

Mahābhārata
As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the fourth part of the serial article, continuation from Oct 2023 newsletter.

The Early Days

Princess Amba had already chosen, mentally chosen, a king whose name was Sala. The other two girls were still free to choose. Because of his grudge, the Kashi king slighted the Kuru family, a royal *kṣatriya* family, and it was certainly a big slight, by not inviting the Kuru family to the *svayamvara* of the three girls. Bhishma, of course, recognized the insult. Bhishma was furious, and he went to the *svayamvara* anyway. Anybody could go; you need not be invited. If you were from a royal family you were a qualified suitor.

The gossip went around the *svayamvara*, “Look at this old guy. Bhishma wants to marry after all these years. He must have changed his mind. He made a firm oath that he was not going to marry in his lifetime. Look at this. All who are here are mortals, will he settle for a mortal?” Like that, all the people began talking lightly. Then, as the girls were about to enter the *svayamvara* hall, Bhishma announced that the girls would marry Vichitravirya. This was within the custom. If the girls did not object, then Bhishma could take them. If any of the other suitors objected, then he should fight formidable Bhishma. That was the Kshatriya custom. Bhishma outright announced that Vichitriya would marry the three as queens and he himself would willingly fight for the right. The girls were silent, nobody else said anything, and Bhishma took the girls and headed for Hastinapura.

In the end there were those who objected and those who tried to fight with Bhishma. There were those who had been disappointed and those who tried to chase him. Of course for mighty Bhishma such threats were all nothing. He made short work of his challengers and then he went on his way. Then Sala, who had thought he was going to marry Amba, confronted Bhishma, and there was a battle. Sala lost his charioteer, then his chariot, then the battle, and Bhishma just took off. Bhishma settled the girls in his kingdom and started arrangements for the weddings. It was then that Amba told Bhishma that she had something to say,

"Before this *svayamvara* I had already committed myself to King Sala. It is Sala I want to marry."

Bhishma was stunned, "Why didn't you tell me before? When I announced my intention you should have spoken up and said that you were not willing. Now you tell me, and what can I do?" What he did was he took her to King Sala and left her there.

When Amba told Sala that she wanted to marry him he said no, "You are already taken and I was defeated and therefore I cannot claim you any more. I do not want to be a beggar. I cannot marry you, it is not proper. Look in the *dharmaśāstra*. Since Bhishma picked you up with his right hand you are his by right. Let Bhishma marry you."

Amba returned to Hastinapura and told Bhishma, "I have become richer in my wisdom and my *dharmaśāstra*. But I did not get anything else from King Sala. Do not destroy my life. Please get married to me."

Bhishma said, "No way. I have taken an oath, and I will never marry anybody. You can just forget me. You can just go plead with Sala."

She said, "There is no way to plead with him."

Bhishma was sad and regretful, and he scolded the girl, "You should have said something at the start. I am sorry that I have destroyed your life, but what can I do?"

Amba was furious. She went to the forest and protested to all the *ṛṣis*. She happened to meet her grandfather there, and her grandfather said, "I will put in a word to Bhargava." Bhargava was a teacher of archery, Bhishma's teacher. "I will put in a word for you. Bhargava is my friend; he is likely to come by. You stay here." In a few days Bhargava came by and was told what had happened. Bhargava, Bhishma's *guru*, sent for Bhishma.

Bhishma came immediately and offered his salutations and his services, "What can I do for you? Tell me why you called for me. Is there anything I can do?"

Bhargava spoke, "As your *guru* I want you to do something for me. You see, I have a girl here. You know this girl. I am telling you, you can break your oath not to marry because your *guru* says you can. I am giving you this instruction and

permission. Therefore you can break the oath and just marry her. That way you can just give life to this woman.”

But Bhishma had already given his word in this matter, and he said, “ I am sorry, I cannot do that.”

Bhargava, said, “Then, as a *guru*, I am going to curse you.” The two argued for some time. “Either you take my curse or you fight with me.” Bhargava was furious.

Bhishma spoke, “I do not want a curse from you, I will fight with you.”

Bhargava, a fierce warrior, and mighty Bhishma fought. All the gods watched with interest. Of course the assembled *devatas* wanted something, they always had an agenda. They watched the great fight as it went on and on. Finally Bhishma proclaimed that such a struggle might never come to an end. Bhishma picked up one of his *astras*, a weapon which was said to be able to destroy the whole world, some kind of an atom bomb. He took the *astra* in his hand, and all who watched were concerned and afraid that he would use this weapon. Narada and Rudra and all the *devatas* had come to watch a fight, but they ended up pleading to Bhishma, “Bhargava will never stop fighting, so you have to stop. You should stop fighting. Do not use this *astra*. Do *namaskāra* to your *guru* and go.”

The *devatas* recommendation encouraged Bhishma to stop fighting, and Bhargava also felt relieved and thanked Narada for saving him from this futile effort. Bhargava addressed Bhishma, “You are a noble man. You are my worthy disciple. Nobody can fight like you. You are my equal, and I have all admiration for you. I praise your commitment to truth, and I bless you.” Then Bhargava embraced Bhishma and told Amba, “Forget about Bhishma. Do something else.”

Amba, caught between Bhishma and King Sala, being rejected by both, was very resentful and angry. She vented her hatred toward Bhishma, even though he had said he was sorry. There was no repair of their relationship possible. Amba did years of severe penance which gained the blessing of Karttikeya, Lord Shanmukha. Amba asked the Lord, “I want to see that this Bhishma gets killed. There is no one who will champion my cause; there are none who will go up against him. He is a blessed person, and I have no leverage. What else can I do? Please bless me.”

Karttikeya gave Amba a garland and told her to keep it with her. He told her that anyone who wore this garland and fought against Bhishma would be victorious. He could defeat mighty Bhishma. She was happy to have this garland for now she could take revenge. She went around to the different kings and prodded them, "Here is a chance for you. You can gain back your kingdom. With this garland you can beat stalwart Bhishma and take Hastinapura. Vicitravirya is no threat, a nobody." But no one accepted. They all rejected her coaxing. The word *bhīṣma* itself spread a terror in their hearts perhaps. When she went to Panchala she spoke to King Drupada, "You, great king, rule according to *dharma*. You see what Bhishma has done; he has destroyed my life. I want to see that he has to pay for this. You should champion my cause; you should fight him."

The king of Pancala replied, "Bhishma is invincible. Who would fight against him?"

"This is not a problem." she said, "Take this garland given by Karttikeya. You just wear this garland and fight and Bhishma is finished. The god has promised this."

"This may be true," said the king, "but I have nothing against Bhishma. Even what you describe tells only of an omission on your part. He did not do anything intentionally. This is purely your *karma*. You are the one who did not speak up. Bhishma is a good man, a man of *dharma*. I have no reason to fight him."

Amba's frustration boiled over, and she took the empowered garland from her neck and threw it and walked away. The garland landed on a pillar and lay there and no one would touch it.

Amba returned to the forest and returned to her *tapas*. This time Lord Shiva came. Shankara came and assured her that her desire would be fulfilled. He said, "You yourself will have to do it. Next time you are reborn you will be able to do it; Bhishma will be killed because of you."

Amba said, "What is the use of my killing him in the next birth? To gain revenge means that I should know that Bhishma has paid the price for what he has done to me. I should have the last laugh at his expense. Then only is that revenge. How will I know?"

To be continued...