

# The Five Sons of King Pandu Short Guide

## The Five Sons of King Pandu by Elizabeth Seeger

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## Overview

The interesting story of the five Pandava brothers and their common wife, Draupadi, provides a view of the sophisticated civilization of the heroic period of Indian history. In its stories, legends, myths, and instructional passages, *The Mahabharata* treats all the aspects of ancient Indian culture—religion, moral values, politics, economics, art, science, and mathematics.

The struggle of the Pandavas to overcome the external obstacles posed by their jealous cousins, the Kuravas, is part of the living culture of India. Every Hindu, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, is influenced by the story.

Storytellers narrate its episodes in villages, priests recount them in temples, and mothers and grandmothers tell them in the homes. These stories have provided an ethical base in India for over three thousand years. The wisdom of *The Mahabharata* is also shared by the countries that fall within India's cultural sphere. The noble deeds of the characters are embodied in many of the stories, dances, drama, and art of Java, Sumatra, Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Besides being an introduction to Indian culture, *The Five Sons of King Pandu* offers a wealth of philosophic wisdom and ethical values that have universal application, especially for those who seek the transcendental dimension of humanity. Ancient Sanskrit literature studied humanity above and beyond its political and social roles to discover the divine self of humankind.

The epic strongly indicates that humanity can realize its spiritual potential through education, meditation, and discipline. In *The Five Sons of King Pandu*, Seeger is able to synthesize the Hindu ideal of heroic action with the inner struggle against human weakness.

## About the Author

Born about 1889, Elizabeth Seeger was a well-known author of books for young people on Eastern history and religion. As a teacher of history and literature at the Dalton School in New York City, she introduced a year of Oriental Studies into the curriculum in the early 1920s. To supplement the inadequate reference material, she wrote a sketch on Chinese history for twelve-year-olds, and later expanded it into *Pageant of Chinese History*. The book was selected as an honor book for the John Newbery Medal in 1935. In 1947, she revised and updated it with a chapter on the fall of the empire and the rise of the Republic of China. This book was followed by *Pageant of Russian History*, which traces the history of Russia up to the Revolution.

Following her teaching career, Seeger continued to write at her home in Bridgewater, Connecticut. She turned her attention to Indian culture and wrote prose versions of the famous epics, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. *The Five Sons of King Pandu*, her condensation of *The Mahabharata*, was a valuable contribution to literature, since there was no English translation for the general reader.

Through these epics, Seeger sought to introduce young adults to the ancient literature and culture of India. In 1973, she published her final book, *Eastern Religions*, which discusses the beliefs and teachings of five Eastern religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto. As a writer for young people, Seeger focused primarily on how history and religion affect people and society.

Seeger died on November 2, 1973, in New Milford, Connecticut.

# Setting

The epic is set in the kingdom of the Bharatas, which flourished along the upper course of the Ganges River in northern India. Although India (known as Bharat-varsha after the Bharatas) was divided into numerous small kingdoms, it was united by a common religion and cultural heritage. The Bharatas' highly advanced civilization was displayed at Hastina, the capital city. The kingdom was one of stability and prosperity. Economic security came from the fertile soil and vast natural resources, and social stability was insured by a system of four castes: priests, warriors and kings, merchants, and servants. In such a culture, intellectual and spiritual life flourished.

There is some disagreement among scholars regarding the dates when the story was originally composed, but many agree that it reflects the development of Hindu thought from approximately 200 B.C. to A.D. 400. The historical fact on which the epic is based is a great war that took place between the Kuravas and the neighboring Panchalas, probably in the fourteenth or thirteenth century B.C.

The battle may not have been of the global proportion that the epic suggests, but grew in magnitude as the account of heroic exploits was spread throughout India. Rivalry between two sets of cousins, the Pandavas and Kuravas, for the right to rule the kingdom gave rise to the war. The mythical Bharata King, Pandu, had given up his kingdom to his blind brother, Kuru, and had retired to the forest with his queens, Kunti and Madri, to do penance for the killing of a stag while it was mating. Following the deaths of King Pandu and Queen Madri, Queen Kunti and her five sons return to Hastina. There they are confronted by King Kuru's one hundred sons who fear that the Pandavas will claim a share of the kingdom. The Kuravas, at the urging of their oldest brother, Duryodha, resort to treachery, intrigue, broken promises, and alliances with neighboring rulers to retain the kingdom at all cost. The inevitable war that follows is fought at Kuru Kshetra, a fertile stretch of land in north-central India.



# Social Sensitivity

Since the epic centers on the colossal war fought at Kuru Kshetra, a sensitive issue is the vastness of the carnage. The revered Drona's white locks are seized and his head cut off and cast on the ground by Jumna; Bhishma, the oldest of the Bharatas, is shot with twenty arrows; Arjuna shoots off Kama's head when his chariot wheel is stuck; and Asvattama avenges his father's death by killing all the remaining warriors (the Pandavas happen to be elsewhere) in the Pandava camp. Bhima avenges the unclothing of Draupadi when he cuts open Dushasa's breast and drinks his blood.

"The taste of this blood," he says, "is sweeter than my mother's milk or good wine mixed with honey."

Another disturbing aspect of the book is that the "good" characters, who are favored by the gods, have to use unfair means to defeat the Kuravas. Arjuna hides behind Shikandin to kill Bhishma because Shikandin was a female in his previous life, and the warrior code prohibits Bhishma from killing a woman. Similarly, Drona is falsely told that his son is dead, and he is then killed when he loses heart and drops his weapons. When Bhima accepts Duryodha's challenge to a duel with maces, he is sorely wounded and would probably have lost because of Duryodha's skill. This decisive battle is won on Krishna's suggestion that Bhima break Duryodha's thigh, as he had vowed to do, even though it would be foul play.

When accused of cheating on three counts, Krishna replies to Duryodha, "You have been slain with all your kindred and your friends because of the sinful path on which you trod . . . Now bear the fruits of your evil deeds." On one hand, the book presents human weaknesses and the realities of war, and, on the other hand, an absolute moral stance.

Despite the praise lavished on the heroic deeds on the battlefield, war is not glorified. The victory of the Pandavas is not a triumph but a sorrowful occasion because both armies are nearly annihilated. Shame and sorrow are associated with the war because of the unrighteous actions to which even the noble characters are forced to resort in order to win.

The strength of the "evil" characters shows that good and evil are not absolutes. Simplistic notions of good and evil, heaven and hell, are further shattered when even the wicked Kuravas are admitted to heaven. The law of karma states that deeds determine one's ultimate fate. Kuru and Gandhari go to heaven because of the penances they perform in the forest. The Kuravas and other warriors gain heaven either by virtue of their thoughts, words, or deeds, and by sacrificing their lives in battle.

The book ends on a philosophic and peaceful note. When the end of life is near, the Pandavas meditate on the transitory nature of military prowess, worldly wealth, and glory. In the end, Arjuna's divine weapons are powerless, and he cannot even protect the women and children of Krishna's kingdom. There is everlasting peace in heaven for all the major characters, who are finally free from anger, fear, jealousy, and revenge.

## Literary Qualities

The Five Sons of King Pandu is based on Kisari Mohan Ganguli's ten-volume English translation of The Mahabharata published from 1883 to 1893. Condensing the epic for young readers was a vast endeavor for Seeger since the original consists of ninety thousand rhymed couplets. It is three times as long as the Bible and eight times as long as the Iliad and the Odyssey put together. The epic was part of the oral tradition of India before it was written down in Sanskrit between A.D. 200 and A.D. 400. As the epic spread, legends of other princes, philosophy, religious treatises, political passages, and didactic episodes were deftly linked to the central theme. It became a repository of Indian culture and values, giving the people an identity and cohesiveness as a nation. It still provides modern Indians with a sense of continuity with the past.

Seeger's version retains the grand theme; lofty, heroic deeds; and majestic structure of the original, but omits irrelevant episodes, moral lectures, political tracts, and instructional sections.

The Five Sons of King Pandu is, thus, a more unified work than the sprawling epic. An omniscient narrator tells the story, instead of the multiple narrators of the original, in order to avoid confusion.

Seeger's style has a simple eloquence.

With her descriptions, imagery, and Indian idioms she evokes the mood of an episode and conveys the epic stature of the heroes. In describing Hastina she writes, "Around the other side mansions were built, white and spotless as the necks of swans or the cloud-kissing peaks of Mount Kailasa." Her prose is flexible enough to capture the pulsating action of the battle scenes, the calm wisdom and philosophy of the seers, and the righteous anger of Draupadi at being shamed. Seeger also touchingly evokes sorrow at the death of the misguided but heroic Kama: "Kama lay on the earth as the thousand-rayed sun falls at the close of the day. Clad in bright garments and golden mail, he was like a mighty tree with flowering branches felled by woodsmen, like a heap of gold, like a fire quenched by Arjuna's arrows."



# Themes and Characters

The characters in *The Five Sons of King Pandu* are divided into two factions, the Pandavas and the Kuravas, together with their respective supporters throughout India. Whether the characters are heroic or evil, they are not stereotypes; they are individuals whose actions are clearly motivated. The evil Kuravas are good rulers and skilled warriors. By the same token, the Pandavas are given human weaknesses which they must overcome. The characters' genealogy is given in detail because birth determines their personalities, the relationships between characters, and their ultimate fates.

The blind and aged King Kuru, the father of the one hundred Kurava brothers, is a weak and pathetic ruler, easily manipulated by his evil sons Duryodha and Dushasan. When Duryodha is born, asses bray and jackals howl, portending evil and the ruin of his people. Yet Kuru will not cast out his newborn son. On the contrary, he indulges Duryodha, who grows to be vain and unscrupulous. Though weak, Kuru is basically a good character. He is the only one of the elders who listens to Draupadi's pleas after she is shamed, and he acts to spare the Pandavas a life of slavery. King Kuru achieves growth and salvation when he goes into the forest to meditate and lead an ascetic life.

Because he killed a stag while it was mating, King Pandu is cursed by the gods to die during sexual intercourse, so he abstains from sex. Queen Kunti, as a maiden, had been granted the power to summon any god in human form, however. She and her co-wife, Madri, summon and are able to conceive sons by five gods. These sons are the five Pandavas, the heroes of this epic. Even though the Pandavas are not the biological sons of Pandu, they are considered his sons because they are born to his wives.

This dual parentage not only allows the Pandavas to inherit the royal rights and privileges from Pandu but enhances their heroic stature because they share the divine attributes of their fathers.

They display the beauty, strength, and nobility of heroes.

Yudhishtra, the oldest, is the son of Dharma, god of righteousness. He is hospitable, truthful, and respectful towards elders. At Kuru Kshetra, he removes his armor, walks over to the enemy lines, and reverently touches the feet of the enemy elders, asking their permission to begin the war. His noble conduct wins him their blessings.

As ruler, Yudhishtra is compassionate and just, keeping the welfare and wishes of his countrymen in mind. Rulers from all India pay homage at his coronation and bring expensive tribute. He is worthy of leading the Pandavas not only because he is the eldest but because he tempers his leadership with a calm and peaceful demeanor. When they suffer the adversities of the fourteen years of exile, he maintains a clear perspective, fulfilling the terms of the treaty rather than giving himself over to anger and revenge. Even his enemies acknowledge his righteousness but use it to cheat him.

To Hindus, Yudhishtra is more than an epic hero; he symbolizes the ideal man.



His virtue is repeatedly tested by his divine father, Dharma. At the end of the story, he is the only character who is worthy to enter heaven in human form because he fulfills the duties of the ruler and warrior caste. In heaven he is subjected to a final test. He is given a false vision of his brothers and wife suffering in hell and chooses to join them rather than enjoy the comforts of heaven without them. After proving his loyalty and selflessness, he casts off his human body and enters the court of Indra, the Lord of Heaven.

The second Pandava brother, Bhima, fathered by the wind god, is the strongest of humans. When Duryodha tries to poison and drown him, the King of the Nagas (who live underwater) gives him the strength of a thousand elephants. Unlike Yudhishtra, Bhima is angry and impatient with the treachery of the Kuravas, and it is to him that Draupadi turns when she seeks revenge on them. The brother Arjuna, sired by Indra, is skilled in every aspect of warfare, especially archery. He makes a journey to heaven and wins the favor of the gods Shiva and Indra, who give him their secret weapons, thus making him invincible on the battlefield.

Yet, Arjuna is sensitive and reluctant to fight when he sees his relatives and the venerable elders arrayed on the battlefield. He would rather be defeated and killed himself. He is induced to fight by the wise counsel of Krishna, who reminds him of the insults to Draupadi and the shameless killing of his son, Abhimanyu. The other two Pandavas, a and Sadeva, twin sons of Madri, are the children of the gods of Twilight and Dawn. They are known for their gentleness and skill with horses and chariots.

The only character equal to Arjuna in military prowess is his half-brother, Kama. He is Kunti's son by Surya, the sun God, born before her marriage to King Pandu. Abandoned as an infant, he is pushed out into a river in a basket but is rescued and raised by a charioteer.

Kama is the truly tragic figure of the epic; he is rejected by his mother, scorned by brothers and equals, and shunned because he is not believed to be of the warrior caste. His bitterness and enmity towards the Pandavas allow him to be exploited by the evil Duryodha.

The female characters, equally noble and heroic, represent the Hindu ideal of womanhood. King Pandu's wives, Kunti and Madri, give up their comfortable palace to share the hardships of forest life. Madri is so devoted to King Pandu that at his death she throws herself on his funeral pyre. Similarly, King Kuru's wife, Gandhari, binds her eyes to share the blindness of her husband.

Draupadi, proud, noble, and beautiful, is sought after by many kings and princes, and is worthy of being the wife of the five Pandava heroes. Her wifely devotion wins her their respect and love.

She follows her husbands into exile even though she could live in her father's palace. Yet, she is not meek and submissive. When her honor is challenged she can be fiery and demand retribution.



When publicly humiliated by Dushasa, she rebukes the elders for their cowardliness. God Dharma himself clothes her with celestial garments.

When the wicked Kichaka makes sexual advances towards her, she makes Bhima kill him. And when her sons are killed dishonorably in their camp by Asvattama, she turns to Bhima to avenge their deaths.

The central theme that emerges from the epic is that of dharma, or righteousness in thoughts, actions, and goals.

The behavior of the noble characters exemplifies that true heroism is not found in physical strength or political power but through following dharma, or the duties associated with one's station in life.

When Arjuna lays down his weapons and refuses to fight, Krishna appeals to his duties as a warrior. "If you don't fight," Arjuna is warned by Krishna, "you will have failed in duty and honor."

Krishna instructs him that each man attains perfection by doing his own duty with detachment—with no desire for reward. When pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat are the same, a warrior may go into battle without sin. Similarly, when Yudhishtra wants to give up his kingdom, the duties of the four castes are enumerated for him. The kingly duty of protection of the weak is considered the highest honor.

The transcendental nature of the soul which cannot be destroyed is also explained in the epic; hence, Arjuna and Yudhishtra need not grieve for the dead, because their souls cannot be killed.

These precepts form the religious instruction of Hindus even today. Western readers need not be disturbed by religious dogma and creed because the epic is not moralizing. These values are presented more as "choices" the characters make when confronted with various situations.



## Topics for Discussion

1. King Pandu gave the kingdom to his blind brother, Kuru, when he retired to the forest. Do the five Pandavas have any right to expect it back? Is it legal for the Kurava brothers to inherit it from their father? Was their fear of the Pandavas justified?
2. Does the burning of the Kandava forest serve a special purpose in the epic? Was some evil being destroyed, or was it a means of displaying Arjuna's and Krishna's military prowess and putting powerful weapons in their hands?
3. At the funeral rites after the war, Kunti is overcome with grief at the death of Kama, and she tells the Pandavas the secret of his birth. The Pandavas feel that the whole course of the war would have changed had they known that Kama was their half-brother. Do you agree? What about Kama's reaction to Krishna's and Kunti's secret talks with him?
4. Yudhishtra is a man of truth and piety. Does his adherence to righteousness go beyond the limits of reason and common sense and extend to the realm of stupidity?
5. In the final confrontation between Asvattama and Arjuna, both fire heavenly missiles that can destroy the three worlds. Asvattama fires out of revenge, but Arjuna has a counter-missile to make the former powerless. In what ways does this remind you of nuclear war? Would Vyasa's admonitions to both warriors on the responsibilities of possessing such knowledge and weapons apply to the modern situation?
6. Krishna says, "Lying is no sin when it can save life." Had Drona not been killed the entire Pandava army would have been wiped out. Is it acceptable to lie under such circumstances? Does the end justify the means?
7. At the end of the epic, both Kuru and Gandhari feel that had they raised Duryodha in a more disciplined manner, the Kuru Kshetra war would have been avoided. Were they responsible for the war due to parental neglect and indulgence, or were the events of the epic pre-ordained by fate?
8. The Pandavas, sages, and elderly characters all retire to the forest to lead spiritual lives. What does the forest symbolize? Why could they not meditate in the city?
9. Even though Arjuna had been given all the celestial weapons and is considered invincible, the war can be won only through trickery. Does this upset your sense of ethics? Shouldn't the gods have intervened?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Was Yudhishtra really upholding his code of honor by accepting the challenge of the chess game, or was he unable to resist the temptation to gamble? Examine his behavior during the match and analyze the human failures that he displays. Do we expect more of the "good" characters?

2. The Hindu law of karma dictates that each individual is rewarded or punished according to his or her deeds.

Examine the major characters and see if there is a correlation between their actions and ultimate fate.

3. Can the ending of the epic be interpreted as a destruction myth in which the gods destroy civilization? Compare and contrast the fate of the Bharatas and Yadus to the story of the Flood in the Bible or in Gilgamesh.

4. Are the various interpolations (sections that were later inserted into the main story), on the duties of caste, the stages of life, duties of a good wife, responsibilities of a king, and so on, essential to the epic? Are they wellintegrated into the structure of the book? What function do they serve?

5. Kama displays all the qualities of a member of the warrior caste—nobility, skill with weapons, and bravery. Should the fact that he is supposed to be of a lower caste prevent him from participating in the contest? Can the qualities of a true warrior be attributed to birth alone or to education and upbringing?

Relate this form of discrimination to racial prejudice. What would have been the outcome of the story had he been allowed to compete with the other princes?

## For Further Reference

Dutt, Romesh C. "The Ramayana" and "The Mahabharata." New York: Dutton, 1969. Dutt's commentary and critical analysis of the two Indian epics provide useful background information for appreciating Seeger's book.

Link, Gorden. "Streamlined Mahabharata." *Saturday Review of Literature* 31 (October 30, 1948): 25-26. This article states that Seeger's version of the original epic is well-suited to a Hollywood serial because it contains sensational incidents—polyandry, espionage, counter-espionage, intrigues, and assassinations. While Link considers Pratap Chunder Roy's translation of *The Mahabharata* far more vivid, he praises Seeger's work as a valuable contribution to the study of Indian literature and mythology.

Ranganathananda, Swami. *The Essence of Hindu Culture*. Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1965. This lecture outlines the distinctive culture of India during the Vedic period. In particular, Swami Ranganathananda elaborates on the philosophical inquiry which formed a central part of the Upanishads, and compares Indian thought and achievement with that of ancient Greece.

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Van Nooten, Barend A. "The Sanskrit Epics." In *Heroic Epic and Saga*, edited by Felix J. Oinas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978. This is a thorough, scholarly essay on the history, background, structure, literary excellence, and philosophy of the two Indian epics.

## Related Titles

Seeger published a prose version of the second Sanskrit epic, The Ramayana, in 1969. Of even greater antiquity than The Five Sons of King Pandu, the events of The Ramayana are believed to have been recited by storytellers from the early days of the Aryan occupation of northern India. One-third the length of The Mahabharata, this epic poem was composed by Valmiki in the fourth century B.C.

Like the Greek epic the Odyssey, The Ramayana is also the story of the trials, adversities, and final triumph of one family. Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, is banished from the kingdom for fourteen years by his step-mother, Queen Kaikeyi, because she wanted her son to be coronated as the next king. Rama is followed into exile by his devoted wife, Sita, and younger brother, Lakshmana.

While in exile, they visit important hermitages, protect the sages from the attacks by the demons, and live a peaceful life. Towards the end of their term, Sita is abducted by the demon king of Lanka (Ceylon), Ravana. At the head of a large army, Rama defeats Ravana and rescues Sita, and then returns to Ayodhya to begin his glorious rule.

Even more so than The Mahdbharata, The Ramayana has become one of the primary Hindu scriptures. Rama is worshipped as an incarnation of Vishnu, god in the form of Preserver. Rama and Sita as ideal man and woman set the standards for social behavior to this day.

Their story is recited and reenacted throughout India during the DassehraDiwali festivities every fall.



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