

The Book of the Assembly Hall

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Discuss the significance of the Assembly Hall in the action of the Mahabharata.

Ans- After Krishna and Arjuna burn down the Khandava forest on the request of Agni (fire god), Maya, the asura, is left as the sole survivor of this devastation. He is given shelter by Arjuna, Maya in turn expresses gratitude to the Pandavas by offering to construct the magical Mayasabha in Indraprastha, the new capital of the Pandavas.

The Pandava brothers proceed to subjugate the kings of various regions of India, once the Mayasabha has been constructed. The Pandavas invite their relatives from Hastinapura on the occasion of the Rajasuya Yajna, a ritual that must follow such worldly conquests.

The Mayasabha, with its obvious display of opulence and prosperity, arouses corrosive envy in Duryodhana's heart, as the Kaurava king enters the great hall with his retinue.

The Pandavas deliberately insult Duryodhana and laugh at him when he mistakes water for land and falls into water, in the hall built by Maya. They also made Duryodhan jealous by displaying their array of wealth, ornaments, and jewels to him. Further Draupadi's ringing laughter, mocking Duryodhana's muddled and dishevelled plight arouses a deep sense of insult in him. This insult coupled with envy, which he wants to satisfy, becomes the impetus of his revenge against the Pandavas and gives rise to the course of the future action in the epic. A vengeful Duryodhana invites the Pandavas to Hastinapura to play the game of dice, and, wins it with the devious Shakuni's help. When Yudhisthira stakes Draupadi in the game and loses her, Duryodhan insults her brutally. Even after Draupadi gets the "boon" from Dhritarashtra that she along with her husband, would be spared the humiliation of slavery, the Pandavas don't experience any really positive turn of fortune.

They are again forced to move into the forest, and finally when it is obvious that they won't be given even the miniscule piece of land belonging to the Kauravas, the Mahabharata war begins. The Assembly Hall and the Sabha Parva remains the central part to the action and philosophical themes of the epic. It is central in so far as it sows the seeds of future war and whips up ruinous envy in the Kauravas. It also symbolizes the illusion of victory, the illusion that all victories are.

2. Discuss the vision of Dharma upheld by the *Mahabharata*. Is it reflected in the Sabha Parva?

Ans- The *Mahabharata* is one of the most complicated texts that continuously tangle and untangle the question of dharma. Dharma or ethics is the principal tenet based on which an individual should carry out his duties, roles and responsibilities in his or her life. The epic is a representation of every human emotion- love, greed, jealousy, power, anger, hatred, love and kindness. The story oscillates between all these impulses. The text explores the conceptions

of Dharma in a dialogic way- there is no singular way to pinpoint what dharma means. The most acutely discernible message of the epic is that one cannot escape from life even though the responsibilities forced upon the individual by life may appear to be meaningless and futile. The question of choosing what is right and wrong shall always stay in front of an individual. However the choices must be governed by the principle of dharma (ethics), that is a thoughtful meditation on the consequences of actions that might bring in the future. Thus it is in the heart of man where the ultimate ethical and spiritual agency is located. The epic has not sung the defeat of humanity but the triumph of the human self, its capacity for continuous self-transcendence. True dharma is not an escape from the world, but a loving orientation to the others on the earth, an awareness of one's responsibility to all the living beings which can make life meaningful even in the face of death.

The Sabha Parva, crucially becomes the pivotal point of action- wrestling with dharma and adharma and the war which happens at the end can be interpreted as a war fought to reinstate *dharma* or virtue over *adharma* or injustice. Thus it serves as a keynote of the epic.

Possible Questions

Long Answer Type (10 Marks)

1. What is the significance of the Assembly Hall set up by Maya in the larger action of the Mahabharata?
2. How would you situate the Mahabharata in the tradition of epics and mahakavyas?
3. Discuss the vision of Dharma upheld by the Mahabharata. Is it reflected in the Sabha Parva?
4. What is the significance of the game of dicing in The Mahabharata?
5. What does Kunti say to Karna when she goes to meet him? What is his reply?

Short Answer Type (5 Marks)

1. Discuss the structure of the Assembly Hall in Indraprastha.
2. Analyse Duryodhana's jealousy in the Indraprastha.
3. Discuss Duryodhana's treatment of Draupadi in the Sabha Parva.
4. Why did Karna refuse to join the side of the Pandavas in the war of Kurukshetra?