



From Jaya to Digital Epics: The Visual and Performative Evolution of the Mahabharata across Time, Space, and Media

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Abstract: The Mahabharata began as "Jaya" (meaning "Victory") and had 8800 verses that dealt with the Kurukshetra war. It was attributed to sage Vyasa, (the "author" of the Mahabharata), and originally it was a composition of verses called the "Bharata" with an additional 24000 verses of genealogies and philosophical narratives. The Mahabharata was then expanded to include many different aspects of life and became "Mahabharata" (~100,000 verses), containing the Bhagavad Gita, didactic literature, moral teachings, mythological stories and poetry and became a monumental piece of literature.¹ The Mahabharata was transmitted from oral tradition (memorized and recited), via Bards (sūtā), to Manuscript culture (4th century BCE)². The Mahabharata is represented as sculptures in monuments created during the Gupta, Chalukyan, and Pallava periods; as paintings in the Mughal, Rajput, Pahari, and Kangra schools; as temple art at Mahabalipuram and Pattadakal; and via the Performing Arts such as Terukkuttu, Yakshagana, Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, and Manipuri³. There are many modern adaptations of the Mahabharata in cinema since the 1920s, the B.R. Chopra television series (1988), animation, video games, museums (Mahabharata Anubhav Kendra), and through digital media⁴. The Mahabharata has been adapted across Southeast Asia (Wayang Kulit in Indonesia, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos) demonstrating the Mahabharata's transformation from its Indian origins to its pan-Asian character⁵. The Mahabharata continues to be a living cultural text, reinterpreted by different societies over time and its existence is not due to permanence in written form but because of the way it has been adapted and absorbed into the fabric of different cultures⁶.

Keywords: Adaptation, Bhagavad Gita, Bharata, Jaya, Mahabharata, Oral Tradition, Performing Arts

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1. Introduction: The World's Longest Living Epic

The Mahabharata can be considered one of history's greatest literary works, viewed as the longest epic poem in the world. Its length is about ten times the combined length of Homer's Iliad and

Odyssey. The Mahabharata is an enormous text consisting of almost 100,000 double verses (shlokas). The number of verses totals more than 74,000 distributed over eighteen books (parvas), with an additional section called Harivamsa added. This extraordinary amount of literature encompasses mythology, philosophy, ethics, politics, astronomy, medicine, and every aspect of human life⁷.

In addition to its literary size, the Mahabharata is an entire cultural universe that has significantly influenced the consciousness of many people for more than two thousand years. It is not merely a story about the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but also serves as an encyclopedic reference work for all aspects of the Indian civilization. The Mahabharata contains the complete moral and philosophical basis of Hindu thought, and includes the famous Bhagavad Gita, which has had profound impacts on such noted philosophers as Schopenhauer and Albert Einstein⁸.

The epic's statement expresses the unequivocal ambition of the epic as a whole: "Anything that exists here can be found in other places; anything that does not exist here exists nowhere." This profound statement declares that the Mahabharata represents the totality of knowledge, produces the totality of wisdom and provides for all aspects of human understanding⁹. Therefore, it is positioned as the complete compendium of the totality of human experience and contains all aspects of life, from the loftiest aspects of spiritual existence to the lowest aspects of everyday life.

The extraordinary durability of the Mahabharata, having existed for over two thousand years, cannot be credited solely to the fact that it has been preserved in the same unchanged state, but rather, to the fact that the Mahabharata is a living document with an extraordinary capacity to adapt to the cultural environment and to be re-interpreted continuously¹⁰. The Mahabharata has changed and evolved with the societies that created and preserved it, absorbing new cultural customs, responding to contemporary issues and speaking to each new generation in a manner consistent with their historical context.

The Mahabharata has continuously evolved from an ancient oral narrative into a global visual and performative tradition that showcases itself through literature, sculpture, theatre, film, television, museums and digital culture. The Mahabharata has retained its integrity in terms of both its core narrative and philosophical essence throughout its evolution as demonstrated by its continued relevance through the transition from oral performance to the present day use of digital media; the Mahabharata possesses an extraordinary variety of numerous versions across the globe¹¹.

This study will explore this issue. What does it mean for the Mahabharata to have evolved from its origins as an ancient oral narrative into a global visual and performative tradition manifested through literature, sculpture theatre, film, television and digital culture?

2. From Jaya to Mahabharata: The Literary Evolution of the Epic

The Mahabharata has its roots in "Jaya", the earliest and most concise form of the Mahabharata. Traditional classical Indian literature attributes this writing to the sage Vyasa (Krishna Dvaipayana). This first written version, Jaya, contained approximately 8,800 verses and centered on the events of the Kurukshetra battleground—specifically, the conflict between two families referred to as the Pandavas and the Kauravas—which is at the center of the entire epic.¹² The earliest set of verses about the war were composed in one of several old poetic styles, with lines that were intended to

be sung by a suta (a bard) who would pass them down from generation to generation, with greater emphasis on the martial nature of the war than the philosophical aspects of the eventual completed text.¹³

As the prototype of the Mahabharata, Jaya is referred to as the epic's "narrative nucleus" because it formed the basis for the numerous later iterations and expansions of the Mahabharata. The Jaya was composed in an oral format and was born from an early tradition, where the narrative was preserved through the recitation of sutas who committed the composition to memory.¹⁴ The martial nature of the Kurukshetra war portrayed in the Jaya reflects the historic martial culture of ancient India and society's and Culture's obligations to be heroes through warfare.¹⁵

2.2. Bharat

Bharat, which emerged from Jaya over time, is a much larger version, with about 24,000 verses¹⁶ (an increase of about three times the original in terms of breadth) than Jaya and an expansion from Jaya was more than just a quantitative expansion;¹⁷ it was also a qualitative expansion, by including genealogical records that trace the ancestry of the kings and provide mythological and historical background information for the story that provides the rationale for the Jaya conflict to be part of a larger royal succession theme.¹⁸

Bharat also contains many of the philosophical ideas that would form the basis for the long-term impact of Mahabharata. Ethically and morally oriented stories that discussed issues of dharma (right behaviour), ethical behaviour and moral issues involving how humans should act are examples of some of the philosophical narratives that were included in the expansion of Bharat.¹⁹ The expansion of Bharat is indicative of the increasing degree of complexity in Indian philosophy, and the increased significance that ethical and religious considerations have been given to the composition of literary works.²⁰

2.3. Mahabharat

The final, and largest version of the "Mahabharata" (Great Bharata), contains close to 100,000 verses, thus being the longest single epic in existence.²¹ The large size of the Mahabharata is an indication of its evolution from being merely a story of war to that of an all-encompassing encyclopaedia of human information. As part of the last version of the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, a 700 verse philosophical dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna which has come to be one of the most significant spiritual texts ever created, was added to the epic.²² By the inclusion of the Gita, the text changed from a mostly narrative style to also include content from a philosophical perspective, and, thus, addressed the fundamental issues of duty, action and the identity of self.²³

Furthermore, the Mahabharata contains many didactic works that offer moral instructions and practical advice on the many aspects of life, with respect to governance (Shanti Parva), morality (Anushasana Parva), and social decorum.²⁴ Additionally, the last version of the Mahabharata contains numerous stories of Gods and evil demons, as well as heavenly beings, which provides context on the cosmic realm for the activities of humans.²⁵

Many years of regional additions and oral storytelling contributed to the evolution of Mahabharata. It is not regarded as a fixed text; rather, it is seen as a continuously expanding cultural repository.²⁶ That this cultural repository is so fluid reflects attributes inherent to oral

tradition—the performer of the story could introduce variations through their own interpretation(s) and/or how the audience responded to them.²⁷

3. Mahabharata in Ancient Visual Culture

The first period of illustrated depictions of the Mahabharata occurred in ancient Indian temples starting during the Gupta period (4th-6th centuries CE). The temple was a primary medium for illustrating the Mahabharata and its narratives through reliefs and sculptures.²⁸ Most of the viewers at this time were non-literate; therefore, each temple's hand-carved sculpture provides a visual, narrative presentation of the Mahabharata, which served as scripture to a largely illiterate population. The relief carvings seen in Gupta-era temples depict the key events from the Mahabharata and laid the foundation of a visual tradition of the Mahabharata, which would not only continue but develop and change in subsequent eras.²⁹

The Chalukyan temples located in Karnataka during the 6th-8th centuries CE (e.g., Pattadakal and Aihole) also contain visual depictions of the Mahabharata and exhibit the narrative refinement associated with the Chalukyan architectural style³⁰. The Pallava monuments in Tamil Nadu (e.g., Mahabalipuram) illustrate early Mahabharata depictions through massive rock-cut relief carvings that represent the most dramatic episodes within the epic.³¹

Examples of the most iconic representations of the Mahabharata can be found at Mahabalipuram in the Shore Temple and the Descent of the Ganges (Arjuna's Penance). The monumental relief carvings of Arjuna's Penance serve dual roles as representations of narrative and symbolic illustrations of the key themes of devotion and spiritual devotion within the Mahabharata³². The Virupaksha Temple at Pattadakal is another example of the sophisticated depiction of Mahabharata narratives and their complexity in narrative storytelling through South Indian temple sculpture³³.

Significant representations in these works can include Arjuna's Penance, Bhishma on the Bed of Arrows, Krishna as the Charioteer, and Draupadi's Humiliation³⁴. Temple wall surfaces also served as a way for non-literate people to have continued access to the Mahabharata's narrative and philosophical themes through visual means and not simply through written text³⁵. This transition from oral to written to visual form is an important evolution in the cultural dissemination/transmission of the Mahabharata, as it enables the Mahabharata to be increasingly accessible to those who were unable to read the written text³⁶.

4. Painting the Epic: Mahabharata in Indian Artistic Traditions

4.1. Miniature Paintings

The Indian miniature painting that featured the Mahabharata provided an important and evolving visual depiction of this epic³⁷. The elaborate Mahabharata illustrations produced by the Mughal school (16th to 18th centuries) represent one of the most significant developments to have occurred during this period³⁸. The various Rajput schools developed distinctive approaches and emphasized the heroic and spiritual elements of the epic, while the Pahari and Kangra schools also created paintings influenced by both Mughal and Rajput styles, but achieving their own unique stylistic characteristics³⁹.

The most significant change to take place was during Akbar's reign (1556-1605), when the Sanskrit epic was translated into the Persian language through the sponsorship of the emperor.

This Persian version of the Mahabharata, called the Razmnama (Book of War), represented an important moment in the cross-cultural transmission of the Mahabharata, as it was incorporated into the Persian literary tradition and made available to Muslim audiences⁴⁰. The Razmnama was illustrated by Mughal court artists, who produced a new and distinct visual representation of the Mahabharata that combined Indian narrative content with Persian artistic styles⁴¹.

Illustrative components of the Razmnama represent an exceptional synthesis of the two major artistic traditions that define India and Islam. Evidence of this project demonstrates how the Mahabharata has transcended its original cultural milieu to be strategically adapted at various cultural levels as a work of art by diverse and multiple cultural communities⁴². The Razmnama itself represents one of the most critical examples of cross-cultural artistic projects in which the Milhbase Mahabharata has been placed into artistic relationship with the literature and artwork of the Persian literary tradition⁴³.

4.2. Folk and Vernacular Paintings

In addition to elite miniature painting traditions, the Mahabharata has been represented in various folk and vernacular painting traditions. The Pattachitra tradition of Odisha creates elaborate scroll paintings that depict narratives based upon the Mahabharata. This tradition is characterized by its use of bold color and stylized figures⁴⁴. The Kalamkari painting of Andhra Pradesh consists of textile-based paintings depicting scenes from the Mahabharata and utilizes natural dyes.⁴⁵ Madhubani painting from Bihar consists of wall and paper paintings of the characters in the Mahabharata. The colors and the use of geometric patterns are very bright in these paintings⁴⁶. The Phad painting expression of Rajasthan includes large scroll paintings that contain stories from the Draupadi cult of the Mahabharata, although they depict many scenes from throughout the work⁴⁷.

Folks from different regions have visualized the same story in accordance with their local aesthetic standards. This illustrates how adaptable the Mahabharata is to many different artistic traditions and cultural contexts⁴⁸. Moreover, these folk and vernacular artistic traditions demonstrate the popularity of the Mahabharata as a cultural text that has reached audiences outside of elite literary traditions⁴⁹.

5. Performing the Epic: Theatre, Dance, and Oral Traditions

5.1. Classical Theatre Traditions

Performance arts based on Mahabharata stories are one of the major ways in which the epic's narratives are expressed through different regional cultures. Terukkuttu, from Tamil Nadu, presents many night-long performances of Mahabharata stories, with a particular concentration on the Draupadi cult⁵⁰. These performances combine dance, music, and dramatic action to take the Mahabharata into rural areas of the region. Yakshagana, from Karnataka, includes elaborate costume, music, and dramatic representations of battle scenes in the Mahabharata⁵¹. Kathakali, from Kerala, includes highly stylized performances of the Mahabharata, with a particular emphasis on Bhima, Duryodhana, and Karna⁵². These performances feature elaborate make-up, costume, and hand movements as a means of representing characters from the epic.

5.2. Dance Traditions

There are many Mahabharata-based compositions in Bharatanatyam, including the representation of the major characters through intricate footwork, hand gestures, and facial expressions⁵³. Odissi features numerous Mahabharata-based compositions that represent the narrative through graceful movements and distinctive gestures⁵⁴. Kuchipudi features many Mahabharata-based compositions incorporating dance, music, and dramatic action⁵⁵. Finally, Manipuri has many Mahabharata-based compositions reflecting the cultural traditions of the region⁵⁶.

These dance forms represent different characters and emotions, illustrating the capacity of the Mahabharata to be expressed through a variety of artistic traditions⁵⁷. They also illustrate that, as a source of artistic inspiration, the Mahabharata generates creative products within many different communities⁵⁸.

6. The Mahabharata Beyond India: Southeast Asian Transformations

6.1. Indonesia

In Java and Bali, the Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry) tradition has adapted the Mahabharata through grand storytelling, where leather puppets have been used to enact comprehensive Mahabharata narratives within the context of the Wayang Kulit performances⁵⁹. In addition to the use of originally indigenous Javanese and Balinese characters within the Wayang Kulit performances, new original characters of Islamic and Indonesian influence are also created and incorporated into the various Mahabharata performances of Wayang Kulit⁶⁰. This illustrates the adaptability of the Mahabharata in reference to local cultural traditions, while sustaining its core narrative⁶¹.

6.2. Cambodia

The Angkor Wat Temple Complex is an example of Mahabharata's influence on Cambodian culture. This is illustrated in the extensive temple reliefs at Angkor Wat depicting the Mahabharata's most important narrative moments⁶², which provide a reflection of the integration of the Mahabharata into the Cambodian cultural and religious realm as a means of beautifying sacred spaces and teaching moral lessons through the retelling of the Mahabharata as an art form⁶³.

6.3. Thailand

Thais create performances celebrating the Mahabharata that incorporates many of the values associated with Thai culture and continue the tradition of celebrating the Mahabharata in a royal court context through dance, music and drama⁶⁴. The adaptations of the Mahabharata illustrate the capacity of the Mahabharata to change and be reinterpreted through local indigenous cultural forms, while sustaining the core narrative elements of the Mahabharata⁶⁵.

6.4. Myanmar & Laos

Regional adaptations of the Mahabharata demonstrate the interchange of culture between Indian and Southeast Asian kingdoms and have established the Mahabharata as a pan-Asian culture language, not just limited to India⁶⁶. This further illustrates the ability of the Mahabharata to transcend its original cultural context as a result of intercultural exchange between India and Southeast Asia⁶⁷.

7. Mahabharata in Modern Literature

The Tamil transformation of the Mahabharata as translated by C Rajagopalachari has united this work with the Tamil literary tradition.⁶⁸ In contrast, the contemporary Marathi Novel *Mrityunjaya* by Shivaji Sawant gives us an interpretation of the character of Karna that is more than simply a heroic epic; it portrays Karna as a character of great complexity and moral ambivalence.⁶⁹ Similarly, the Odia Novel *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray provides a re-interpretation of the life of Draupadi, focusing on her experiences as a woman and on political aspects of her identity⁷⁰.

In today's world, contemporary authors are re-telling the Mahabharata from social and cultural perspectives; these authors emphasize the lives of marginalized individuals such as Karna, Draupadi, Gandhari, and Kunti.⁷¹ This shift represents an increasing concern in contemporary society regarding the social and cultural marginalization of people (i.e., a large portion being women) and political exploitation of individuals; authors use the narrative of the Mahabharata to engage contemporary issues through a traditional storytelling medium.⁷²

8. Cinema, Television, Animation, and Digital Culture

8.1. Cinema

The film adaptations of the Mahabharata began first with the productions of the films "Karnan" and "Kurukshetra" starting in the early 1920's.⁷³ These early films provided an avenue for the unique adaptation of the Mahabharata into motion pictures resulting in establishing a framework from which the Mahabharat films being made today were created.⁷⁴

8.2. Television Revolution

The television series produced and directed by B.R Chopra entitled *Mahabharat* began creating a cultural phenomenon and legacy throughout the country of India; millions of homes viewed this series weekly.⁷⁵ As *Mahabharat* has established itself as a collective memory, audiences develop an affection for the characters; this accordingly determines the success for future productions of this story for years to come.⁷⁶

8.3. Animation and Gaming

As the development and expansion of animated films, graphic novels, video games, and digital media create new means through which individuals can engage with the Mahabharata, the Mahabharata is now expressed more through visual media than it has ever been through written forms, reflecting both the evolution of forms/boundaries of cultural transfer in the digital age as well as a change in how individuals relate to the Mahabharata.⁷⁷

9. Museums, Heritage Interpretation and Immersive Experiences

Multimedia displays, digital storytelling, interactive exhibits and immersive interpretation create the Mahabharata Anubhav Kendra Museum in Kurukshetra. The Kurukshetra Panorama and Science Centre has combined educational content with an immersive experience; therefore, as a cultural epic, the Mahabharata has moved from oral recitation to the museum setting of an immersive cultural transmission⁷⁸.

10. Why the Mahabharata Is Never Ending: Cultural Adaptation Theory

Oral Tradition Theory, Reception Theory, Cultural Memory Studies, Performance Studies and Visual Culture Studies provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the Mahabharata. Because each generation recreates the Mahabharata through a variety of forms (i.e., manuscripts, sculptures, temple reliefs, paintings, dance, theatre, film, television, museum, digital media), the Mahabharata's continuous existence is assured, and in producing a different version of the Mahabharata; therefore, the Mahabharata is always new.⁷⁹

The survival of the Mahabharata is a demonstration that cultural endurance cannot occur through textual permanence, but through the ability to successfully utilise diverse forms of media and cultural contexts to create adaptations and transformations over time.⁸⁰

11. Conclusion

The Mahabharata has undergone remarkable transformation throughout time from being the original oral account of the family warfare (the Jaya) to how it is experienced by people now through digital means. The Mahabharata has changed from an oral tradition to a literary encyclopedia that was the world's inspiration for sculptors, painters, dancers, and playwrights and has spread throughout Asia through the mediums of film and television into museums and now the digital Platform⁸¹. This allows us to see that the Mahabharata has continued to reinvent itself and thus, while the text of The Mahabharata may seem to be fixed or unchanging over time, it is through the cultural transformation of The Mahabharata from one generation of people to another that gives it its continuing meaning⁸². Each generation will experience its own version of The Mahabharata, but each version will reflect back to the great importance of the four themes that relate to the duty, powers and morals, kinship and fate that are presented in the Mahabharata⁸³. Because of this, the Mahabharata is not just a historical document but rather one of the world's most alive and evolving cultural traditions.

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