

Chapter 2. The Birth of a God-loving Person

Parikshith is saved while in the womb

Maharaja Parikshith was the very self of Abhimanyu, who had attained the heavenly abode of heroes. When Parikshith was an embryo growing in the womb of Uttara, he saw the sharp arrow shot by Aswathama flying toward him, emitting sparks of fury and terror, bent on his destruction. But at that very moment, he also saw a person of brilliant charm armed with a terrific wheel, breaking that death-dealing arrow into a hundred pieces. The royal foetus was filled with wonder and gratitude.

He pondered deeply on the identity of his saviour. “Who is he? He must be dwelling in this womb with me, because he could see the arrow at the very moment I saw it! But he has such intrepidity and skill that he could destroy it before it reached me. Can he be a uterine brother? How could he get hold of that wheel? If he is endowed with a wheel, why wasn’t I? No. He is no mortal.” He argued thus for a long time within himself.

He couldn’t forget that face, that form. It was a boy, with the splendour of a million suns. It was benign, blissful, blue like the clear sky. After saving him so dramatically and so mercifully, the form had disappeared. He had the form always before him, for he was seeking to see it again. He examined whoever he saw to find out whether that form corresponded with the form he had reverentially fixed in his mind.

Thus, he grew in the womb, contemplating that form. The contemplation transformed him into a splendour-filled baby. When at the end of the period of gestation he was born into the world, the lying-in-room was lit by a strange light. Uttara’s female attendants were dazzled by the brilliance. Their wits were overcome by wonder.

Recovering herself, Subhadra, mother of Abhimanyu, sent word to Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas, announcing the birth. The Pandava brothers were overwhelmed with joy when they heard the glad tidings for which they were waiting anxiously. They ordered bands to play and guns to be fired in honour of the event, for a scion had been born for the royal family, a successor to the Pandava throne.

The people heard the peal of guns and sought the reason for the joy. They rushed toward Indraprastha in large masses of enthusiasm, and every corner of the kingdom gushed with joy at the event. Within minutes, the city was transformed into a heavenly garden, fit for gods to give audience to men. Yudhishtira distributed several varieties of sweets to all who came. He granted several cows as gifts to *brahmins*. He instructed the ladies of the court to give golden caskets full of saffron and *kumkum* (vermillion powder) to women. *Brahmins* were awarded silk clothes and precious gems. Citizens were transported with joy, for the dynasty had secured an heir. Night and day they revelled in hilarious exultation.

Next day, Yudhishtira called the family priest, Kripacharya, and performed the rite of first cleansing of the infant. He satisfied the *brahmins* by gifts of various costly jewels. The scholars and priests blessed the child and returned home.

The astrologers’ predictions

On the third day, Yudhishtira called to his presence renowned astrologers as well as famous palmists and soothsayers, for he was eager to know whether the fair name of the kingdom and its culture would be safe in the

hands of the prince who had come to carry the burden of the state. He received them at the palace with traditional hospitality; they were given appropriate seats in the hall and were offered scents and silks.

The king bowed before them and, joining his palms in reverential adoration, prostrated before them and prayed, “O, wise men, who know the past, present, and future, examine the horoscope of this infant, calculate the positions of stars and constellations and the planetary influences that will guide his life and tell me how the future will be shaped.” He wrote down the exact time of birth and placed the note on a golden plate before them.

The pundits took the note, drew up the plan of planetary positions, and studied it with great care. They communicated to one another their increasing joy as they began to draw conclusions; they were in great joy themselves and couldn’t get words to express their amazement.

The doyen of the group, a great pundit, at last rose and addressed King Yudhishtira, “*Maharaja!* I have till this day examined thousands of horoscopes and prepared concerned plans of the zodiacs and constellations. But I must admit I have never come across a more auspicious grouping than is indicated in this horoscope. Here, all the signs of good augury have assembled in one moment, the moment of this prince’s birth. The moment indicates the state of Vishnu Himself! All the virtues will gather in this child. Why describe each glory separately? The great Manu has again come into your dynasty.”

Yudhishtira was happy that the dynasty had such good fortune. He was overpowered by joy. He folded his palms and bent low before the scholars, who had given him such good news. “This family is lucky to claim such a gem as its scion, through the blessings of elders and of pundits like you as well as the blessings of the Lord, who is our guardian. You say that the boy will develop all virtues and will accumulate fame. But of what use is all that if he hasn’t acquired the quality of reverence toward pundits, spiritual aspirants (*sadhus*), and *brahmins*? Please look into the horoscope once again and tell me whether he will have that reverence.”

The leader of the astrologers replied, “You need entertain no doubt on that score. He will revere and serve the gods and the *brahmins*. He will perform many sacrifices and rites that are prescribed in the ancient texts. He will earn the glory that your ancestor Bharatha won. He will celebrate even the horse sacrifice (*aswamedha*). He will spread the fame of this line all over the world. He will win all things that gods or men covet. He will outdistance all those who have gone before him.” They extolled him in various ways to their hearts’ content. They stopped because they were nervous to recount all the excellences; they feared they might be charged with exaggeration and flattery if they continued to detail the conclusions they had drawn from the baby’s horoscope.

Yudhishtira was not satisfied; he wanted to hear more from them of the excellences of the Prince’s character. The pundits were encouraged by this yearning. They said, “O King, you seem eager to know about some more aspects of the child’s fortune. We shall be only too glad to answer specific questions that you feel inclined to put us.”

Noting their enthusiasm, Yudhishtira came forward and asked, “During the regime of this prince, will there be any great war? If war is inevitable, will he achieve victory?”

“No,” said the pundits, “He won’t be pestered by any foe. He knows no failure or defeat in any undertaking of his. This is absolutely true, an unshakable truth.”

Hearing this, Yudhishtira and the brothers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva looked at each other with great joy.

Prediction of Parikshith's death by serpent bite

Meanwhile, Yudhishtira began to speak. He had said, "If that is so..." but, before he could complete the sentence, he hung his head and was plunged in thought. The pundits noticed it and said, "You seem to be anxious to know something more. You have only to ask, and we shall readily answer all questions."

"Of course I am happy at all the answers you have given. He will be virtuous, famous, triumphant over all, loving, and kind, treating all equally. He will perform many sacrifices and rites. He will have no enemies, and he will bring honour to the dynasty and restore its reputation. All this gives me great joy. But, I would like to know also how he will meet his end." The brothers saw Yudhishtira getting rather upset at the anxiety that agitated him over this problem. His voice had faltered a bit, when he put the question.

They consoled him and said, "Why worry about that at this stage? The end has to come some day, some way. It cannot be avoided. Something will cause it; some circumstance will bring it about. Birth involves the contingency of death. We are afraid that the extreme joy of this incident has queered your line of thought a bit. We think this much is enough. We shall leave the rest in the realm of doubt; let us not probe further. Let us leave it to God."

But Yudhishtira could not give up his desire to know how such a virtuous ideal prince would end his career on earth. He imagined it must be a truly wondrous finale to a glorious life. So he wanted the astrologers to tell him about it.

The scholars set about the calculations again, taking a pretty long time over it. Watching this, the King became excited; he hastened them and pressed for a quick answer. They gave the reply, "This prince will give up his kingdom as the result of a sage's curse." Yudhishtira wondered how such a paragon of virtue could ever invoke upon himself the curse of a sage. He was shocked at the possibility.

Then the pundits said, "Our calculations show that he will be bitten by a serpent." Yudhishtira lost heart at this news. All his joy evaporated in a moment. He became very sad and dispirited.