

Chapter 3. Child Parikshith and the Prophecy

“Alas! Is he to suffer at last this tragic fate? Is this to be the reward for all the good in store for him? Can the consequence of years of good living suddenly turn into this calamitous end? It is laid down that those who die drowning, those who are killed by fall from trees, and those who die of snake bite have a bad afterlife. Those are considered inauspicious deaths; those who die that way become ghosts and have to suffer so, it is said. Why should this child end up like that? O, the horror of it. O, the injustice of the whole thing!” lamented Yudhishtira, biting his lips to suppress his sorrow.

A boon, not a curse

The *brahmins* hastened to console him. “*Maharaja*,” they interceded, “There is no reason to give way to grief. Such a great man will never meet with such a tragedy. No. In the horoscope of this child, studying the positions of the planets, we can clearly notice two happy conjunctions, which indicate the conjunction of Indra (*vajra-yoga*) and the conjunction of devotion (*bhakthi-yoga*), both powerful and propitious. Therefore, as soon as he learns of the curse, he will give up his kingdom as well as his wife and children and retire to the bank of the holy Bhagirati river and surrender himself to the Lord. The great sage Suka, son of Vyasa, will arrive there and initiate him into self knowledge (*Atma-jnana*) through the recital of the glories of Lord Krishna and the singing of His praise. Thus, he will spend his last days on the sacred bank of Ganga and breathe his last with the adoration of the Lord. How can such a man meet with any tragedy or calamity? He will not be born again, for through the *yoga* of devotion he will attain oneness with the Lord of All (*Purushothama*).

Hearing these words, Yudhishtira gave up grief and became happy. He said, “If so, it is a unique boon and not a curse!”

At this, everyone rose. The *brahmins* were honoured as befitted their learning and austerity. They were given gems and silken clothes, and the king arranged to send them home. Yudhishtira and his brothers moved into their palaces, but they spent many hours talking about the happenings of the day and of the fears, luckily removed. They were filled with joy at the turn the predictions had taken.

The baby engages in a quest for the divine

The baby grew in the lying-in room as the moon in the bright half of the month. Since it was born as heir to the great empire, after a succession of dire dangers, everyone loved it and guarded it like the apple of the eye, as the very breath of their lives. Earlier, Droupadi had been broken by the loss of her own children (the Upapandavas), Subhadra had suffered inconsolable loss in the death of Abhimanyu, and the Pandava brothers had dreaded that Aswathama’s terrific sorrow directed against Abhimanyu’s posthumous child, still in Uttara’s womb, might do the worst and destroy the Pandava line forever. All were relieved, nay overjoyed, when they saw the child. They were supremely happy. They spent the days dotting over the little lovely babe, whom they brought from the women’s quarters for the purpose whenever they felt the urge to see it and hold it in their arms.

The child was very bright; it seemed to watch the lineaments of everyone who fondled it or came before it. It stared into their face long and longingly. All were surprised at this strange behaviour. Every person who came to it was subjected to this searching examination by the child, who seemed determined to trace someone or some

thing in the world into which it was born.

Some said, sadly, “it is seeking its father, Abhimanyu.” Others said, “No, no; the child is searching for Lord Krishna.” Others opined that it appeared to be trying to discover some divine brilliance. The fact remained that the child was examining all for some trait or sign that it knew already, to recognise some form it had in mind. “*Pariksha* (quest)” was the word used by everyone for the “quest” in which the child was engaged, so, even before the formal naming ceremony, everyone in and out of the palace began referring to the child as Parikshith, “He who is engaged in quest!”

That name, Parikshith, stayed. From the king to the farmer, from the scholar to the boor, from the monarch to the man in the street —everyone addressed or referred to the child as Parikshith. The fame of the child grew from day to day. It was on everyone’s lips.

Preparing for the naming ceremony

One auspicious day, Yudhishtira had the court priest brought before him and commissioned him to fix a good day for the ceremony of naming the child-prince. The priest called together his group of scholars and astrologers. After consulting the conjunctions of heavenly bodies, they discovered a day that all of them agreed was a good one for the event. They also settled the hour for the actual naming. Invitations to attend the ceremony were sent to the rulers of the land and to scholars and pundits, as well as prominent citizens. The king sent his emissaries to invite sages and personages full of spiritual wealth. Arjuna went to Lord Krishna and reverentially prayed for Him to shower His grace on the child on the occasion; he succeeded in bringing Krishna when he returned.

Kings, subordinate rulers, and citizens got ready to receive Him with respectful homage. The Pandava brothers, attired magnificently, waited at the main gate of the palace to offer Him welcome. When the Lord’s chariot was sighted, drums sounded, trumpets pealed a mighty welcome, and joyful “victory, victory (*jai*)” rose from every throat. Yudhishtira approached the chariot and embraced the Lord as He alighted; he held Him by the hand and led Him into the palace, where a high throne was specially placed for Him. After the Lord was seated, everyone occupied seats according to their rank and status.

Parikshith’s quest ends when Krishna appears

Sahadeva went to the inner apartments, and the child was brought on a gold plate, resplendent as the sun and made more charming by magnificent jewels. The priests recited mantras that invoked the Gods to bless the child and confer health and happiness on him.

Sahadeva laid the child down in the centre of the court hall. Maids and chamberlains came in long lines toward the prince, holding gold plates full of perfumes, flowers, silks, and brocades. Behind specially fitted curtains, the queens Rukmini, Droupadi, Subhadra, and Uttara watched the gambols of the child and rejoiced at the happy scene. Sahadeva took the child and placed it on a bed of flowers that was erected for the naming ceremony. But the child rose up on all fours and started crawling bravely on, in spite of the remonstrances of the maids. Apparently, it wanted to go somewhere!

Sahadeva’s efforts to stop its journey proved futile. Yudhishtira, who was observing its movements with interest, said with a smile, “Sahadeva, don’t stand in the way. Leave him alone. Let’s see what he does.” Sahadeva let go and allowed the child to move wherever he liked. He did take care to keep his eye always on him lest he fall

or hurt himself. He followed him at every step, vigilantly.

With this freedom of movement, the child soon made a beeline toward Lord Krishna, as if He was seeking to meet an old acquaintance. The child grasped Krishna's feet and pleaded, by his looks, to be taken onto His lap and fondled! The Lord saw this yearning; He laughed aloud and graciously bent low to lift the child on to His lap.

Sitting on His lap, the prince stared at the Lord's face without even a blink; he didn't turn his head this way or that or pull at anything with his hands or make any sound. He just sat and stared. Everyone was amazed at this behaviour, so unlike that of a child. Even Krishna shared in the feeling that pervaded the hall.

Turning to Yudhishtira, Krishna said, "I didn't believe it when I was told that the child stared at everyone who came and examined their lineaments. I thought it was a new explanation, given by these priests, to the usual prank and play of children. Now, this is really a wonder. The fellow has started examining even Me! Well, I shall test his behaviour a little Myself."

Then, the Lord tried to distract the attention of the child from Himself by placing before him a variety of toys, and Himself hiding from view. He expected the child to soon forget Him. But his attention was not drawn toward any other object. He had fixed his eye inexorably on the Lord Himself; he sought Him and no other. He was trying to move toward where he imagined Krishna was.

When Krishna's attempts to transfer the attention of the child from Himself failed, He declared, "This is no ordinary child. He has won through My tests. So the name Parikshith is most appropriate for him. He lives up to it already!"

At this, the pundits recited verses indicating their blessings on the child and the *brahmins* recited relevant passages from the *Vedas*. The music of trumpets rent the air, and women sang auspicious songs. The family preceptor dipped a nine-gemmed jewel in a golden cup of honey and wrote the Name on the tongue of the child; the name was written on the rice grains spread on a gold plate, and the rice was then showered on the head of the child, in token of prosperity and happiness. The naming ceremony was thus celebrated in grand style. Men and women who attended were given presents as befitted their rank, and they departed. Everyone was talking appreciatively of the wonderful way in which the child sought out the lap of the Lord. Many praised the steady faith that the child had already attained.

Vyasa explains baby Parikshith's searching looks

Yudhishtira, who was puzzled at the unique behaviour of the child approached Vyasa, the great sage, to learn from him the reason for the strange search and the consequences of this attitude. Vyasa said, "Yudhishtira! When this child was in the womb, the deadly arrow that Aswathama aimed at it in order to destroy it was about to hit its target. Lord Krishna entered the foetal home and made it safe and saved it from destruction. This child has been eager to know who had saved him from within the womb. He started examining everyone to find out whether he had the same effulgence that he saw while a foetus in the womb. Today, he saw that divine form with all its splendour, so he moved straight toward Him and prayed to be taken up and seated on His lap. This is the explanation for the strange behaviour."

Hearing Vyasa's words, Yudhishtira shed tears of joy and thankfulness. Overjoyed at the limitless grace of the Lord, he paid Him reverential homage.