



## The Forest of Stories

*Ashok K. Banker*

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## **The Forest of Stories** Ashok K. Banker

The Forest of Stories, Book One in Ashok Banker's long-awaited 'MBA' Series, takes us deep into the haunted jungle of Naimishavan. Here, at the ashram of Kulapati Shaunaka, a dusty traveller arrives with sad tidings: Maharishi Krishna Dweipayana Vyasa has passed on. Yet the great collator of the Vedas has left behind a fabulous legacy, the epic narrative poem called Maha Bharata. At the urging of the ashramites, the traveller Suta begins to recite the great composition, starting with the incredible creation myths and tales of god and giants, snake-mothers and gargantuan eagles. And as the night wears on and the tale grows darker, he senses the presence of countless ghostly beings in the shadows beyond the flickering oil-lamps, the restless souls of the many millions butchered in the climactic war that ended the great tale itself, gathering now to hear the epic saga that led eventually to their destruction and the decimation of the Kuru Bharata race.

## **The Forest of Stories Details**

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# From Reader Review The Forest of Stories for online ebook

## Harsha Priolkar says

I had read the author's Ramayana series many years ago and quite enjoyed his fresh take on it. I just finished Govinda, Book 1 in Krishna Udayasankar's The Aryavarta Chronicles where she gives a fresh spin to this immortal myth, just as Banker had done with the Ramayana, although she takes much more creative licence than he did. Reading Govinda made me want to revisit the original story and refresh my memory because let's face it - most of us when we refer to the Mahabharata are referring to only that part of it that is etched indelibly in our memories - the family feud, the Great War, Krishna, Kurukshetra.

But this epic is so much more! And that's what I wanted to refresh...the creation of the world, the ancient rishis, the Snake sacrifice, the story of Parashuram...all fascinating and yet their details only vaguely remembered. This is truly a Forest of Stories...as I read I meandered along with the narrative, flowing from one rishi's story to another here, from one king to another there, and often from a sage to a king to another sage with a few Gods and demons thrown in for good measure! I've enjoyed my travels through these forests as one enjoys revisiting a favourite destination - it feels comfortably familiar and yet there's always something new that keeps the magic alive :)

Have already begun the second book - The Seeds of War.

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## Arun Divakar says

This review begins with the solemn hope that the love for stories never dies down as long as humanity is left on earth. To me, there is no bigger addiction/obsession/craze than stories, the lands of make-belief, characters that I will never meet in real life....all those ingredients that make up a magnificent story. But there is always a capability that I admire above writing which is the art of telling stories. You would never need to discover a movie, a documentary or any other form of visual media if you were to discover a teller of tales who could transport you to distant lands with just words to guide you through the way.

I could recollect the words that one of my favorite authors from Malayalam used in his collection of short stories : *To my mother, who made me a writer out of me through only her skills at narrating tales.* How many such minds would have stories moulded ? We owe a great many of our writers to this power and this power alone.

Why this long digression ? There is ofcourse the fact that *Mahabharata* is narrated time and again as stories within stories. This here is the tale of a storyteller (*Sauti*) named Ugrasrava who travels to the fabled forest of Naimisha-Aranya and meets up with the sages there. The bard then proceeds to narrate the great epic to the august crowd gathered around him. Late into the night and around the camp fire he regales them with tales that begin from the birth of the universe. But why does the crowd around him seem to increase every time he looks at them ? Was there this big a sea of faces when he began his story ? Even after the entire company of ascetics and novices at the hermitage joining the crowd, why does he feel even the forest itself is listening in to the tale ? The forest was ages ago, the fabled land where the Pandavas and Kauravas met in mortal combat. And as the night wears on, the spirits of the dead ones arrive at the hermitage to listen to the great bard. Such was the magic of the story and to someone irrevocably addicted to this epic like me, this feeling is a very understandable one.

This here is the Adiparva of the *Mahabharata*. Which is to say that it does to the epic what Genesis does to the Old testament. It begins at the time when the universe we know comes into existence. Tells us of the gods, demons and legendary monarchs. Then of the mighty serpents and the creatures of myth and later to the tales of the women and men who make up this hefty tome. There is Parashurama who traversed the Earth twenty one times to massacre the arrogant race of *Kshatriyas*, there is the legendary *Garuda* who true to his word battles the forces of heaven to free his mother from slavery and lot many other interesting characters. All this leads us to the legendary emperor named Bharatha ( not to be confused with Rama's sibling from *Ramayana*) from whom begins the line of Kuru kings who ages later meet on the plains of Kurukshetra to annihilate each other. Now if this isn't fascinating then I do not know what is !

So much about the story line, so you may ask how is the writing ? To me, it was in pace with the original work. Having once read an unabridged and translated version of the Adiparva from Sanskrit, I could find that the author stuck very close to the epic. Unlike his *Ramayana* retelling, Ashok Banker takes very few creative liberties here except for maybe a few battle scenes. I could see traces of his style from his earlier works in the battle scenes of Parashurama, the death of Parikshit and in the Shakuntala-Dushyanta yarn. Reading the Parashurama angle did give me a pause for it seemed to have reflections of Moorcock's Elric and his blade *Stormbringer*. The rating of four stars here is for the stories themselves which start of looking like they are all over the place and gradually but surely appear to become beads from a single huge ornament. An ornament which takes its sweet time to appear before us. However, I felt the author dragging the tale along for a bit towards the end which could have been avoided. Something a good editor could have trimmed and shaped up !

Now I do not know how many of you are aware of this little snippet from the epic. It appears arrogant (and rightly so) and speaks about the power of the *Mahabharata* and its influence on the world :

*Yadihasti tadanyatra yannehasti natat kwachith*

It translates to : What is here is elsewhere; what is not here is nowhere.

Amen to that !

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### **Shekhar Ruparelia says**

A narration of the epic Mahabharat, Banker stays very close to the original. This book, the first in the series, tells of the back-stories which lead to the setup of the Kuru empire. Well written and well researched, just the kind of book I wanted to read on the great epic.

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### **Reshmy Pillai says**

Through out the book, except for the title on the cover page the reader never guesses that we are headed towards something that we had grown up watching Girish Karnaad and party perform every Sunday, it is simply a ride we enjoy for the proverbial journey, not the destination. The book ends with a promise of the writer Vyasa's existence and excitement that a thrilling story is to follow. Ashok Banker very intelligently connects the different stories from the 'maggi' of Indian legends and myths, bringing together an exciting finish to the first book in the series while throwing the pressure of the next book on the reader. He has set the

stage for the different characters of the Mahabharata, as we know it, to make an appearance and thrill us, yet again. The stage is set, cat calls on the way – the publishers just need to hurry with the launch of the next book.

A speedy ride on the expressway of Indian mythology, with the right dose of 21st century realism and the ancient reverence. Full review: <http://thetalespensieve.wordpress.com...>

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### **Aparajita Shorey says**

My only association with mythological epics was the version that were telecasted on the television when I was a kid and that is how I first came across Mahabharata all thanks to the Mr B.R Chopra. When I first came across *The Forest of Stories* by Ashok K. Banker I was pretty skeptical as the book clearly mentioned that he was merely retelling the great epic of Mahabharata and retelling a story that has been narrated time and again by elders in the family in almost every Indian household is never an easy job as most readers would lose interest after a while. But this doubt in my mind was dispelled as soon as I did a background check on the author to find that he has done it before and has been very successfully at the same with his Ramayana Series and Krishna Coriolis series ( which I now plan to read )

*The forest of stories* is the first book in what Ashok Banker calls the MBA series. When I picked up the book I was actually expecting that I would be reading about the war, the Kauravas, the Pandavas and usual names that come to your mind when you think about Mahabharata, instead the book turned out to be a collection of seven interesting stories that do not involve any of the main characters of the great battle but it is important in the sense that it introduces us to the very circumstances, situations and the history of the characters associated with this Great War.

The thing that I admire most about the book is how the author has been able to.....Read complete review here: <http://www.coml13.com/book-review-for...>

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### **Uttara Srinivasan says**

(And the half star goodreads refuses to part with goes to the author!)3.5 stars

Like the River you come back to is never the same as the one you'd first visited - both the River and you have changed in the interim, so is the Mahabharata of readers and disciples.

I use Banker's words and paraphrase - borrowing liberty as has he to recreate history (itihasa). Little else has been truer about this epic poem that is such an intrinsic weave the fabric of our culture and society. Every student's version of the Mahabharata has brought life a new ripple of color before unseen - from Rajaji's factual rendition to Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni's wildly fantastic creativity.

Ashok Banker's work goes beyond. He takes the essence of the original (or at least what we seem to have access to as the original) and binds it with the simplicity of a foreign language. He retains the character of the poem as he focuses on setting it up with the context of the tales that are so integral to knowing and understanding why the tale is considered as magnificent as it is.

Of particular beauty is the author's ability to bring to life the principle of circularity of life (as starkly

opposed to the principle of linearity), of the limitation of (wo)man" in defining everything that happens to him/her (as opposed to actions have consequences here and now). Unsettling - especially in the times of shortening gratification timelines

As far as beginnings of series go, this one checks of many boxes. And yet, it almost seems that to enjoy Mr. Banker's work almost mandates you possess the same devotion (I use that word as distinct from the religious connotation) for the tale of our past (even if an imaginary one) as he seems to. Oh well, isn't that why we are here, after all?

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### **Pradeep Mohandas says**

It has been 14 days since I read this book and I have been going slow on all the other books that I have on my reading shelf. I have a good excuse for this. I am slightly recovering from the huge count of books that I read and because I again have access to the idiot box. So, there was an initial hike in the hour I spent in front of it. Time taken away from reading.

This book can best be described as a book of interlinked short stories within a story. A story teller narrates these every evening at an ashram. These form the initial stories of Bhriгу, Garuda and Parasurama among various others.

I enjoyed this much better than the earlier books because I was able to take wider breaks in between without having to worry about forgetting the direction that the story was going to.

The paper and book quality was much better than Sons of Sita or other books in the Ramayana series!

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### **Casey says**

Clean language. Not much stalling styled writing as seen in his Ramayana series.

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### **Nisha says**

Amazing!!

Finally got a chance to read Mahabharata without the interpretations being thrust upon! :)

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### **Sahil Pradhan says**

This here is the Adiparva of the Mahabharata. Which is to say that it does to the epic what Genesis does to the Old Testament. It begins at the time when the universe we know comes into existence. Tells us of the gods, demons and legendary monarchs. Then of the mighty serpents and the creatures of myth and later to the tales of the women and men who make up this hefty tome.

There is Parashurama who traversed the Earth twenty-one times to massacre the arrogant race of Kshatriyas, there is the legendary Garuda who true to his word battles the forces of heaven to free his mother from

slavery and lot many other interesting characters. All this leads us to the legendary emperor named Bharat from whom begins the line of Kuru kings who ages later meet on the plains of Kurukshetra to annihilate each other.

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The rating of five stars here is for the stories themselves which start of looking like they are all over the place and gradually but surely appear to become beads from a single huge ornament. An ornament which takes its sweet time to appear before us.

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## **Ramkumaar Shanker says**

Indian mythology lovers, a must-read book!!

Ashok Banker is truly an epic story-teller. Most of us have read different versions of Mahabharatha such as Rajaji's version and Kamala Subramanian 's version. But this book had something different to offer. Mind you, there is hardly fictional descriptions rather than the substance itself, however the way he flits across stories is amazing. We have read about the battefield Hastinapura in itself, but hardly about the history of the place in itself. The reverence conveyed in the book towards a work such as Mahabharatha somewhere emphasizes the underlying meaning that Mahabharatha is not another story but the answer for many questions. The most lovable bit was the reference to additional listeners to the story-teller everytime he recounts a tale. For Indian mythology lovers, this is a must read!!

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## **Sruti says**

Perhaps reading epic fantasy (I'm looking at you, George R.R. Martin!), and other amazing fantasy has ruined me for anything less epic. I could not get into The Forest of Stories at all. I know the author makes a disclaimer that this book is not a fantasy retelling of the Mahabharata. Nonetheless, I expected a more engrossing retelling. Characters said their predestined lines and acted out their ordained actions, and did nothing more. I can see this as being a decent introduction to the Mahabharata; however, I am familiar with the story, and I now wish for something which allows the foibles of the characters and their internal thoughts to be explored. This is something which I have found lacking in all retellings of this epic tale; it leads me to the question- can the storyteller deviate from the traditional style of telling the story (action-> outcome) without adulterating it's message? I think I would prefer a bit more artistic license from all authors attempting to this age-old story, to bring forth the moral dilemmas and individual weaknesses of the characters, rather than simply rehash it with the trite predetermination and deus-ex-machina plot device. After all, affairs are had, illegitimate children are born, kingdoms are fought for and even the Gods are impartial- there seems to be such unexplored scope in storytelling value, with regards to these events. Of course, those were not the aims of the author; Ashok Banker has delivered the tale exactly as it is acknowledged to have been, and I cannot fault him for that. However, this interpretation brings nothing new to the tale; I feel that a more engaging version would be the Amar Chitra Katha comic of the Mahabharata, if you can get your hands on the volumes.

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## Saloni says

Fun, fun, fun. Ashok Banker brings back the original Mahabharata and what a ride it is! For me, the best thing about the book is how, by simply retelling existing stories, it exposes the exploitative power structures of Indian society. Looking forward to more.

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## Neeraj says

A good translation of epic Mahabharata. Now I know that this epic is written same way as modern day novels. Stories inside stories. Also quite interesting and increased my urge for the next part. Sad have to wait for it.

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## Manu says

Book 1 of Ashok Banker's Mahabharata, MBA if you will. It is an exact rendition of the saga written by Krishna Dweipayana Vyasa. The narrative begins in Naimisha-sharanya, where Ugrasrava, son of Lomarsana and better known as Sauti, arrives to convey the news of Vyasa's transcendence to the next life, and to narrate the grandest tale ever created.

The tale begins long before the descendants of Kuru faced each other on the battlefield at Kurukshetra. Kurukshetra, famous long before as Samantapanchaka where Parasurama created five lakes of blood from the decimation of kshatriyas, and famous long after as the venue for the sarpa satra conducted by Janamajaya, descendant of the Pandavas.

Sauti explains how Jaya, the original tale swelled from 8800 slokas to 24000, named Bharata and then over several narrations, to Mahabharata, made of one hundred thousand slokas. A narration that Sauti himself was the recipient of, from Vaisampayana, as well as Vyasa himself, at the satra.

The narrative is anything but linear, like a tree with a multitude of branches, and does stick to Vyasa's original work. It flits from story to story, occasionally coming back to what can be loosely described as central narrative, in this case, a sort of index built by questions being asked to Sauti during his narration. Thanks to this, from creation of the world and the origin of different species to the reason for the Mahabharata war and the stories of many antecedents of the Pandavas and Kauravas, there are stories and stories. This book ends with the introduction to Bharata - the emperor, son of Dushyanta and Shakuntala, after whom the country is named.

As someone deeply interested in mythology, this is a very interesting read, despite the elaborate prose, but what you will get from it completely depends on your level of interest in the epic.

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