

Mahābhārata

As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the fifth part of the serial article, continuation from November 2023 newsletter.

Lord Shiva said, “Do not worry, you will remember everything. What happened and why it has all come down this way you will know. You will remember.” Amba was satisfied with Lord Shiva’s words, and she could not wait another day. She went where there was a large fire and she entered the fire. She killed herself.

Amba was born again as a girl in Drupada’s kingdom, in the same palace where the garland lay untouched on that pillar. Drupada had instructed everyone to stay away from a garland that no one could handle. No one knew what would happen to them if they touched it. Born as girl, Amba grew up there. What happened is one day she saw the garland and she took it and put it around her neck. Drupada was terrified when he came to know about this. But Amba remembered the whole Bhishma affair the minute she touched the *mālā*. She remembered her past. She knew exactly why she was born in Panchala and what was behind all of this. She knew exactly what she was going to do, and she assured Drupada that she would be all right.

After some time, she changed. There are two versions of this part of the story. One version says that as soon as she put on the *mālā* she became a male, a man. The other version says that she had asked celestial Drona to teach her archery and he had told her that he would teach no woman. She wanted to become a man, and whatever was needed for that to be done was done. She underwent a change of sex and became a male. What was once the reborn Amba became a boy named Shikhandi. He had that name because he wore just a pronounced tuft of hair on top, like a coconut thing, you know. Shikhandi waited for the day when he could destroy Bhishma. In the Mahabharata war, Shikhandi will be responsible for Bhishma’s fall. There was no way Bhishma would fight a woman, so the story goes this way. Bhishma would not even fight a woman turned man. He would fight no man with a feminine name. These three Bhishma would not fight, and Shikhandi knew that.

Under the tutelage of Drona, Shikhandi became a great archer. His skill was on par with Dhrstadyumna, Drupada's son, and others. Everybody knew the truth of Shikhandi's transformation. It was news known to everybody. Indeed Bhishma knew about this guy. Therefore in the great Mahabharata battle, when Bhishma was wreaking destruction on the Pandava army, which was being trampled by Duryodhana's army again and again, Duryodhana addressed Bhishma, "Bhishma, even though you are fighting for me, I feel your heart is with the Pandavas and that is why you are not absolutely destroying them. You are invincible. There is no match for you. There must be some reason why you have not destroyed all of them. The reason is that you love them." Duryodhana would taunt Bhishma like this even though Bhishma did fight on his side. Then after this particular day and conversation, Bhishma promised Duryodhana that he would see victory. The battle raged, and Bhishma was at the head of it. The whole Pandava army was devastated and demoralized by Bhishma's ferocious heart.

Sometimes it is necessary for us to go ahead and tell the story. During the night of Bhishma's glorious victories, the Pandava's met to discuss what they would face on the next day. They reckoned how to infuse some kind of courage in the ranks of their armies. Dharmaputra, Arjuna's oldest brother, described the only way, "We have to go to Bhishma and ask him how he can be defeated." The trust in Bhishma just amazes me, the trust in *dharma*. At night, while all in Kurukshetra were lying in their tents, Dharmaputra went to Bhishma, who was resting. Bhishma welcomed Dharmaputra and the other Pandavas who were there. Bhishma asked, "What can I do for you, Dharma? What can I do?" The Pandavas all stepped forward and did *namaskāra* to Bhishma. They spoke to Bhishma, "Look, our army is totally demoralized. We cannot really stand even one more day. There is no way we are going to win the war unless you get killed. You have to tell us how to kill you."

Bhishma smiled at Dharmaputra's words and said, "Nobody can kill me, that is true. There is only one way. Do you know what that way is? Number one, only Arjuna can do something to me. He alone is equal to me. But alone, he cannot kill me. Neither can I kill him. But there is one thing he can do. You have Shikhandi, and I know who he is. Bring him. Shikhandi is born to kill me, and he will

be responsible for my death. He will be responsible, but he will not kill me either. Bring Shikhandi and station him right in front of my chariot. I will not fight him, and you all know why. Then Arjuna can do the deed.” Bhishma gave them the method to kill him. Bhishma was tired. He had lived a life of one continuous sacrifice. He was a Vasu, a *deva*, anyway, the eighth Vasu, and he had to go back.

Bhishma had cast his lot with Duryodhana, and that itself was a very heavy thing for him. He could not carry that heart. *Dharma* was on one side, and his own words and vows were on the other side. As a man of commitment to his vows, to his words, he had promised to protect the throne. That was extremely important to him. Whoever sat upon that throne he would protect. His whole life he had been protecting Hastinapura. Even though he knew that Duryodhana was wrong, Bhishma was with Duryodhana. Bhishma had advised Duryodhana to change course before the war, and during the war, even when Duryodhana had taunted him, Bhishma advised Duryodhana that he could not win this war. He told Duryodhana that he would bring the destruction of his own people because Krishna and Arjuna were there on the other side. He told Duryodhana, “*Dharma* is there. They have *dharma* with them, *yogeshvara*, Krishna.” Duryodhana would hear this again, and it would make him red with fury. Arjuna was a red flag for Duryodhana. Duryodhana would dismiss any praise of Arjuna. Duryodhana held that Karna was the greatest of all the people. This was in many ways true. Karna, born a Pandava but on Duryodhana's side, may have been the best, but still Arjuna had *dharma* with him. Karna had his own personal *dharma*. But Karna's life was cast along with *adharma*. To that extent he was stifled. He did not have the unfettered energy of one with *dharma*, and he always had problems. In the battlefield he would forget the right *mantra* to activate his weapons. Yet it is true that Karna was considered to be the best of that time, and Karna always assured Duryodhana that he would win the great war.

Bhishma always championed the Pandava cause. He wanted to avoid this war. Repeatedly he advised Duryodhana that it was not too late to call it off. But in time, Shikhandi was stationed before Bhishma's chariot. Then Bhishma gives up, out of arrows, and Arjuna sends the arrow. Bhishma was happy that the arrow had not come from Shikhandi. Bhishma pulled the shaft from his body and

saw it was shot from Arjuna's bow Gandiva. That made him happy. He said to Arjuna, "Hey, I am thirsty." Duryodhana and others tried to bring water for him, but he blew them off. He wanted Arjuna. He asked for a bed, and men scattered every which way for mattresses and sheets. But he dismissed all of them. He wanted Arjuna to prepare a bed for him. Arjuna prepared a bed of arrows with their points driven into the earth. Bhishma decided to die only when the sun was north of the equator. It was coming anyway, and he had the boon that he would die of his own choice of time. Whenever he wanted to die he would die. That was the story of Amba.

Ambika and Ambalika lived happily with their husband Vicitravirya, yet Vicitravirya suffered from a disease that no one could diagnose. The doctors were all brought to look into it but no one knew what to do for him. In time Vicitravirya passed away without children. Now, if there were no children the Kuru family comes to an end. There was nobody to maintain their ongoing responsibility for the whole country. Therefore Satyawati told Bhishma, "Bhishma, I want you to rule the kingdom. You enthrone yourself. I will make all the arrangements." Bhishma laughed. The same Satyawati had been responsible for his renouncing the kingdom and for making the vow that Bhishma would never marry. It had all been due to Satyawati alone. Now she herself wanted Bhishma to take the crown. His was a big laugh.

"Satyawati, what are you saying? I made a vow to your father and all the people, to all the elements and all the *devatas*," he said. She pleaded, but he said, "No way." What was going to happen to the family? Who would rule?

Bhishma said, "We must find some other means. We must look into the *dharmaśāstra*, into the minds of those who protect and practice *dharma*, to find out what is proper. We have to see where there are such precedents and what is proper in such situations." They consulted the *śāstra* and they sought people's counsel as to how to keep the lineage going. They came up with a plan.

Satyavati asked and then ordered Bhishma to take the throne and to marry the two sisters Ambika and Ambalika, but Bhishma would have none of it. Their inquiry gave a solution: whenever in the royal family there was such a break in the lineage, there were a few things they could do. They could invite an ascetic, a

tapasvin, someone highly learned, someone with no claim over the kingdom, someone with no attachments, to make the proper gesture, to give an offering. They thought the best person to do this was Vyasa himself. Vyasa was the son of Satyavati, but nobody knew he was her son. Satyavati had had a certain relationship with Parasara, and Vyasa was born of their union. Then Parasara returned Satyavati's virginity to her, and again she became an unmarried virgin. This was done as a boon from Parasara to Satyavati after Vyasa was born. Vyasa was to be born, and he had a mission to do. Parasara knew this.

Vyasa was to bring the Vedas together, and he was a great *tapasvin*. Certainly Satyavati knew who he was when she recommended him to come and take the action that would continue the Kuru line. Vyasa knew that Satyavati was his mother. This was not common knowledge, but it was known in certain circles. Vyasa was called and asked to give this blessing of progeny to Ambika and Ambalika. Ambika and Ambalika did not want the kind of union Satyavati instigated. They did not want to have to meet in this way with a matted-hair sage. But the deed was done. Because of her attitude, her reaction to the ascetic who fathered her child, Ambika's child Dhrtarashtra was born blind. Pandu was born with a pale color to Ambalika. The families had been told by Vyasa that the boy Dhrtarashtra would grow to be very strong but he would be born blind. Pandu was born with no handicap. A blind son cannot rule the kingdom. Satyavati was desperate about Dhrtarashtra's condition because she wanted the Kuru family to have a clear and undisputed heir and to continue uninterrupted.

Satyavati called again for Vyasa, and a servant-girl in the royal chamber was chosen to carry a child. That is why there was a third child, Vidura. Vidura was never really considered a *kṣatriya*, but Vyasa had said Vidura would be the wisest of the three sons. Vidura would be wisest, Pandu would be great and Dhrtarashtra would be strong and blind. Bhishma took up the job of raising the children, and that meant he did not give as much attention to ruling the kingdom. For some time, years and years, there had been no king at all. As a result, around Hastinapura, those rulers who had paid tribute to the Kurus had developed their own protective kingships. The empire that had been there was all gone.

To be continued...