Vyasa

c. 1500 BC

**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** A great sage of ancient India, Vyasa wrote one of India’s most famous epic poems. Called the *Mahabharata*, this work is a collection of history, theology, philosophy, and romance. In addition to teaching about moral responsibilities, it tells the story of a great Indian civil war. In this epic, Vyasa captured a period of time from over 3000 years ago.

As you read the biography below, think about what Vyasa contributed to Indian literature.

According to legend, Vyasa was born about 3,500 years ago in the forests of India. He was the son of Parasara and a princess, Satyavati. Vyasa lived among hermits, or people who chose to live away from others. From them, Vyasa learned about the *Vedas*—ancient sacred texts of Indian literature.

As a grown man, Vyasa became a priest and a teacher. He gained followers over time and moved near the Himalaya mountains. There he is thought to have divided the *Vedas* into four collections. He also wrote the *Mahabharata* (muh HAH BAH ruh tuh), one of the great epic works of Indian literature.

The *Mahabharata* is considered one of the most influential pieces of literature ever written. It is written in Sanskrit, which is the ancient language of India and of Hinduism. According to Hindu tradition, Vyasa actually dictated his writing to his scribe, Ganesa, the god of learning. Some scholars believe that Vyasa wrote only parts of this work. They contend that it is actually a collection of writings by several authors from different time periods in history.

The *Mahabharata* means the great epic of the Bharata dynasty. Set in about 1200 BC, it tells the story of two families who live in northern India. The story has had a profound influence on the people of India for thousands of years. It has influenced the religious, social, and political thinking of hundreds of millions of Hindus. In fact, the *Bhadgavad Gita*, a section of the epic’s sixth book, has become one of the main texts central to Hindu beliefs. It is considered by many to be the most sacred of all Hindu texts.

In the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa describes a civil war between two royal families—the Kurus and the Pandus. Arjuna, the leader of the Pandus,
gathers an army to fight his cousins and reclaim the Pandus’ kingdom. Confused about the morality of killing friends and relatives from both families, Arjuna cannot command his troops to begin to fight.

Eventually the battle begins. Over the course of the story, the futility of war is a central theme. The poem’s characters represent both human characteristics and religious thought. As the story unfolds, the epic teaches about one’s dharma, or spiritual obligations and duties. This monumental piece of literature is considered a major source of information dealing with ancient India.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall**  What are Vyasa’s contributions to ancient Indian literature?

2. **Express and Support a Point of View**  What can readers learn about ancient India from his texts? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

ACTIVITY

With a small group, prepare a 5-minute skit of a conversation that might have taken place between Arujuna and one of his military leaders about going to war. Write a script for your skit based on information from the biography, your textbook, and outside research. Rehearse and then perform your skit for the rest of the class.