

**Mahābhārata**  
**As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati**

*This is the second part of the serial article, continuation from Aug 2023 newsletter.*

**The Early Days**

There was a person called Ugrashravas. He was born in the family of Suta. He is Sauti. He was well versed in the Puranas. He was the son of Lomaharshana. Ugrashravas went to a place in the Naimisha forest where a *sattra* was going on. *Sattra* means a huge ritual, many people sharing and eating, many major discourses going, all the Puranas being taught, *brahmavidyā* being taught, all disciplines are taught there. That is a *sattra*, and this *sattra*, this ritual, lasted for twelve years. They had enough *purāṇas* and all the things to keep going for those twelve years of study. Jupiter takes twelve years to come back to the same position. Saunaka, said to have taught ten thousand disciples, was the *kulapati* at the ritual. He had such a following. He taught them and maintained them also. That is a *kulapati*. *Rṣis* and *paṇḍitas*, all seers, were there. Ugrashravas walked in.

All of the *tapasvins* approached this effulgent one who had entered the sanctified place. The *paurāṇikas*, those with the knowledge of the past, were brilliant people, very big people. You could not miss them – there is a *tejas*. Everybody was interested in listening to stories. In those days there was no newspaper. Anyone who walked in was asked for news, what was happening here and there. Any visitor was a newscarryer, and especially a *paurāṇika* who arrived. Naturally they wanted to hear some stories from Ugrashravas. They surrounded him.

These *tapasvins* gathered for the ritual were all good people. All of them were ascetics, not ordinary fellows, but well-informed fellows, and they were worshipped by the people. Ugrashravas asked them about their pursuits, their efforts, their gains. *Tapas* can be for different things: *tapas* for *jñānam* and *tapas* for varieties of accomplishments. *Tapas* means any committed pursuit. It is an effort done to the exclusion of everything else; all other things subserve that one dominant pursuit. Understand the value here. They were all there for the sacrifice, all were interested in learning, and it was all *tapas*. Ugrashravas asked them about their *tapas*.

Ugrashravas, Laumaharshana, was given a seat. This was a usual form of recognition. He was offered a prime seat amongst those in the gathering who had

risen from their own seats to greet him. With humility he sat.

One *r̥ṣi* in the assembly requested, "From where have you come? What places were visited by you?"

Ugrashravas told the story of his having come from Janamejaya's snake sacrifice. Janamejaya was the son of Parikshit, and he was performing a ritual where he wanted to destroy all the snakes in the world. That was the ritual, and it was initiated because Janamejaya's father had died of a snakebite. That is another story which we will come to. The Mahabharata is all story after story. Ugrashravas answered the *r̥ṣi*, "I went to that *sattra*, the great snake sacrifice, and I tell you one thing. I heard something which I should tell you. I heard Vyasa's masterpiece, this *jayam mahābhāratam*. I heard it narrated by Vaishampayana to Janamejaya. It was amazing." Thus he praised what he had heard, and all the ears of all the people were turned and all in attendance spoke, "Won't you tell us that? Tell us what Vyasa has composed." Then Ugrashravas told the story; Mahabharata begins.

In both Ramayana and Mahabharata we find that the whole epic is first presented in a brief manner. Narada tells Valmiki the Ramayana in a concise summary. Then Valmiki expands that. He makes it a *kāvya*. So too here, the skeleton of this great epic, in a number of verses, is presented by the Sauti, by Ugrashravas, to all the *brāhmaṇas* who were there in the *sattra*. Ugrashravas tells of his going to the snake ritual of Janamejaya.

Parikshit, Janamejaya's father, was a king. Janamejaya performed this ritual because of his anger, and because of his sorrow and his grief. Parikshit had gone to the forest, where he happened to see a sage, a *sādhu*, sitting there under a tree with his eyes closed. Parikshit called to him and tried to draw the attention of the *sādhu* but the fellow did not open his eyes. There was a dead snake nearby. Parikshit picked up the dead snake. Perhaps it was a silly thing to do. People do silly things, you know. Parikshit picked up the snake and just put it on the *sādhu* as if a garland. He wanted to garland the *mahātmā*. He put the dead snake there and he went away.

The son of the sage who had been garlanded with the snake came to know what had been done, and the son gave Parikshit a curse. The son, also a sage, cursed Parikshit to suffer a snakebite and to die within a week. Parikshit learned about this *śāpa*, this curse. You will find *śāpa* like this everywhere. There will be a curse, and the same fellow who curses will tell how to neutralize the curse. What

is given is given, but a means to neutralize what is given is also given. Out of anger he gives this curse – this and this will happen – and often the antidote is also given.

Parikshit knew he had little chance. He had only one week. He went to Shukha, a highly respected sage, the son of Vyasa. Parikshit said to Shukha, “I have only one week, and before that I want to get *mokṣa*.” In one week Parikshit wanted *mokṣa*, because that was all the time he had to live. Shukha laughed. Parikshit said, “Why are you laughing, I am going to die in a week?”

Shukha said, “Parikshit, you are sure that you will live one week. I myself cannot be sure of even that. That is what makes me laugh.” Then he narrated to Parikshit the story of Bhagavan, and that story is what we call Bhagavata Purana. He told him the Bhagavata. The Bhagavata story is of the Lord’s incarnation. What is the Lord’s incarnation? You are also the Lord’s incarnation. The Bhagavata is the story of *avatāra*. *Avatāra* is the assumption of a special form for accomplishing a given end, doing a given job. Most of the *avatāras* manifest for doing one job. Whereas *avatāras* like Rama and Krishna were not for one job. They were taken to set a pattern of life. That is different. That is why Rama-Krishna became very popular. Because a whole life is lived by Rama. He becomes an archetype. Rama is an archetype of *dharma*, an example for *dharma*. Similarly, Krishna is an archetype of *ānanda*. Therefore with Rama and Krishna we have two types of *avatāra*. Both Rama and Krishna go through the trials in life. They are not in any way different. Both face challenges, and there is a certain response to all those challenges. One is *dharma*-predominant, the other is *ānanda*-predominant, which in Krishna's case means mischief predominant and freedom predominant. Therefore there are these two types, the two extremely popular *avatāras*.

Even though Parikshit tried to set himself up in a place where snakes could not reach at all, in a comfortable palace in the midst of a lake, the snake sneaked in. Through a garland or something, the snake sneaked in and Parikshit died. His angry son Janamejaya promised to perform a *yajña* that would do away with all of the snakes. Look at this promise, it is just ridiculous. Janamejaya said, “I am going to destroy all of the snakes.” He initiated a ritual which invoked all these snakes to come. Among the snakes there was one *rājā* called Daksha; he was the *nāgarājā*. The summoned snakes came and, one-after-another, fell into the fire at the ritual. Daksha approached the fire and was about to enter when he was saved by a per-

son named Astika. In time, Janamejaya and his sacrifice were cooled off, and it was then that Vaisampayana, a disciple of Vyasa, told Janamejaya the entire story of the Mahabharata.

Sauti, Ugrashravas, is telling the *ṛṣis* that Vaishampaya narrates the Mahabharata to Janamejaya. We have to remember who started what. This introduction has a purpose. It presents briefly the whole Mahabharata. Afterwards, Janamejaya wants to know in detail all that happened and Vaishampayana tells the whole story. So we will start here, after the introductory summary - Vaishampayana spoke. I am skipping the brief version of the Mahabharata and going to where the real Mahabharata starts. Because vastness and profundity are there, there is no need for dilation that dilutes the topic. Dilation or making it too brief will make the interest go. It should be vast and profound all the way. It is not easy. That is why it is called Mahabharata.

Vyasa says, "Give me a minute, take a minute for yourself - listen. This entire description I am going to give in detail, this venerable story written by Krishnadvaipayana." Krishnadvaipayana is another name for Vyasa. "Because you have asked for it, please take the time to forget about everything else and just listen. There are only one hundred thousand verses. Both those who listen and those who make others listen to these verses will gain great results." *Dharma, artha, kāma, mokṣa*: everything you will get here. Whatever you want you get here. Even one who reads for *artha* will end up in *mokṣa*. In this *itihāsa*, in this epic, all *puruṣārthas* are taught. Herein one's mind, *buddhi*, becomes committed to *mokṣa*, the ultimate truth, fulfillment.

The king who listens will become an emperor. All his enemies will fall at his feet in defeat. The people who have no children will have children when they listen. It will bring all that is good in this world to you. With *śraddhā* the king should listen along with his queen, and that will yield a great son, or a daughter, a princess, who will be capable of ruling the whole kingdom and of making it a place of the *śāstra*. If you want to know what is *dharma* - what is to be done, what is not to be done - this is the *dharmaśāstra* you have to study. If you want to know how to gain success in life, then too you should study this. You will get all the secrets of success: how to influence people, how to create problems in your conversations and what really accounts for success. All that you will find here. Vyasa, whose truly fathomless knowledge, whose *buddhi*, has no boundaries, will give you. If you

want *mokṣa*, it has got it, and not only in the Bhagavad Gita. There are portions of *mokṣasāstra*, *vedānta*, all over.

Any *pāpa* that you have done, all that you will give up. When you read this, follow this, you will give up all that. Duryodhana, all his crippled deeds, will make you give up everything. When you read his lot and what all happened because of him, your heart goes to those who suffer, to Arjuna and Dharmaputra. Thereby you change: a change takes place. You develop an informed dislike, a disinterest, because Mahabharata is *satsaṅga*. That is why there is a length of time involved, because if you go on hearing it for a period of time you will change.

All those people who are in the righteous lineage are here, people who have never seen *doṣa*, a limitation, where there is virtue. It is like when someone has written a clean book and someone else just has to say something negative about it, even cite a minor omission. This is that criticizing *buddhi*, finding fault or limitation in others to make up for one's own shortcomings. In Mahabharata we see people who see the good qualities in others and do not cavil at those limitations. Please listen to the birth and the life of such people. Those who listen need no longer worry about pressure and stress. One will gain a good mind, and all psychosomatic problems will not be there. In this life itself there is no reason to live in fear, not to talk of going to some hell in some afterlife. Thus Vyasa places the whole *sāstra* in the Mahabharata to be told.

Hey, son of Parikshit, you wanted to know in detail. The entire story which will bring joy to your heart I am going to tell you. This is a sacred story, something otherwise unheard of, a story all kings listen to to gain *puṇya*, for gaining victory. For making your life, please listen to this story.

Every day, getting up in the morning, the *muni* Vyasa, the great *manaśīla*, saw the Mahabharata in its entirety. He saw in his mind how it was going to be. Then he began writing. Getting up in the morning he would complete all his routines, and then he would sit and write. With this he finished the whole thing in three years. With reference to all four *puruṣārthas*, for *puṇya* or wealth, for righteousness or growth for *mokṣa*, for any subject matter you take, what is said in Mahabharata is no different from what is said in the other sacred Vedic books. As to *dharmārthakāmamokṣa*, what is not mentioned here is not going to be found anywhere else. There is praise of the whole *sāstra*. Vaishampayana draws the attention of those listening, and then he proceeds to tell the story.

Sauti, Ugrashravas, tells that Janamejaya is listening as Vaishampayana relates the Mahabharata. In the founding Indian family of the universal monarch Bharata, there was a great king called Puru. Therefore the people after him are called Pauravas – in the same way, those who followed Kuru are called Kauravas. In the royal Paurava family, also called the Lunar dynasty, there was a king called Shantanu. Shantanu had a previous birth, and between births he visited a *loka* where there was a celestial girl Ganga. He wanted to marry Ganga, but he was of course a mortal. She liked this fellow, but she was a celestial. That she liked an ordinary mortal angered the *devas* so they demoted her to be a mortal for some time. Though they had cursed her, it was not without some good intention. They sent her down to the earth. That is the story. Whether it is true or not we do not know. It has its own beauty. She came down from another *loka* and Shantanu, reborn on earth as a king, happened to see this girl on the banks of River Ganga. He had what they call *deja vu*. He felt he knew this woman, and she of course knew who he was.

They talked to each other, and then there was a *vivāha*. What goes on now in the West is the same *gandharvavivāha*. That means the individuals themselves decide to marry. You do not take into account the antecedents. Only later you discover his father is some kind of scoundrel. It is a marriage based on romantic love. This is how Shantanu and Ganga decided to marry. There is nothing wrong in that *vivāha*, for it is allowed. Even today in India it is increasingly common. The alternative is the arranged marriage. In an arranged marriage the parents have the responsibility. That is why they are mortally afraid. That is why even when the marriage does not go well, the parents push to make it happen. They feel guilty otherwise. It is a problem; everything has its own problems. The arranged marriage can have problems, but in the arranged marriage at least you accept the person that you marry for what he or she is.

In the West you marry a person that you think you love. Later you may change your mind. You must have heard about *anima* and *animus*. A man falls in love with a woman and there is no big reason for this. That is called *anima*. He has a certain image that he picked up somewhere – somebody's nose, somebody's eyes. All put together, he has got a patchup. Every idiot has got one *anima*. The other participant has got *animus*. The guy falls in love with his own *anima*, not with the person. You have got your own idea, and you fall in love with your image. After some time you find that everything about the partner you picked, ex-

cept the nose, is out for you. So it becomes difficult. Then you have to understand the person, only then does it have a chance to work. You have to understand the person.

In arranged marriage at least you accept the person already as your life's partner. With that you can begin discovering the person, because you can love anything in this world, from a rat onwards. Love can be discovered for anything. You can discover love for the person, you understand, because you have already accepted. Therefore there is enough commitment to discover love for the person. There is an advantage in that, and you know what are the possible disadvantages also.

The *gandharvavivāha*, choosing themselves whom to marry, was one of the types of marriage in India at that time. It was done only by adults. *Svayamvara* was another type of marriage. *Svayamvara* was only among the royal clan; the princess had to choose. It was up to the girl. The princess decided to marry, and the news went around that on a particular day there would be *svayamvara*. She herself made the choice. The fellows, the suitors, even kings, all came, for they had heard about and perhaps even seen this princess. They were royally received, and they sat there in the assembly hall in two rows. This girl, the princess with a garland in hand, came there with her friend. To whomsoever she gave the garland, that fellow was chosen.

She would go down the rows, and you could see the fellows on each side stretch their necks and get ready. She passed all these fellows until finally one fellow got it. There was no conversation or anything between them; all these fellows were sitting there like dolls. Now, the princess' friend did tell her a bit about each of the boys. She tells about one fellow, "This champion has been in so many wars. He spends so much time in the battlefield of victory. He has so won many laurels..." The princess passes him; number one, he may die at any time. Number two, he obviously has no time for her at home. The friend describes the next person, "This boy loves music. He is an excellent chess player. He loves to stay at home." The princess passes him. Who wants some idiot you cannot stand home all the time? "This fellow is a great scholar. He spends all his time with books." She moves on. This is how it is. Dramatist Kalidasa tells that Indumati, at her *svayamvara*, is like a lamp walking into this dark corridor with the kings on both sides. As she walks, like a lamp she brightens the faces of the suitors nearby. The

shining one thinks he is going to get it, and all the other fellows are in darkness, because they are afraid that this fellow may get it. They are all gloomy, and certainly the fellows she has passed are gloomy. There is darkness on both sides, only the face of the fellow she faces is bright. Then she passes, and it plays out again. Kalidasa describes many things that happen during the princess' choice, all the preening and posing. That was the *svayamvara* that was there in those days. We will see it in the Mahabharata also.

There is another form of marriage called *rākṣasavivāha* that involved the *kṣatriya* class. A king could kidnap a girl and then challenge any other suitor, like that damsel in distress in the romantic stories in the West. If you want her hand, you challenge me. If you have the capacity, take her from me. It was all based on valor. Krishna picked up Rukmini like that. Krishna got the news that someone else was going to take off with Rukmini, so he got there first and kidnapped her and took her away. Afterwards the contenders were all chasing him, but they could not do anything because she wanted to marry Krishna. It was the ruling class who took part in these things. There were a number of types of marriages.

Shantanu and Ganga were married, and she began to bear children. As soon as she bore a child she would take it to the river Ganga and throw it into the Ganga. Before the marriage she had put a condition on the relationship. She had said, "Whatever I should do, you should not say anything against me. Do not cross me. Not a word. The day you say anything, I am gone. I will not be yours." It was all because she had come by a curse, and that is how she would go back. The day he questioned her would be the day she left him. Now, there was no reason for Shantanu to say anything, for Ganga was such a clean person. No problem. When this child was thrown into the river, he wanted to say something but he had to contain himself. If he said anything, not only would he lose the baby, he would lose her as well.

The first child was lost, then a second and a third and a fourth. The fifth and sixth babies met their end in the river. The seventh too was lost. When the eighth was born, Shantanu could no longer contain himself. He said to Ganga, "Are you a human being? Don't you have any sense of motherhood? You have a baby and you throw it away?"

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

*To be continued...*