes for the next hundred years or so. The marriage of Vichitraveerya, the birth of Pandu and Dhritarashtra, the choice of Pandu over his older brother for the title of king... everything happens under Bhishma's stewardship.

In a number of ways, Bhishma refuses to nip the Kaurava-Pandava rivalry in the bud. His indecision can be argued to be one of the primary factors driving the Kurukshetra war.

During the war, Bhishma fights the first ten days as commander of the Kuru forces. His strategy is to leave the Pandavas alone and to focus on the Panchala forces instead so that the Pandavas are left with no army with which to fight.

On the evening of the tenth day, he is defeated by Arjuna, who fights using Shikhandi as a human shield.

Bhishma falls on a bed of arrows and watches the war right to the grim end. Then, after coaching Yudhishtir on aspects of governance and behaviour, he makes use of a boon given to him by Shantanu – and invites death to come take him.

He is around a hundred years old at the time of his last breath.

Chitrangada the Princess

Chitrangada is the princess of a kingdom called Manipura. Arjuna visits this city during his twelve-year exile.

Chitrangada's father is a king named Chitravahana. Smitten by her beauty, Arjuna asks the king for her hand in marriage. Chitravahana tells Arjuna that while he has no objections for the match, there is a small catch.

It so happens that Chitravahana is an heirless man. He has therefore made Chitrangada a 'putrika', which essentially means that after she gets married, Chitravahana will not give her away to her husband's family.

Instead, Chitrangada will continue to live at her father's place, and any sons that she has will become Chitravahana's heirs.

Hearing this, Arjuna readily agrees to marry Chitrangada and to live with her until they have their first son. Chitravahana is overjoyed at Arjuna's acceptance of terms. The wedding occurs with great pomp.

In good time, Chitrangada gives birth to a son named Babhruvahana. Arjuna immediately takes leave of his wife and son, and continues his exile.

Babhruvahana does not fight in the Kurukshetra war. But he does get into a fight with Arjuna during the Ashwamedhika Parva, and unwittingly becomes a tool with which Arjuna gets liberated from Ganga's curse.

Chitrangada the Prince

The other Chitrangada that appears in the Mahabharata is the first son of Satyawati and Shantanu.

Owing to the promise of Bhishma to Satyawati's father, this Chitrangada is born as the rightful king to the throne of Hastinapur. Bhishma becomes elder brother, guide and mentor to the growing prince.

But in his early youth, Chitrangada accepts an ill-fated challenge to a single combat. His challenger is a Gandharva who is *also* named Chitrangada.

We're given very little details about this event. We're not told where Bhishma was during this time, and how the heir-apparent of a large kingdom like Hastinapur was allowed to engage in combat with an unknown Gandharva.

Nevertheless, this turns out to be a fatal choice for Chitrangada. He loses his life.

Bhishma is distraught at what has happened. He immediately installs Satyawati's second son, Vichitraveerya, on the throne and begins ruling on his behalf.

Vichitraveerya lives longer than Chitrangada, but he dies before his time as well, with an illness. His wives, Ambika and Ambalika, unite with Sage Vyasa – another of Satyawati's sons – and give birth to Pandu and Dhritarashtra respectively.

Dhrishtadyumna

Dhrishtadyumna is the son of Drupada born magically from a sacrificial fire. Though he is not biologically related to either Draupadi or Shikhandi, he is considered their sibling.

Soon after suffering a humiliating defeat at the hands of Drona's wards, the Pandavas, in which he is forced to give up half his kingdom, Drupada embarks upon a sacrificial ceremony with one express intention: he wants to gain a son who will kill Drona.

The project is successful: at the end of the ritual, a dashing young man attired in full battle gear springs forth from the fire. A divine voice proclaims: 'This young man will one day kill Drona.'

Along with this, Drupada is given another gift. Also taking birth from the fire is a beautiful young man, whom the voice anoints the 'reason for the Kuru dynasty's downfall'.

Both Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi go on to fulfil their respective destinies, though the price they exact is huge. In Dhrishtadyumna's case, he does not conquer Drona in a heroic manner. Instead, he chops off the acharya's head when the latter is meditating.

He pays for this heinous act with his life, when Ashwatthama – Drona's son – wages an all-out night-time attack on the Pandava camp.

In Draupadi's case, the destruction of the Kuru dynasty also brings with it the destruction of a large number of other kingdoms – including Panchala. Drupada's quest for revenge, therefore, becomes a self-inflicted wound.

Dhritarashtra

Dhritarashtra is the eldest of three sons sired by Vyasa. He is considered to be Vichitraveerya's firstborn because Vyasa impregnates Vichitraveerya's wives through the ritualistic process known as *niyoga*.

During this time, Dhritarashtra is born to Ambika. Pandu is born to Ambalika. And Vidura – *not considered Vichitraveerya's son* because his mother is a Sudra waiting-woman – is born to an unnamed woman working at the royal court.

Of these three, Dhritarashtra is the rightful heir to the throne because he is the firstborn of the first wife of Vichitraveerya. Second in line is Pandu, by virtue of being the firstborn of the second wife.

(We must note here that if Ambika had had more than one son with Vyasa, he would have had a bigger claim to the throne than Pandu.)

As it happens, though, Bhishma makes a decision to strip Dhritarashtra of his title because he is blind. Pandu is thus favoured to become king because he does not have any glaring physical defects.

There is precedent for a decision like this – a physical deformity in a king is considered reason enough to favour the next contender – but there is also precedent for blind kings doing a good job as rulers and administrators.

In short, the choice before Bhishma is a tough one. In hindsight, it is easy to see that he should have perhaps allowed Dhritarashtra to become king – with Pandu, Bhishma and Vidura offering support.

In time, Dhritarashtra becomes king of Hastinapur by proxy when Pandu relinquishes the throne. Dhritarashtra marries Gandhari, a princess of a western kingdom named Gandhar, and with her he has a hundred sons.

The eldest of these hundred sons – called the Kauravas – is Duryodhana.

Dhritarashtra lives through the war and dies as an old man in the forest. The primary theme of his life is the blind partiality that he displays toward Duryodhana, and thus becomes a reluctant accomplice in many of the prince's machinations.

Draupadi

Draupadi is the common wife of the Pandavas. The five brothers share her, and have a son each with her. She is the daughter of Drupada the king of Panchala, though she is not born to him biologically.

Drupada conducts a sacrificial ritual soon after losing half his kingdom to Drona and his Kuru princes who had just graduated from his school. In this rite, Drupada wishes that he is granted a means by which Drona can be killed.

Though it is not stated explicitly, part of Drupada's anger is directed at the larger Kuru establishment as well.

This is reflected in the manner in which Drupada's desire is fulfilled during the ceremony. He is given not one but *two* gifts, both of whom emerge from the fire:

- The first is a young man attired in full battle gear. He rides a horse around the compound and comes to pay his respects to Drupada. A voice prophesies that he will one day take the life of Drona.
- The second is a young woman with dark skin and bright eyes. A divine voice proclaims that she will cause the destruction of the Kuru empire. The Drupada household decide to call her Krishnaa. She also takes the name of Draupadi.

Draupadi's destiny, therefore, is to cause the downfall of the Kuru race. The exact process by which this happens is of course unknown to anyone at the time of her birth. But by becoming the common wife of the Pandavas, she becomes the symbol of the Pandavas' prowess, and later the tool by which Duryodhana seeks to hurt them.

The Mahabharata war, in many ways, is fought to restore Draupadi's honour; honour which is lost during the dice game.

Draupadi is the first of the six (her five husbands and herself) to die during their final ascent up the mountain of Meru. All six of them hope that they will be allowed into heaven in their mortal bodies. But only Yudhishtir is given the privilege.

At Draupadi's fall, Bhima asks Yudhishtir why the gods had denied her. And Yudhishtir replies, 'Because she loved Arjuna more than she loved the rest of us.'

Later, Yudhishtir meets Draupadi in Indra's hall, where she is decked in all ornaments and looks like the incarnation of Sri herself.

Drona

Drona is the son of Sage Bharadwaja and a celestial maiden called Ghritachi. However, the sage does not physically unite with the woman; his sperm leaves his body while he's thinking of her, and then he captures the fluid in a vessel to preserve it.

A few months later, the vessel gives birth to a baby boy. Bharadwaja names him 'Drona' – which means 'pot'.

During his growing-up years at Bharadwaja's hermitage, Drona makes friends with Prince Drupada of Panchala. The two of them become inseparable companions, and in a moment of affection, Drupada promises Drona that he will give him half the kingdom after they've both grown into adults.

Their paths diverge after Drupada's education is complete. Drona becomes a poor householder married to a woman named Kripi. They have a son named Ashwatthama.

Driven by the desire to provide his family with material comfort, Drona travels first to Panchala and reminds Drupada of the age-old promise. Drupada pretends to not know Drona at all.

Seething with the snub, Drona goes to Hastinapur and takes shelter at Kripi's brother Kripa's house. Kripa has already served a stint as a teacher to the hundred and five Kuru princes. Now Kripa introduces Drona to Bhishma.

Bhishma employs Drona as the weapons-teacher of the princes. Drona thus becomes Dronacharya.

After teaching his students, as his dakshina, Drona asks the Pandavas and Kauravas to invade Panchala and take half the kingdom from Drupada. This

incident serves as a significant one, because it leads directly to the birth of Draupadi.

In the Kurukshetra war, Drona fights on the side of Duryodhana. He presides over the most violent phase of the war, from the tenth to the fifteenth days. He supervises the ruthless killing of Abhimanyu.

He dies on the fifteenth day of the war, after Yudhishtir lies to him about Abhimanyu's death. When he relinquishes his weapons and sits down on his chariot to meditate, Dhrishtadyumna cuts off his head with a sword.

This act inflames Ashwatthama's heart, and leads to the night-time massacre of the Sauptika Parva.

Drupada

Drupada is the king of Panchala and Drona's contemporary. After losing half his kingdom at the hands of the young Pandavas shortly after their graduation ceremony, Drupada performs a sacrifice with the express desire to take revenge.

His main target is Drona, but he also has an eye on the Kuru kingdom because he believes that Drona's attack on Panchala must have had Bhishma's approval as well.

His sacrifice becomes a success: he gains a son and a daughter from it. He names his daughter Draupadi – she is destined to bring the Kuru dynasty to its downfall – and his son Dhrishtadyumna.

Drupada's biggest political play is to seek and gain the friendship and trust of the Pandavas. He does this by designing an archery test so difficult for Draupadi's hand that he is certain only Arjuna can pass it.

Thus he ensures that Draupadi is won by one of the Pandavas. And when Yudhishtir proposes that Draupadi will be the common wife, he agrees after a brief period of reluctance – not least because the arrangement makes Draupadi Yudhishtir's first wife.

With the ascension of the Pandavas' fortunes, Drupada and Panchala also become prosperous.

Drupada falls out of favour when the Pandavas leave on their exile, but at the end of the thirteen years, he is eager for war. He wishes to destroy the Kuru dynasty alongside the Pandavas.

In the war, Drupada dies in a duel against Drona. But he dies secure in the knowledge that his son Dhrishtadyumna is destined to kill his arch enemy.

Though he does not live to see it, Drupada's children accomplish their respective destinies. In the wake of Kurukshetra, the Kuru throne is pounded into the dust. A new power structure emerges.

Duhsasana

Duhsasana is the second-eldest of the hundred Kaurava brothers, after Duryodhana.

Along with Duryodhana, Karna and Shakuni, Duhsasana is often considered the fourth prong of the ‘wicked foursome’ that constantly plots against the Pandavas.

Though not powerful, wise or crafty in his own right, Duhsasana is completely loyal and obedient to his elder brother, and is often seen encouraging all of Duryodhana’s destructive thoughts.

Duhsasana plays the role of ‘enforcer’ during the dice game. First, Duryodhana commands him to go after Draupadi in her chambers and to bring her forcefully to the assembly. Second, Karna – after dismantling Vikarna’s argument – orders him to remove Draupadi’s robes in public view as befits a prostitute.

Duhsasana eagerly obeys each instruction. Later, after the second dice-game has been lost by the Pandavas, he loses all sense of civility and dances grotesquely in front of them, taunting them with unbridled hubris.

He earns Bhima’s wrath on both these instances. Bhima takes the oath that he will one day not only kill Duhsasana but also drink his blood.

In the war, Duhsasana distinguishes himself on a couple of occasions as a warrior. But at the end, he dies at the hands of Bhima. His chest gets torn open by his cousin’s eager hands, and the blood that flows out from within him is quaffed by Bhima.

Incidentally, Gandhari confronts Bhima about this later, to which Bhima replies that he did not really drink Duhsasana's blood in the moment, but was only soaking his lips in it to fulfil his oath.

Durvasa

Durvasa is one of the sages that populate the Mahabharata universe. Like Vishwamitra, Durvasa is known for his temper.

His main contribution to the storyline is that he visits Kuntibhoja when Pritha (also known as Kunti) is an unwed maiden, and after a year of living at the royal palace and being attended upon by the princess, gives her a boon.

The boon gives Kunti the power to summon any god of her choice and compel him to have a son with her. She can call upon a single god with each use of the incantation. And she can use it as many number of times as she wishes.

Soon after Durvasa's departure, Kunti uses the chant with the intention of testing it – almost half-believing that it would not work – and summons Surya to her side. With this encounter, she becomes mother to a boy who will grow up to be Karna.

After her marriage to the sexually cursed Pandu, Kunti uses Durvasa's mantra three more times to give birth to Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna. It also appears that this chant can be transmitted from person to person, because soon after the birth of Arjuna, Kunti heeds Pandu's recommendation and teaches Madri how to use it.

Madri craftily uses her one chant to summon the Ashwin twins – and becomes mother to twin boys.

The Pandavas are born, therefore, with the direct action of Durvasa's boon.

In another, smaller incident, Durvasa visits the Pandavas on their exile one evening after Draupadi had washed the Akshayapatra and put it aside. The sage

has been sent there by Duryodhana, who hopes that the Pandavas' failure to feed Durvasa would stoke the latter's anger and probably lead him to curse them.

However, Krishna arrives just in time to save Draupadi. Using a single grain of rice as seed, he uses his magic to feed Durvasa and his band of followers.

Duryodhana

Duryodhana is the eldest of the hundred Kaurava brothers. His father is Dhritarashtra and his mother is Gandhari.

As the biological firstborn of the elder brother, Duryodhana believes that his claim to the throne of Hastinapur is stronger than that of Yudhishtir.

He argues that Dhritarashtra had been robbed of the throne unnecessarily, because blindness is not the kind of affliction that would obstruct all duties of a king. He accuses Bhishma of being partial to Pandu.

Duryodhana's position is that even if Dhritarashtra had to be sidelined, the decision should have been binding only upon *that generation*. If Dhritarashtra's sons are able-bodied and otherwise free of diseases, why should they not succeed their father?

In Duryodhana's mind, therefore, Pandu is the interim ruler, given the throne only for one generation because of his elder brother's unfortunate circumstance.

Pandu's sons, therefore, have no right whatsoever to the throne.

This view of Pandu and the Pandavas as usurpers of his throne fuels all of Duryodhana's hatred. Everyone who disagrees with him on this is denounced as a detractor. Bhishma and Drona often find themselves targets of his ire.

When Duryodhana cheats the Pandavas out of their kingdom, therefore, his justification is that he is only taking back what is rightfully his. By that time, plenty of bad blood has already flowed between the cousins. And when he slaps his thigh to beckon to Draupadi as if she were his slave, he reaches his nadir.

His biggest play is the nurturing of Karna in the hope that he would become Arjuna's nemesis. In the war, Duryodhana tries his best to rally Bhishma and Drona to his way of thinking. But despite his best efforts, the Kuru army loses.

Duryodhana fights a climactic mace-battle against Bhima at the end of the eighteenth day. He falls to his death when Bhima – in a move that contradicts all rules of fair fighting – crushes his thighs.

In his dying moments, Duryodhana hears from Ashwatthama's lips the story of how the Panchala camp was set ablaze during the night. Duryodhana praises the son of Drona and dies peacefully.

Ekalavya

Ekalavya is one of the minor but significant characters in the Mahabharata. He is the son of Hiranyadhanush, a Nishada chieftain who lives in one of the forests surrounding the Kuru kingdom.

Ekalavya desires to have Drona, the preceptor of the Kuru princes, as teacher. But on being rejected by Drona, he teaches himself the art of archery and surpasses even Arjuna in skill.

However, his progress is cut short by a chillingly ruthless act.

When Drona discovers that the Nishada prince has become better than all of his higher-born students – especially Arjuna – he demands that Ekalavya give up his right thumb as *guru dakshina*.

(At the end of a person's tenure with a teacher, it is customary for the guru to ask for dakshina from his student – as fee. Typically, a student should never say no to whatever his guru asks.)

Ekalavya gives up his right thumb smilingly, even though Drona did not consent to become his teacher.

This little episode does not have much of a bearing on the overall story, but serves to exemplify the privileged position enjoyed by the Kuru princes, and the extent to which Drona went to protect it.

Later, Ekalavya becomes one of Jarasandha's allies during Magadha's many wars with Mathura. During these skirmishes, Krishna kills him.

If Drona had reacted to the situation with more maturity, he might have brought Ekalavya to the notice of Bhishma. The grandsire might have then asked the young man to enter the service of the Kuru army.

Maybe Ekalavya would have been brought into the fold of the royal palace. Maybe he would have been taught by Drona alongside the Kuru princes.

Ekalavya would never have had the same opportunities for wealth or privilege as the Kuru princes – far too much social distance separates him from them – but he might have become a famed atiratha in his own right.

But then, maybe this is all wishful thinking. Archery is considered the sport of kings, so perhaps Bhishma and Drona would have pushed the young man into a role more ‘suited to a Nishada’ – that of a foot-soldier or a supply-carrier in the army.

Still, it is tempting to think how different Ekalavya’s life would have been if Drona had been kinder to him.

Alas, it was not to be.

Gandhari

Gandhari is the wife of Dhritarashtra, and mother to the hundred princes of the Kuru dynasty together known as the Kauravas.

Her marriage to the elder but invalid brother puts her in direct competition with Kunti, because the woman to give birth to a son first would strengthen her claim to the throne of Hastinapur.

Gandhari gets pregnant before Kunti, but is forced to endure a long, two-year pregnancy with her stomach getting heavier and heavier with each passing month. During this time she hears news that Kunti had already given birth to Yudhishtir.

This causes Gandhari to beat her stomach repeatedly in despair, which makes the hardened ball of flesh inside her womb fall out. A shocked Gandhari does not know what to do, but Vyasa arrives to calm her.

He breaks the mound of flesh into a hundred and one thumb-sized pieces. He places each of them into a jar of clarified butter. He tells the waiting women to watch over them, and leaves.

Ten months or so after this, the first of the jars breaks open and out pops Duryodhana. All the other brothers emerge from their respective wombs soon after. Their only sister, Dussala, is also born.

Throughout her life, Gandhari is torn between her love for Duryodhana and her desire to be fair to the Pandavas. Despite professing love and affection for the sons of Pandu, Gandhari does not take any significant action to rein in her son's ambitions.

She tries to bend Duryodhana's mind toward peace right at the very end, as war seems imminent. But she fails.

After the war, Gandhari curses Krishna because she believes that Krishna could have and should have prevented the carnage. She tells him that the race of Vrishnis will also collapse by infighting – much the same way as the Kurus.

Gandhari dies a couple of years after the end of the war. She voluntarily immolates herself in a forest fire along with Dhritarashtra and Kunti.

Ganga

Ganga is a goddess that personifies the river Ganga, on whose bank the kingdom of Kuru stands. In many ways, the Mahabharata begins with the descent of Ganga to Earth to meet Shantanu, the king of Kuru.

From the union of Shantanu and Ganga is born Devavrata, who grows up to become Bhishma.

It so happens that Ganga comes to Earth in order to meet Mahabhisha, a man she desires in heaven. Mahabhisha is cursed by Brahma to become a king on Earth for another transgression. So Ganga decides to come to the world of men to meet him.

Another angle to the story is that around the same time, the eight elemental gods (called the *Vasus*) steal Nandini, Vasishtha's cow, from his hermitage. Vasishtha curses the eight gods with punishing stints on Earth.

But when the Vasus appeal to Vasishtha and tell him that the act was perpetrated by only Prabhasa, the youngest of them, Vasishtha relents and spares the elder seven. But Prabhasa is destined to live long, celibate life on Earth.

The Vasus then approach Ganga, and ask whether she would bear them in her womb. Ganga says yes.

These two tales converge in the marriage of Shantanu and Ganga. Soon after, Ganga begins to kill her newborn babies. Shantanu tolerates this seven times, but on the eighth occasion, the one time Ganga does *not* wish to kill her son, he confronts and insults her.

Ganga leaves Shantanu with Devavrata. She rears him in heaven. After sixteen years, she brings him back to be made crown-prince of Hastinapur.

Toward the end of the story, angered by the way in which Arjuna has killed her son Bhishma, Ganga curses the third Pandava that he will be killed by his own son one day.

Ulupi the Naga princess hears of this, and arranges matters such that a fight breaks out between Arjuna and Babhruvahana, and that Arjuna loses his life to his son. Ulupi then revives him with her magic.

Ghatotkacha

Ghatotkacha is the son of Bhima and his first wife, Hidimbi.

He is born shortly after the Pandavas escape the fiery trap set for them in Varanavata by Duryodhana. They escape through a tunnel to the riverbank, cross over in a boat, and hide inside a forest.

Here, Bhima kills a Rakshasa named Hidimba, and marries his sister Hidimbi.

The Pandavas stay in the forest with Hidimbi until she gives birth to a son. They give him the name Ghatotkacha because his head looks as bald as a pot. (The word 'ghata' means 'pot'.)

Ghatotkacha grows into youth almost immediately after he is born – a trait, we're told, shared by all Rakshasas. He takes over the abandoned clan of Rakshasas left behind by Hidimba and becomes their chief.

Later, when the Pandavas are on their exile, Ghatotkacha helps them traverse the rugged northern peaks. He and a bunch of his men carry Draupadi and the Pandavas to Gandhamadana and back.

In the war, Ghatotkacha fights on the Pandavas' side. On the night of the fourteenth day, he is sent on a mission by Krishna to fight Karna to the death. He lures the Vasava dart from Karna's clutches.

In the moment of death, he swells to the size of a giant so that when he falls, he crushes a whole akshauhini of troops under his weight.

With his death, he also ensures that Karna no longer poses a danger to Arjuna.

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Indra

Indra is the king of the gods. In the Mahabharata, he is the father of Arjuna, the third Pandava.

He makes an appearance in multiple portions of the story. When Kunti asks Pandu who he would like to summon for her *third* use of Durvasa's incantation, he says, 'I'd like a son by Indra, the lord of the gods!'

As a young man, shortly after his marriage to Subhadra, Arjuna fights against an army led by his father during the burning of the Khandava forest. Agni wishes to devour the forest to cure himself of indigestion. Indra, meanwhile, wants to rescue it because his friend Takshaka – a Naga king – lives there.

Krishna and Arjuna team up to defeat Indra in a violent fight. In this instance, neither Arjuna nor Indra acknowledges one another as father or son.

During the Pandavas' exile, Arjuna sets out on a long quest to procure divine weapons. He sets out to Indrakila, the abode of Indra, and calls out to him for help. It is Indra who guides Arjuna to Shiva, who gives the Pandava his Pashupatastra.

After this, Indra takes Arjuna to Amaravati for a period of five years. Arjuna helps Indra defeat the Nivatakavachas, and also frees the city of Hiranyapuri. During this time, Indra showers Arjuna with numerous weapons.

Closer to the beginning of the war, Indra performs another action that directly helps Arjuna. Disguised as a Brahmin, he visits Karna and asks him for the kavacha-kundalas, which make Karna invincible.

Karna peels his divine armour and earrings without a murmur. Though Indra gives Karna one use of his Vasava weapon in return, this exchange immensely helps Arjuna in his rivalry against Karna.

At the very end of the story, Indra personally welcomes Yudhishtir into heaven, proclaiming him as the very embodiment of Dharma.

Jarasandha

Jarasandha is the king of Magadha during the years of Krishna and Balarama's childhood and early youth.

At the time of Arjuna's wedding to Subhadra and Yudhishtir's first foray into ruling Khandavaprastha by himself, Jarasandha is at the peak of his powers, annexing not only the eastern kingdoms but also nabbing important allies in Chedi and Mathura.

He courts the prince of Mathura, Kamsa, and encourages him to overthrow his father, Ugrasena. Then, Jarasandha gives two of his daughters in marriage to Kamsa, strengthening the alliance.

When Krishna and Balarama kill Kamsa, it comes as a huge blow to Jarasandha's expansionist ambitions. It may even have been an existential threat too. So he puts Mathura under constant military pressure and makes life incredibly difficult for the two brothers just finding their feet.

He forces Balarama and Krishna to vacate Mathura and migrate to the western ocean.

Jarasandha is born to King Vrihadratha, who gives his twin wives (unnamed) half a fruit each in order for them to give birth to sons. The magic works; they get pregnant and do deliver on the same day. But to Vrihadratha's shock, his two wives each give birth to half a male infant's body.

The two parts of the boy are lifeless. Vrihadratha asks for them to be discarded in the forest. Here, a Rakshasa woman named Jara inadvertently puts the two parts together and is astonished to see the boy come to life.

She brings the prince back to the kingdom. Vrihadratha gives his son the name, Jarasandha – he who was joined by Jara.

During the Rajasuya Parva, Jarasandha dies during a wrestling match again Bhima. This clears the path for Yudhishtir to become emperor unchallenged.

Jayadratha

Jayadratha is a king of the Sindhu kingdom. The only daughter of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra, Dusshala, is given in marriage to Jayadratha. This makes him the son-in-law of the Kuru house.

Jayadratha's father is Vriddhakshatra. He is one of the great royal sages, who has performed enough god-pleasing sacrifices to get a boon that whoever causes his son Jayadratha's head to fall to the ground will himself immediately have his own head shatter into a thousand pieces.

The wording of the boon is important. On the fourteenth day of the war, when Arjuna sees Jayadratha come into view with sunset looming, Krishna advises his friend that he should behead Jayadratha and send the head flying into the distance, into the forest next to Kurukshetra.

The plan is that Arjuna should send Jayadratha's head into the lap of Vriddhakshatra, who is meditating at that moment under a tree.

Vriddhakshatra is not aware of his son's head on his lap. At the end of his prayers, when he gets up, the head falls to the ground. And according to the boon, his own head disintegrates into a thousand pieces.

In the war, Jayadratha's most important contribution is the skill with which he guards the mouth of Drona's Chakravyuha on the thirteenth day.

After Abhimanyu goes past him into the array, Jayadratha withstands the combined might of Bhima, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Nakula and Sahadeva, and stops them from following Abhimanyu in. He thus protects the Chakravyuha from breaking.

As a direct consequence of this, Abhimanyu is left alone in the Chakravyuha. In due course of time, he dies. Arjuna takes a vow that night that he will definitely kill Jayadratha the next day – a quest that proves ultimately successful.

Jayadratha is able to summon so much power on this one day because of Shiva's boon. Jayadratha asks him for enough ability to defeat the Pandavas, but Shiva tells him that that is impossible.

As a consolation, he says, 'You will be able to defeat the Pandavas on *one* day – with the exception of Arjuna.'

Karna

Karna is the first biological son of Pritha (also known as Kunti), the adopted daughter of Kuntibhoja. Kunti receives a boon from Durvasa that she will be able to summon any god of her choice and compel him to give her a son.

Kunti is a young and impetuous maiden when she receives this gift. She wonders after the sage has left whether it actually works. Just to test it, therefore, she calls to the sun god, Surya.

To her great surprise, Surya actually descends into her room and proclaims himself smitten by her. Though Kunti is reluctant, their union produces a resplendent baby boy clad in divine armour.

It is unclear how many people in Kuntibhoja's palace knew about the princess's unwanted pregnancy. But all the stakeholders decide that the best solution to the problem was to abandon the baby.

The boy is thus left afloat on the Yamuna, and is found by a charioteer named Adiratha and his wife, Radha. They call him Vasusena – he who is born in wealth. Over time, he comes to be known as Karna.

Karna's arrival at the Kuru graduation ceremony marks his entry into the story. His life is defined by several incidents that could be termed 'unfortunate', the most significant of which is when Kripa asks him to introduce himself.

When he hesitates, it becomes clear that he is a low-born man. This gives Duryodhana the opportunity to extend a hand of friendship toward Karna.

Loyalty toward Duryodhana, from this moment on, becomes Karna's vital tenet. This drives all of his choices – the humiliation of Draupadi, the enmity with

Arjuna, the rejection of Krishna's offer on the eve of the war – right up until his death.

Karna dies on the evening of the seventeenth day, in a long-awaited archery duel with Arjuna. He is outmatched in every respect – Arjuna has the better charioteer, better chariot, better weapons, and better skill – but he manages to hold on until his chariot-wheel gets stuck in the mud.

When he leaps onto the ground to attend to the wheel, Krishna tells Arjuna to shoot a fatal arrow at his enemy. Arjuna complies.

The Pandavas come to know a few days after the war that Karna is their elder brother. They are shocked beyond belief. Yudhishtir laments that the war has forced him not only to kill his preceptor and grandfather, but also his elder brother.

Kripa

Kripa is the son of a sage named Saradwata. He has a twin sister named Kripa, whom Drona marries. Kripa and Drona have a son together called Ashwatthama.

Kripa and Kripa are born in the same way as Drona, from a vessel containing a sage's vital fluid, without need for fertilization with a woman's egg.

Saradwata the sage is engaged in severe austerities with the intention of learning as much as he can about weapons and warfare. Indra, worried that the rishi is going to use the powers to overthrow him from heaven, sends a maiden called Janapadi to distract the young man.

Despite being the epitome of restraint, Saradwat involuntarily ejaculates when he sees Janapadi. The semen that leaves his body falls upon a clump of heath, and in due course of time, two children take birth on the grass.

A soldier from the army of Shantanu chances upon that way, and takes the two children back to the king's court. Shantanu says, 'Let them become my children!' And he names them Kripa and Kripa.

Saradwata, having learnt that his children are being fostered at Shantanu's palace, comes there and teaches his son the four branches of the science of arms.

Kripa thus grows up to be a man well-versed in weapons and war. He becomes the first preceptor to the Kuru princes. Later, after Kripa returns to the palace with her husband Drona, Kripa passes the mantle of royal teacher over to his brother-in-law.

In the Kurukshetra war, Kripa is one of the three survivors on the Kaurava side, the other two being Ashwatthama and Kritavarma. He tries to talk

Ashwatthama out of launching the night-time attack on the Panchala, but fails. He and Kritavarma guard the entrance to the camp as Ashwatthama wreaks havoc inside it.

Kripa is often considered one of the Kuru elders – alongside the likes of Bhishma, Drona and Vidura.

Krishna

Krishna is the younger brother of Balarama, the eighth son of Devaki and Vasudeva, and the adopted son of Yashoda and Nanda. In the Mahabharata, he is described by several characters (including himself) as an avatar of Narayana, or Vishnu.

His birth occurs in a prison during the regime-change of Mathura which sees Kamsa overthrow his father Ugrasena. Behind this coup is the scheming mind of Jarasandha, the king of Magadha, who convinces Kamsa to defect from his alliances with Shurasena and Kunti and to befriend Magadha instead.

Krishna and Balarama are sent to Vrindavan, where they're fostered in the house of Nanda, the chief of a cowherd settlement, and his wife Yashoda.

In his sixteenth year (or thereabouts), Krishna returns to Mathura, kills Kamsa, and 'liberates' the kingdom by reinstalling Ugrasena as its king. Here the word 'liberation' means that Mathura breaks its alliance with Magadha and realigns itself with Shurasena.

This, of course, brings about backlash from Jarasandha. He launches a series of attacks on Mathura, forcing Krishna and Balarama to vacate the kingdom and migrate westward to build a new city – called Dwaraka.

From this point on, Krishna's connection to Vrindavan and Mathura is effectively severed. All his energies are spent in the complex task of uniting the Vrishnis and persuading them to fight under Balarama.

After the founding and consolidation of Anarta (with its capital at Dwaraka), Krishna seeks new allies – especially on the Gangetic plain. He sets his eyes on Kuru in particular.

He builds a deep and enduring friendship with Arjuna, the most powerful of the Pandavas, while allowing Balarama to build a similarly strong relationship with Duryodhana, the most influential of the Kauravas.

Throughout the Pandava-Kaurava quarrel, Krishna makes sure not to take an official position though he privately condemns the actions of Duryodhana.

In the final war, Krishna gives all of his army to Duryodhana and becomes Arjuna's charioteer. He guides the Pandavas to an improbable victory with the help of several well-placed tactics.

Krishna dies after the events of the Mausala Parva, during which the kingdom of Anarta is destroyed by infighting – just as predicted by Gandhari's curse. After witnessing the death of Balarama, Krishna arranges for some affairs to be set in order, and then goes to sit under a tree.

A stray arrow from the bow of a hunter drives through his foot, and in a short while he bleeds to death.

Kritavarma

Kritavarma is one of the chieftains of the Anarta kingdom that pledge their allegiance to Balarama when he builds the city of Dwaraka. Along with Satyaki, Kritavarma appears to be one of Krishna's most loyal followers.

Before the unification of the Vrishnis – which happens after Balarama and Krishna migrate westward from Mathura – Kritavarma and Satyaki are princes of independent kingdoms. They were constantly at war until Krishna arrives to unite them.

This rivalry between the Vrishnis rears its ugly head long after the Kurukshetra war has been won. A quarrel erupts between Satyaki and Kritavarma, which leads to the civil war that brings down Anarta.

Kritavarma is one of the three survivors of the war on the Kaurava side, the other two being Kripa and Ashwatthama.

Despite fighting on Duryodhana's side, Kritavarma remains loyal to Krishna the whole time. During Krishna's trip to Hastinapur, Duryodhana makes a plan to capture Krishna. Kritavarma and Satyaki work together to foil it.

Kritavarma is considered by Bhishma to be one of the atirathas, and he brings one akshauhini of troops to fight for the Kauravas. Satyaki brings exactly the same number of his soldiers to fight alongside the Pandavas.

Kunti

Kunti is the son of King Shurasena who rules the kingdom of the same name. Her birth name is Pritha. She is given for fostering at the house of King Kuntibhoja of Kunti. The princess takes on the name of Kunti shortly thereafter.

As a maiden, Kunti serves Sage Durvasa for a period of a year with such dedication that the sage gives her a boon: Kunti will be able to summon any god of her choosing who will then be compelled to have a son with her.

Kunti uses this incantation once as a maiden just to see if it works – and is shocked when Surya the sun god appears to her. With him, she reluctantly has a son, and then abandons him.

This son grows up to be Karna, who becomes the most popular tragic hero of the Mahabharata.

In her swayamvara, Kunti chooses Pandu, the king of Hastinapur. At the time of her marriage to Pandu, Dhritarashtra, the older brother in the Kuru house, has already married Gandhari the princess of Gandhara.

Shortly after marrying Pandu, Kunti realizes that her husband is impotent. She uses Durvasa's boon and summons three gods – Yama, Vayu and Indra – to give birth to three sons: Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna respectively.

She also gives Madri, her co-wife, one use of the mantra. Madri makes a clever play with it, summoning the Ashwin twins together to gain *two sons* with one stroke.

The five of these sons together are called the Pandavas – though biologically speaking, none of them are born to Pandu.

Kunti plays an important role in nurturing what she thinks are her son's rights to the throne of Hastinapur. She repeatedly urges Yudhishtir and his brothers to fight the Kauravas for kingship.

During the Pandavas' exile, Kunti lives with Vidura, refusing to take advantage of Dhritarashtra's hospitality when relationships between the cousins are so bad. Here, just before the war begins, she receives Krishna and tells him the secret of Karna's birth.

Kunti tries to lure Karna over to the Pandava side, one morning on the bank of the river Ganga. Karna refuses, but gives her a promise that he will not kill any of the Pandavas except for Arjuna.

Kunti dies of old age two years after war, in the forest. She accompanies Gandhari onto Dhritarashtra's funeral pyre.

Madri

Madri is the second of Pandu's wives. She is the princess of a kingdom called Madra, and sister to Shalya. She is often considered to be the more favoured wife of Pandu.

Kunti and Madri have a relationship that is functional but understandably tinged with mutual envy. While Madri envies Kunti's position as queen and first wife, Kunti envies the younger woman's emotional and sexual hold on their husband.

Pandu gets cursed by Sage Kindama that he will die the moment he approaches a woman sexually. For a long while he manages to control his impulses. But on the Gandhamadana, one spring evening, he succumbs to temptation and comes to Madri.

This leads Kunti to blame Madri for Pandu's death. Madri also blames herself to the extent that she chooses to immolate herself on Pandu's funeral pyre.

The other reason that Kunti does not trust Madri is because when Kunti gives Madri the chance to use Durvasa's chant for precisely *one* time, Madri puts it to clever use and summons the Ashwin twins so that she can get two sons with one chant.

Madri gives birth in that way to Nakula and Sahadeva. At the moment of her death, she hands the twins over to Kunti and tells her, 'You're their mother now.' Kunti, to her credit, does not allow her ill-feeling for Madri to spill over onto her care for Nakula and Sahadeva.

In the Kurukshetra war, Shalya fights on the side of the Kauravas, and clashes repeatedly with Nakula and Sahadeva, the sons of his dead sister.

Nahusha

Nahusha is a king in the Mahabharata universe who – during his time on Earth – earns so much goodwill that when Indra relinquishes the throne on one occasion, the gods ask Nahusha to come up to heaven to rule them.

Nahusha starts off being a good king to the dwellers of heaven as well, but over time, his pride gets the better of him. In a moment of bad judgement, he insults Sage Vasishtha, who curses him to become a serpent and fall to the Earth.

The deliverance of the curse will happen, Vasishtha says, when a worthy king will come and answer all his questions correctly.

Nahusha thus becomes a snake and inhabits a cave. Years later, during the twelfth year of the Pandavas' exile, he gets a visit from Bhima, whom he promptly ensnares and prepares to eat.

But close on the heels of Bhima is Yudhishtir, who engages with Nahusha in conversation and answers all of the serpent's questions. These questions cover a wide range of topics from philosophy and politics to ethics and spirituality.

After Yudhishtir answers all of Nahusha's questions satisfactorily, Vasishtha's curse is broken and Nahusha's form changes from that of a snake to that of a human.

This episode with Nahusha – and the manner in which Yudhishtir rescues Bhimasena – will repeat itself later when Yama disguises himself as a Yaksha and tests Yudhishtir. This time, the questions are more numerous and wide-ranging, and the stakes are higher: because if Yudhishtir fails, all four of his brothers will die.

Yudhishtir's character arc lends itself to tests like this; while Arjuna proves his skills and Bhima his strength, Yudhishtir grows in wisdom and knowledge, which he displays through conversations with the likes of Nahusha.

Nakula

Nakula is the fourth of the Pandavas in order of birth. He is the elder of the two sons of Madri, the second wife of Pandu.

Though Nakula and Sahadeva are considered to be Pandavas and brothers of Kunti's sons, it is important to note that they're not biologically related to Yudhishtir, Bhima and Arjuna.

Nakula is considered to be the most handsome of the five Pandavas. During the Rajasuya, Nakula conducts a military expedition to the west, and brings back a large amount of wealth for Yudhishtir's emperorship.

Among his conquests, the prime ones are the kingdoms of Rohitaka, Sairishaka and Mahetta. He also defeated many small tribes like the Dasarnas the Sivas and the Trigartas.

During the thirteenth year of the Pandavas' exile, Nakula disguises himself as a horse-trainer named Granthika.

Nakula is third of the six of them to die on their final ascent to heaven on the mountain of Meru. When Bhima asks Yudhishtir why Nakula was not granted permission to enter heaven, Yudhishtir replies: 'Because he was vain about his physical beauty.'

Pandu

Pandu is the only son of Ambalika, the youngest of the three princesses of Kosala abducted by Bhishma for marrying into the Kuru family. Her older sisters are named Amba and Ambika.

Amba takes Bhishma's permission to seek her fortune with her lover, Suvala. Ambika and Ambalika become wives of Vichitraveerya, but he dies without impregnating either of them.

Vyasa is brought to help with the matter, and with him, Ambika has Dhritarashtra while Ambalika has Pandu.

Despite being the younger of the two princes, Pandu gets thrust onto the throne by Bhishma because Dhritarashtra's blindness is thought to be a handicap too debilitating for a king.

Pandu is a formidable warrior, but he shows plenty of reluctance at attending to royal duties such as administration. Soon after a lengthy and successful expedition of conquest, he installs Dhritarashtra as temporary king and retires into the woods with his two wives.

During this retreat, Pandu shoots a deer while it is mating with his doe. In its dying throes, the deer transforms into a sage who refers to himself as Kindama.

Angrily berating the king for shooting down a beast while in the process of seeking sexual congress, Kindama curses Pandu that he will die the moment he approaches any woman with amorous intentions.

This essentially renders Pandu impotent. But with the help of Kunti's magical boon (received from Durvasa), he adopts five children: Yudhishtir, Bhima,

Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva. Together they come to be known as the Pandavas – ‘sons of Pandu’.

Shortly after the birth of Sahadeva, Pandu – after years of practicing celibacy – gives into his desire while out on a walk with Madri. In the moment of their union, he is struck down by an invisible bolt of thunder, and dies.

Parashara

Parashara makes precisely one appearance in the entire Mahabharata, but it is a significant one.

Satyavati, the daughter of King Uparichara, is being fostered at a fishing settlement. She is given the name of Matsyagandhi because the smell of fish that clings to her person. She ferries passengers across the Yamuna back and forth.

When she comes of age, she chances upon a meeting with Sage Parashara, who takes a liking to her. He approaches and propositions her.

While Satyavati is flattered by the sage's attention, she also knows that sex means a high likelihood of pregnancy, and that pregnancy before marriage is frowned upon for women. She tells Parashara her fears.

Parashara assures her of two things:

- Satyavati's virginity will not be 'taken' by her union with Parashara. It will be restored right afterward. We can take this to mean that her hymen will magically return.
- Satyavati's pregnancy will not take the usual time; she will give birth in a few hours instead of the usual ten months. What's more, the son that will be born to them will grow into a young man by that evening, and will accompany his father on his travels.

In short, Parashara tells Satyavati that she can go back home that very night as if nothing had happened. Also, he promises to replace the stench of fish that emanates from her body with a divine fragrance that will change her very destiny.

This proves too irresistible to Satyavati. She rows the sage to a fog-covered island in the Yamuna, and there, she gives birth to a boy who – as promised –

grows into a youth before her very eyes. They give him the name Dwaipayana, the 'island-born'.

Later, Dwaipayana grows into a great sage who will divide the Veda into four parts. This project gives him the name Veda-vyasa – the 'divider of the Vedas'.

For Satyawati's part, she begins to now emit a sweet scent constantly. This fragrance catches the attention of Shantanu, and entices him into falling in love with the fisher-maiden.

Thus, the union of Parashara and Satyawati brings forth a number of incidents that prove to be pivotal in the larger context of the Mahabharata.

Parashurama

Parashurama is the son of Jamadagni and Renuka. He is the antithesis of Vishwamitra, in the sense that while Vishwamitra is a Brahmin born in a Kshatriya body, Parashurama is a Kshatriya born in a Brahmin's.

While Parashurama is considered by many to be one of the avatars of Vishnu – the Ramayana has a famous scene in which the energy of Narayana transmits itself from Parashurama into Rama through the bow of Shiva – in the Mahabharata, he is described as one of the many great sages.

He touches the main narrative primarily through three points:

- He is the preceptor-in-arms to young Devavrata, the son of Ganga and Shantanu. Later, when Amba approaches him with the request that he should persuade Bhishma into marrying her, Parashurama fights against his own student – and loses.
- He is the chosen preceptor for Karna. The young Karna – knowing that he will be rejected if he told the truth about his lineage – disguises himself as a Brahmin and learns all that he can from Parashurama. The truth comes out toward the end of Karna's education, and Parashurama curses Karna in anger.
- He gives away all his weapons – and the knowledge behind their use – to Drona, thus anointing Drona his spiritual successor. Using this gift, Drona becomes preceptor to the Kuru princes, and later fights in the Mahabharata war with distinction.

Also, the land known as Kurukshetra also has another name: Samantapanchaka. This is where five great lakes meet. It is said that after

annihilating the Kshatriyas a total of twenty one times, Parashurama comes here to wash his axe, turning the water of the lakes red.

Many, many years after Parashurama's act of violence, the Kurukshetra war happens to once again cleanse the Earth of all unvirtuous Kshatriya blood.

Sahadeva

Sahadeva is the youngest of the five Pandavas. He is the second son of Madri, and is often considered the wisest of the five brothers. Yudhishtir is often seen taking his opinion on matters.

During the Digvijaya Parva, as Yudhishtir readies himself to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice, Sahadeva goes southward at the head of a large army. Of the many kingdoms that he invades, the most notable one is Mahishmati.

Mahishmati is ruled by a king named Nila. His son-in-law is none other than Agni, the god of fire. During his daughter's wedding, Nila extracts from Agni the promise that the god will defend Mahishmati from all invasions.

So when Sahadeva arrives at the kingdom, he sees in front of him – decked in complete battle armour – the imposing form of Agni. Sahadeva is at first willing to fight anyone for the sake of Yudhishtir's ambition, but better sense prevails upon some thought, and King Nila agrees to offer support to the Pandavas.

At the Rajasuya, when Shishupala makes a ruckus and insults all and sundry, Sahadeva makes a public threat that anyone who seeks to stop Yudhishtir from performing the arghya will 'face the brunt of my sword'.

This angers many of the assembled kings, and they all rise in revolt. It is left to Yudhishtir to calm them down.

At the dice game, Sahadeva takes a vow that he will kill Shakuni. He fulfils this promise on the eighteenth day of the Kurukshetra war, when he challenges the prince of Gandhara to a duel and kills him.

Sahadeva is the first of the Pandavas to die during the Mahaprasthanika Parva, as the five brothers seek to climb the mountain of Meru in a bid to reach heaven in their mortal bodies.

When Bhima asks Yudhishtir why Sahadeva had been denied admission, Yudhishtir replies, 'Because he was always vain about his wisdom and spiritual strength.'

Satyaki

Satyaki – whose given name is Yuyudhana – is a Vrishni chieftain and the son of a king called Satyaka. Along with Kritavarma, he is considered one among the staunchest followers of Krishna.

He fights on the side of the Pandavas at the head of an akshauhini of troops. Krishna sends Kritavarma – also with an akshauhini – to fight for the Kauravas, and Satyaki to the Pandavas.

From the beginning, Satyaki is passionately in support of the Pandava cause, even to the extent of advising Yudhishtir against seeking a peaceful solution.

Satyaki's moment of glory in the Kurukshetra war occurs during the fourteenth day, when – sent by Yudhishtir into Drona's array to ensure that Arjuna is safe – he scythes through the Kaurava ranks, following Arjuna's chariot.

After he reaches Arjuna, a fight emerges between Satyaki and Bhurishrava. (Bhurishrava is the son of Somadatta, who is himself the son of Bahlika. Bahlika is Shantanu's elder brother.) In this battle, the two warriors fight for a long time from their chariots before descending onto the ground and attacking one another with a sword and shield each.

Bhurishrava gains an ascendancy over his opponent. He wrestles Satyaki to the ground and is about to cut off his head with a knife.

Just at that moment, at the urging of Krishna, Arjuna intervenes from *behind* Bhurishrava and lopes off his arm just above the elbow with a razor-sharp arrow.

Bhurishrava is aghast at Arjuna's flagrant violation of battle law. But fresh from the grief of having lost his son the previous day, Arjuna remains

unrepentant. Bhurishrava relinquishes his weapons in a show of protest, and sits down to meditate.

Satyaki takes this opportunity, and picking up a sword, he advances upon his seated, praying foe. Even as Krishna and Arjuna are calling out to him to desist, Satyaki beheads Bhurishrava.

This is an important event that serves as precedent for Drona's killing at the hands of Dhrishtadyumna the next day. Years later, Satyaki and Kritavarma quarrel over this very incident, and the fight eventually leads to the destruction of the Vrishni race.

At the time of Krishna's visit to Hastinapur, Satyaki and Kritavarma foil the plan of Duryodhana to capture Krishna.

Satyavati

Satyavati is the second wife of King Shantanu. She gives birth to two sons with the king: Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya. But both of these men die childless.

Her most significant child is the son she bears Sage Parashara before her marriage, on a fog-covered island of the Yamuna. This boy comes to be named Dwaipayana – the ‘island-born’ – and later takes the name, Vyasa.

Vyasa impregnates Ambika and Ambalika, Vichitraveerya’s widows, and fathers Dhritarashtra and Pandu. It is Satyavati’s son, therefore, that ensures the continuation of the Kuru race.

Satyavati is born inside a fish that gets impregnated with twins – one boy and one girl – after it swallows the seed of King Uparichara. The girl is fostered at the fishing settlement on the bank of the Yamuna inside Hastinapur.

She gains the name of Matsyagandhi to begin with, owing to the stench of fish that clings to her body wherever she goes. As a maiden she ferries passengers across the Yamuna to and from Hastinapur.

On one such trip, she meets Parashara, who falls in love with her at first sight. He assures her that their union will result in a son that will gain much fame in the three worlds. He also tells her that her virginity will be restored, and that he will replace the bad smell of fish that surrounds her with a scent much more delectable.

Satyavati agrees to this. As a result of this encounter with Parashara, she becomes the ‘sweet-smelling one’, and attracts the attention of King Shantanu.

Satyavati retires to the forest shortly after the birth of Pandu and Dhritarashtra, on the advice of Vyasa.

Shakuni

Shakuni is the brother of Gandhari and the son of Subala, a king of Gandhara. As maternal uncle to the Kauravas, he becomes the chief malignant influence on Duryodhana, encouraging him to plot tactic after tactic to bring the Pandavas to ruin.

He is often depicted in popular culture as a limping, bearded man with a conniving smile. The Mahabharata does not describe him explicitly, but it does mention that Shakuni is the incarnation of Dwapara Yuga, the third epoch of Hindu cosmology which comes to an end with the Kurukshetra war.

Shakuni's death on the eighteenth day of the war, therefore – at the hands of Sahadeva – is symbolic of the end of the Yuga as well.

Whether Shakuni lives full-time at Hastinapur or whether he makes regular visits to the city from his home kingdom of Gandhara is not well known.

During the wedding of Gandhari to Dhritarashtra, it is mentioned that Shakuni accompanies his sister to Hastinapur, but that he returns to Gandhara soon after.

After the Kauravas have grown up a little, Shakuni is present in all the most significant scenes. Perhaps the zenith of Shakuni's life is his masterminding of the game of dice, during which he entices Yudhishtir into pledging all of wealth and family.

When, after losing his four brothers, Yudhishtir proclaims himself as a man who has nothing, Shakuni slyly reminds him that there is Draupadi to be played and won.

Considering how important Draupadi's disrobing is to the overall plot of the Mahabharata, Shakuni's role in bringing it about is pivotal.

Shakuni is considered one prong of the 'wicked foursome', the other three being Duryodhana, Duhsasana and Karna. The Pandavas take personal oaths to kill each one of these four – Bhima against Duryodhana and Duhsasana, Arjuna against Karna, and Sahadeva against Shakuni.

All four oaths are fulfilled by the end of the war. Shakuni becomes one of the last stalwarts of the Kuru army to die, on the eighteenth and final day.

Shalya

Shalya is the king of Madra, and brother to Madri the second wife of Pandu. As such, he is the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva.

Despite this, Shalya fights on the side of Duryodhana during the Kurukshetra war. This happens because Duryodhana tricks Shalya into giving support for him though Shalya wishes to fight for the Pandavas.

However, Yudhishtir asks Shalya not to exert himself fully while fighting in the war. ‘There may come a time when you will be able to tilt the scales in our favour, O King,’ he says. ‘Please be aware for that moment, and act accordingly then.’

In effect, Yudhishtir employs Shalya as a spy. The ‘moment’ that he presciently refers to occurs on the seventeenth day of the war, when Shalya is asked by Duryodhana to become Karna’s charioteer.

Duryodhana’s hope is that Shalya’s chariot-wielding skills will elevate Karna’s strength in a battle against Arjuna. But Shalya, remembering his promise to Yudhishtir, continually taunts Karna throughout the day, and sings Arjuna’s praises instead.

During the battle against Arjuna, even when Karna’s wheel is stuck in the mud, Shalya refuses to disembark from the vehicle and attend to it. This is the kind of job that a charioteer is supposed to do, but Shalya scoffs at the suggestion.

Thus, he becomes an important player in the Karna-Arjuna battle, tilting the balance decisively in favour of the Pandava.

Shalya becomes the commander of Duryodhana's army on the eighteenth morning, after Karna's death on the seventeenth evening. He participates in a few noteworthy fights, but is then challenged and killed by Yudhishtir.

At the death of Shalya, the Kaurava army breaks ranks and flee in all directions. The Pandavas begin slaughtering everyone at sight. Duryodhana flees the battlefield and the war enters its final chapter.

Shalya's other notable skill is that he is considered as skilful as Bhima and Duryodhana with the mace. Both at Draupadi's swayamvara and during the war, Shalya challenges Bhima to a mace-fight. He loses on both occasions.

Shikhandi

Shikhandi is the son of King Drupada of Panchala. He is revealed – by Bhishma, at the beginning of the war – to be the next-life incarnation of Amba, who kills herself with revenge against Bhishma on her mind.

Shikhandi takes birth in the palace of Drupada as Shikhandini, a girl. At her birth, Shiva appears to Drupada in a dream and tells him to rear the girl as a boy. ‘She will one day transition into a male body, O King,’ says Shiva.

Despite the nonsensical nature of this request, Drupada obeys it. Shikhandini thus grows up in a man’s world. She dresses like a man. She is trained in male things. All the people of the kingdom think of her as a man.

Drupada even marries her to a woman, who realizes on her wedding night that her ‘husband’ is actually a woman. This gives rise to much animosity between the two families, and the father of the girl even calls for war against Panchala.

Meanwhile, Shikhandini goes into the forest and fortuitously meets a Yaksha who switches her gender from female to male. This transition is meant to be a temporary one but circumstances collide to make it permanent.

Shikhandi goes back to Panchala, proves his manhood, and prevents war between the two kingdoms. The chapter ends more or less peacefully.

It is due to this gender-altering history of Shikhandi that Bhishma refuses to fight him in the war. On the tenth day of the battle, Arjuna uses Shikhandi as a human shield and brings down Bhishma onto a bed of arrows.

Shikhandi dies at the hands of Ashwatthama during the massacre that happens at the Panchala camp on the night of the eighteenth day.

Shishupala

Shishupala is the son of King Damaghosha of Chedi. His mother, Srutashrava, is a princess of Shurasena and sister to Vasudeva. This makes Shishupala first cousin to Krishna on his father's side.

Both Damaghosha and Kamsa, however, defect on their long-standing alliances with the Yadavas to join hands with Jarasandha of Magadha. From the time of Krishna's birth until his return to Mathura, Chedi is also a Magadha ally.

Even after Krishna's overthrow of Kamsa, Jarasandha moves swiftly to drive the two upstarts (as he sees them) out of his territory toward the western ocean. While Krishna and Balarama are building their seaside city, therefore, Jarasandha and Damaghosha are consolidating power among the middle kingdoms.

It is only with the death of Jarasandha that Chedi loses most of its power. By this time, Damaghosha has passed on and Shishupala is the king of Chedi. He puts on a brave face, invites Bhima into his palace as royal guest, and agrees amicably to support Yudhishtir.

But on the inside, he is seething. He had been close friends with Jarasandha, and would have gained plenty of territory and wealth if the old king had continued to hold sway.

Now, after Bhima had unfairly killed Jarasandha, Shishupala is left with nothing but Chedi... and even as king of Chedi he is going to have to play tribute to Yudhishtir.

He deeply resents the situation, but there isn't much he can do. All the kings that he knows have already capitulated.

At the Rajasuya, however, Shishupala makes a play to stir up revolt against Yudhishtir. He picks on a small aspect of the ceremony – Yudhishtir's choice of Krishna as the recipient of arghya – and begins to insult everyone present there.

Bhishma, Drona, Krishna, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva – no one escapes his ire. His hope is that even if one of them reacts with enough anger, and if enough of the kings revolt, the emperorship of Yudhishtir can be called the question.

But Krishna nips this in the bud. After giving Shishupala a bit of leeway to have his say, Krishna stands up, tells the assembly that he is going to punish Shishupala, and cuts off his head with the Sudarshana Chakra.

Surya

Surya is the god of the sun, and such, considered by all characters in the Mahabharata to be the giver of life.

He is the first god that Kunti summons in order to test the boon of Durvasa. The sage had assured her that she would be able to call any god down to Earth so that she may have a son with him.

While Kunti trusts Durvasa's word, a part of her is incredulous that the gods themselves will do her bidding. So she tests it on Surya.

Surya, of course, is bound by the power of Durvasa's boon, and gives Kunti a son. Kunti abandons the boy immediately after this, and he is found and reared by Adiratha the charioteer and his wife, Radha. They call him Vasusena.

Surya keeps an eye on Vasusena, and watches in delight as the boy becomes a staunch devotee of the sun. When Indra deigns to visit Vasusena with the intention of stripping him of his divine armour and earrings, Surya intervenes in a dream to warn his son.

But Vasusena does not heed Surya's advice. Despite knowing of Indra's intentions, he willingly peels off his armour and makes a gift of it. At this moment, Vasusena gains the name Karna.

In another unrelated incident, Surya gifts Yudhishtir the Akshayapatra – the 'vessel that never runs out'. Using this, the Pandavas and Draupadi feed a large entourage of Brahmins throughout their exile years.

Susharma

Susharma is the king of the Trigarta kingdom. The Trigartas are often named in the Mahabharata as being one of the smaller tribes. But they play an important role in two different instances of the story.

First, during the Pandavas' year of incognito, after the death of Kichaka, the kingdom of Matsya is left – to outside eyes – unprotected. Susharma seizes on this opportunity and tells Duryodhana that the cattle of Matsya can now easily be looted.

He proposes that the Trigarta army and the Kuru army combine their resources together on this project, and take half each of the winnings.

From Susharma's point of view, this is an absolute win. Even if the Trigartans are not powerful enough to strike Matsya on their own, by enlisting Kuru's help, he has significantly bolstered his chances.

What he does not contend with is the fact that King Virata now has the Pandavas at his court. The Trigartan army is routed by the combined might of the Pandavas and Virata. Meanwhile, Brihannala singlehandedly defeats the Kuru army.

The second time Susharma comes to the fore is during the Drona Parva. When Drona embarks upon this mission of capturing Yudhishtir alive, he tells Duryodhana that for the project to succeed, Arjuna should be kept busy.

Susharma and his Trigartan army then volunteer to perform the unenviable task of keeping Arjuna away from the thick of action, busy in one corner. On the twelfth day, this ploy fails, and Arjuna manages to swoop back just in time to rescue Yudhishtir.

But on the thirteenth day, the Samshaptakas (the name Susharma's men give themselves) engage with Arjuna successfully for the whole day, and indirectly this leads to the death of Abhimanyu.

Ulupi

Ulupi is a Naga princess, the daughter of King Kauravya, who first encounters Arjuna during his twelve-year exile and becomes his consort.

Celibacy is one of the primary conditions of Arjuna's exile, but Ulupi tells him that unless he takes her as his lover, she will give up her life. Torn between his vow and the possibility of a princess dying with his name on her lips, Arjuna relents.

He allows himself to be taken to the depths of the river Ganga, where Kauravya has his kingdom. Here he stays for precisely one night, and leaves at sunrise the next day.

Arjuna moves on to Manipura, where he marries Chitrangada. Meanwhile, Ulupi gives birth to a son called Iravan. Iravan fights in the Mahabharata war on the side of the Pandavas, and is killed by Alambusha the Rakshasa.

In some retellings of the Mahabharata, Iravan volunteers to be sacrificed on the eve of the war to ensure Yudhishtir's victory. But he places a condition that he must be married to a woman who will mourn his death.

Vishnu then adopts the form of Mohini and becomes Iravan's wife. After the consummation of their union, Iravan is sacrificed. Mohini weeps at her husband's pyre and mourns his passing for thirteen nights.

Ulupi returns to play another small part in Arjuna's life after the war, during Yudhishtir's Ashwamedha. When the horse wanders into Manipura, Arjuna and Babhruvahana challenge one another to a duel. Babhruvahana kills Arjuna after a prolonged fight.

Ulupi appears at this moment and revives her husband. Then she tells him that this fate of dying at his son's hands has been decreed for Arjuna by Ganga, who had cursed the Pandava out of anger for the way in which he killed Bhishma.

Having heard of this, Ulupi then orchestrates events such that Arjuna and Babhruvahana fight one another and Arjuna dies at his son's hands.

Uttara

Uttara is the daughter of King Virata during the time of the Virata Parva. She is taught dancing by Brihannala for a period of a year when the Pandavas live there in disguise.

At the end of the thirteenth year, Virata offers Uttara's hand in marriage to Arjuna. Arjuna rejects it kindly, saying that it would be improper for a teacher to marry his student. Instead, he says, Uttara could marry Abhimanyu.

At the wedding of Uttara and Abhimanyu, all of the Pandava allies assemble and discuss steps that should be taken to bring about a resolution in the long-standing Kuru feud.

Uttara becomes a widow a short while after her marriage, because Abhimanyu dies on the thirteenth day of the Mahabharata war. However, Uttara becomes pregnant shortly before the war begins.

Owing to Ashwatthama's curse upon the wombs of the Kuru women, Uttara's child becomes the only survivor capable of keeping the Kuru dynasty alive.

It so happens that Ashwatthama's Brahmastra kills Uttara's foetus as well. But Krishna, with his magic, brings the stillborn boy to life after Uttara delivers him.

The boy is named Parikshit. His son Janamejaya performs the great snake-sacrifice at which the Mahabharata is narrated as a complete story for the first time.

Vasishtha

Vasishtha is one of the great sages of the Vedic world. He appears right in the prologue of the Mahabharata when the Vasus – eight elemental gods – steal the divine cow Nandini from his hermitage.

An enraged Vasishtha places a curse on them that they should all endure lives on Earth. But the eight miscreants appeal to the sage and explain to him that only the youngest of them – Prabhasa – had committed the act and the rest of them are innocent.

Vasishtha then amends his curse, allowing the first seven of the Vasus to escape Earth after an extremely short life. But for Prabhasa, he assigns a long and arduous life which will have to endure the suffering of celibacy to boot.

From this curse emerge Ganga's murders of her first seven children, Shantanu's anger at his wife, his estrangement with his son and the eventual reunion.

One can also claim that it is the force of Vasishtha curse that prompts Bhishma to take the vow of lifelong celibacy as well. In short, Vasishtha influences the course of the Kuru dynasty's history.

Vichitraveerya

Vichitraveerya is the second and youngest son of Satyawati and Shantanu. He is the third of Satyawati's sons, counting Vyasa whom she gives birth to before she meets Shantanu.

When Chitrangada, Satyawati's first son, dies after an ill-fated battle against a Gandharva, Vichitraveerya is made crown-prince first, and then king. Bhishma takes on the role of guiding and mentoring his half-brother.

Bhishma attends the swayamvara of the princesses of Kosala on Vichitraveerya's behalf. Instead of participating in it, he abducts the three maidens and carries them off by force to Hastinapur. On the Ganga's shore he fights against the angered suitors of the princesses, and wins the right to take them away.

This act throws into disarray the plans of Amba, the eldest princess. She had been planning to garland her lover Suvala at the ceremony. But now she must marry Vichitraveerya.

She pleads with Bhishma to let him go to Suvala. In consultation with Satyawati, Bhishma agrees. Vichitraveerya thus marries only two of the three princesses meant for him: Ambika and Ambalika.

When Amba returns to Hastinapur after being snubbed by Suvala, Vichitraveerya also rejects her. This results in Amba losing all of her prospects overnight, which turns her bitter and vengeful toward Bhishma.

Vichitraveerya dies – childless – because of an illness. At his death, Satyawati summons her son Dwaipayana (Vyasa) to impregnate Ambika and Ambalika so that the Kuru dynasty can continue.

Vidura

Vidura is the son born of the union between Vyasa and an unnamed Sudra woman that serves as a waiting woman at the court of Hastinapur.

The story goes that Satyawati wants Ambika to have a second child with Vyasa – since the first, Dhritarashtra, was born blind – but the queen is so reluctant at the prospect that she sends one of her servants to the bedchamber in her stead.

Since he is not born to either of the two queens, according to the principles of Niyoga, Vidura is not considered one of Vichitraveerya's sons. He lives his entire life as a Sudra, and chooses a Sudra woman for himself when it comes time to marry.

Vidura is also the incarnation of Yama, the lord of justice. The sage Mandavya, upon getting punished by Yama for a crime he committed in the innocence of childhood, curses the god that he will one day take birth in a low-born family on Earth.

Vidura occupies a position as advisor in Dhritarashtra's court, often helping Bhishma in important decisions. At the time of Draupadi's disrobing, it is Vidura who appeals to Dhritarashtra to bring the whole charade to an end.

He also helps the Pandavas during the episode of the inflammable house in Varanavata, by first warning Yudhishtir in a coded language and then by sending his engineer over to dig a tunnel that will rescue the Pandavas.

Despite his obvious bias toward the sons of Pandu, Vidura performs his duty and remains by Dhritarashtra's side till the very end.

Vidura dies shortly after the Kurukshetra war, in the forest where Dhritarashtra, Kunti, Gandhari and Sanjaya go to spend their final days. When Yudhishtir visits them, Dhritarashtra points him to Vidura.

Yudhishtir walks over to where the older man is standing, leaning back against a tree. No words are spoken between them. But the essence of Vidura leaves his body and enters Yudhishtir.

Vikarna

Vikarna is one of the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. As a younger brother of Duryodhana, he is counted among the Kauravas.

His main claim to fame is that during the disrobing of Draupadi, when she asks the assembly whether or not Yudhishtir had the right to pledge her after first having lost himself, Vikarna argues in her favour.

‘Because gambling is a vice and a man is not within his senses when under its influence; because Yudhishtir did not play the game of his own volition but was goaded into it by Shakuni; because Draupadi is not the sole property of Yudhishtir but is also owned by four other men; and because Yudhishtir staked himself first and became a slave,’ says Vikarna, ‘I consider Draupadi not won.’

Taking up the opposite view in the debate is Karna, who argues successfully that even slaves have rights to possessions and family. Even a slave, therefore, has certain ownership over his wife and children.

Whether Vikarna has a soft spot for the Pandavas or whether he was treating this purely as an intellectual point is unclear. But it bears noting that when Bhishma and Drona refuse to answer Draupadi’s question, one of the Kaurava brothers rise to her support.

In the war, Bhima kills Vikarna to fulfil his oath of bringing all of the Dhartarashtras to their death.

But Vikarna’s gesture does not go unremembered. Bhima laments his cousin’s death and says, ‘Vikarna, you were the only one in the assembly who spoke on our behalf. Forgive me that I had to kill you to complete my oath.’

Vishwamitra

Vishwamitra is one of the most venerated sages of Vedic India who finds mention in some of the Mahabharata's side stories. While he does not touch any of the main narrative arcs, I am including him in this list because of his sheer prominence.

Vishwamitra is born a prince in the race of Kusika. His birth is often considered the antithesis of Parashurama's birth, because while Parashurama was born into a Brahmin family with Kshatriya traits, Vishwamitra was born into a Kshatriya family with Brahmin traits.

So Parashurama ends up living a life full of Kshatriya-like activities like war and bloodshed. Vishwamitra takes up the life of a sage.

The turning point of his life arrives when, on a trip to Vasishtha's hermitage, Vishwamitra sees how much power the old sage wields in the spiritual realm. Vishwamitra tries to steal Vasishtha's cow, Kamadhenu, but with a single syllable Vasishtha manages to obliterate Vishwamitra's entire army.

After returning to his palace, Vishwamitra resolves to give up his kingly life and dedicate himself to achieving spiritual mastery.

Early on during his Brahminhood, Indra sends the apsara Menaka to distract Vishwamitra. The sage and the woman fall in love, and they have a daughter by name Shakuntala.

Shakuntala gets fostered at the hermitage of Kanva, and goes on to marry King Dushyanta. This couple's son is named Bharata – and he becomes such a great king that his dynasty comes to be named 'Bharata'.

The 'Bharata' in the word *Mahabharata* refers to this man.

After the birth of his daughter, Vishwamitra realizes that Menaka had been sent just to distract him. So he sends her away to Indra and refocuses his energies on his pursuit of spiritual mastery.

Over a number of years, after plenty of obstacles, Vishwamitra succeeds in becoming a Brahmarshi.

Vyasa

Vyasa is the title given to Sage Dwaipayana after he completes the immense task of dividing the Veda into four parts. His complete title is ‘Veda Vyasa’ – ‘the divider of the Veda’.

Vyasa’s mother is Satyawati the fisher-princess. She is the biological daughter of King Uparichara, but she is fostered at the fishing settlement that lies on the Yamuna’s bank in the kingdom of Kuru.

One day while ferrying passengers across the river, she meets Sage Parashara, who convinces her to sleep with him in exchange for blessing her person with a divine-smelling scent that will make her irresistible to men.

Satyavati and Parashara unite on a fog-covered island on the Yamuna. The result is a baby boy whom Satyawati carries to term in less than two hours. The boy grows into a youth immediately after his birth, and accompanies his father on his travels.

They give the boy the name Dwaipayana, the ‘island-born’.

Vyasa is both a character in the Mahabharata story, and also its narrator. He makes himself visible at all the key moments of the tale, and he is its omniscient god that can go anywhere and hear anything at will.

Some of the key decisions that Vyasa has a hand in are the following:

- Impregnating Ambika and Ambalika so that the Kuru line does not extinct
- Telling the Pandavas the story of Draupadi and encouraging them to go to Panchala from Ekachakra
- Assuring Drupada that having Draupadi become a common wife to all five Pandavas is all right

- Giving Sanjaya the gift of omniscience so that he can narrate to Dhritarashtra all that happens during the war
- Asking Arjuna and Ashwatthama to withdraw their respective weapons because they may destroy the world

The above is by no means an exhaustive list. Vyasa is the divine poet, and everything we hear about the Mahabharata is filtered through his perceptions.

Yama

Yama is the god of justice in the Hindu pantheon. He often carries negative connotations because he is the god of death. The important thing to remember is that he does not *cause* any deaths.

His job is to collect souls from dead bodies, and to take them to a place of judgement where he weighs up their sins and virtues against one another. He then decides how long the soul will spend in heaven, how long in hell, and when – and if – to send it back to Earth.

Yama is the biological father of Yudhishtir, the eldest of the Pandavas. He keeps a close eye on Yudhishtir throughout the story, and intervenes on a couple of occasions to help the Pandavas.

The first of these occurs during the twelfth year of the Pandavas' exile. Yama disguises himself as a Yaksha and guards a lake in the forest. He causes the younger four Pandavas to fall to their deaths by the shore, and waits for Yudhishtir to arrive.

When Yudhishtir comes, Yama asks him a long series of questions about philosophy, ethics, law and politics. The condition is that unless Yudhishtir can answer all the questions to Yama's satisfaction, the four Pandavas will remain dead.

Yudhishtir passes the test with flying colours. Yama blesses Yudhishtir that the year of hiding will pass successfully, without them being found out by anyone.

The second of these occasions is at the very end of the story, when Yudhishtir ascends the mountain of Meru to reach heaven in his mortal form. Yama dons the disguise of a dog and accompanies the Pandavas.

Indra tells Yudhishtir that he will be allowed into heaven if he forsakes the dog. Yudhishtir decides not to, because the dog's loyalty must not be betrayed. Yama then reveals his true form and once again blesses his son.

Yama also lends a portion of his essence to Vidura, and in that form, he helps Yudhishtir in a number of ways.

Yudhishtir

Yudhishtir is the eldest of the five Pandava brothers. He is the biological son of Kunti, the first wife of Pandu, and Yama the god of death and justice. He becomes a 'Pandava' because Pandu adopts him and his four brothers as his own sons.

Yudhishtir's primary motivation in life is to pursue wisdom and knowledge. While Arjuna is the most powerful and gifted of the Pandavas, and Bhima is the strongest, Yudhishtir strives to be the best and wisest of men.

What characterizes him the best is his insatiable curiosity. He is always asking questions of sages and people around him, trying to understand how to be a better king, a better person, how to unravel the complex knots of ethics and morality.

During the first half of the story, Yudhishtir is given everything by his brothers. Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva win the entire world for Yudhishtir's benefit, and make him an emperor.

Yudhishtir's journey begins in earnest when he plays the dice game with Shakuni and loses all of his wealth – and his brothers and wife too. Yudhishtir becomes a pauper, and during the exile he has to figure out all the subtle ways in which Dharma works.

He learns to be a king, a sage, a philosopher, and a devoted family man. He returns from his exile ready to fight in the war to get back what he has lost. He balances his life and understands that a king must immerse himself in worldly matters and yet be detached to them in order to fulfil his duties.

Yudhishtir is the only character in the Mahabharata not to die. He succeeds in reaching heaven in his mortal body, as reward for the virtuous life he has lived and for the manner in which he has learned the secrets to a 'good life'.

Yuyutsu

Yuyutsu is a son of Dhritarashtra, but he is not born to Gandhari. His mother is an unnamed Vaishya woman who works in the royal palace.

In order of birth, Yuyutsu is said to be younger than Duryodhana but older than Duhsasana, the second Kaurava. From a young age, he displays a predisposition toward the Pandavas, often informing Yudhishtir of Duryodhana's evil plots. Duryodhana then stops including Yuyutsu in his trusted circle.

Vikarna is also similarly biased toward the Pandavas, but he never breaks away from the rest of his brothers. Yuyutsu, on the other hand, switches over to the Pandava side on the first day of battle, when Yudhishtir announces that the time is right for anyone to shift their allegiance.

Yuyutsu thus fights alongside the Pandavas. He is also one of the few survivors of the war. As the eighteenth day draws to a close, he leaves the battlefield and goes to the palace to inform the women that the war had ended.

Thirty six years later, when the Pandavas and Draupadi set out on their final journey, they make Parikshit the king of Hastinapur, and install Yuyutsu as his chief advisor.

Yuyutsu is considered to be an atiratha, but he is largely circumspect in the war, and does not feature in any of the key battles or encounters.

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