

Mahābhārata
As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the seventh part of the serial article, continuation from February 2024 newsletter.

Pandu pleaded, “Hey, do not do this. Is there any way I can get this curse neutralized?”

The deer said, “No way, you will die.” Then the *ṛṣi* and his wife died. They decided to die and died. Pandu became despondent. He decided not go back to Hastinapura. Condemned to die, he saw no reason to go back. He decided to spend his time as a renunciate. He said that he would learn to look at things, at *sukha duḥkha*, with dispassion. He said he would no longer be carried away by kingdom and pelts and pleasure. Thus he renounced and began to live in the forest, and his wives decided to join him in this lifestyle. He and his wives gave away everything that they had brought with them and sent the retinue back to the royal city. A few years passed for Pandu in this simple lifestyle.

Then Pandu again became very sad and pensive. He regretted that he had left no progeny. Again there was the threat the royal lineage would be snapped. Because of the *ṛṣi*'s words, he could not conceive children - it would cause his death. Therefore he was in trouble. He did not know that Kunti had been blessed with that great *mantra* by which she could invoke a *devata* and thereby gain the blessing of a child. In his sadness Pandu discussed with Kunti his problem of being helpless to leave children to rule the kingdom. It was then that Kunti told him of the boon she held. She told him she could solve his problem. She could invoke the *devatas* and get a child.

Pandu was overjoyed at the suggestion, “Oh, that is wonderful. Look, let us have a son who will carry the burden of ruling this kingdom. Let us have a son who will be born of Lord Dharma. He will be ideal. Our son should be a man of *dharma*, and he will live a life of *dharma* and establish *dharma*. Lord Dharma was invoked, and Kunti was given a child. A voice from heaven announced, “This son is going to be the greatest on this earth in upholding *dharma*. There will be none like him, and he will be remembered forever.” Thus there was great praise of this child, and Pandu and Kunti were happy. The name given for the child was

Yudhisthira, the one who is firm, *sthira*, in every battle, a good name.

Dharma is not easy to protect always. You may protect *dharma*, but the *dhārmika* always suffers. In order to be a *dhārmika* you have to be strong. *Dharma* and strength go together. A weakling cannot uphold righteousness. Only the strong can afford to be dharmic. If you strike a matchstick, the flame will not last if there is wind. It is gone. Vayu is enemy to the flame, to the weak flame. But suppose this flame becomes a huge fire – then Vayu courts friendship with the flame, “Come on, let’s go to the next house.” The same enemy turns into a friend because the fire has become strong. In order to uphold *dharma*, even to establish its friendship, one has to be strong.

Pandu had argued with Kunti and convinced her that it was important to have a strong person in order to back up *dharma*. Therefore we have a Dharmaputra, Yudhisthira, a son of *Dharma*. Without the strength to back it up, Dharmaputra could not have lived a life of *dharma*. Pandu asked Kunti to ask for a second child.

A strong child was required, one who would become a strong man later. Strength means you cannot think of anyone else but Vayu. Vayu, Lord Vayu, the lord of wind, is strong, like Hanumanji. It was Lord Vayu who was invoked to bless the couple with a second child. Thus in time another strong child was born, strong and always hungry. There was never a time when he was not hungry. He had muscles but no belly, only a *vrkodara*, a wolf’s belly; nobody knew where the food would go. It was all converted into toned up muscle, and that was Bhima. Thus the second child was given the name Bhima. He was beautiful and affectionate, and from heaven along with him came the voice that said he would be the strongest on the earth. No one could touch him, and he would be the most affectionate person. Bhima, a man of great deeds, was born on the night of the same day that Duryodhana was born to Gandhari and Dhrtarashtra. Dharmaputra, Yudhisthira, was born first, one year earlier.

The scene shifts to Hastinapura where Dhrtarashtra, the blind king, the

source of all the problems here, summoned Vidura, his younger brother. Vidura was like a minister to the king. Dhrtarashtra said, "You are a *jñānī*, a man of compassion, a wise man, always a forthright man of *dharma*. I have borne a son, Duryodhana, but I am told a son has been born to Pandu earlier while in the forest. That means Pandu's son will rule the kingdom." Vidura agreed with both statements. It was obvious that Dhrtarashtra was disturbed, and from then on he began scheming. To the outside world, to the children, he would be very kind and affectionate, and his words were as soft as the autumnal clouds which make a hell of a noise but no rain at all. Dhrtarashtra suggested to Vidura that there had been some bad omens when his son Duryodhana was born, and he asked what meaning there was in those omens.

Vidura said, "They are prophetic omens. This child will bring destruction to the *kṣatriya* race, to your world in general. This child will be an evil genius. The best thing for us to do would be to sacrifice this child." Vidura argued that it was all right to sacrifice a person, even a child, for the sake of a family. It was all right to sacrifice a family for the sake of a community, and a community for the sake of humanity. For *ātmā* you have to sacrifice everything; to save yourself you have to give up everything. That was Vidura's statement, the argument he made to justify the sacrifice of this child, a child that promised to be a source of unimaginable destruction. In this, Dhrtarashtra proved to be not only blind, he was deaf also. He did not hear those words at all. His attachment for his own first son was so much that he thought somehow everything would be okay. This "somehow everything will be okay" is a problem. But that was what he thought.

Meantime in the forest, Pandu thought that he and Kunti should also have an invincible child who would grow into an invincible man, a versatile prince who would bring glory to the family. He should be a great warrior, a great archer. Pandu told Kunti to invoke Lord Indra, the lord of the heavens, for this child. With Indra's grace a child born would not be ordinary. Again the *mantra* came to Kunti's mind and lips, and Indra came and a child was given. When the child was

born, the voice from heaven said this child would hear the sound of trumpets in his ears and be the glory of the entire Kuru family. Not only would he be the glory of his community, he would be the glory of the whole of humanity. He would be invincible and a man of *dharma*, a man to fight for *dharma*. Thus was Arjuna born of Lord Indra.

Then Pandu said, "I am not tired; I want to have more children."

Kunti said, "No way, three are enough. Why don't you ask Madri, who has no children as yet."

Pandu said, "You're right. You should teach her the chant so that she can invoke the *devatas* and bear a child."

Kunti taught Madri the *mantra*. Madri learned the incantation and invoked the Ashvins and two children were born. These were Pandava Princes Nakula and Sahadeva. The voice from heaven said that these boys would grow to be most dharmic and valiant and wise.

Pandu was very happy now that his wives had given him these five beautiful, promising sons as a true progeny. For fifteen years Pandu and Kunti raised the children, and the boys were instructed in archery and all martial arts. Sukha was their teacher, and all the boys became proficient. But each boy excelled in one or the other of the arts. Yudhisthira was master of the javelin, Bhima mastered the mace and Arjuna was the expert archer. The twins were also great archers. These princes could all handle weapons. They learned all Sukha had to teach them, and he said they were his equal. He said that now they had to learn from somebody else. They had to move on for more advanced training. Not every teacher can handle every level of instruction. Neither should a competent teacher just teach introductory material. The intellect would go stale and there would be no depth or breadth. Many musicians who teach lose the ability to move forward with their own performance if they focus only on teaching the fundamentals.

The Pandu family looked for another teacher. Then, once, when Kunti had

gone into the forest with her five teenage sons, Pandu forgot about his curse. It was an inauspicious day or something that brought on his lapse. Pandu chased Madri all over; he would not let her be. He amazed her and then that was it. He fell over dead. The curse caught up with him. Pandu died. Kunti came back and found Madri crying. She asked and came to know her husband's fate. Naturally the word "fate" fits here. Kunti was angry for some time, but nobody can go against fate. In time both Kunti and Madri both decided to join Pandu by entering the funeral pyre. The forest *ṛṣis* came and tried to convince these two women that they should not do this. But Madri said, "No way. I cannot live without Pandu. I am going to enter fire." She performed the first *satī*. She had her own sheer sadness and pain for she thought she had caused Pandu's death and had been helpless to avoid it. She could not handle it. Her self-immolation was the first *satī*.

Kunti too was sad and was overwhelmed by the thought of taking care of all the five children. But the children were the very reason why the *ṛṣis* all said, "You cannot die like this." Before she took her own life Madri told her boys, Nakula and Sahadeva, that they were to listen to their Mother Kunti. They were to look upon her as their mother and the other three boys as their true brothers. Dharmaputra was there as their father, and they were told to never disobey. Having said these words, Madri got into the fire and was gone. Kunti had been convinced not to do the same. Kunti survived to watch her boys and all the problems and the war to come. She survived this particular calamity, and she and the boys returned to Hastinapura.

When Dhrtarashtra received word that Pandu had died he was relieved, but not completely free of worry. Though Pandu was gone and Dhrtarashtra controlled the Kurus, young Dharmaputra was alive, and Dhrtarashtra knew what was to come as a result. Dhrtarashtra was anxious, and his son Duryodhana did not want the other part of the family, the Pandavas, to come back at all. Duryodhana protested against them even coming to the palace. He said he could not stand even the thought of them. But grandfather Bhishma and Vidura were

there in Hastinapura and the sons of Kunti had to come back from the forest. There was no other way. The boys had to continue their education and training in statecraft and warfare, for all that is part of a *kṣatriya* upbringing.

In the Shatashrnga forest the *ṛṣis* were all very fond of the five sons of Pandu: Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The *ṛṣis* came to console Kunti, and they performed the rites for Pandu. The boys were all initiated into *gāyatrī*. Seventeen days after Pandu's death the *ṛṣis* said the time had come. The boys and Kunti were accompanied back to Hastinapura. Dhrtarashtra was glad to be rid of Pandu, and unhappy because the boys were coming and he did not know what was going to happen. His emotions were mixed. Bhishma was of course unhappy that Pandu had passed away. Ambalika, Pandu's mother, was grief-stricken. Grandmother Satyawati and Vidura were in mourning, as were all of the royals and citizens who came to receive at the city gate the group arriving from the forest.

This was the first time in Hastinapura for the boys, and they were all introduced. They stayed in the palace Pandu had stayed in. Also in the royal palaces were Dhrtarashtra's one hundred sons and one daughter. Over time, all of the children would come to play together, and Bhima emerged as the physically strongest of all. He would naturally show off his strength as a child – somewhat of a young bully. If Dhrtarashtra's sons were in a tree, Bhima's fun was to shake the tree and make the boys fall from the tree like fruits. In time Duryodhana became very jealous of Bhima's strength and tired of his dominance. Duryodhana had been spoiled by all the attention he had received in the palace before the five Pandava boys entered the scene. Duryodhana's jealousy increased every day; there was no cure for it. Even Dhrtarashtra was miserable; he had some of the same feelings as he learned how extraordinary the sons of Pandu were. This all came to a head within a year or two.

All the boys were taught by Krpa, who had grown up in the palace and was like one of the Kauravas. Children of a *ṛṣi*, Krpa and his sister had been picked up

in a forest by Shantanu and raised as his own children. Krpa was adept in all the arts of warfare, and he was asked to teach the sons of Pandu as well as all the Dhartarashtras. Arjuna proved himself to be very proficient in archery, and he was a very popular prince. Bhima and the other brothers became popular in their own way, and Duryodhana could not stand this. He wanted to destroy them. Every day he would say, "I wish they were dead. I wish they were dead. I wish this Bhima was dead." One of Duryodhana's uncles was Shakuni, his mother's brother, one of the important villainous characters in Mahabharata, an evil genius, mentor for Duryodhana. Duryodhana's jealous *buddhi* and Shakuni's scheming mind combined very well to stir up disorder and create havoc.

When Duryodhana expressed his anger toward Bhima, Shakuni said, "We will do one thing. This Bhima is always hungry. We will prepare him some foods, tasty things, gourmet, and we will mix in poison." The poison was *kālakūṭa* poison, an extracted venom. Their concoction was offered to Bhima one day when he was alone. He readily ate the altered food, and he went into a kind of coma. Then the conspirators tied up Bhima in creeper vines and dropped him in River Ganga. At the same time they let loose an entire bag of venomous snakes next to Bhima and they went away. Duryodhana was certain Bhima would soon be dead.

Now, Dharmaputra was very fond of his brother Bhima, and without him he would not even eat. Dharmaputra began to search for Bhima. He asked his brothers if they had seen Bhima. Nobody had seen him for some time, and they all began to search and shout for Bhima. Bhima did not show up, and the boys went to Kunti. Kunti was alarmed and afraid that there had been foul play. Everybody knew about Duryodhana's jealousy. Kunti sent for Vidura. When Vidura came to know the situation he suspected foul play, but he said, "I know Bhima will survive. The *ṛṣis* have all told me that the Pandavas will live long. Because of the *ṛṣis'* words I am definite about that – Bhima will somehow survive. Do not worry."

To be continued...