

Chapter 13. The Coronation of Parikshith

Pandavas lament the loss of their mother

Kunthi Devi took the road that Krishna had taken. The lifeless body was left. Arjuna wept aloud, “Brother! What shall I say? We have lost our mother.” Dharmaraja was shaken hard by the shock; he stepped toward the body and, finding the face blanched, stood petrified.

The maids outside the door heard Arjuna’s words and peeped into the room. Kunthi Devi’s body was lying on the floor; Arjuna had the head on his lap and was intently looking at the face with tearful eyes. The maids of the palace transmitted the news from one to another; they entered and realised that the dowager Queen had left them, without possibility of return. They wept aloud at the heart-breaking calamity.

Meanwhile, news reached the queens in the inner apartments. Within seconds, the sad tidings spread all over Hasthinapura. The queens were overcome with grief; they tottered in, beating their breasts in anguish. In an endless stream of sorrow, the denizens of the palace flowed into the apartment. Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, and the ministers were overpowered with grief.

The air was filled with indescribable agony. Nobody could believe that Kunthi Devi, who just a few minutes ago was so eagerly awaiting her son Arjuna to hear the news from Dwaraka, could have passed away so soon. Those who came and saw stood mute and motionless. The wailing of the maids, the groans of the queens, and the grief of the sons melted the rockiest heart.

Dharmaraja consoled everyone and instilled some courage. He told them not to give way to grief. He didn’t shed tears but moved about bravely, directing everyone and infusing strength of mind. This made everyone wonder at his self-control. The ministers approached him and said, “O King, your unruffled nature fills us with admiration. You revered your mother and treated her as the very breath of your life. How has your heart taken her death so callously?”

Dharmaraja smiled at their anxiety. “Ministers. I am filled with envy when I think of her death. She is indeed most fortunate. The world dropped from her life as soon as she heard the news of Krishna moving on to his heavenly Home. She left immediately to that Home, for she could not bear the pang of separation from Him.

“We are most unfortunate. We were so near Him and derived so much bliss (*ananda*) from Him. We heard of His departure, and yet we are alive! Had we really the devotion that we claim, we would have dropped the body like her when we heard of that loss. Fie on us! We are but burdens on the earth. All our years are a waste.”

When the citizens and others learned that Kunthi Devi had died as soon as she heard the news of Krishna’s departure from the world, they wept even louder, for the grief at losing Krishna was far greater than the grief at losing the dowager queen. Many behaved as if they had suddenly become insane; many beat their heads on the walls of their houses. They felt miserable and forlorn.

It was as if petrol had been poured on a fire. In the flock of unbearable anguish, born out of the double loss, Dharmaraja was the only calm soul. He consoled the queens. He spoke softly and assuringly to each and told them that there was no meaning in lamenting the loss of the mother or departure of the Lord. Each of them had their

course according to a predetermined plan. “It remains only for us to fulfil our destiny through appropriate steps,” he said.

Kunthi’s funeral

Dharmaraja called Arjuna. “Arjuna, dear brother, let’s not delay any further. Mother’s funeral rites must be begun immediately, and Parikshith must be crowned Emperor. We should leave Hasthinapura tonight. Every moment appears an age to me.”

Dharmaraja was filled with extreme detachment, but Arjuna was filled with even more renunciation. He lifted the mother’s head from his lap and placed it on the floor. He ordered Nakula and Sahadeva to make preparation for Parikshith’s coronation. He gave instructions to others —ministers, officers, and so forth— on the arrangements to be made in view of the decision of the king and the princes. He was very busy, indeed. Bhima busied himself with the arrangements for the mother’s funeral.

The ministers, citizens, priests, and gurus, were full of wonder, admiration, and sadness at the strange developments and incidents in the palace. They were sunk in grief and despair, but they had to keep it all to themselves. They were also affected by a strong wave of detachment. Struck with wonder, they exclaimed, “Ah, His paternal uncle and aunt left the palace all of a sudden. The news of Krishna’s departure fell like a thunderbolt on the head already distracted by this calamity. Then quite soon, the mother passed away; before the corpse was removed from where she fell, Dharmaraja is preparing for the coronation! And the Emperor is planning to give up everything —power, riches, status, authority— and move into the forest with all his brothers! Only these Pandavas can have such steady courage and renunciation. No one else is capable of this boldness.”

Within minutes, the funeral rites were performed. The *brahmins* were called in. Dharmaraja decided to have a simple coronation ceremony. The subordinate rulers and tributary kings were not to be invited; nor could invitations be given to citizens and kinsmen at Indraprastha.

Parikshith’s coronation, amid acclamation and sorrow

Of course, a coronation in the Bharatha Dynasty, seating a ruler on the sacred lion throne of that line, was usually a grand affair. The date would be fixed months in advance, the auspicious moment chosen with meticulous care, and elaborate preparations on a magnificent scale would follow. But now, in a matter of minutes, everything was got ready with whatever material was available and whoever was near at hand.

Parikshith was given a ceremonial bath, the crown jewels were put on him, and he was brought to the throne by the *brahmins* and ministers. He was placed on the throne. Everyone in the hall wept in distress as Dharmaraja placed the diamond-studded diadem on Parikshith’s head with his own hands. The imperial authority that had to be assumed to the joyous acclamation of the people was imposed on the boy to the accompaniment of groans and sobs.

Parikshith, the newly crowned Emperor was weeping. Even Dharmaraja, the man who crowned him, couldn’t stop his tears in spite of his best efforts. The hearts of all the spectators were torn by agonising sorrow. Who can stem the force of destiny? Fate executes every act at the time and place and in the manner it has to be so executed. Man is nothing before It; he is helpless.

Parikshith was a well-bred, virtuous boy; he watched the sadness that pervaded every face and noted the

incidents and happenings in the palace. He had sat on the throne because he felt he shouldn't transgress the command of his elders. But, suddenly, he fell at Dharmaraja's feet and pleaded pathetically, "My Lord! Whatever your wish, I will honour and obey. But please don't desert me, don't leave me alone." He didn't give up his hold on the feet; he continued weeping and praying. All who saw the tragic scene wept, even the hardest could not but weep. It was terrible, fraught with dire distress.

The boy fell at the feet of his grandfather, Arjuna, and cried piteously. "Grandpa! How can you move out of here with peace in your hearts after placing this heavy burden of empire on my head? I am a child who knows nothing; I am very foolish; I am ignorant; I have no qualifications; I am incompetent. It is not just, it is not proper for you to lay this empire, which has been in the care of a long line of heroes, statesmen, warriors, and wise men, and remove yourselves to the forest, on my head. Let someone else bear this responsibility; take me with you to the forest."