

The Mahabharata Reader

Volume One

Books 1 - 10

Sharath Komarraju

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Book 1

Mahadivya, the Mighty Egg

Aivam aitam anaadya antam bhootasamhaara kaarakam
Anaadi nidhanam loke chakram sam parivartate
(1: 38)

*And in this way the wheel of Time causes destruction of everything, without
beginning or end.*

VERY EARLY IN THE Adi Parva, we encounter the story of Mahadivya, the mighty egg which is the inexhaustible seed for all created beings. It is the starting point of all creation, the Big Bang of the Hindu cosmology. At the beginning of the yuga, Brahma is the first to emerge from the Mahadivya, followed by Suraguru (Vishnu) and Sthanu (Shiva). The twenty-one Prajapatis, the Adityas, the Vasus, the twin Ashwins, and the sages were then created, who together gave rise to the world as we know it.

The theory is that at the end of every yuga, everything in the universe will compress into the form of Mahadivya, only to be released at the beginning of the next yuga. There is no beginning or end to this expansion and contraction cycle. Everything that comes into being must be destroyed, and everything thus destroyed must take birth later in a different form.

This concept of rebirth after death is applied in Hinduism to individual human beings as well. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna exhorts Arjuna to renounce attachment with the material (the 'body') and instead build a lasting relationship with the eternal (the 'soul'). While the body represents the destructible Self, the soul represents the indestructible Other.

The central theme of the Mahabharata, in fact, is this very dual nature of existence: one reality which the human mind inhabits with itself at the core and the universe revolving around it, the other governed by the relentless passage of time to which all of creation – both animate and inanimate – must ultimately succumb.

The Despair of Dhritarashtra

Kaalo vikuroothe bhaavaana sarvaala loke shubhaa shubham
Kaalaha sankshipathe sarvaaha parajaa visrujathe punaha
(1: 189)

Time creates all states and thoughts in the universe, both good and evil. Time cuts short all things, and creates them anew.

AFTER NARRATING A SUMMARY of the war, Ugrasrava Sauti, the story's principal narrator, describes a moment of contemplation that occurs between Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra. Lamenting the misfortune of his sons, and what he interprets as Krishna's active role in instigating the Kurukshetra war, Dhritarashtra expresses a wish to end his life because he is overcome by grief.

Sanjaya consoles his king then by giving a list of illustrious names from the past, like Yadu, Kuru and Puru, who despite their greatness had to yield to the ravages of time. Time is the one reality, Sanjaya tells Dhritarashtra; it creates all things, and it destroys all things. Time burns everything to the ground; it then extinguishes that fire. Time alone is awake when everyone is asleep.

'You're well-versed in the *sastras*, Your Majesty,' Sanjaya says. 'You know very well the decrees and intricacies of fate. Does it suit you to grieve for the deaths of your children, then, they who were malevolent and inflamed by earthly passions? Does this anxiety for the safety of your children become you? When kings as noble as Bharata and Raghu had to bend to the sway of time, of what import are your sons? Rouse yourself from this pall, O King, and perform your duty to your best while you still draw breath.'

While this seems like a back-to-front way of telling a story, where the end is revealed in the first chapter, it is worth noting that only the 'what' is revealed, not the 'how'. Also, in this short speech by Sanjaya, we're given a quick primer on the philosophical themes that will be developed through the rest of the tale – the sedate cruelty of time, the transient nature of human life, and the importance of fulfilling

one's duty while remaining detached to the rewards and punishments fate throws in our way.

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The Five Lakes of Blood

Samantapanchakam iti yad uktam sootanandana
Etat sarvam yathaa nyaayam shrotum icchaa mahe vayam
(2: 1)

*Sootanandana (son of the Soota caste), we wish to hear a full account of the place
you have called Samantapanchaka.*

THE SANGRAHA PARVA BEGINS with the above question, where the sages of Naimisha bring Sauti back to a passing reference he makes in the Anukramanika about a place called Samantapanchaka, where the sons of Kuru and the sons of Pandu are said to have drawn their battle lines.

Sauti tells the following story:

In the interval between the Treta and the Dwapara yugas, Parashurama, the son of Jamadagni, embarks upon a campaign of annihilation directed toward the Kshatriya race. Twenty one times he wipes them off the face of the Earth. Anger still not sated, he offers oblations to his ancestors with the blood of his slain enemies. The five lakes of Samantapanchaka are turned red due to this.

When Parashurama's ancestors appear and declare themselves pleased with his reverence, the sage asks for a boon that he might be absolved of all the sins he has accrued due to his Kshatriya-killing. This land of five gory lakes, from then on, has been venerated as a holy place.

This mass killing of Kshatriyas at the beginning of the Dwapara serves as a portent of things to come, for toward the *end* of Dwapara, eighteen Akshauhinis of soldiers from all over Aryavarta assemble at this very place, and they all get slain over an eighteen-day cleansing ritual that we now call the battle of Kurukshetra.

The Mahabharata uses Samantapanchaka and Kurukshetra synonymously as the venue for the final battle. Modern historians suggest that Samantapanchaka is located in present-day Thanesar, at the Brahma Sarovar Lake, with the Kurukshetra field about seven kilometres away.

What is an Akshauhini?

Akshauhinya iti paroktam yata tavayaa sootanandana
Etad ichhaamahe sharotum sarvam eva yatha tatham
(2: 13)

Sootanandana, we wish to know the exact and full meaning of the term 'Akshauhini' that you have used.

THE RISHIS IN THE forest of Naimisha ask Sauti the above question in the Sangraha Parva, immediately after the bard narrates the tale of Samantapanchaka. Sauti answers thus:

One chariot, one elephant, five foot-soldiers and three horses form one **Patti**.

Three pattis make one **Senamukha**.

Three senamukhas are together called a **Gulma**.

Three Gulmas form a **Gana**. (An aside: the ganas of Shiva are led by Vinayaka, thus his name Ganesha.)

Three ganas make one **Vahini**.

Three vahinis are together called a **Pritana**.

Three pritanas form a **Chamu**.

Three chamus to one **Ankini**.

And ten Ankinis, when assembled, is called an **Akshauhini**.

An Akshauhini contains 21870 chariots, the same number of elephants, 109350 soldiers that fight on foot, and 65610 horsemen.

Eighteen such Akshauhinis were assembled for the battle of Kurukshetra, seven on the side of the Pandavas and eleven on the side of the Kauravas.

A short account of the battle is also given here: Bhishma commandeers the Kaurava army for ten days. Drona leads for the next five. Karna takes over the reins after Drona's death and fights for two days, followed by Shalya for half a day. The remaining half a day is consumed by a battle of clubs between Suyodhana and

Bhimasena. On the night of the eighteenth day, Ashwatthama and Kripacharya destroy the remaining army of Yudhishtir in a stealth attack.

A note on the numbers: Given the geographical area covered by Aryavarta and the Sixteen Great Kingdoms, and what we know of estimated population densities from the Vedic period (we don't have reliable actual figures), the size of the armies as described by Sauti is probably an exaggeration. Also, is the Kurukshetra battlefield big enough to accommodate 30 lakh soldiers and fighting animals at one time? Perhaps not.

Elsewhere, Yudhishtir claims that around 1.6 billion people lost their lives to the Kurukshetra war over eighteen days, which also sounds unreasonable.

Like all myths, the Mahabharata is likely to have undergone various embellishments under the storyteller's gaze during the process of being written down. As modern readers, we will do well to ignore the literal truth of events (such as numbers) and focus instead on the timeless *literary* truths that these stories give us.

An Interlude: The Number Eighteen

The number eighteen appears repeatedly in the Mahabharata context. There are eighteen parvas. The number of Akshauhinis that fought is eighteen. The war lasts for eighteen days.

Why eighteen? We don't know. But there have been a few attempts at an explanation.

Here's one: The human body contains nine orifices. The Gita describes the body as a 'city with nine gates'. And since a good life consists – at the very fundamental level – of a harmonious relationship between the self and the other, the inner and the outer, it requires us to gain knowledge of eighteen gates in all; nine that belong to the self, nine that belong to the other.

Here's one more: The Katapayadi is a system of assigning single-digit numerals to each letter of the alphabet, to aid in composition of syllables into verses and words. According to this system, the 'ja' syllable gets the number 8, and the 'ya' sound gets the number 1. The original title of the text, 'Jaya', therefore represents the number 81. But since the Mahabharata is a tale of duality, and what is titled *jaya* (victory) is in fact a tale of *apajaya* (defeat and destruction in the hands of Time), Vyasa has reversed the numerical notation to 18 and has sprinkled it across the story to enhance its thematic value.

Such theories are often spun by enthusiastic analysts with the benefit of hindsight, and if one looks hard enough for a pattern, one is bound to find one. So I would urge you to give them no particular importance. But still, it's fun to speculate.

The Eighteen Parvas

Etat parvam shatam poornam vayasenoktam mahaatmanaa
Yathavat sootaputrena lomaharshaninaa punaha
Kathitam naimishaaranye parvaanya ashta dashaivatu
Samaaso bhaarata syaayam tatroktam parva sangraha
(2: 70, 71)

The great man Vyasa composed hundred such parvas and distributed them into eighteen sections. The son of Suta (Sauti) recited them consecutively in the forest of Naimisha as follows.

IN THIS SECTION, WE will look at the eighteen parvas with short summaries for each. At this stage we will not go into every little incident that happens in each section; we will just try and trace the broad Mahabharata arc so that we understand where each parva begins and ends.

The Adi Parva packs quite a punch in the amount of story it covers. It begins with the descent of Ganga from heaven and her marriage to Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur. It takes us through the passing of generations: the growth of Bhishma into a regent, the short reigns of Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya (sons of Satyawati), the crowning of Pandu as king over his blind brother Dhritarashtra, the birth and rearing of the Pandavas and Kauravas, the burning of the house of wax, the escape into the forest and the events in Chaitraratha, the wedding to Draupadi, the alliance with Dwaraka through Arjuna's marriage to Subhadra, and to end, the burning of Khandava and the construction of Indraprastha.

The Sabha Parva sees the establishment of the Pandavas as the foremost rulers of Aryavarta. We hear of the Rajasuya yaga, the killing of Jarasandha, the crowning of Yudhishtir as the emperor of the land, and the killing of Shishupala at the hands of Krishna. Toward the end of this parva, the most pivotal incident of the Mahabharata occurs: the disrobing of Draupadi and the freezing of enmity between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Stripped of their royal bearings, Yudhishtir and his brothers, accompanied by Draupadi, set out to honour the rules of the dice game.

Vana Parva describes the life of the Pandavas in the forest. The main theme of this section is the rise of Arjuna's power; he obtains the Pashupatastra from Shiva, goes to heaven and meets with Indra, his father, and sets out on an extended exploration of Aryavarta, where he marries Ulupi and Chitrangada, thus securing strong allies in the far-eastern part of the kingdom.

In **Virata Parva**, we see the Pandavas enter the court of Virata in disguise, to spend their year of *Agyatavasa* (hiding). There are two main events that happen here: one is the killing of Kichaka, and the other is the battle between Arjuna and the Kaurava army to protect the cattle of Virata.

The **Udyoga Parva** documents efforts from the Pandavas to broker peace with the Kauravas, and their subsequent failures. Then the focus shifts toward war building, and ends with both armies facing each other on the battlefield. Krishna's famous negotiation attempt with the Kauravas, and his pledge that he will not bear arms while his entire army fights for Suyodhana, happen in this section.

The **Bhishma Parva** tells the story of the first ten days of war, when Bhishma leads the Kaurava forces. These are often called the most peaceful war days, where both armies seem to fight almost reluctantly. It later becomes clear to Krishna that Bhishma is deliberately engineering a stalemate in the hope that the war will be called off. The parva ends with the fall of Bhishma onto a bed of arrows.

In **Drona Parva**, the war becomes a bloodbath. On the thirteenth day, Arjuna's son, Abhimanyu, is killed by the great warriors on the Kaurava side, and all rules of just warfare are abandoned in this period. Ghatotkacha also dies during the night time battle on the fourteenth day. The volley of lies and deception comes to a head when on the fifteenth day, Yudhishtira utters the first lie of his life and forces Drona to give up arms, at which moment Dhrishtadyumna cuts off his head and obtains revenge for the wrongs done to his father Drupada.

Karna Parva narrates the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth days. The commander-in-chief defeats each of his four stepbrothers in battle during this time, but owing to his promise to Kunti, refuses to kill any of them. He is killed at the end of the section by Arjuna, at the behest of Krishna while he is unarmed and thrown off his chariot.

In the **Shalya Parva**, the war draws to a close, and Shalya becomes the fourth and last leader of the Kaurava camp to die on the battlefield. This is the section in which the Pandavas secure victory on the eighteenth day. A mace duel takes place

between Suyodhana and Bhimasena, in which the former is mortally wounded. The parva ends with Ashwatthama, Kritavarma and Kripacharya plotting revenge on the Pandavas.

The **Sauptika Parva** describes the manner in which the three surviving members of the Kaurava army attack the sleeping soldiers in the Pandava camp and kill them all. The only survivors of this massacre are the five Pandava brothers, Satyaki and Krishna. Toward the end of this section, the Pandavas chase and apprehend Ashwatthama, who admits defeat and is cursed by Krishna to become an immortal.

The **Stri Parva** is better known as the book of grief, mostly by women but also by the surviving men. Dhritarashtra's attempt to kill Bhimasena by embracing him occurs in this section. Gandhari also curses Krishna that his Yadava clan will meet its death like the Kurus, plagued by infighting. Vyasa and Vidura's treatises on the nature of grief and death brings this section to an end.

In the **Shanti Parva**, the longest of the eighteen books, Yudhishtir receives wisdom and knowledge from a group of sages and Bhishma on varied topics such as caste, religion, philosophy, cosmology, politics, governance and morality. While it is true that critics consider the Shanti Parva and its successor, the Anushasana Parva, later interpolations into the epic, they're still considered integral parts of the Mahabharata.

Next comes the **Anushasana Parva**, which continues in the same vein as the Shanti Parva, where Yudhishtir continues his studentship at the feet of Bhishma and other sages. The topics of conversation are centred around the conduct of a leader, and the behaviour and habits of those closely assisting a ruler. At the end of this section, Bhishma dies and his last rites are administered.

The **Ashwamedha Parva** contains the story of the horse sacrifice that Yudhishtir conducts to celebrate his victory. At the end of the ritual, a mongoose with a golden head springs out of the ground and declares the entire ceremony meaningless. Also in this section appears a sub-parva called the Anugita Parva, which reiterates much of Krishna's battlefield discourse with a few further additions. Scholars almost unanimously consider the Anugita a later addition.

In the **Ashramavasika Parva**, we are told of the peaceful and gracious nature of the Pandavas' subsequent rule over fifteen years after the Kurukshetra war. The Kuru family is one again, with Yudhishtir consulting Dhritarashtra and Gandhari

over matters of polity. Draupadi and Gandhari find comfort in each other's company, and the parva ends with the death of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Kunti and Vidura.

The **Mausala Parva**, one of the shortest books of the Mahabharata, nevertheless recounts an important tale: that of the death of Krishna and the Yadavas. The section ends with the sinking of Dwaraka, and the fall of Arjuna as warrior. All his weapons and skills desert him when he tries to defend the children and women of Dwaraka from robbers.

In the **Mahaprasthanika Parva**, the shortest book of the epic, the Pandavas journey around Aryavarta and finally begin their ascent toward the Himalayas. One by one, the Pandavas and Draupadi drop to their deaths with the exception of Yudhishtir, who reaches heaven in his mortal form because of his steadfast adherence to virtue.

The last section of the Mahabharata is called the **Swargarohanika Parva**, in which Yudhishtir's experiences in heaven are described. After one final test where Yudhishtir is shown a hell filled with good people and a heaven filled with bad people, the epic ends with a happy reunion in the company of gods.

The anger of Sarama

Janamejayaha parikshitaha saha bharaatru bhihi kurukshetre deerghasatram
upaaste
Tasya bharaatarasa tarayaha sarootasenograseno bheemasena iti
(3: 1)

Janamejaya, son of Parikshit, was attending a long sacrifice along with his brothers in Kurukshetra. His brothers were three in number: Srutasena, Ugrasena and Bhimasena

THE STORY GOES THAT in Kurukshetra, the brothers of Janamejaya trouble an offspring of Sarama, the celestial bitch. After ascertaining that the pup had not troubled the princes in any way to earn the heckling, Sarama goes to where Janamejaya was performing his sacrifice and curses him that evil shall come upon them when they least expect it.

This alarms Janamejaya into searching for a sage that would help him wash away his sin and neutralize the effect of the curse. He comes upon the hermitage of a sage called Srutashrava, who offers the services of his son, Somashrava, to the king. ‘My son,’ he tells Janamejaya, ‘was born of a she-snake that had drunk my vital fluid, so he can free you of any sins save those committed against the Mahadeva.’

However, the boy Somashrava has a certain weakness of generosity: he is liable to grant any Brahmin his wish. Janamejaya decides that it is a character flaw he could live with, so he takes Somashrava back to court and installs him as chief priest. Leaving him in charge of his brothers, he marches towards Takshashila to bring that country under his rule.

(Somashrava returns in later volumes of the story. We will have more to say on him then.)

The First Disciple of Dhaumya: Aruni

Yasmaad bhavaana kedaarakhandam avadaaryotthi tasa
Tasmaad bhavaana uddaalaka eva naamanaa bhavishyateeti
(3: 29)

Because in the act of getting up from the ditch you have reopened the water course for this meadow, therefore you will henceforth and forever be called Uddalaka.

THE SAGE DHAUMYA HAS three disciples of note: Aruni, Upamanyu and Veda. First, Dhaumya sends Aruni on a mission to plug a breach in a water-course that is overflowing a certain meadow. Aruni, upon reaching the spot and not finding the right tool or plan to perform the task, uses his body as a dam instead and lies down to confine the water.

Back at the hermitage, after a long period of waiting, Dhaumya sets out in search of our disciple. When he finds him, soaked and chilled to the bone, still holding up the water in the field, Dhaumya gets overcome by the depth of Aruni's devotion and grants him a boon whereby the disciple is named Uddalaka, and decrees that all the Vedas and the Dharmashastras will shine with all their lustre in his mind.

Thus pleasing his preceptor, Aruni leaves the hermitage to return to the kingdom of his birth, Panchala. In years to come, Aruni would go on to take a place of prominence among the great Vedic sages, and his name would appear in many of the principal Upanishads.

The Second Disciple of Dhaumya: Upamanyu

Arka patraani bhaksha yitvaandhee bhooto asmi
(3: 57)

Having eaten the leaves of the Arka plant, I have become blind.

THE SECOND OF DHAUMYA'S disciples, Upamanyu, is sent by his master to look after the cows. After having watched them all day, he returns at dusk to the hermitage, and one look at him is enough to tell Dhaumya that the boy had eaten well. 'How come you're so plump, Upamanyu?' Dhaumya asks, and the disciple replies, 'Sir, I support myself by begging.'

Dhaumya clucks his tongue and tells the boy that eating alms by oneself without offering part of it to one's master is wrong. So the following day, Upamanyu dutifully brings the day's proceeds to Dhaumya. Dhaumya takes all of it for himself and forbids Upamanyu from begging.

However, the next day, Dhaumya once again notices that Upamanyu looks well-fed.

'I have taken all your alms, boy,' says Dhaumya, 'and I have ordered you not to beg for food. Yet you look like you have eaten.'

'Yes, sir,' says Upamanyu. 'I drink some of the milk of the cows when I feel hungry.'

'Hmm,' says Dhaumya. 'Do you not know that the cows belong to me, and that you must not drink of their milk without first taking my consent?'

Upamanyu agrees with the justice of that observation and promises that he will not drink the cow's milk. But the next day, again he appears at the hermitage with no sign of having suffered hunger. Dhaumya asks him what he has done this time.

‘Sir,’ says Upamanyu, ‘today I sipped the froth that the calves threw out while sucking their mothers’ teats.’

Dhaumya, now angry, chastises his disciple for intervening with the natural order of things and interrupting the calves’ meals. He forbids him from sipping even the froth cast away by the animals.

Now, plagued by hunger, Upamanyu eats the leaves of a certain poisonous plant in the forest (the *Arka*) that turns him blind. Then, while attempting to return to his preceptor’s hermitage, he falls into a ditch. When he is found by Dhaumya late into the night, he is in a sorry shape, shrunk by hunger, dirtied by mud and driven half mad by blindness.

Dhaumya consoles him and tells him to pray to the Ashwin twins. When the Ashwins appear after a prolonged time of worship, they offer Upamanyu a cake to eat. But Upamanyu refuses to take a bite of it, saying that he must first make an offering of it to his teacher. Even when the Ashwins tell him that Dhaumya had already invoked them in the past and had eaten the cake (without offering it to *his* teacher), Upamanyu stands his ground and refuses to take the bait.

Impressed by the strength of his loyalty, the Ashwins bless Upamanyu with sight and good fortune. Upon returning to the hermitage and narrating the story to Dhaumya, Upamanyu gets further blessed, like Aruni, that the Vedas and the dharma shastras will ‘shine within him’.

The Third Disciple of Dhaumya: Veda

Gaura iva nityam gurooshu dhoorshu niyujyamaanaha
Sheetoshna kshuta trushnaa dukkha saha sarvtaraa pratikoolaha
(3: 81)

*Like an ox under the burdens of his master, without a murmur he bore all travails
caused by heat, thirst and hunger.*

COMPARED TO HIS TWO comrades, one who had to make himself a human dam and the other who almost died of hunger and blindness, Veda had it easy.

Dhaumya's task for him was to serve the preceptor's household in the manner of a slave. Though it says that he worked like an ox, one cannot escape the feeling that he suffered less than Dhaumya's two other disciples.

The trial of Upamanyu seems particularly harsh, even allowing for the fact that it was common practice for teachers in those days to test their students before declaring their education complete. What could justify first starving a boy, blinding him, and then forcing him to please the gods? And why does Veda get away with such a light task when his two predecessors had to undergo deeper hardships?

A possible explanation is this: The education system in those days was one to one. The teacher designed a student's 'curriculum' after taking into account what he already knew and what he needed to know. For instance, if you already knew the verses of the Rig Veda, your teacher will not waste any more time reciting them to you again.

Similarly, the tasks you were given will be aligned to the character development that your teacher wishes you to undergo. A student who has a propensity for being lazy will be given household chores; a student who is particularly vulnerable to food will be asked to look after the cattle and refrain from eating; a student who, perhaps, is obsessed with cleanliness will be tasked with lying down in the mud in order to stop the flooding of a meadow.

Those who fail at their tasks – like Upamanyu does repeatedly – will be punished, but not permanently so. They will be given a chance to redeem themselves, and indeed, at the end of the story, faced with the temptation of a cake given by the Ashwins, the boy displays that he has conquered his greed when he insists that he must first offer it to his preceptor.

The story of the three disciples, I think, gives us two important messages. One: each man's trials are his own. The task of performing daily household chores to the preceptor's satisfaction is as onerous to a sloth as the task of learning to resist the lure of a tasty food item is to a glutton. The extent of a man's suffering under the weight of a problem is wholly dependent on his ability to meet it. There is, therefore, no objective way in which we can conclude one problem to be lesser or greater than another.

The second message is this: failure to overcome our inner psychological demons may bring us great punishments, like it did in the case of Upamanyu, but all such setbacks are temporary, and with sufficient power of the will and proper guidance, we can all aspire to eventual success and its rewards.

The Adventures of Uttanka

Dagdhum arhasi tam paapam javalitey havyavaahane
Sarvasatrey mahaaraaja tavayi nada dhi vidheeyate
(3: 190)

You must burn the sinful wretch in the blaze of a sacrificial fire. O King! Make arrangements right away for a sarpasatra (snake sacrifice).

UTTANKA IS THE DISCIPLE of Veda, whom we met in the previous story. His contribution to the Mahabharata story is that he is the one who instigates Janamejaya against the Naga King Takshaka, and encourages him to perform a great snake sacrifice. It is at this ceremony that Vaisampayana, one of Vyasa's disciples, narrates the story of the great war. Ugrasrava Sauti is present at this gathering, and later goes to Naimisha to tell the sages there of his experiences.

The tale of Uttanka's enmity with Takshaka is as follows.

When it comes time for Uttanka to give his *guru dakshina*, at his preceptor's behest, he goes to Veda's wife and asks her what he must get as payment for all the instruction he has received. The lady asks him to get the earrings worn by the queen of the land, King Paushya's wife. 'Four days from now,' she says, 'I wish to appear in front of the Brahmins who will dine at my house adorned with these earrings. Can you bring them from me, Uttanka?'

The Man on the Bull

On his way to the royal palace, Uttanka encounters a bull larger than any he had ever seen, upon which is seated a man of uncommon stature. The man addresses Uttanka and says, 'Eat the dung of my bull. Your preceptor ate of it before.' Despite his misgivings, Uttanka assents to this bizarre request. For good measure, he washes down the dung with the bull's urine.

At the palace, King Paushya allows Uttanka into the ladies' chambers. The queen, handing over the earrings, tells the young Brahmin to be careful because

Takshaka, the king of the Nagas, is also after the jewels. Uttanka asks her not to worry, that the king of the Nagas would not overpower him, and sets out on his way.

On the path back to Veda's hermitage, Takshaka appears in the garb of a naked beggar and steals the jewels from Uttanka's possession. Just when Uttanka is about to subdue the beggar by force, the serpent assumes his original form and burrows into a hole in the ground, through which he proceeds to his own abode, the land of the snakes.

Uttanka tries to gratify Takshaka with worship and praise, and with the help of Indra's thunderbolt, even enters the land of the Nagas and beholds its splendour. But on not receiving the earrings despite his best efforts, he becomes thoughtful about what to do. Then he looks about him and sees a strange sight.

The Women at the Loom

Two women sitting by a loom, spinning a cloth with threads of two colours: black and white. Next to them, six identical boys spinning a wheel with twelve spokes. By the side, a handsome man seated on a fine horse.

When Uttanka is wondering about what to do, the man on the horse says, 'Blow unto this horse, and I shall see to it that the Nagas are brought under your control.'

Uttanka does as he is told, and the horse turns into a ball of blazing fire. Just as it is about to enter the Naga kingdom and turn it into ashes, Takshaka, consumed by fright, emerges from his hole and returns the earrings to Uttanka.

The handsome man lends Uttanka his horse so that he might return to the hermitage in time. Later, when Veda asks him the reason for his absence, Uttanka narrates the whole tale and asks the meaning of it.

Veda says, 'The two women you saw were Dhata and Vidhata. The black and white threads signify day and night. The wheel of twelve spokes represents the year which comprises of twelve months, and the six boys a season each. The handsome man was Parjanya, the deity of the rain, and the horse was none other than Agni, the lord of fire. The bull you saw on the road was Airavata, and the dung and urine that you partook is none other than the nectar of the gods. You've been looked after by Indra himself, Uttanka; that is why you have returned safely with your life intact.'

Further quest for revenge

Uttanka, his heart still burning with anger toward Takshaka, goes to Janamejaya and tells the king, 'Your Majesty, the Naga Takshaka has committed the grave folly of killing your father, Parikshit. The fates have ordained that you must now complete the act of vengeance.'

'How do I do that, O sage?' asks Janamejaya.

'By performing a snake sacrifice, O King,' replies Uttanka, 'which will kill every Naga on Earth and will render unto ashes that vile and malignant being, Takshaka.'

Janamejaya then finds out the circumstances of his father's death from his courtiers, and when he realizes the role the Naga king played in the matter, he becomes engulfed at once by grief, and orders for arrangements to be made for an immediate *sarpasatra*.

How Chyavana Got His Name

Tataha garbho nivaasana krukshou bhrugu kulodvaha
Roshaana maatusha chayutaha krukshesha chayavanasatena so abhavat
(6: 2)

The infant living in the womb dropped from it, enraged at the violence, for which he gained the name, Chyavana.

THE SAGE BHRIGU, one of the Saptarishis who was created by Brahma, had a wife named Puloma. When she became heavily pregnant with their child, one day Bhrigu leaves her alone at their hermitage and goes to perform his ablutions. At this time, a Rakshasa, also by name Puloma, appears at their house and gets besotted by the sage's wife.

Now it so happens that Puloma (the woman) was in the past first promised to Puloma (the Rakshasa) before she was given in marriage to Bhrigu. The Rakshasa questions the live sacrificial fire burning at the hermit's hut whether this is fair or right. 'This woman has first been promised to me, O Agni,' says the Rakshasa, 'and now I have to watch her bear another man's children.'

Agni does not reply at first, for he does not wish to lie by denying the Rakshasa's words, nor does he wish to earn Bhrigu's wrath by admitting their truth. But on further goading from the Rakshasa, Agni relents and concedes that yes, Puloma was indeed first promised to him but was later given in marriage to Bhrigu.

This response from the god of fire angers the Rakshasa further, and in a fit of rage, he assumes the shape of a boar and carries Puloma away.

The speed with which the boar carried away the maiden is said to have exceeded that of the wind and even of thought. This causes the child of Bhrigu, lying in her womb, to slip and drop to the ground. A premature child is called a 'chyut' in Sanskrit, so the son of Bhrigu came to be known as Chyavana.

(In later years, Chyavana himself becomes a well-respected sage trained in the arts of healing. He is considered to be the original inventor of a nutritious paste

containing sugar, honey, gooseberries, sesame oil, berries and other spices – called Chyavanprash.)

The Rakshasa, meanwhile, takes one look at the infant Chyavana, and is turned into a heap of ashes. Puloma picks up her son and returns home. Beholding this, Brahma creates a river with all the tears that Puloma has shed during the ordeal, and shapes its path so that it flows by the hermitage of Bhrigu. This river is named Vadhusara.

For his trouble, Agni ends up earning a curse from Bhrigu all the same. After the sage returns and hears from his wife how the fire god betrayed them by siding with the Rakshasa, Bhrigu decrees that Agni will ‘eat of all things’.

The Retaliation of Agni

Nirom kaarava satkaaraaha savadhaa savaahaa vivarjitaaha
Vinaangnina parajaaha sarvaasa tat aasana sudukkhitaaha
(7: 13)

Deprived of the 'Om' and the good deeds that accompany the syllable, without the swadhas and the swahas, the people of Earth became saddened.

THE CURSE BY BHRIGU angers Agni. He says, 'Rishi, I was asked a question in the capacity of a witness, and I told the truth as I know it. Is this wrong? Is this the sin for which you have cursed me? Know that I have the power to curse you as well, but I shall not, because I hold sages such as you in high regard.

'Also, listen. All the great multitudes of men in the world make their offerings to both the Gods and the Pitris (ancestors) through me. I am present at the daily homa, at places of sacrifice, at times of union between man and woman. The Gods and the Pitris are fed through me, because they eat the clarified butter that is poured into me. Thus, I am their mouth. How, then, am I to be the eater of all things?'

Saying this, Agni retreats from all places, and refuses to appear in the world of men, starving it of warmth, light and the means of worship. The sages then go to Brahma and implore him to placate Agni. The Creator addresses the god of fire and says, 'You are the supreme power that creates and destroys, feeds and burns. It shall be so that whatever you touch from now on will be pure and holy. And in order to make the Rishi's curse come true, you shall have the first part in every offering that is made to you. You shall not exist just as the mouth to the Devas and Pitris, but you shall purify everything that is poured into you by taking your part of it and eating it first. Thus you shall be the eater of all things, just as Bhrigu wishes.'

And Agni bowed to Brahma and said, 'So be it.'

It was thus that fire returned to human dwellings, and ever since, whenever an offering is made at a temple or a ceremony, it reaches the Gods and the Pitris only after a share of it has been consumed by the lord of fire.

Ruru and Pramadvara

Aayusho ardham parayachhasva kanyaayai bhrugunandana
Evam utthaasyati rooro tava bhaaryaa paramadvaraa
(9: 10)

Son of Bhrigu, if you give half your life to your bride, Pramadvara, she will rise from the ground and return to life.

RURU IS THE SON of Chyavana's son, Pramati. Pramadvara is the daughter of King Vishwavasu of the Gandharvas and the celestial dancer Menaka. She was abandoned at birth by the hermitage of Sage Sthulakesa, who raises her as his own child.

Ruru and Pramadvara fall in love, and with the blessings of their elders, make preparations to get married. But a few days to the wedding, while out in the forest in the company of her female friends, Pramadvara accidentally steps on a serpent, is bitten by it, and falls to her death.

This plunges Ruru into grief, and he wanders deep into the forest, lamenting out loud to the gods that if he had done any charitable deeds in his life, the merits of those should be transferred to Pramadvara and increase her life span.

A messenger of the gods, presumably Narada, appears now and says, 'Ruru, your utterances are ineffectual. No one whose days on Earth are finished can be made to return by mere words. The daughter of the Gandharva has finished her time in this realm, and therefore she has been taken away. However, the gods have provided in her destiny a means by which her life may be restored.'

Ruru sits up, interested. 'What is this method you speak of, O Messenger?'

'If you resign half of your own life to your bride, Young Sage, your Pramadvara will rise from her death.'

To which Ruru answers: 'I shall most willingly give half my life for the sake of my beloved.'

The sacrifice works, of course, and before long Pramadvarya is back on her feet, her usual beautiful self. Ruru marries her, and in time brings to life a son by name Sunaka.

At their wedding ceremony, Ruru takes a vow that he will kill every serpent that crosses his way. For a few years he keeps this promise too, carrying a staff for the purpose. But then one day he sees an old serpent of the Dundubha species, and just as he raises his weapon, the snake says, 'I belong to a species that never bites a human being, O Brahmin. So is it not unfair that you wish to punish me for a crime I know not how to commit?'

'A snake that does not bite?' says Ruru suspiciously, his staff still half-raised. 'Why should I believe you?'

'I was actually not born a serpent, O Sage,' replied the snake. 'I was born a Brahmin, and I was a sage by name Sahasrapat. It is by the curse of another Brahmin that I became a snake.'

Now curious, lowering his weapon, Ruru asks, 'For what were you cursed, Snake? And how long will your form remain so?'

The Story of Sahasrapat

Sahasrapat recounts the following story:

'A long time ago, I used to be friends with an impetuous ascetic named Khagama. On an inauspicious day, I got the misguided idea of trying to jest with him with a mock snake fashioned out of blades of grass. He was engaged in the fire-sacrifice then, so he was not amused by my attempt at frolic. In fact, it enraged him to a point where he placed a curse on me saying, 'Since you ventured to frighten me with a fake snake, you shall be turned into a serpent that cannot bite.'

'After his anger had died down, when I begged him to take back his curse, he said that a sage by name Ruru, the son of Pramati, would come and deliver me from the curse. You are the very same Ruru, O Sage, and now I can leave my snake-body to assume my real form. Once I have regained my true self, I shall tell you something for your good.'

And then Sahasrapat, in his original form, said to Ruru, 'My boy, a Brahmin must never take the life of another creature. A Brahmin should ever be mild, and should encourage other people on a path of wisdom, faith and peace. Being stern and

wielding the sceptre should be left to the Kshatriyas. You should follow in the footsteps of a great Brahmin from the old days who went by the name of Astika.’

‘Who is Astika, O Sage?’

‘Astika is the man who delivered the race of serpents from the wrath of Janamejaya, the king of Hastinapur, who embarked upon a great snake-sacrifice to kill every serpent on Earth.’

Ruru joined his hands at the chest and said, ‘Tell me the story of this Astika, O Sage, and that of Janamejaya.’

‘That tale you will hear when the time is right, my boy,’ says Sahasrapat, and vanishes out of sight.

This brings to a close the Pauloma sub-parva of the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata.

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Jaratkaru weds Jaratkaru

Jaratkaaro jaratkaarooahu savaseyama anujaa mama
Tavadartham rakshitaa poorvam parateechhemaam davijottama
(13: 34)

Jaratkaru, my younger sister is called Jaratkaru. I have saved her for you, O Best of All Dwijas, so accept her as your spouse.

AS WE SAW TOWARD the end of the previous chapter, Astika is the sage who eventually saves the serpents from the wrath of Janamejaya. At the beginning of the Astika Parva, on being asked by the sages to describe the tale of this man, Sauti begins with the story of how Jaratkaru, Astika's father, came to have him.

Jaratkaru was a great ascetic who ate sparingly and had his desires under firm control. He belonged to a race of sages called the Yayavaras. Once, when he was on a journey around the world, inside a cave he saw a group of elderly men hanging from the ceiling by their legs like bats.

'Who are you, good sirs?' asked Jaratkaru, making to help one of them and realizing that the rope which suspended the men had almost fully worn off, eaten by rats. 'And why do you hang heads down in this cave in such a precarious manner?'

'We are the ancestors of a sage called Jaratkaru,' says the leader of the hanging men. 'We are sinking low into the land of the dead because our line is close to going extinct. Our son has entered a life of austerities and penance. Not for him such quaint desires such as having a son and extending his lineage. Who are you, O Sage, who worries for us so?'

'Why, I am the Jaratkaru that you refer to!' said Jaratkaru. 'I am your descendant, and you my ancestors. Pray tell me how I am to serve you.'

'Set your heart on marriage and offspring,' said the ancestors. 'The merit one acquires by becoming a father far exceeds that begotten by virtue and ascetic practice.'

After a moment of thought, Jaratkaru agrees to help. 'I shall not marry just any other maiden, though,' he says. 'I shall marry only that girl who has the same name as I, and her relatives must be willing to give her to me as charity without expecting anything in bride price, for what do I, a mere sage, have to give?'

Saying so, he takes leave from his ancestors and begins looking for a suitable wife. But he does not succeed in finding anyone because of his twin conditions. After a long time, while praying in the middle of the forest, Vasuki, the king of all serpents, appears before him and offers his sister to Jaratkaru in marriage. But Jaratkaru reminds Vasuki of his condition, whereupon the snake smiles and says, 'My sister's name is Jaratkaru as well, O Sage. I have been told that you will arrive to take her hand in marriage, so I have waited for you all this while. Please accept her as your wife.'

And so the sage Jaratkaru married the Naga woman Jaratkaru. Their son, Astika, will go on to play an important role in saving the serpent race from annihilation in Janamejaya's hands. We will see exactly how in a future story.

The Curse of the Egg-child

Maatraa hi bhujagaaha shaptaaha poorvam baraham vidaam vara
Janamejayasya vo yagne dhakshyasya anila saarathihi
(13: 35)

The mother of snakes cursed them saying, 'Agni (anilasaarathi) shall burn you all at Janamejaya's sacrifice.'

NOW WE APPROACH THE story of Astika from the other side, where we look at how the Nagas were born and why they became sworn enemies of Garuda, Vishnu's steed. The sages in Naimisha request Sauti to tell the history of Astika in detail, and the bard chooses to begin with the wedding of Sage Kashyapa to the two daughters of Daksha Prajapati, Kadru and Vinata.

Early on in their marriage, Kadru asks for a boon from Kashyapa to receive thousand snakes of equal splendour as offspring. Having granted his wife her wish, he asks Vinata what she would like, and she replies, 'My lord, please grant me just two sons who will surpass all of Kadru's children in strength, energy, size of body and prowess.'

As per the wishes, in due course of time, Kadru brings forth a thousand eggs, and Vinata but two. After five hundred years, all of Kadru's eggs hatch and her thousand snakes come into the world. But Vinata's eggs are still hard. Overcome by envy, Vinata breaks open one of the eggs, only to find a half-developed human being inside. He curses his mother and says, 'Since you could not wait for your eggs to hatch, you will serve as a slave. You will need to take good care of the surviving egg during your years of slavery, for it is the son growing inside it that will rescue you.'

Saying so, he rose to the sky and became Surya's charioteer.

In the meantime, Kadru and Vinata have a bet on the colour of Uchchaihshravas, the divine horse that came into the world during the churning of the ocean of milk. Now it is common knowledge that Uchchaihshravas is completely white, with not even a single strand of black hair on his body. But Kadru challenges Vinata that the tail of

the horse is black. 'Shall we agree, sister,' says Kadru to Vinata, 'that the loser will serve the winner as a slave?'

Vinata agrees to the condition. Kadru now goes to her sons, the serpents, and orders them to become a strand of black hair each and cover the tail of the divine horse so that it could be blackened. The snakes refuse to do their mother's bidding, whereupon Kadru places a curse on them. 'During the snake sacrifice of the wise king Janamejaya of the Pandava race, Agni shall consume you all,' she says.

Cowed by this, in a bid to win back her affection and hopefully reverse the curse, the snakes decide to obey Kadru's order. They become strands of black hair and settle upon the tail of Uchchaihsravas, turning it from snow white to coal black.

Thus the curse of the egg-child came to be. When the two sisters examined the horse's tail and discovered that it is black, Vinata enters into a state of slavery and begins serving Kadru.

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The Birth of Garuda

Tataha kaamagamaha pakshee mahaaveeryo mahaabalaha
Maatur antikam aagachhat param teeram mahodadhehe
(21: 1)

*That bird of great strength and valour went to his mother on the other shore of the
great ocean*

A FEW YEARS AFTER Vinata begins her duties as Kadru's slave, her other egg hatches and a bird of great strength flies out of it. He is capable of assuming any form, of going at will anywhere he wishes, and of calling to his aid any measure of energy. In resplendence he is comparable to Agni himself. Indeed, when Garuda first spreads his wings, the gods think that Agni has awakened to destroy the universe, but Agni soothes their concerns saying that Garuda is the foe of the Nagas and the Rakshasas, a friend to the gods.

The gods then proceed to pray to Garuda to reduce his energy, and after he does so, he goes to meet Vinata in the company of Aruna, his brother, the sun's charioteer.

The first task that Garuda is given by Kadru and the thousand snakes is to carry them all to the island of Ramaneeyaka. With all his half-brothers and both his mothers aboard his wings, Garuda soars to the sky, close to the sun, and the snakes almost wither and die, but Kadru prays to Indra and causes a great rain to fall upon the Earth, which fills even the nether regions with water.

They arrive at Ramaneeyaka safely, on the shore of the Lavanasaṃudra (the ocean of salt). They find here a beautiful forest washed by the waters of the sea and replete with nature's music. The sons of Kadru, while enjoying themselves greatly on this island, command Garuda to find them *another* such island, so that they could inhabit it after they had had their fill of Ramaneeyaka.

After a pause for thought, Garuda goes to Vinata and asks her why he must obey the snakes. This is when Vinata tells her son about the story of her slavery.

Determined to rescue his mother, Garuda asks the snakes what he could bring them so as to buy her freedom. And the snakes reply, 'Bring us the nectar of the gods, and you shall be freed from bondage.'

Garuda sets out in search of the nectar, but before he starts on his journey, following the suggestion of Vinata, he ravages an island of Nishadas and eats them to satisfy his hunger. An entire town of fishermen is destroyed to feed Garuda's hunger, and we're told that when he mistakenly swallows one Brahmin, his throat begins to burn with such heat that he has to spit him out and let him go on his way.

(This section of Garuda's invasion of a fishermen colony, and the partial treatment he gives the sole Brahmin – suggesting that one Brahmin's life is more important than an entire kingdom of lower-borns – might well be a later interpolation.)

After the destruction of the Nishadas, Garuda meets Kashyapa, his father, on the bank of a lake. When Garuda alights, Kashyapa smiles at him and says, 'How are you, my child? Do you get enough food to eat in the world of men?'

'My mother does well,' replies Garuda, 'and so does my brother as Surya's charioteer. But I do not get much in the way of food in this world, Father. Can you not point me to some source of food that will quench my thirst and hunger?'

At which Kashyapa points to the lake. 'This is a sacred lake,' he says, 'one even the gods have heard of. Here there is an elephant that continually drags a tortoise, his elder brother, away from the water. Do you wish to know of their story?'

Garuda did not know what this tale of the strange elephant had to do with his raging hunger, but out of respect for his father the venerable sage, he sits down and prepares to listen.

The Elephant and the Tortoise

Aaseed vibhaavasur naama maharshihi kopeno bhrushama
Bharaataa tasyaanujasha chaaseeta supratiko mahaa tapaaha
(25: 10)

There was once a maharishi by name Vibhavasú, who was wrathful by nature, and his brother, the high-souled Supratika.

KASHYAPA TELLS HIS SON Garuda the following story about the lake on whose bank they sat:

There was once a great, wrathful sage by name Vibhavasú. His younger brother was named Supratika. The latter did not wish to share his patrimonial wealth with his older brother, so he asked for a division of property. This angers Vibhavasú, and after advising Supratika in vain about the folly of fighting among brothers, he curses his younger brother that he should become an elephant. In retaliation, Supratika musters all his ascetic power and places a curse on Vibhavasú that he would turn into a tortoise.

At a certain time of every day, both the sages, in their animal forms, come together at the bank of this very lake and fight until their muscles ache. Theirs is a never-ending battle, beginning on land, where the elephant is stronger, and ending in water, where the tortoise can defeat the older animal.

‘The elephant is six yojanas in height and twelve yojanas in circumference,’ says Kashyapa to Garuda, ‘whereas the tortoise is three yojanas in height and ten yojanas in circumference. Eat both of them, my son, and they will satiate your hunger like nothing else can. By doing this you will also free this lake and this land of the recurring violence and destruction.’

Garuda goes to the side of the lake where the fight is meant to take place, and waits for the two animals to appear. When they do, he seizes the elephant in one claw and the tortoise in the other. He soars to the skies and reaches a sacred place called

Alamva, where among many trees stands a grand banyan. When Garuda reaches this tree, it speaks in the voice of a human to the bird: ‘Come, son of Kashyapa. Sit on my largest branch, which extends to the length of a hundred yojanas, and eat the two animals that you have brought with you.’

But the very moment Garuda alights on the branch, it snaps off the main trunk. Since both his claws are otherwise occupied, Garuda grabs the branch in his beak. Just as he’s about to cast it to the ground, he sees that a large number of Valakhilya sages are hanging off the branch inverted, their eyes closed, lost in yogic sleep. He once again sets out with the three objects and moves northward, in the direction of the mountain Gandhamadana.

While on this journey, scores of people on Earth – sages, kings, peasants – see a great bird, larger than they had ever seen, darken the sky and are overcome by wonder. A bird carrying an elephant a tortoise and a bough of a banyan tree all at once? It must be a divine bird indeed, the foremost of all flying creatures. And they give him the name Garuda, which means ‘bearer of great weights’.

Once he reaches Gandhamadana, he again meets his father Kashyapa engaged in his yogic practice. It is not clear how Kashyapa can be at two places at once – both at the lake and at Gandhamadana. One can assume that through his powers, the sage is able to appear and converse with his son at all times when the latter needs him.

At the foothills of the Gandhamadana, Kashyapa prays to the Valakhilyas to abandon the bough caught in Garuda’s beak. The Valakhilyas wake up and go in the direction of the Himavat mountain to continue their penances.

Meanwhile, Garuda, as guided by Kashyapa, flies to a distant mountain where there are no humans and drops the great bough in that place. He then sits on top of the mountain and eats both the tortoise and the elephant, thus readying himself for the main part of his mission: the stealing of the gods’ nectar.

One could read multiple meanings into the story of the tortoise and the elephant. The most obvious one, of course, is that age-old maxim: united we stand, divided we fall. The practice of brothers fighting over combined property seems to be as old as the Vedas themselves. This little fable reminds us that when two family members fight, it is usually a third entity that benefits. Also, this tale foreshadows the Mahabharata story, the prime theme of which is the Pandava and Kaurava brothers fighting one another over the throne of Hastinapur.

The Second Indra

Ko aparaadho mahendrasya kaha paramaadasha cha sootaja
Tapasaa vaalakhilyanaam sambhooto garoodaha katham
(27: 1)

What is the sin of Mahendra toward the Vahakhilyas, and what penance of theirs resulted in the birth of Garuda, O Son of Soota?

THOUGH INDRA IS THE official king of the gods, he is often portrayed as lustful, impatient and arrogant. While Garuda is preparing himself for his onslaught on the gods to steal their nectar, Indra goes to Brihaspati, and on receiving counsel to prepare to guard the divine juice, gathers his army in order to meet Garuda in battle.

At this stage a small interlude occurs, where the sages ask Sauti about the supposed enmity between Indra and the Valakhilyas. Sauti tells the following story:

A long time ago, before the birth of Garuda, when Kashyapa was performing a sacrifice in order to gain offspring, he entrusted Indra with the task of bringing the sacrificial fuel. The king of the gods manages to bear the mountain-like weight without any fatigue, but on the way he sees the Valakhilyas, each the size of a normal man's thumb, together walking toward Kashyapa's hermitage while carrying a single stalk of the Palasa leaf.

Indra mocks their size and their meagre contribution to Kashyapa's ceremony, thus earning their wrath. With their powers, the Valakhilyas place a curse that another being as powerful as Indra would appear in the future, and that being would teach Indra the lesson of humility.

'This being will be invincible, capable of going to any place in the three worlds at will, and of mustering any measure of energy at once. We shall see to it, O Indra, that such a being will take birth in the near future, and he shall be the one to surpass even you in all the blessed attributes of which you are so vain.'

Scared by the implications of this curse, Indra goes to Kashyapa and asks the sage to lessen the effect of the Valakhilya's words. Kashyapa speaks to the sages and

soothes their anger. 'It is the word of Brahma that made Indra the lord of the three worlds, O Sages,' he says. 'If another Indra is to emerge and challenge this one, the intentions of Brahma will be disrespected. So please take back your curse.'

'Kashyapa, O Sage,' said the Valakhilyas, 'you know as well as we that a curse once uttered cannot be returned, just mitigated. We understand your concern, though, so we shall leave it to you to find a way so that the effect of our words is diminished.'

The Valakhilyas thus assuaged, Kashyapa tells Indra that the great being wished into existence by the sages will be born as the result of that very sacrifice. 'But do not worry that he will challenge your superiority, O Indra, King of Devas. I shall see to it that he will serve you as a brother would. From him, no injury will come to your person or to your legacy.'

Kashyapa also had a word of warning for Indra. 'But remember, O King, that the speakers of the word of Brahma are never to be slighted again by thee, because despite their lack of physical strength, their minds possess great energies that cannot be fathomed by you, and if they are to curse you again, I shall be powerless to convince them to grant mercy.'

And thus did Kashyapa's second wife Vinata, give birth to two magnificent sons, one Aruna and the other Garuda. The former, a half-developed egg-child whom we encountered in a previous story, became a charioteer to the sun, whereas Garuda would go on to become a staunch devotee of and constant companion to Vishnu. Neither would ever fight a battle against the Gods, as per Kashyapa's promise.

Except for the one time when Garuda attempts to steal the *amrita*.

The Stealing of Amrita

Jaamboonadamayo bhootvaa maareechi vikachojjwalaha
Paravivesha balaata pakshee vaarivega ivaarnavam
(29: 1)

Assuming a golden body as bright as the sun, that potent bird entered with great speed like a tornado subduing the ocean.

THIS IS THE FIRST and only time Garuda fights the gods openly. Among the first casualties on Indra's side is Brahmana, the celestial architect, who succumbs to the bird's talons and beak. Garuda raises a dust storm with his incessant flapping so that the immortals are blinded, and then he mangles them with his beak.

Even with the arrival of Vayu, the wind god, the balance of the fight does not tilt. Not even wavering for a moment, the son of Vinata attacks the celestials from all sides at once, changing shape and size at will, using stealth and power alternately. The Sadhyas and the Gandharvas are the first to flee eastwards, followed by the Vasus and the Rudras who take refuge in the mountains to the south. The Adityas run to the west, and the twin Ashwins to the north.

Garuda destroys the Yakshas as well, and in doing so resembles Shiva himself, that destroyer of enemies, that holder of the Pinaka at the end of an epoch.

With Indra's army dispensed with, Garuda goes to where the *amrita* is kept, and sees that it is surrounded by tall flames that cover the entire sky, so hot and orange that they look intent on swallowing the sun itself. Garuda enlarges the size of his mouth by ninety times and fills it with the waters of many rivers. And returning to the place of the *amrita* in less than a moment, he douses the fires with the water in one fell swoop.

Now, placed near the *amrita*, he sees a wheel of steel-edged swords revolving incessantly, designed by the Gods to keep robbers at bay. To thwart this contraption, Garuda diminishes the size of his body to that of a fly and whizzes past the rotating blades.

Next, he faces two serpents who could turn the object of their gaze into ashes. Here he covers the eyes of the reptiles with dust so that they cannot look at him, and having blinded them thus, he picks them apart with his talons and cuts them into pieces.

Thus he took the jar containing the *amrita* and, having broken the machine with the rotating swords with the strength of his wings, he rises to the sky once again, intent on reaching his half-brothers and freeing his mother Vinata from slavery.

However, his journey home would not be smooth, for standing in his way amid the clouds is none other than Vishnu.

A Trading of Boons

Balam vigyaatum ichhaami yata te parama anuttamam
Sakhyam chaanantam ichhaami tavayaa saha khagottama
(29: 23)

I wish to know the extent of your great strength, Khagottama (the best among birds). I wish to be your eternal friend.

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT them, the old saying goes, bribe them.

Vishnu uses something of this strategy at this point, with Garuda on the cusp of making away with the *amrita*. Knowing that violence has not worked on the bird, he resorts to flattery.

‘It pleases me that you have resisted the urge to drink the nectar of immortality yourself, O Bird of the heavens,’ says Vishnu. ‘Whom did you steal it for?’

Garuda tells Vishnu the story of his half-brothers and mother, at which Vishnu makes some more approving noises.

‘You have tremendous control over your senses, O Garuda,’ he says. ‘I wish to give you two boons. Ask for anything you wish.’

‘The first,’ says Garuda, ‘is that I shall forever be above you.’

Vishnu smiles. ‘Granted. And the second?’

‘Make it so that I shall remain immortal and free from disease even without drinking the *amrita*.’

‘I shall make it so.’

Now, Garuda offers one boon to Vishnu in return for the two he had been granted. Vishnu asks that Garuda should become his steed.

‘But if that is so, how will I remain above you, O Narayana?’

‘I shall fight with your image on the banner of my chariot,’ replies Vishnu. ‘So you shall always be above me, Garuda, save for when I need to go somewhere.’

Whether Garuda agrees to this willingly or whether he’s tricked, we do not know, but once the boons are given and granted, he becomes Vishnu’s carrier.

After this short exchange, as Garuda is about to resume his journey home, Indra hurls at him his most destructive weapons, the Vajrayudha. It causes not even a scratch on the body of Garuda, and he laughs at Indra and says, 'O King of the Gods, I shall respect the sage (Dadhichi) of whose bone the Vajrayudha was made, and I shall respect the weapon itself, by not attacking you. But I shall leave you a single feather plucked from my body. See if you are able to destroy it.'

Saying so, Garuda lets afloat one of the thousands of feathers that adorn his wings. The sight of the feather is so magnificent that the gods – including Indra – are held in thrall. The gods now give Garuda the name of Suparna: one in possession of fair feathers.

And Indra, accepting defeat at the hands of Garuda, asks for the mighty bird's friendship.

Thus, the Valakhilya's curse comes true with the defeat of Indra at the hands of Garuda, but so does Kashyapa's word that the second Indra will not be a threat to the position and power of the first.

The Bed of Deception

Tato davaidhee krutaa jihvaa sarpaanaam tena karmanaa
Abhavamsha chaamru tasparshaad dhabhraasate atha pavitrinaha
(30: 20)

And thus were the tongues of the snakes divided in two by Garuda's actions, and thus did he bring amrita from the heavens.

GARUDA ACCEPTS INDRA'S OFFER of friendship, as was ordained by Kashyapa, and reassures him that he does not intend to give the nectar of immortality to anyone; he merely wishes to free his mother with it. 'The moment I hand it over to my half-brothers, O Sakra,' he tells Indra, 'you're welcome to take it back to where it belongs, having first made certain that I have rescued my mother.'

Indra is overjoyed hearing this, and when he offers Garuda a boon, the bird asks that the mighty snakes of the world become his food.

He then makes haste to return to his half-brothers. Offering them the jar of *amrita*, he says, 'Here, according to your condition, I've brought the nectar from the gods. You must free my mother now and allow me to take her away. I am placing the jar here on this bed of *kusa* grass. Please perform your ablutions before you partake of this divine fluid.'

The snakes, rejoicing at their good fortune, leave to attend to their devotions, but in the meantime, as per the plan, Indra takes the nectar and returns it into its rightful place in heaven. The serpents, on coming back, realize that they have been tricked, but in their desperation, they lick the grass on which the jar had been resting, on the off chance that some of the nectar had dropped on it. This causes their tongues to be slit along their lengths by the sharp blades of the *kusa*.

Garuda, for his part, having developed a healthy appetite for his half-brothers, made a habit of eating them at all times, both to appease his hunger and for enjoyment. Thus ends the mighty bird's successful quest for *amrita*, and the beginning of his alliance with the gods.

Sesha, the Virtuous Serpent

Adho maheem gachha bhujangamottama
Svayam tavaisha vivaram paradaasyati
(32: 21)

O Best of snakes, go underneath the Earth. She will herself give you the crevice that you must pass through.

UPON HEARING THE CURSE of Kadru that all the snake-brothers will one day be burnt at the sacrifice of Janamejaya, one of the serpents, Sesha, breaks away from the group and heads to Gandhamadana to perform austerities in praise of Brahma. It is said that he also went to Vadri, Gokarna, the woods of Pushkara, and finally to the foot of Himavat in his attempt to seek the blessings of the Creator.

At last, Brahma appears to him and says, ‘Your hard penances are affecting the well-being of the creatures of Earth, Sesha. Tell me what it is that your heart desires and I shall grant it.’

‘Sir,’ replies Sesha, ‘my brothers are all wicked of heart. They show no kindness to Vinata and her sons. Garuda, the fair-feathered bird, is our brother, but the other serpents think of him with hatred. I do not wish my destiny to be entwined with theirs just because they’re my siblings, O Grandsire. So I have come to this part of the world to cast off my old life and lose myself in your worship.’

Brahma smiles down at the serpent. ‘All of what you say has already been pre-ordained, my son. Even this conversation between you and me. So do not grieve for the destinies of your brothers. Ask of me a boon that will serve *your* future, for I can see that your path is going to be a virtuous one.’

‘All I ask, O Brahma,’ says Sesha, ‘is that my heart never yields to temptation, and that it forever remains steadfastly twined with peace and love.’

Pleased with the snake’s request, Brahma decrees that Sesha holds the Earth steady on the ocean of milk. ‘With her many mountains and rivers and forests and towns, Mother Earth crumbles and undulates at the most inopportune moments, my

son,' he says. 'Upon my command it shall be your job to now bear her weight upon your strong body so that she might find the balance she seeks.'

'I shall do it, sir,' replied Sesha. 'Gladly!'

Entering a hole provided just for the purpose, Sesha now goes to the other side of the Earth, the bottom, and props her up with his head, while encircling her protectively with the rest of his body. (We should note here that the Vedic stories imagine the Earth as a flat, carpet-like structure floating on top of an ocean, so there is a top and a bottom, and edges off which one could fall.)

Ever since accepting this burden of carrying and supporting the weight of the Earth on his head, Sesha came to be known as Ananta Sesha, and sometimes as Adi Sesha.

Vasuki's Plan

Daiveno pahato raajanyo bhaveda iha purushaha
Sa daivam evaashrayate naanyata tatra paraayanam
(34: 3)

*O King, a person afflicted by the ravages of fate must seek recourse in fate alone;
nothing else.*

ANOTHER SERPENT BROTHER TOOK an altogether different approach to handling Kadru's curse. While Sesha went away and lived a life of meditation and penance, Vasuki held a council of all the snakes and asked for possible methods by which they could lessen the effect of their mother's wrathful words.

'There is a way out of all curses,' began Vasuki, 'but not when the curse is placed on one by one's mother. Perhaps our time of annihilation has come. But within our limited view of our fates, it seems to me that we must fight this turn of events. Perhaps a means of deliverance yet exists. If there is any way in which we can prevent King Janamejaya from performing the snake sacrifice, why, we might save our entire race from eternal damnation in Yama's abode.'

Thus addressed the snakes came up with a lot of suggestions. Some said that they should disguise themselves as Brahmins and become the king's counsellors, so that when he asks them for advice, they could dissuade him from the project. Others said that if the chief priest could be bitten at the right time and made to die, the ceremony will be put on hold and therefore will not happen. A few of the more violent ones even suggested that they should kill Janamejaya himself. 'No king, no snake-sacrifice,' they said.

Among all these voices was that of Elapatra, who stood at the end of the litany and addressed Vasuki thus: 'Brother, the sacrifice cannot be prevented. King Janamejaya cannot be hindered. Let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we're powerful enough to change the course of Brahma's writ. A hurdle that has been placed in our path by fate has to be removed by fate alone.'

‘What do you mean by that, Elapatra?’ asked Vasuki.

‘Listen, Brother,’ said Elapatra. ‘On the day our mother placed her curse on us, I was seated on her lap, and I heard the gods speak of us to Brahma. They expressed the same concern that we today share, that the race of snakes will disappear from the Earth. But the Grandsire told them that it would not be so. A man named Astika will come to put a stop to the sacrifice of Janamejaya. Only the sinful among the snakes will die; the virtuous will survive.’

‘Astika!’ said everyone.

‘Astika?’ said Vasuki. ‘Who is this Astika?’

‘The Creator said that Astika will be born of a sage among the Yayavaras called Jaratkaru. And hear this, Brother. He will wed a maiden from the Naga clan, also named Jaratkaru. Now, is it not true that one of your sisters possesses that name?’

‘Yes,’ said Vasuki. ‘Yes, indeed.’

‘Then you have heard from me the right method of delivering us from the dreadful curse of our mother,’ said Elapatra.

And so Vasuki instructs his brothers to keep an eye on Jaratkaru the Yayavara, and to alert him immediately after it becomes known that the Brahmin is on the lookout for a bride. When the time arrives, he appears before Jaratkaru and offers his sister as his wife (as described in *Jaratkaru Weds Jaratkaru*, which appears earlier in this collection), thus closing the loop of fate that will in due course cause the birth of Astika and the timely end of the snake-sacrifice.

The Curse upon Parikshit

Saptaraatraadito netaa yamasya sadanam parati
Divijaanaama avamantaaram kuroonam ayashaha karam
(37: 14)

*That insulter of Brahmins, that destroyer of the Kuru fame, that king, will go to the
abode of Yama within seven nights.*

YOU WILL RECALL THAT Uttanka instigates Janamejaya to perform the snake sacrifice by recalling that Takshaka killed his father, Parikshit. How that came to be is told from here on.

Parikshit is the son of Abhimanyu, and the king of Hastinapur. On one of his hunting expeditions, chasing a deer that has been struck by his arrow, he comes to the hermitage of the sage Samika. At the moment of the king's arrival, the sage is engaged in deep penance, oblivious to the physical world, whereas Parikshit is hungry and thirsty from a day of riding in the woods.

'O Sage,' asks Parikshit when he sees Samika, 'did you happen to see a deer come this way, hind leg pierced with an arrow?'

But Samika, his eyes closed, does not reply.

After trying a few more times to elicit a response from the sage, frustrated, Parikshit picks up a dead snake with the tip of his bow and places it around Samika's neck. When even this act does not bring about a reaction, the king rides back to join his hunting companions, leaving the snake's corpse still about the ascetic.

Now Samika has a son by name Sringin, a tender youth in age but of marvellous yogic powers at his disposal, gained from years of practice. He has a friend called Krisa, who mockingly asks him why his father is wearing a dead snake around his neck. 'Do not purport to wisdom and strength that you do not possess, Sringin,' he says, 'for you're the son of a sage who worships his gods with a body of a snake adorning his shoulders.'

This angers Sringin, and after Krisa tells him where the snake had come from, in a moment of impetuous wrath, the boy utters a curse directed at the king. 'I hereby decree that the king Parikshit will meet his death within seven nights from now by none other than Takshaka, the king of the serpents, who will be bound by the strength of my word.'

The curse turns out to be one laid in haste, because when Sringin tells Samika about it all later, the father rebukes the son. 'I am not pleased with you, Sringin,' Samika says. 'The king did what he did while overcome by fatigue. It is not representative of his character. We live in the dominion of Parikshit, and he has looked after us well. By all accounts he is a wise and just king. Must we place such fatal curses on good men for sins they commit through momentary passions of the heart? No, Sringin. You have done a rather bad turn to the people of Hastinapur, all of whom love Parikshit.'

So wasting no time, Samika sends Sringin to the court of Parikshit to explain the situation and plan for a possible deliverance from the curse. Along with Sringin goes Samika's other disciple Gurumukha, he of good manners and soft words. They tell the king all that has transpired, and leaving him in a state of deep anxiety, return to Samika's hermitage.

This motif of a curse placed while blinded by anger plays out repeatedly during the Mahabharata as a plot device. Sages like Vishwamitra, Durvasa and Parashurama are always cursing someone or the other while in the throes of fury, and then amending their words after the passion had receded somewhat. It is interesting to see that deep within the story of the *narration of the Mahabharata* also, there is this curse that was uttered in haste. But for this, maybe the snake sacrifice would never have happened, and the Mahabharata would not have been told to Janamejaya in the way it was.

The Death of Parikshit

Dashtam yadi mayeha tavam shaktaha kim chichi chikitsitum
Tato vruksham mayaa dashtam imam jeevaya kashyapa
(39: 1)

If you're indeed as powerful as you claim, Kashyapa, then bring back to life this tree which is bitten by me.

IN ORDER TO GIVE himself the best chance of escaping the curse of Sringin, Parikshit orders a tower to be erected over a single column of stone, well-staffed with physicians and well-guarded by soldiers. A group of Brahmins are also present to combat anything other-worldly that might arise, and the king locks himself up in the topmost room, with no chance of being approached by anyone.

Kashyapa gets bribed

On the seventh day, the day on which Parikshit is supposed to meet his death, the sage Kashyapa makes his way to Hastinapur to attend on the king. *I shall revive the king after he is bitten by Takshaka, he thinks, and he shall reward me with gold and other forms of wealth.* But he is stopped on the way by an old Brahmin, who is in truth Takshaka in disguise.

‘Where are you going in such haste, O Sage?’ he asks.

‘I am going to the king’s tower to revive him from the bite of Takshaka, the foremost of the Nagas.’

‘Sage,’ replies Takshaka, ‘I am the Takshaka you speak of. I do not think that you possess the power to bring life to a body consumed by my poison. Here is a banyan tree; I shall dig my fangs into it. Let us see if you can revive it the way you claim.’

So saying, Takshaka bites a nearby banyan tree and reduces it to blue ash. With a smile upon his lips, Kashyapa then brings it back to life, bit by bit. First the sprout,

then the leaves, then the branches, and finally the trunk. Before long, the tree is standing as if it had never been touched.

Accepting defeat in the challenge, Takshaka tries another tack. ‘O Sage, I am bound by the words of the high-souled Sringin. It is not proper, therefore, that you should attempt to save someone whose time on Earth has run out. How much wealth do you hope to gain out of this action? Tell me, for I shall give you all that you ask.’

Hearing his words, Kashyapa sits down to meditate. With his inner eye he discerns that Parikshit’s time on Earth has indeed run out, and his interference in the matter is bound to only complicate matters. So he accepts Takshaka’s offer of wealth, and returns to his hermitage on the Gandhamadana.

Having dealt with Kashyapa in this manner, Takshaka now enters Hastinapur, and plots his way to reach the king in his single-columned tower so that he might be administered his dose of venom.

An insect inside a fruit

In order to enter the tower, Takshaka takes the help of his brothers, who disguise themselves as Brahmins taking flowers and fruit for the king. He himself assumes the form of an insect and enters one of the fruit, that is eventually picked up by Parikshit in his room. When the insect appears and begins to swell in size, the king realizes the futility of his attempt to thwart Sringin’s curse. While his councillors scurry back and forth to summon the guards at the place, he stops them with a raised hand.

‘Men,’ he says, ‘it is clear that my time in this world has come to an end. Why fight that which is preordained? The sun is just about to set; now I find myself freed from the fear of poison. Let this great snake, Takshaka, fill me with venom and thus fulfil his part in the narrative.’

The councillors stop on hearing the monarch’s words, and Takshaka, now back in his original form, raises his hood, coils his enormous black body around Parikshit’s chest, bites him on the neck and fells him in an instant.

After the final rites of the king are completed, the prince Janamejaya, though a mere boy at this time, ascends the throne of Hastinapur. The ministers of Parikshit secure an alliance of marriage for the young king, and get him wedded to the beautiful and virtuous Vapushtama, the daughter of Suvarnavarman, the king of Kasi.

Jaratkaru Leaves Jaratkaru

Sa taata drushtva barooyasa tavam jaratkaaroom tapasvinam
Yathadrushtam idam chaasmayi tavayakhyeyama aseshataha
(41: 29)

O fortunate one, the being that you have conceived is like Agni himself, a highly virtuous sage, a master of the Vedas and their branches.

MEANWHILE, JARATKARU THE SAGE and Jaratkaru the Naga maiden (Vasuki's sister) have married and have been living together. After a short amount of time, much to the delight of the snake brothers, Jaratkaru becomes pregnant.

During her third month, one evening, Jaratkaru the husband is lying down on the floor of their hut, with his head resting on his wife's lap. At this moment the sun approaches the western horizon, prepared to set. Afraid that her husband might miss his evening prayers and that might lessen his virtue, the wife Jaratkaru awakens her husband with a sweet voice.

But the husband wakes with his lower lip quivering in anger. (If there is one thing that all great sages have in common, it is a heightened ability to get furious over trifles.) 'The sun would not have set until I had woken up, woman,' he tells his wife. 'You should not have disturbed my nap. For this careless act of yours I am going to leave you and return to my life of penance.'

Jaratkaru the wife is much aggrieved by this. She asks her husband what would become of her and the child growing inside her if the sage were to abandon them. In response, his anger now cooled, Jaratkaru the sage says, 'The son that shall take birth from you, my wife, will be like Agni himself, and do not worry, he will fulfil his life's purpose and save your brothers from the horrific effects of your mother's curse.'

'But my lord,' said Jaratkaru, 'why must you leave us at this time? Can you not stay and forgive me this little mistake?'

The sage smiles at this and runs his hand over his wife's hair. 'My dear,' he says, 'just like our son is taking birth in the world of men for a purpose, so is there a

purpose behind our union, which is now fulfilled. My ancestors have their wish; they have their descendant. I have completed my duty toward them. And you – your purpose was to give birth to the protector of your brothers, which you will in due course, even without my help. Now it is time for me to seek my life's other purposes, those of unlocking the mysteries of existence through yogic means. Once you have given birth to our son, you shall move on too, to other things. That is the nature of all that is, my dear, that it moves relentlessly on.'

So saying, Jaratkaru the sage, having given the snakes the son they so desperately wanted, and having pleased his ancestors, goes back to his life of austerity and severe penances.

And in due course of time, the maiden Jaratkaru gives birth to a boy of name Astika (*whoever is*), who is reared in the house of Vasuki, and trained in the scriptures by Sage Chyavana, the son of Bhrigu.

The Anger of Janamejaya

Asti raajan mahata satram tavadartha devanirmitaam
Sarpasatram iti khayaatam puraane kathyate nrupa
(47: 6)

There is, O King, a great sacrifice devised by the gods themselves for you, called the snake-sacrifice, described in the Puranas.

NOW WE RETURN TO the scene of Janamejaya's youth, where sage Uttanka has instigated the king against Takshaka. After listening to the story of his father's death by the venom of the snake king, Janamejaya gets consumed by anger. 'It is clear that Sage Kashyapa would have revived my father if he had been allowed to attend upon him,' the young king says. 'But the malignant wretch Takshaka bribed the Brahmin and stopped him from performing his duty, to which he was originally inclined.

'So I intend to exact my vengeance upon this vile beast. O Sages! Tell me what I must do in order to see this Takshaka burn in live fire before my very eyes.'

And to this sages advise that the king must perform the great snake sacrifice that is told of in the Puranas, whereby a great fire is lit in an open field, and upon chanting of the right verses out of the right books by the right people, all the snakes in the world, against their will, will come flying to the place of the sacrifice and drop on their own into the fire. And the performer of the ceremony can watch the serpents burn to their deaths.

This gladdens the hatred-ridden heart of Janamejaya, and he passes an order that immediate preparations must begin to ensure that the snake sacrifice would happen without delay or stoppage.

And so a great platform is erected in a field, with suitable positions laid out for Brahmins, priests and other noblemen of court. A special place is set aside for Janamejaya himself. Among the sages is Uttanka, the man who has his own reasons for hating Takshaka.

But just as the sacrifice is about to begin in earnest, an incident of foreboding (according to Janamejaya) occurs. An architect of great skill, well-versed in the knowledge of laying foundations, a *Suta* by caste, examines the soil on which the sacrificial platform is being erected, and makes the following proclamation:

‘The earth here is loose and crumbling; and the time in which we’re instructed by the king to raise this structure is, alas, not enough to allow the foundation to set. These factors indicate to me that the ceremony will not be completed, and it is the arrival of a certain Brahmin that will disrupt the flow of intended events.’

And like all fortune tellers of doom, this one too is disbelieved, ridiculed. Janamejaya places an order to his gatekeepers to drive the man out, and to not admit anyone into the field without first taking his permission.

Thus the snake sacrifice began on time with all the priests and the king in attendance. As the verses slid off the sages’ tongues, snakes came flying through the bright skies and immolated themselves in the fire built for the purpose. The massacre of the serpents had begun.

The Arrival of Astika

Baalo vaakyam sathavira iva parabhaashate
Naayam baalah sathaviro ayam mato me
(51: 1)

This boy speaks like a wise old man. He must be a sage in guise of a child.

WITH THOUSANDS OF SNAKES dying in the sacrificial fire every passing hour, Takshaka, the king of the Nagas, and the prime target of Janamejaya's ire, takes refuge in Indra's palace. Vasuki, meanwhile, looks around despondently at the dwindling numbers of his brothers, and feeling his own skin bristle and itch with the need to fly into the fire, he calls upon his sister Jaratkaru and begs her to send Astika to Hastinapur.

Jaratkaru summons Astika, just a boy at this time, and tells him that the time has arrived when he must fulfil the purpose of his birth. Astika asks his mother the details of this, and is told the entire story that appears earlier in this book.

Thus, armed with the knowledge of who he is and what he must do, Astika goes to Hastinapur and enters the sacrificial compound. The gatekeepers allow him in because he's just a boy. Reaching the platform on which Janamejaya is sitting, Astika beholds the splendour and size of the ceremony and sings many words in its praise.

'Soma and Varuna and Prajapati have all performed sacrifices in the Prayaga, Your Majesty,' he says, 'but none of them match the grandeur of this one. Sakra is said to have performed a hundred great sacrifices in his time, but this snake sacrifice, O King, is equivalent to a thousand of his events. Not Ajamida, the son of Dasaratha, not even Yudhishtir, the famed king of Hastinapur, your ancestor, had assembled a gathering of sages so knowledgeable and great as this, O Janamejaya. My eyes are forever blessed for having been fortunate enough to witness this great occasion.'

Pleased with such words, Janamejaya says to his priests, 'He is just a boy, this well-spoken one, but he exudes the wisdom of a person much older. Perhaps it is right that I should offer him a boon?'

At this the chief priest of the ceremony, rather displeased, says, 'You Majesty, Takshaka has not yet been consigned to flames, and until that happens, your gaze must not waver.'

'Where is Takshaka?' says Janamejaya at once. 'Do everything you must to bring him here, O Sage. He is my sworn enemy, and I cannot rest until he breathes his last.'

Spurred by the king, the priests renew their efforts in chanting the right verses, and Indra, with Takshaka hidden in his chariot, is brought out to the compound. Seeing them and his anger roused further, Janamejaya commands his sages: 'If Indra deems it fit to protect Takshaka, then make it so that he is brought into the fire as well, O Sages. Let there be no mercy today for anyone, not even for the king of gods himself.'

Hearing these words, Indra hurls Takshaka off his chariot and flees.

Takshaka remains suspended in mid-air without actually falling into the fire. At this moment, the Brahmin boy Astika asks of Janamejaya for a boon that the snake sacrifice must come to an end, and that no more snakes should be burnt at the altar.

Takshaka remains suspended in mid-air because Astika, summoning all his powers, says, 'Stay! Stay! Stay!' three times, to counteract the potency of all the verses that are pulling him down toward the fire.

Janamejaya repeatedly asks Astika to choose some other boon, like gold or cows or land, but Astika stands his ground and wishes for the end to the sacrifice. Reluctantly, Janamejaya grants the young Brahmin his wish, and thus the race of the Nagas was saved from annihilation.

So ends the Astika sub-parva of the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata. It is said that whoever takes the name of Astika when faced with a snake will be saved from its clutches, and whoever reads this holy history of Astika will have all fear of snakes removed from his mind.

The Seed of Uparichara

Saa tu satyavatee naama matsyaghaatya abhisamshrayaat
Aaseena matsya gandhaiva kam chith kaalam shuchismita
(57: 55)

*That girl, known as Satyavati, of agreeable smiles, owing to contact with
fishermen, smelled of fishes for a while.*

THE SAGES OF NAIMISHA now ask Sauti to tell them all that Vaisampayana, Vyasa's disciple, told Janamejaya during the snake-sacrifice. Among other things, this includes the Mahabharata.

Vaisampayana begins the story in Chedi, with the just and virtuous king Uparichara, who was on such friendly terms with Indra that he would ride the God's chariot through the skies. One day, when he is in the midst of one such trip, he spots a river by name Suktimati, trapped on all four sides by a mountain range called Kolahala. Uparichara frees the river by striking the mountain with his foot and boring a hole in its side. As a gesture of gratitude, Suktimati gives Uparichara two of her children: a son who remains nameless and becomes a general in Uparichara's army, and a daughter named Girika who becomes the king's wife.

A few days later, after Girika's period of the month is past and the time has come for their union, Uparichara's ancestors appear before him and command him to slay deer. Thinking that disobeying his Pitris would have undesirable consequences, Uparichara sets out into the forest.

But thoughts of Girika do not leave him. At one particularly arresting meadow filled with nature's beauty, desire conquers him, and his seed leaves his body. Since the seed of great men is not to be wasted, he gives it to a nearby hawk with instructions to carry it back to the capital where his wife resides.

On the way, the hawk gets into a fight with another hawk, and amid the altercation the seed of Uparichara drops into the Yamuna.

Now living in the Yamuna is an apsara who is serving a curse to live in the body of a fish. This apsara swallows the seed, and ten months later, gives birth to a boy and a girl. This act returns her to her original form, after which she makes her way back to heaven.

The fishermen who lived on the riverbank take the two children to the king. The male child is taken into Uparichara's court, and in time grows up to become a famed ruler of the Matsya kingdom.

However, we're more concerned with the girl, because she would be fostered in the fishing settlement as the daughter of the chief, and in time she would become the sweet-smelling Satyawati, whose charms would seduce the then king of Hastinapur, Shantanu. Her sons, Chitrangada and Vichitraveerya, would each rule Hastinapur in turn, the latter after the death of the former, and when the city is left without a king after Vichitraveerya's death, it is her son by a Brahmin, Vyasa, who fathers the three boys – Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura – who would form the cornerstones of the Mahabharata story.

More on Satyawati in a moment.

The Birth of Vyasa

Evam dwaipaayano jagnye satyavatyaam paraasharaat
Dweepe nayastaha sa yad baalasa tasmaad dwaipayano abhavata
(57: 71)

In this way a son was born to Satyavati and Parashara. Since he was born on an island, the boy was named Dwaipayana.

THE STORY OF VYASA'S birth appears in many mainstream retellings of the epic. Let's recount it here.

Satyavati, the daughter of Uparichara, whom we met in the previous chapter, becomes famous in her fullness of youth for the sweet fragrance that her body exudes. Because she could be smelled from as far away as a yojana (about thirteen kilometres), she is sometimes called Yojanagandhi as well.

But she was not always thus. When she was a young girl plying her father's boat across the Yamuna to ferry passengers to and fro, she smelled of rotting fish and was called Matsyagandhi instead. Her life changes, though, when she meets the wandering sage, Parashara.

When Parashara first lays eyes on Satyavati on a sunny morning aboard the canoe, he finds himself smitten by desire. He approaches her even as the boat leaves the shore of the Yamuna and makes for deep waters, and says, 'O Beauteous One, please accept my embraces.'

Satyavati's first response is to demur, citing the number of people that are watching them in broad daylight from the riverbank. 'There are many eyes fastened upon us at this moment, O Sage,' she tells him. 'How, then, shall I grant you your wish?'

Parashara raises his arms in reply, his face set in a grim expression. In no time at all a dense fog descends upon the Yamuna and cloaks them. 'Now no one can see us, fair maiden,' says the sage. 'Not even the gods.'

He begins to advance, but Satyavati holds up the oar in meek protest. ‘But O Sage, I am but a virgin, and a daughter of a chief. If I am to lose my virginity, how will I be able to return home? How will my father’s reputation among his men suffer?’

‘It need not suffer at all, my girl,’ says Parashara. ‘I shall see to it that your virginity is restored after our union.’

‘You are kind beyond words,’ replies Satyavati. ‘I have indeed dreamed of knowing the love of a man such as you. But – my body –’

‘Not even Menaka has a body as beautiful as yours,’ Parashara says in a murmur, advancing one more step.

‘It smells of foul things.’ Satyavati looks at the sage, the oar still held firmly in place. ‘Can you make it so that instead of such a rotten stench, my body emanates a pleasant fragrance?’

‘Indeed, I can,’ says Parashara. ‘Will that be all?’

A smiling Satyavati pushes away the oar. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘That will be all.’

The union of Parashara and Satyavati gives rise to a son who is born on a fog-covered island in the Yamuna. The sage’s powers ensure that the boy grows in Satyavati’s womb in a matter of a day, and once he exits her body, he grows to the size of a walking boy in a few hours. They call him Dwaipayana (the island-born), and in later years he embarks upon a massive project of arranging the Vedas into their current form. For this he is called Veda Vyasa (the compiler of the Vedas), or simply, Vyasa.

Parashara takes Dwaipayana with him when he leaves the island. Dwaipayana promises Satyavati that he will come to her aid whenever she thinks of him.

Birth Details

Bharadwaajasya cha sakannam daronyam shukram avardhata
Maharshera ugratapasasa tasmaad darono vayajaayat
(57: 89)

The seed of Maharshi Bharadwaja was developed inside a pot in safety, and out of this was born Drona.

IN THIS CHAPTER, we will look at the birth details of some of the main characters of the Mahabharata. Some of this information will return later in the volume in the form of full-blown stories, and some of it will remain important only for trivia-seekers, but having it all in one place is useful for further reference.

Please note that I'm using some discretion in deciding which names to include and which to leave out. If I manage to omit one of your favourite characters, I apologize in advance.

- Bhishma was born in the womb of Ganga, sired by king Shantanu of Hastinapur.
- Vidura, Dhritarashtra and Pandu are fathered by Dwaipayana. The latter two are given birth by Ambalika and Ambika respectively, whereas the first is mothered by an unnamed maid. Vidura is also the incarnation of Yama, come to Earth to serve a curse laid on him by Sage Mandavya.
- Krishna, the incarnation of Vishnu, is born of Devaki through Vasudeva.
- Satyaki and Kritavarma, obedient to Krishna in all matters, had their births from Satyaka and Hridika.
- Drona (the 'pot-born') springs from the seed of Bharadwaja, which is stored and developed in a pot.
- The seed of Sage Gautama, fallen upon a clump of reeds, gives rise to the twins Kripa and Kripa. Kripa becomes Drona's wife, and together they have a son named Ashwatthama.

- Dhrishtadyumna and Krishnaa (later called Draupadi) are born of the sacrificial fire in the kingdom of Panchala, to King Drupada.
- Of King Suvala, who rules over the rocky kingdom of Gandhara, are born Shakuni and Gandhari.
- Kunti and Pandu give birth to the Pandavas, with the help of the gods. Yudhishtir is the son of Yama. Bhimasena (also called Vrikodara, he whose stomach resembles that of a wolf) is born of the wind god, Marut. Arjuna is the son of Indra, whereas Nakula and Sahadeva are sired by the Ashwin twins.
- Dhritarashtra fathers a hundred sons through Gandhari, and a separate son called Yuyutsu of a vaishya woman. Gandhari and Dhritarashtra also have a daughter named Dussala.
- Of the hundred Kauravas, eleven – Duhshasana, Dushaha, Durmarshana, Vikarna, Chitrasena, Vivinsati, Jaya, Satyawata, Purumitra, and Yuyutsu – are Maharathas.
- Abhimanyu is born of Subhadra, the wife of Arjuna and the sister of Krishna and Balarama.
- Each of the Pandavas father a son through Draupadi: Prativindhya (Yudhishtir), Sutasoma (Bhima), Shrutakirti (Arjuna), Satanika (Nakula) and Srutasena (Sahadeva).
- Bhima, through his wife Hidimba, fathers a boy named Ghatotkacha. In the Mahabharata war, Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha's deaths serve as major turning points.
- Drupada also has a daughter named Sikhandini who later gets transformed into a male child by name Shikhandi. Shikhandi is considered to be Amba reborn with the sole purpose of killing Bhishma.

The Rise of Evil

Tam bhuvaha shodhanaayendra uvaacha purushottamam
Amshenaava tarasveti tathetya aaha cha tam hareehi
(58: 51)

*To him who is the prime mover of all creation (Vishnu), Indra said, 'Be incarnate',
and Hari replied, 'It shall be so.'*

JANAMEJAYA ASKS VAISAMPAYANA towards the end of the Adivansavatarana Parva (a sub-section of the Adi Parva) why there was a sudden explosion of evil on the Earth during the Krita yuga which led to the great cleansing in the form of the Kurukshetra war.

Vaisampayana gives two complementary reasons for this: one, the great thirst of Parashurama for Kshatriya blood. 'The son of Jamadagni wiped out the race of Kshatriyas from the Earth twenty one times, O king,' says the sage. 'But each time he killed all the men, the women would seek out Brahmins to father sons that would continue their line.'

This gave rise to a new generation of Kshatriyas who would establish virtue on Earth. And it is said in the Krita yuga, no Brahmin ever taught for money, no man ever milked his kine while they suckled their calves, and no merchant ever sold his wares by false scales. There was an overabundance of virtue in the world; and Parashurama, pleased by his actions, hung up his axe.

The second reason for the rise of evil is that at this time, the sons of Diti, the Daityas (also called the Asuras), began to be born in the land of men into Kshatriya families. After having lost battles in the hands of the Devas, the Asuras looked down at the virtuous Earth and saw that it is ripe for the picking. Over the period of the Krita yuga, then, thousands upon thousands of Asuras descended to Earth and polluted it with their vile acts.

Indeed, an abundance of virtue is necessary for sin to thrive, and an abundance of sin is necessary for the return of virtue.

The Earth (Bhoomi), thus oppressed by the weight of all this insolence, goes to Brahma for a solution. The Creator, having divined the purpose of Bhoomi's visit, tells her that the time has come for a large number of gods to take birth in the land of men. 'Do not fret, O Mother of all human beings,' he tells Bhoomi, 'for this state of sin will not continue for much longer.'

After Bhoomi leaves, satisfied, Brahma then calls a council of the gods and proposes that a number of them shall go down to Earth and see to it that order is once again restored. Indra agrees, and asks Vishnu to lead them in this mission, and Vishnu replies, 'It will be so.'

With this proclamation of Vishnu ends the Adivansavatarana Parva of the Mahabharata.

The Thirty Three Gods

Deva daanava sanghaanaam gandharvaapsarasaam tathaa
Maanavaanaam cha sarvershaa tatha yaksharaakshasaam
Sharotum ichhaami tattvena sambhavam krutnam aaditaha
Paraaninam chaiva sarveshaam sarvashaha sarvavida dhayasi
(59: 7, 8)

I desire to hear from the beginning about the births of the Devas, the Danavas, the Gandharvas, the Apsaras, the humans, the Yakshas and the Rakshasas. Please tell me all about how these creatures came into being.

BRAHMA HAS SIX SPIRITUAL sons: Marichi, Atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha and Kratu. The son of Marichi is Kashyapa, the father of the gods by Aditi and of the Asuras by Diti.

Aditi and Diti are the daughters of Daksha Prajapati, the great sage who is said to have taken birth from the right toe of Brahma.

Aditi is the mother to twelve Adityas: Dhatri, Mitra, Aryaman, Sakra, Varuna, Ansa, Vaga, Vivaswat, Usha, Savitri, Tvashtri, and Vishnu. Vishnu is the youngest of the lot but is considered the most important.

Sthanu, who also takes birth at the hatching of the cosmic egg, has eleven sons, called the eleven Rudras: Mrigavadhya, Sarpa, Niriti, Ajaikapati, Ahirvadana, Pinaki, Dahana, Iswara, Kapali, Sthanu and Bharga.

Another son of Brahma, Manu, has a son called Prajapati who gives rise to the eight Vasus: Dhara, Dhruva, Soma, Aha, Anila, Anala, Pratyusha and Prabhasa.

The twelve Adityas, the eleven Rudras and the eight Vasus together number thirty one. With the addition of the Ashwin twins to the number we get the thirty three gods of the Vedic pantheon.

One must note that the names and composition of the thirty three bear slight differences depending on the source. Even the names of the eleven Rudras are different in the various Puranas. Here, I'm confining myself only to the Mahabharata.

A detailed list of all the children and grandchildren of the various sons of Brahma and the daughters of Daksha is given at the beginning of the Sambhava Parva. I'm not including it here because it is a bit tedious to make a list of names that we've never heard and will probably forget at the first available opportunity.

Therefore I have only included names of people who are worth knowing in the context of the epic.

The other daughters of Daksha whose sons play an important role in the story are Kadru and Vinata. Vinata is mother to Aruna and Garuda, both of whom we have met earlier in this volume. In addition to these, she has two other sons: Tarkhya and Arishtanemi. We have also read the stories of characters such as Sesha, Vasuki and Takshaka, who are among Kadru's many sons.

Varchas, the son of Soma

Yaha suvarcheti vikhyaataha somaputraha parataapavaan
Abhimanyur bruhat keertir arjunasya suto abhavata
(61: 86)

And the valiant Varchas, son of Soma, took the form of Abhimanyu of dauntless deeds, the son of Arjuna.

DURING THE COUNCIL OF the celestials where it was decided that Vishnu would be incarnate on Earth as Krishna, a proposal is made to Soma, the moon god, that his son, Varchas, should also be sent to the land of men to combat evil. To which Soma replies, ‘O Celestials, my son is most dear to me. I cannot part with him for the length of time that is being proposed here. Listen, instead, to my suggestion:

‘Let my Varchas be parted from me for a mere sixteen years. He will make an appearance toward the very end of the long process over which all the forces of evil must be assembled before they’re destroyed. Both Nara and Narayana (Arjuna and Krishna) will fight on the side of the good in this great battle, but there will come to pass one encounter in which neither Nara nor Narayana take any part. And my son will step into this void and force all his enemies to retreat.

‘All of your portions will continue to fight to the best of your abilities, but Varchas will break a complex formation called the chakravyuha, and he shall cause a full fourth of the hostile force to be eliminated on this single day. He will pay for his valour with his life, and by the time the sun sets on this fateful event, he shall leave the land of men and return to me.

‘He will also beget one heroic son in his line, who shall continue the almost extinct Bharata race. So after the great cleansing is finished, he will ensure that the blood of the celestials will be present in the monarch that will follow, who will be entrusted with the enormous task of bringing the dead and fallow Aryavarta back to life.’

To this other celestials agree, and Varchas appears in the Mahabharata as Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna. On the thirteenth day, with his father and Krishna away fighting another section of the Kaurava army, the young prince assumes the responsibility of breaking open Drona's complex wheel formation of soldiers, and kills three Akshauhinis of the Kauravas single-handedly. He fights with such ferocity that Drona is forced to resort to unlawful means to kill the boy, and these incidents turn the battle on its head, galvanising the Pandava forces into defeating the Kauravas.

Dushyanta and Shakuntala

Gandharvena cha maam bheeru vivaahenaihi sundari
Vivahaanaam hi rambhoru gaandharvaha shareshtha uchyate
(67: 4)

*Wed me by the Gandharva code, O beautiful one. Out of all forms of marriage, the
Gandharva is considered the best.*

WHEN ASKED BY JANAMEJAYA to recite the origin of the Kuru race,
Vaisampayana tells him the story of Dushyanta, the first of the Pauravas.

The king was great and strong in all ways, and was praised by his subjects as an
Indra on Earth. One day, when he was on a hunting expedition, he comes upon the
hermitage of Kanva, he of the virtuous line of Kashyapa. Intending to pay his respects
to the sage, Dushyanta ventures into the hermitage and seeks the central courtyard,
where he meets a young maiden whose beauty strikes him with desire.

‘I am the daughter of Sage Kanva, O King,’ she tells him. ‘They call me
Shakuntala, after the birds of the forest.’

‘An ascetic of such virtue as Sage Kanva would not let his seed slip like us mere
mortals, fair maiden,’ replies Dushyanta. ‘How is it that he has come to sire you? I
am certain the story of your birth is not a normal one. Please narrate it to me so that
my curiosity is sated.’

Shakuntala says, ‘You are right, Your Highness. I am not one born of the sage’s
seed. Once or twice in the past, I have overheard him tell my story to visitors here in
this hermitage, so I shall tell you what I know.’

The Seduction of Vishwamitra

(Shakuntala says)

A long time ago, the sage Vishwamitra, who we now know as a Rajarshi, was
engaged in austerities so horrific that they scared Indra, the king of the gods. He sent
the first of the celestial apsaras, Menaka, to distract him from his world of penance

into a life of a mortal, ever consumed by desires of the flesh. Armed with the wiles of the wind god Marut, Menaka arrived at Vishwamitra's house and lured him with the sweetness of her voice, the gentle curves of her body, and the affection in her gestures.

The sage and the apsara spent a long time in each other's company, and a child was born of that union. After Menaka became pregnant, she went to the bank of the river Malini coursing along a valley amid the mountains of Himavat. And there, after giving birth to a baby girl, she left the child close to the hermitage of Sage Kanva, and returned to her duties in Indra's court.

It is here, surrounded by birds (Shakuntas), that my father Kanva found me. And indeed, one becomes a true father not just by making a new being of one's body, but by also offering protection to a being's life, and by giving it food. My father might not have done the first, but he has done the second and the third with faultless determination all these years.

Dushyanta's Proposal

Hearing the story of her birth, Dushyanta is impressed by the noble birth of Shakuntala. Not only has she been reared in the ascetic environs of Kanva's hermitage, but she had also been fathered by a man who was equal parts king and sage, through Menaka, one of the most desirable women the world has ever known.

Such a woman ought to become my queen, thinks Dushyanta, and says, 'O maiden of slender waist, I wish to make you my wife, my life's companion. Please let us be wed to each other by the Gandharva code of marriage, which is considered to be the foremost of all forms by which a man might take a wife.'

'Perhaps we should wait until my father returns,' says Shakuntala. 'He will then bestow me unto you.'

At this juncture, Dushyanta tells Shakuntala of the eight forms of marriage. We will see what they are in the next chapter.

The Eight Forms of Marriage

Ashtaava evam samaasena vivaahaa dharmataha samrutaaha
Baraahamo daivasa tathaivaarshaha paraajapatyasa tathaasuraha
Gaandharvo raakshasasha chaiva paisachasha chaashtamaha samrutaha
Tesdaam dharmaanaa yathaapoorvam manuhu savaayambhuvo abaraveet
(67: 8, 9)

Eight forms of marriage exist: Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa and Paisacha. Manu, the son of the Creator, has spoken of the appropriateness of these forms to people according to their order.

THE FIRST FORM, the Brahma, is when the father of the bride chooses a groom fit for his daughter, and invites him to his house. He then gives his daughter, adorned with ornaments and dresses, to the boy along with some dakshina in the form of gifts. This is in keeping with the theory that a daughter is akin to wealth that has to be guarded and kept safe, so this form of marriage is often considered the most pious.

The second form, the Daiva, is when the father of a bride, after having waited in vain for proposals to arrive for his daughter, gifts her to a suitable priest. Here the bride's father makes the request, and if it is agreeable to the Brahmin whom the question is asked, a ceremony is arranged during which the man accepts the woman as wife.

The Arsha form of marriage is when the father of a bride gives his daughter away to a sage who lives an austere form of life. Here the dakshina is limited: all that the groom gets from the bride's family is a cow and a bull.

In the Prajapatya form, the focus is on progeny. During the wedding ceremony, the bride's father takes a promise from the groom that he will never become a Sanyasi. In return the bride promises her husband that she will accompany him in both the other phases of his life: the grihastya and the vanaprastha.

The Gandharva style is when the man and the woman, having confessed their feelings for each other, get married without any witnesses besides the elements such

as air, water and fire. This form also has received sanction from the scriptures, and does not require any third person to be present apart from the couple.

The Rakshasa form of marriage occurs when the bride is carried away by force. Sometimes, when this abduction happens during the groom-choosing ceremony, the abductor throws an open challenge to the other suitors to stop him from carrying the girl away.

The Paishacha is a variant of the Rakshasa form, whereby an unconscious or sleeping girl is carried away.

Of all these, to the modern reader, the last two are likely to sound downright repulsive. What could justify treating a woman in that manner? The Prajapatya form is the one that is predominantly practiced in arranged Hindu marriages in India, where the groom makes a show of becoming a Sanyasi and the father of the bride convinces him that it's a bad idea. A variant of the Gandharva form is favoured by couples in forbidden love, though in most cases other witnesses (friends, registrar, temple priest) *are* present.

In any case, after telling Shakuntala about the eight forms, Dushyanta tells her that for kings, the Gandharva and Rakshasa forms are recommended. 'Therefore, O Shakuntala, you may become my wife according to the practice favoured by the Gandharvas.'

The Boons of Shakuntala

Paratignya tu duhsante paratiyaate shakuntalaa
Garbham sushaava vaamoroo kumaaram amitoujasam
(68: 1)

After Dushyanta left Shakuntala with his promises, she gave birth to a boy of limitless energy.

SWAYED BY THIS PERSUASIVE line of argument employed by Dushyanta, Shakuntala agrees to marry the king. After they have consummated their union, Dushyanta takes leave of his new wife, assuring her that he would send for her a royal retinue that would take her back to the palace. Before the wedding ceremony commences, however, Shakuntala asks Dushyanta for a boon that their child – if a son – would grow up to be Dushyanta's heir. And the king grants it to her.

Now, Kanva, on returning to the hermitage, divines what had happened in his absence, and is pleased that his daughter has found a worthy husband. He calls the frightened Shakuntala to his side and says, 'My dear, you have chosen a great king as your spouse. Ask me for a boon on this happy occasion and I shall give it to you.'

'Let it be, then, Father,' replies Shakuntala, 'that the Paurava line of monarchs will ever be virtuous and never deprived of their thrones.'

But by far the most precious of Shakuntala's blessings is the birth of Sarvadamana, her son, named so because the sages of the hermitage wished him to be the tamer of all evil beings. At the age of three, the boy displays the strength and willingness to slay lions, and by the time he is six years old, he is bending full-grown trees of the forest to the strength of his arms.

Dushyanta, meanwhile, has not returned in all this time, nor is there any sign of the entourage he promised to send. Therefore, after the child's sixth birthday, Kanva deems it the right time to introduce the heir-apparent to the king. He calls upon his disciples and instructs them to take Shakuntala to Dushyanta's court, so that she may

assume her position as his queen, and Sarvadamana may be declared the next king in the Paurava dynasty.

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At Dushyanta's Palace

So atha sharootvaiva tada vaakyam tasyaa raajaa samaranna api
Abraveen na samaraameeti kasya tavam drushta taapasi
Dharmakaamaartha sambandham na samaraami tavaya saha
(68: 18)

Hearing these words, the king, even though he remembered, said, 'I do not remember anything, you wicked women in the garb of an ascetic! In the name of dharma, kaama and artha, I do not recall anything in connection with you.'

WHEN SHAKUNTALA ARRIVES at Dushyanta's court with the boy Sarvadamana in tow, the king pretends like he does not know her. He insults her with harsh words, and accuses her of making false allegations. Shakuntala too gets angry, tells him that her birth (of Menaka the celestial dancer) had been much higher than his, and that it is his good fortune that she agreed to have a child by him.

After Shakuntala leaves, a voice appears in the king's court, loud enough for everyone to hear. 'This woman speaks the truth, O King, and the son she brought with you is yours. He will bring you much honour and name in his time, and he will be one of the foremost kings of the Paurava line, if only you give him the acknowledgement and love that he deserves. The maiden, too, will be a fitting queen, so Dushyanta, do what is right and invite them to become part of your family.'

Once the voice has finished speaking, Dushyanta addresses his courtiers and advisors, assembled in the court: 'I knew right from the beginning who the maiden was, but if I had been too eager in accepting her, I know that tongues would have wagged here and around the kingdom. So I played this little game to prove the truth of Shakuntala's story.'

Having said this, he commands a retinue to be sent after the departing mother and child, so that they might be brought back with full honours. Once Shakuntala returns, Dushyanta apologizes to her for his rash behaviour, and explains the reasons for it. The king then bestows the name of Bharata to Sarvadamana, and formally installs him as his heir-apparent.

And in his time, Bharata became the most gloried of all the Paurava kings, so much so that the line after him would be called the Bharata race.

This is the Dushyanta-Shakuntala story told in the Mahabharata. But another version of it, told later by Kalidasa in his play, *Abhignana Shakuntalam* (*The Recognition of Shakuntala*), has become more popular among modern readers. In this, a ring plays an important part. Dushyanta, before leaving the hermitage of Kanva, gives Shakuntala a ring bearing his seal that will serve as proof in court that she is indeed the king's wife. And he leaves her with full intentions of sending back a royal entourage to bring her to the palace.

However, a curse placed by Sage Durvasa on Shakuntala, who is enraged because of the girl's lovelorn preoccupation at the hermitage during one of his visits, ensures that Dushyanta loses memory of all that happened. So the promised retinue never arrives.

As in the Mahabharata version, Shakuntala journeys to the court with her child, but on her way, she loses her ring in the river, and has to suffer the insults of Dushyanta in silence.

A queer coincidence supplies the climax of this story. The ring lost by Shakuntala in the river is swallowed by a fish, which is caught by a fisherman who sells it to the royal kitchen. It ends up on the plate of Dushyanta, who, in the course of his dinner, finds the ring and remembers everything. That is when he sends for Shakuntala again, and installs Bharata as the heir-apparent.

There is more drama in Kalidasa's version. It explains the strange six-year silence of Dushyanta a bit better. My personal preference, though, is for the Mahabharata version because it portrays Shakuntala as a strong and fierce woman, not afraid to look Dushyanta in the eye and argue with him in his own court. Kalidasa's Shakuntala comes across as a bit too demure, passive, desperate for Dushyanta's approval, a delicate thing that will break at the merest touch.

However, I concede that this is a matter of taste. You might have equally sound reasons for preferring the Kalidasa story. To each one's own.

Puru

Tavayaa daayaadavaana asmi tavam me vanshakaraha sutaha
Pauravo vamsha iti te khayatim loke gamisyati
(70: 45)

O Son, you're my true heir, and it is by you that my race will extend itself. The world shall come to know our dynasty by the name of Paurava.

THE PAURAVA LINE is named after Puru, the youngest son of King Yayati by his second queen, Sharmishtha.

Yayati is said to have stricken by a disease owing to a curse that destroyed his natural beauty. Since the curse allowed itself to be transferred to any one of his willing sons, thereby freeing him, the king asks each of his five sons whether they would accept the disease from him. The four elder sons say no. Puru agrees.

As reward, Yayati gives him the kingdom to rule, while he himself retires to a life enjoyment in the company of his two wives. In the gardens of Chitraratha, the Gandharva king, he also takes as a lover the apsara Viswachi.

However, after many years of this, the king finds that his appetites are still unsatisfied. He realizes then that like sacrificial butter poured into the fire, indulgence of desire only further flames it. Even if one enjoyed all the wealth, comforts and women of the world, one may not yet find contentment. The whole universe is not enough for the desires of one man. The only desirable state, therefore, he reflects, is one in which a man fears nothing, is feared by nothing, wishes for nothing, and injures nothing. Attaining such a state brings a man closer to the purity of Brahma, the divine being.

Having come to this conclusion, he goes back to Puru and accepts the disease back from him. He installs the young king on the throne formally, accompanied by all official ceremonies, and tells him, 'Son, you're my true heir. It is in your name that our race will be continued. In the world of the future, all of us will be known as Pauravas.'

Then Yayati, with his two wives, went to the mountain of Bhrigu so that he may attempt to reach the state of purity. And after gaining the ascetic merit that was due him, when his time came, he succumbed to the passage of time.

This story holds up a mirror to the most basic state of the human mind: that of desire. At every moment in our lives, we desire something or the other. Some of these desires pass fleetingly, whereas others consume us to the point that we dedicate our whole lives to them. But small or big, it bears noting that once a desire is fulfilled, another one takes its place, and asks us to run a little faster. The only freedom from this cycle is to aspire to reach a state in which we desire nothing. While this is a logical contradiction in terms ('what I desire is desiring nothing') and impossible to achieve in totality, I think the essence of the message is that we could all perhaps be a bit more vigilant about the desires that drive us, and give careful thought to the question of which ones deserve our attention and which, like the sacrificial fire that is fed too much butter, might just burn us down if chased with abandon.

Kacha and Devayani

Tatra devaa nijaghnur yaana daanavaana yudhi sangataan
Taana punarjeevayaam aasa kaavyo vidyaa balaashrayaat
Tatasa te punaruthyaaya yodhayaam chakrire suraana
(71: 7)

Those Danavas killed by Devas in battle were revived, aided by the strength of Kavya's (Shukracharya's) knowledge. Those Asuras, having returned, then killed many celestials.

JANAMEJAYA ASKS VAISAMPAYANA at this stage to narrate the story of how Yayati obtained for himself the unattainable daughter of Shukracharya as wife. The sage begins this story right at the beginning, which concerns the age-old battle of the Devas and the Asuras, and the conflict between the two preceptors on either side: Brihaspati on the side of the gods, Shukracharya on the side of the Asuras.

Little is known of Devayani's birth, and even less is known of her mother. She is introduced as the young daughter of Shukracharya when Kacha, the son of Brihaspati, preceptor of the Gods, arrives at the hermitage. The secret aim behind Kacha's arrival is the procuring of the Sanjeevini Mantra from Shukracharya, which returns life to a corpse. This incantation has been hurting the Gods in the eternal battle with the Asuras, and they decide that unless they also have the knowledge of the Sanjeevini, the Asuras would eventually win.

Kacha, though, does not expose his true aim. He joins his hands in front of Shukracharya and says, 'I come here to be your disciple, O Preceptor. I shall serve you and observe the vow of celibacy so that I may acquire some of your inner calm.'

Shukracharya accepts the young man. 'When I accept you, Kacha, it is as though I am paying my respects to Venerable Brihaspati.'

During this time, Devayani has just entered her mature years as a woman, and as soon as she catches sight of Kacha, she falls in love with him.

Attacks on Kacha

For a few months, Kacha lives with Shukracharya as a disciple. Shukra, on his part, keeps the Sanjeevini to himself, and Kacha does not ask for it. However, the Asuras get more and more restless with each passing day, for they think: 'What could the son of Brihaspati be learning from our teacher? What if he learns of the Sanjeevini?'

They therefore hatch a plan to kill Kacha, and one day, when he is out herding the sage's cows, they capture him, cut his body into pieces and feed them to jackals and vultures. That night, the cows return to the hermitage without their keeper, and Devayani implores her father to fear the worst and call for the Sanjeevini.

'You must not love an enemy with such a deep heart, Devayani,' cautions Shukracharya, but unable to say no to his daughter, recalls Kacha, who returns in a few hours, safe and whole.

On another occasion the Asuras kill Kacha, grind his body into powder, and dissolve it in the sea. Again Devayani begs Shukracharya to use the Sanjeevini, and again the sage revives his disciple.

The Third Attack

The Asuras, tired of this game, now kill Kacha and burn his body down to cinder. They dissolve the ashes into Shukra's goblet of wine so that the sage will not be able to resurrect him. When Kacha again does not return at the expected time, Devayani once again falls to her knees in front of her father.

Shukracharya, with his divine sight, realizes what has happened, and tells his daughter, 'The Asuras have killed Kacha and they have dissolved his ashes in my wine, child. His remains are now inside me. If I revive him, I am afraid that you will have to lose your father.'

'No!' says Devayani. 'I cannot bear to lose either of you, Father.'

'Forget him, Devayani,' says Shukracharya. 'You are blessed with great beauty. King after king shall come for your hand. Do not obsess over the son of our sworn enemy.'

'Then you must have told me this on the day you took him in, Father,' says Devayani with tears in her eyes. 'You did not raise a finger when we took walks together, when dear Kacha made garlands for my hair. You just smiled when we roamed these meadows hand in hand. And now you tell me that I must forget!'

Shukracharya sighs. He combs his white beard and thinks for a while. 'There may yet be a way out of this maze,' he says. 'But it will weaken the Asuras and strengthen the Gods.'

'Do whatever you can, Father, for my sake, for otherwise you shall have your Asuras, but you shall lose me.'

Shukracharya lets out a long breath. Then he closes his eyes to invoke the Sanjeevini. He feels a stirring deep within his stomach, and a low voice emerges from inside him, as though from deep inside a cave. 'O Venerable One,' says Kacha, 'I think that I am inside your stomach.'

'You are,' says Shukracharya. 'And you shall come out of me by ripping open my innards.'

'But sir, that will put you to death. How can a disciple knowingly slay his teacher?'

'I shall teach you the mantra of Sanjeevini,' says Shukracharya. 'After you have torn open my body and stepped out, please use it on me and restore me to life.'

'I shall do that.'

And so Shukracharya falls dead in front of Devayani, even as Kacha comes out. Then, using the incantation, the disciple revives the teacher. While Devayani prostrates in gratitude before her father, there appears on the face of the old man a grave, deep frown. For he knows that in giving in to his daughter's wishes, he has betrayed the great secret of his race. Now, the battle between the Asuras and the Gods will be an even one.

Proposal and Rejection

Kacha, with his mission accomplished, makes ready to leave for heaven. Shukracharya blesses him with all success. Devayani approaches him on the eve of his departure and confesses her love for him. But Kacha says, 'My lady, I have ever seen you as a playmate, as a dear friend, yes, but not as a woman to serve my base desires nor as a wife. Your father has given me birth three times over, which means that I must look upon you as a sister. It would be wrong of me, Devayani, to accept your hand in marriage.'

Pushed to anger, Devayani curses Kacha that he shall never be able to use the Sanjeevini to save himself. With folded hands Kacha accepts the rebuke. 'I have already been revived three times, my lady. I dare say I have used up my fair share of

the incantation. I shall lay the mantra at my father Brihaspati's feet. Let him use it as he wishes.'

Yayati and Devayani (and Sharmishtha)

Satuvato duhitaa na tavam bhadre na parati gruhanataha
Astotuhu satuya maanasya duhitaa devayaanya asi
Vrushaparvaiva tada veda shakro raajaa cha naahushaha
(73: 35)

(Shukracharya says) You are no daughter of one who asks for alms and accepts gifts, Devayani. Your father adores none, but is one adored by all. Vrishparva knows this, so does Indra, and also the son of Nahusha (Yayati).

A SHORT TIME AFTER Kacha's leaving, Devayani falls in love again, this time with Yayati. The story goes that Devayani gets into a fight over a misplaced garment with Sharmishtha, the daughter of Vrishaparva, the king of the Asuras. The fight escalates quickly, and ends with Sharmishtha throwing Devayani down a disused well and abandoning her.

Yayati, who happens to pass by and hear the maiden's cries, helps her out. Devayani is struck by Yayati's beauty, and asks him to marry her, but Yayati is reluctant because she is a sage's son and he is a Kshatriya. Inter-caste marriages, unless they cannot be avoided, tend to attract curses, he says.

Sharmishtha's Penance

Devayani then returns to the hermitage and complains to Shukracharya about Sharmishtha's behaviour. When Shukracharya goes to Vrishaparva and threatens him with dire consequences, the king relents and agrees to send Sharmishtha as a maid to Devayani. Accompanied by a thousand other waiting women, Sharmishtha leaves the palace in a palanquin, and once they reach the hermitage, she sheds her royal finery and puts on the clothes of a commoner to wait on Devayani.

For months after that, this arrangement continues, with the princess serving the daughter of the preceptor. Yayati comes to the hermitage once again and gazes

upon the many women waiting on Devayani, and wonders if she is of royal parentage. He approaches her and asks if she is a princess.

‘No,’ says Devayani. ‘But my father is Shukracharya, and he is more powerful than any king. So he cares for me better than any princess.’

Devayani asks Yayati once again to marry her, and once again Yayati voices his old fears. ‘But come to speak with my father and he shall willingly give me away to you,’ says Devayani. She takes him by the hand and leads him to where Shukracharya is sitting.

After hearing his daughter’s plea, Shukracharya assures Yayati that there is indeed no sin in a Brahmin maiden wedding a Kshatriya man. He gives Yayati many gifts, and also gives him Sharmishtha and the thousand other waiting women as dowry.

Yayati and Sharmishtha in love

In time, Devayani gives Yayati a son named Yadu. During this time, Sharmishtha lives in a maid’s quarters situated in the corner of the royal garden. Consumed by envy, she approaches the king and tells him that it is indeed she who is the daughter of a royal, a Kshatriya by birth, who would give Yayati the sons he deserved.

When Yayati dithers, Sharmishtha says, ‘It is no crime to bed the waiting woman belonging to your wife, O King. Do you not know that the scriptures offer you full right to the sex of every woman serving your queen? It is indeed a failure of duty if you refuse a woman seeking your pleasure, especially if she is of high birth as I am.’

Yayati gives in, and begins a secret love affair which yields three sons: Druhyu, Anu and Puru. In the meantime, Devayani also has another son by name Turvasu.

At first, Sharmishtha tells Devayani that the father of her sons is a travelling Brahmin. But as the children grow older, Devayani begins to notice similarities between them and Yayati, and one day when she confronts her husband, he admits that they are his. In a fit of rage, Devayani storms off and complains to Shukracharya, who summons Yayati and curses him with old age.

‘For your insatiable lust’ roars Shukracharya, ‘I curse you with senility and weakness of limb. May you never again be able to act on your desire for a woman.’

Yayati falls at the sage’s feet and asks for a kinder curse. Devayani, too, filled with pity for her husband, requests her father to soften his words.

His lips still pursed but his anger stilled somewhat, Shukracharya says, 'Fine. If any one of your sons is prepared to bear your curse, you can steal his youth and he can inherit your old age.'

This is the same curse that Puru, the son of Yayati, accepts from his father, the details of which we saw in an earlier story.

Themes

This story contains a few themes that are worth remembering.

- Devayani's habit of approaching men and confessing her love for them makes one wonder if it used to be common for women in those days to be open about their romantic needs.
- Jealousy and entitlement are constant motifs in this story, both of which form the core of the Mahabharata.
- Love for an offspring to the extent of causing harm to the world at large – which Shukracharya displays in this tale – strongly foreshadows what Dhritarashtra would later do with Duryodhana.
- The concept of 'you encounter your destiny on the path you take to avoid it' is presented by what the Asuras do. Plagued by fear that Shukracharya would voluntarily give up the Sanjeevini, they killed Kacha again and again, thus forcing Shukracharya to give up the Sanjeevini, an act he would not have committed otherwise.

Mahabhisha

Ikshvaaku vamsha prabhavo raajaaseeta pruthivee patihi
Mahaabhisha iti khayaataha satyavaak satya vikramaha
(91: 1)

There was a king by name Mahabhisha born in the race of Ikshvaku. He was the lord of the Earth. He was truthful in speech and was very powerful.

THE MAHABHARATA BEGINS with the love story of Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur, with Ganga, the great river goddess. But the cause of this meeting between the king and his future queen is another tale, which happens high up in the heavens, a tale concerning two curses.

The first of these curses is placed on king Mahabhisha. He is known to be one of the few king-sages on Earth, a person who is equally well versed in the scriptures and the principles of statecraft and battle. As a result, he attains heaven in his mortal form. On one occasion, Mahabhisha, while sitting in council with Brahma and some other gods, sees Ganga pass by, and though the rest of them lower their heads in respect, Mahabhisha looks upon her with lust. Brahma, noticing this, places a curse on the king, saying, ‘You shall be born on Earth for looking at the pious Ganga with desire.’

Mahabhisha accepts the curse with good grace and asks Brahma when he will be released from it.

‘When your wrath is provoked,’ replies Brahma, ‘the curse will let you go and you will return to heaven.’

Meanwhile, Ganga, who has seen Mahabhisha while passing by the gods’ council, begins to think of him as well. On her way back to her place amid the mountains, she meets the eight Vasus, looking rather dejected. When asked the reason for their sadness, they tell her, ‘The sage Vasishtha has seen it fit to curse us for no more than a tiny fault, O Ganga. He has decreed that the eight of us will descend to Earth in the form of men.’

‘What did you do, O Vasus, to provoke the anger of the sage thus?’

‘We shall tell you that story in due course, O Mother of all things,’ the Vasus reply. ‘But we wish to know whether you would be kind enough to bear us in your womb on Earth, for we are unwilling to enter the body of any ordinary human female.’

‘Who is going to be the father of you all?’

‘We are informed that unto the virtuous king Pratipa will be born a son by name Shantanu, who is himself Mahabhisha of our world, preparing to descend upon Earth to serve another curse – for what sin, we do not know. We think that he will make a suitable father for our human forms if you accede to become our mother.’

At the mention of Mahabhisha’s name, Ganga becomes excited at the thought of meeting him again on Earth. *This must be destiny indeed*, she thinks, *for how is it that events have transpired to place this opportunity at my feet?* And with haste she agrees to carry the Vasus in her womb on Earth.

‘But remember, Lady Ganga,’ say the Vasus, ‘you must make certain that you kill the first seven of us within a few hours of our birth, by drowning us in your person so that we know no pain. The eighth of us, though, you shall *not* kill, and he shall be reared as the son of Shantanu, and he might in the future become king to the land of Hastinapur. This is in accordance with Sage Vasishtha’s curse.’

Ganga asks them again why this is the case, and the Vasus tell her the following story.

Vasishtha's Curse

Taam oochur vasavo devaaha shaptaaha samo vai mahaanadi
Alpe aparaadhe samrambhaada vasishtena mahaatmana
(91: 11)

*We have been cursed, O Great River, by the illustrious sage Vasishtha, in anger, for
a small fault of ours.*

THE EIGHT VASUS are the elemental gods, who control different aspects of the weather. Of these, Prabhasa is the youngest. Around this time, caught in a playful mood, and encouraged in the act by his wife, Prabhasa steals Nandini, the divine cow being reared at Vasishtha's hermitage.

When the sage comes to know of this, he summons the Vasus to his house and places on them a curse that they will all be born as men on Earth to atone for their sin. The Vasus then tell the sage that the main culprit was Prabhasa, and the rest of them had sinned merely in being complicit. 'For such a small sin, O Sage,' they ask, 'is it right that you hit us with such a heavy punishment?'

Vasishtha reflects upon the words, and his anger now having ebbed a little with the uttering of the curse, agrees that they are reasonable. So he amends the curse, saying, 'The seven of you who were complicit in the act will live but short lives on Earth, not amounting to more than a few hours each. But Prabhasa, you who has seen it fit to think of all this a joke, and has planned and executed the act fully, you shall live a long, hard life spanning more than a hundred years and four generations. Let that be your punishment, and your punishment alone.'

With Prabhasa still withering under the sage's words, Vasishtha continues, 'And since you did this while blinded by lust for your woman, Prabhasa, you shall spend this long life of a man devoid of intimate knowledge of a woman. You shall remain constantly desiring but never attaining sexual pleasure in the company of a maiden. Let that also be your punishment, and your punishment alone.'

It is after this incident that the Vasus meet Ganga on their way back, and gain her assurance that she will give birth to them on Earth.

Therefore the first seven sons she bears, she kills by drowning them in the river, earning the wrath of Shantanu in the bargain (the wrath which frees Mahabhisha of *his* curse, incidentally). The eighth, named Devavrata, she rears on her own in heaven. On his sixteenth birthday, she brings him back to Hastinapur and hands him over to the king. In time, this boy comes to be known as Bhishma the terrible, on account of another oath he takes concerning Satyawati the fisherwoman.

‘The Left Lap is for the Wife’

Naaham parastriyam kaamaad gachheyam varavarnini
Na chaasavarnaam kalyaani dharmasya tada viddhi me varatam
(92: 6)

I do not see others’ wives with lust, nor do I lie with women outside of my order, O Fair One. This is my virtuous vow.

A SHORT TIME AFTER these two curses were given and received in heaven, here on Earth, the king Pratipa is seated at the source of the river Ganga, immersed in ascetic penance. One day, Ganga assumes her human form and makes her way to the monarch. She sits on his right thigh and tells him, ‘O foremost of the Kuru kings, I desire you as my husband. Please accept me as your wife and I shall give you all the sons that you seek.’

Pratipa replies, ‘Fair maiden, I do not lie with women who are not of my order. It is a vow that I have taken in my youth, and I am but bound by it.’

‘I am not inauspicious, O King,’ Ganga says, an edge to her voice. ‘I am the river Ganga, the most auspicious of all the women who have ever offered themselves to you. I am a celestial maiden, far above the station of other women of Earth. So do not make the mistake of refusing me, my lord.’

This is where Pratipa brings up a rather interesting point. ‘By sitting on my right thigh, my girl,’ he tells Ganga, ‘you have already become my daughter or daughter-in-law. As you know, the left lap is for wives and other women with whom one might lie. The right lap, on the other hand, is reserved for pious and pure relationships – like that of a father and a daughter – where sexual union is not even thought of. But I shall tell you what I will do. Since you have already become my daughter-in-law by sitting on my thigh, I will accept you as wife for my son.’

Ganga agrees to this proposal, and tells Pratipa to instruct his son to wait for her arrival in his life. ‘Also tell your son that he must not question the propriety of my acts at any time, O King. This is the condition upon which I will marry him.’