

Mahābhārata
As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the third part of the serial article, continuation from Sep 2023 newsletter.

The Early Days

Ganga said, "I am sorry you crossed me. I am going away."

"All right, go, but tell me, why did you make me suffer?" he asked.

"Shantanu, I will tell you the whole truth," said Ganga. "I was a celestial, the goddess Ganga. You happened to come to Indra's court, and I liked you. The other celestials found out; they could easily see what was between us. Therefore they sent me down. Now I am going to go back. You and I had a happy life. But these children that I have thrown away are also celestials. They were the Vasus, Ashtavasus, eight celestials who themselves had been cursed. They were cursed because they stole Vashistha's Kamadhenu, the wish-yielding cow." From ordinary cows you get milk, or a kick. But anything you wish from Kamadhenu, she will give you. Ganga continued, "In the stealing of the cow by the Ashtavasus, the main culprit was the eighth one. All eight were cursed, and I made a promise to them. I promised I would give birth to them here and I would release them immediately." That would be the process by which the eight could return to their *loka*. Each child she threw into the river Ganga released a soul. Ganga went on, "But the eighth one was cursed to live a long life on earth, and I am going to leave him here with you. I will go, he will stay; call him Devavrata, or Gangeya."

Devavrata was saved and raised by Shantanu. Devavrata is Bhishma. He grew up to be brilliant, a great archer, a master of every discipline, of all martial arts. By his spiritual penance he acquired a vast collection of powerful missiles that were suffused with the power and blessing of *devatas* like Indra and Agni and Varuna. Each *astra*, missile, would be sent from a bow as an arrow, but in flight each became a missile because of the chant, the incantation, the *mantra*, that Devavrata sent along with it. He would invoke the deity and the *astra* would

come to life with the specific capacity and strength originally imbued by its *deva*. In time, Bhishma, Devavrata, was made a crown prince.

When his wife Ganga went away, Shantanu became very lonely and love-lorn, weaker and weaker. He went to the forest, as was the wont of all the kings in those days, to take care of the forest and manage the imperial wealth and all the animals. They had elephant and deer and they did not want the population of carnivorous animals to get too many of them. To protect the animals, the kings would hunt those animals who preyed on others, the *himsakāḥ*. The royals did not have jeeps and guns. In those days it was dangerous business. Originally, for control of certain populations of animals royals hunted.

In the forest on a riverbank Shantanu picked up a fragrance. It was a celestial fragrance. Enchanted by the fragrance he followed it; he went after it to find its source. The source was a girl, Satyavati her name. On earth as a fisherman's daughter, she really was a celestial, another princess. She had grown up under the custody of a fisherman. She was a fisherman's daughter, and previously she carried a fishy smell. But by the grace of ṛṣi Parashara, Vyasa's father, she was given a celestial fragrance instead. This was no modern French perfume named Samsara; it came from her, and it was divine and fascinating. Of course Shantanu wanted to marry this girl. He introduced himself as the king of Hastinapura, scion of the Puru dynasty, and he sought her hand.

She said, "You should talk to my father, Nishada." So Shantanu went to the father with Satyavati. She rowed the boat on the way. Rowing the boat was her great joy.

Satyavati's father said, "This is a great honor. I should look upon it as my fortune that the king of Hastinapura seeks my daughter's hand. What more blessing could there be for me? When she was a child it was said that she would marry a great person. Now it is coming true. I also was told that the son of my girl would rule the kingdom, and I do not want that prediction to be untrue. I have lived with that idea. Therefore, Lord Shantanu, I want you to promise me that her

child alone will rule the kingdom.”

Shantanu was stunned. The apple of his eye, Devavrata, his son by Ganga, a stalwart, effulgent son, had already been named crown prince. Shantanu told the fisherman, “I am sorry, this just will not work out.” Shantanu left the forest, but the girl Satyawati would not leave his mind. He missed his appointments, he did not eat well and all his cheer was gone. Even to Devavrata he was indifferent.

Devavrata went to his father and asked what was wrong. His father tried to tell him nicely, “You know, something bothers me. I have you as my only son, and as kings and princes we are called upon to protect our kingdom, our honor, our dignity. In the process we create, sometimes, you know, enemies in the kingdom. Our prosperity can also create enemies. There will be battles. Even with your expertise in warfare it is a risk - suppose I lose you. That would be the end of our dynasty. Therefore I think I should have one more child.” That is what Shantanu said. From that, Devavrata had sensed something about his father's discomfort.

Out of his concern, Devavrata asked the elderly minister in his court, “Sir, why is my father not doing well? Do you know what afflicts him? Is there anything I can do?”

The minister replied, “I think he wants to marry somebody.”

Devavrata: “Is that all?”

“Yes.”

Devavrata said, “Who is that girl?” The minister said he did not know.

So this went around, you know. Devavrata asked the king's charioteer, because the charioteer knows everything, “Please tell me the truth. What's happening?”

The charioteer just said the same thing the minister had plus a little more, “Your father is flat. He went to the forest; he met a girl; the girl's father was willing to give the girl in marriage. But the father put one condition on the marriage.

The condition was that the girl's child should come to rule the kingdom. How can your father accept that? It is you he has already anointed."

Then Devavrata went straightaway to Nishada, the father of the girl, and asked him why Shantanu wanted to marry and why he should not and why there should be this condition. After listening to the fisherman, Devavrata promised Nishada, with the sun and all gods and elements as witness, he openly declared, that the child born of Satyawati would rule the kingdom. Devavrata abdicated his kingdom. He said, "I do not want the kingdom."

Nishada, really a very mean fellow, scratched his head and said, "You know what? You are a man of *dharma*. I trust you. I know you will not go against your words. But I am just not so sure about what will happen when you have your own sons. Your eldest will be a rightful heir to the throne, and he need not accept what you say. He will fight against my claim. Therefore I do not think this is a good proposition. I do not want it."

Devavrata said, "In that case, if that is the thing, I promise that I will not marry. All my lifetime I will be a *brahmacārī* and you need not worry about it. This is the frightening vow that Devavrata took like that. He was young and brash. That is why he was called Bhishma. *Bhīṣma* means frightening. He took the vow and all the gods exclaimed *bhīṣma bhīṣma*. Thus was born Bhishma, and the name Devavrata was completely forgotten. Devavrata, Gangeya, called Bhishma was as though born by that name. Then Bhishma took Satyawati in his chariot and took her to the royal court and gave her to his father Shantanu.

Shantanu was happy that he had ended up with Satyawati, and when he heard how it had come about, Shantanu was sad too. He was happy and he was sad, but Bhishma's firmness and cheerfulness neutralized his sadness and Shantanu lived with Satyawati happily.

To be continued...