

TWO GREAT ADVENTURES EPIC TRADITIONS

Which of ancient India's treasures would you most like to take home with you? One of those cool carnelian belts? A rope of milky pearls? A personalized seal carved with your name and favorite animals? An intricately inlaid chest of *shisham* wood? Or perhaps a brightly glazed and gracefully shaped ceramic pot?

Many of the people who love ancient India would choose none of those things. They would vote for the stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, poems that are as widely read and loved today as they were when they were first composed thousands of years ago.

The hero of the *Mahabharata* is a great warrior named Prince Arjuna. He falls in love with Princess Draupadi, and wins her hand in marriage by stringing a massive bow that is too heavy for anyone else to use. Then he uses the bow to shoot out the eye of a golden fish spinning on top of a tall pole, while looking at the fish's reflection in a vat filled with boiling water.

Despite his beautiful wife and fabulous archery skills, Prince Arjuna has a problem. He and his four brothers, the Pandavas, are at war with his cousins, the Kauravas. Arjuna wants to win the war and defeat his evil cousins. But at the same time, he wants to be a good man, and good men don't go around making war on their relatives. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a poem that is part of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna tells his charioteer that “conflicting sacred duties confound my reason.”

Lucky for Prince Arjuna, his charioteer turns out to be Lord Krishna, who is an *avatar* of the god Vishnu, the god who preserves life. Krishna explains to Arjuna that even though he may not want to hurt his cousins, it's Arjuna's duty—his *dharma*—to do so. Krishna asks Arjuna what he thinks would happen to the world if the gods didn't do their

“ *Bhagavad Gita*, fourth century
BCE–fourth century CE

Avatar comes from the Sanskrit word for “descent.” An avatar is the form a god or goddess takes when he or she descends, or comes down, to earth and appears to humankind.



duty, and explains that performing his *dharma* is the only path to peace and salvation. Otherwise, he will just be reborn endlessly until he gets it right.

Without faith in *dharma*,
men fail to reach me, Arjuna;
they return to the cycle
of death and rebirth.

Despite Krishna's advice, Arjuna holds back at a crucial moment of the battle. The day is saved when Krishna jumps into the fray and sends his spinning *chakra*, a flat disk with a razor-sharp edge, slicing through the advancing army of the Kauravas. The poem ends with the words:

Where Krishna is lord of discipline
and Arjuna is the archer,
there do fortune, victory, abundance,
and morality exist, so I think.

The ancient Ramayana story about Rama and his loyal wife, Sita, is still presented in theatres in India to help people understand the important religious message of devotion and truth.

“ Bhagavad Gita, fourth century
BCE–fourth century CE

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BCE–fourth century CE

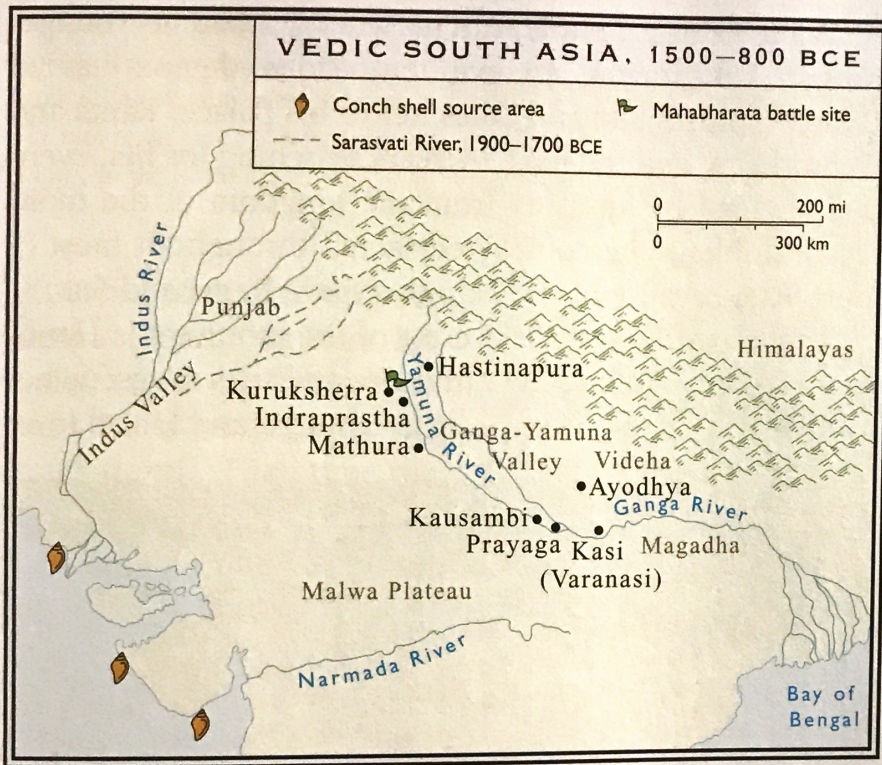
66 *Bhagavad Gita*, fourth century
BCE–fourth century CE

The *Mahabharata* is an exciting story, a beautiful poem, and an important source of religious teaching. But it is also a historical document that tells us a lot about the Vedic communities at the end of the Vedic Era. For example, in the final battle, the warriors ride in magnificent chariots covered with gold and gems, with tinkling bells and iron-rimmed wheels, calling each other to battle with trumpets made of conch shells. “Tumult echoed through heaven and earth,” says the *Mahabharata*. That passage tells us that the Vedic people had horses and chariots, that their artisans knew how to work with iron and gold, and that they had reestablished trade with the coastal villages that collected conch shells. The place names in the poem also remind us that India was being settled along the Ganga and Yamuna River valleys and in the Punjab. Krishna, for example, was from the city of Mathura, on the Yamuna, while the Kaurava brothers were from the city of Hastinapura, on the Ganga.

Archaeologists have found some of the things talked about in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Both of the



Lord Krishna, who is often shown with blue skin to indicate he is a form of the god Vishnu, drives Arjuna's war chariot in the final battle of the Mahabharata.



poems describe warriors and rulers gambling with dice (the good guys always lose everything because the bad guys cheat!). Sure enough, archaeologists have found colored counters and rod-shaped dice dating from that time—they look a lot like dice still used in India today. They have also found soapstone molds for gold and silver jewelry; horse bones; and iron, brass, and bronze tools.

The *Ramayana* is a Sanskrit poem written by Valmiki sometime between 300 and 200 BCE and based on an episode from the *Mahabharata*, which was composed hundreds of years earlier. The *Ramayana* tells the story of Prince Rama and his lovely wife, Sita. Rama is a good man and a popular leader. Valmiki describes himself as a leader and a father to everyone: “As a father to his children, to his loving men he came.” Unfortunately, Rama’s father had two families—one with Rama and his mother and brother, and another with Rama’s stepmother, Kaikeyi, and her son, Bharata. The king is about to name Rama as his heir when Kaikeyi reminds the king that he has promised that he will grant her two wishes. She wants the king to send Rama into exile for 14 years and to make her son, Bharata, the crown prince.

BRONZE AND BRASS

Bronze is made by mixing copper with a little tin and sometimes lead. Add zinc to copper or bronze and you get brass. Combine tin, zinc, or lead with copper and you change its color from reddish to golden—you also make it harder and more brittle. Bronze is good for making weapons and tools as well as for casting fine sculptures. Brass is even easier to cast because it melts at a lower temperature. The Vedic people made perhaps the earliest examples of brass in the world.

66 Valmiki, *Ramayana*,
300–200 BCE

And You Thought You Had a Hard Time Waking Up

Near the end of the Ramayana, the villain Ravana decides to ask his brother Kumbakarna for help:

It was a mighty task to wake up Kumbakarna. A small army had to be engaged. They sounded trumpets and drums at his ears and were ready with enormous quantities of food and drink for him, for when Kumbakarna awoke from sleep, his hunger was phenomenal and he made a meal of whomever he could grab at his bedside. They cudgeled, belabored, pushed, pulled, and shook him, with the help of elephants; at last he opened his eyes and swept his arms about and crushed quite a number among those who had stirred him up.

Rama sits on the shoulders of the monkey hero Hanuman and aims an arrow at the 10-headed demon Ravana. After killing Ravana, Rama rescues his wife, Sita, and returns to his capital city, Ayodhya.

While Rama is in exile with his wife, Sita, and his younger brother, Lakshmana, an evil ten-headed demon named Ravana captures Sita and takes her to his palace. Rama and his brother spend the next 14 years searching for her, eventually helped by an army from the kingdom of the monkeys. (Monkeys are considered sacred throughout most of South Asia because of the help they gave Rama and Sita.)

The bravest and the cleverest of the monkeys is Hanuman. Hanuman helps Rama find Sita and tries to rescue her from Ravana. In the process, he is captured and forced to sit



Bandar Poonch, which means “the mountain of the monkey’s tail,” is the tallest mountain on the right. The mountain gets its name from a story in the Ramayana.



at the feet of the demon king Ravana. Hanuman uses his coiled tail to lift himself up until he is as high as the king’s throne. Each time the king raises his throne to be higher than the captured monkey, Hanuman lifts himself higher with his tail. In the end, the demons are so angry that they tie an oil-soaked rag to his tail and light it on fire. Hanuman races through the palace lighting the whole building on fire before he flies to the snowy Himalayas and buries his burning tail in the snow of a high mountain. When he gets up to leave, he ends up pulling down the top of the mountain. Today the mountain is called Bandar Poonch—the mountain of the Monkey’s Tail.

In the end, Rama and Ravana fight a huge battle that spills over into the heavens:

Rama sent a crescent-shaped arrow which sliced off one of Ravana’s heads and flung it far into the sea, and this process continued; but every time a head was cut off, another one grew in its place. Rama lopped off his arms but they grew again and every lopped-off arm hit Matali and the chariot and tried to cause destruction by itself, and the tongue in a new head wagged, uttered challenges, and cursed Rama.

Rama eventually triumphs, and everything ends happily, with Sita and Rama reunited and Rama crowned as king. The monkey king Hanuman loved Rama so much that it is said that he is present every time the *Ramayana* is told. So look around—see any monkeys?

66 Valmiki, *Ramayana*,
300–200 BCE