

Chapter 14. The Exit of the Pandavas

Parikshith pleads not to be left behind

It was a pitiable sight. Parikshith, the little boy with the crown on his head, plaintively approached his grandfather and others, clung to their feet, and pleaded to accompany them into the forest. He would eat roots and fruits, engage himself in sacred ceremonials, and be happy. “Please entrust the kingdom to some virtuous minister and allow me to come with you, so that I might serve you and make my life worthwhile,” he appealed. Those in the hall were moved to tears by his agony at being left behind. Rocks would have melted in sympathy, had they listened to his anguish.

Dharmaraja managed heroically to suppress his emotions; he lifted the boy, placed him on his lap, and poured consolation and courage into his ear. “Dear child! Don’t become so weak-minded. You are a child born in the dynasty of Bharatha; can a sheep be born in a dynasty of lions? Your father, mother, and grandfathers are full of courage, bold champions of truth, who made their names famous in the world. So it is not fit for you to weep thus. Henceforward, these *brahmins* are your grandfathers, your parents. Take their advice and rule this land accordingly. Live up to the grandeur and glory of your name. Stop grieving over us.”

But the boy was lovingly adamant in spite of all the persuasive advice of the elders. He lamented, “Grandpa! I’m too young to convince you with my pleading. I know it. But listen. I lost my father even before I was born. You brought me up with the care and affection that my father would have showered upon me had he lived. And now, when I love to sing and play and roam about with my companions, you hoist this great empire on my head. Can this be right? Is it justice? Instead of leaving me alone, steeped in sorrow, you could sever my head with your sword and then leave. What harm did I do to you that you should punish me thus? Couldn’t you have scotched me in my mother’s womb on the day my father died? Was my lifeless body resuscitated just for you to inflict this assignment on me?” Parikshith continued to condemn himself for his fate, in this strain, for a long time.

Arjuna infuses courage into wailing Parikshith

Arjuna couldn’t stand it any longer. He covered the boy’s mouth with his palm; he caressed the child with sweet affection; he pressed his lips on his head. “Child! It is a disgrace to the protector (*kshatriya*) clan to behave like a coward. We also lost our father; we also grew up under the fostering care of ascetics and monks. At last, we were able to win our uncle’s affection and, after overcoming many a formidable handicap, we established our sovereignty over this kingdom. He who guarded us, guided us, and directed our steps throughout will certainly be your guardian and guide. Don’t lose heart; follow the advice that these *brahmins* and ministers will render for some years. Later, you will be able to solve the problems of the empire yourself,” he said.

Parikshith could not be assuaged. He said, “Grandpa! Are you now discarding the throne and the kingdom and placing them on my head? Well, be with me for some years more, teach me the art and principles of government and then leave. I was happy and free, romping and roaming with no trace of care, for I was confident I had grandfathers to guard me, though I had lost my father. Now. If you too desert me, what will be my fate? You were the centre of all my hopes, the support on which I relied. And you are deserting me and plunging me suddenly into despair.” He wept aloud, rending the hearts of all who saw and heard. He rolled on the ground, holding the

feet of the elders.

Arjuna lifted him up with both hands and embraced him. He kept him on his shoulders and fondled him. He wiped the strings of pearly tears that rolled down his cheeks. He couldn't stop his own tears while doing so. Turning to the *brahmins* standing around, gazing at all this, Arjuna asked them why they were only silent witnesses, not attempting to console the boy.

They were really too full of grief themselves to think of assuaging Parikshith. They said, "The sharp words this child is lisping are wounding us like arrows; his anguish is petrifying us. What can we tell him? How can we console him? What can instil courage in him now?" They too were overcome with grief.

Kripacharya, the family teacher, succeeded at last in suppressing his grief. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the ends of his garment and spoke to Arjuna, "What do you want us to tell this boy? We don't feel like saying anything. We are struck dumb. This day, you are renouncing the empire that you gained after a victory for which rivers of blood flowed, for which millions laid down their lives, for which you strove for years. You haven't ruled over it for a thousand years, no, not even for a couple of centuries, or even for seventy years. Who can say what lies in the womb of time? Of course, the actions of the great will have some inner purpose. Pardon us; you are our overlords; you know best." Kripacharya stood with head bent, for he was heavy with grief.

Dharmaraja declares Parikshith emperor of Bharath

Dharmaraja came forward a few steps and addressed the preceptor (*acharya*). "Every act of mine was according to Krishna's command, as you know. I dedicated all my activity to Him. I played my role as He dictated. I did not desire or retain any individuality. All my duties and obligations have faded out with the departure of the Lord. Of what use is Dharmaraja's survival of now? I can't continue on this land even for a minute, since *Kali* has come to sway. It is your duty now to guard this boy, to guide and train him so that he may be secure on the throne. Preserve adherence to *dharma*; continue the dynastic traditions; maintain the honour and fair name of the line. Love him and foster him as your own son." Thus saying, he placed Parikshith's hands in Kripacharya's. All those who were there, including Dharmaraja and the family preceptor, were in tears that moment.

In a few minutes, Vajra was called in. He was informed that from that very day, Parikshith was the Emperor of Bharath, so Vajra paid homage to him as befits the suzerain of the continent. The ministers and *brahmins* also honoured him as their ruler with due ceremony.

Afterward, Dharmaraja held Parikshith's hands and, placing them in Vajra's hands, announced, "This is Vajra, the Lord of the Yadavas; I now install him as the King of Mathura and of the Surasena State." He placed a diamond-studded golden crown on Vajra's head. "Be brothers both of you, staunch allies in peace and war, inseparable in friendship," he exhorted. He called Vajra aside and advised him to treat Parikshith as his own paternal uncle. He advised Parikshith to revere Vajra as he would revere Aniruddha himself; he told both of them that they should ensure the unimpaired continuance of *dharma* and to consider the welfare of their subjects as the very breath of life.

The Pandavas start their last journey

Then, the Pandava Brothers showered auspicious rice grains on the heads of Vajra and Parikshith. The *brahmin* priests recited appropriate mantras. Drums were beaten and trumpets flared. With tears in their eyes, Vajra and

Parikshith prostrated before Dharmaraja and the rest. The Pandava brothers couldn't look the two darlings in the face, they were so overcome with detachment. They just held them in one quick embrace and spoke just one word of loving farewell, before filing out into the beyond, with nothing on except the clothes they wore.

The kith and kin, citizens, queens, others in the women's quarters, courtiers, and maids raised pathetic wails. The citizens fell across the path of the ruler and tried to hold fast to his feet. They prayed piteously for him to stay. They appealed to the Pandavas to take them with them. Some brushed aside objections and ran along with the royal party. However, the Pandavas never turned back; they never spoke a word. Their ears were closed to entreaties. With their minds fixed on the Lord Krishna; they moved straight on, like men blinded by a fanatic resolve, heeding none, observing none.

Droupadi, with her maids, came running behind them, calling on her lords one by one. Parikshith also pursued them along the streets, but he was caught and carried away by the ministers, who tried to pacify him, though they were themselves greatly affected.

But the Pandavas walked on unconcerned, neither asking those who followed to stop nor permitting those who desired to join to come along. Hundreds of men and women had to stop when they were too tired, and they mournfully returned to the capital. The hardier ones kept on. The women of the *zenana*, unused to sun and winds, were exhausted quickly and fell fainting on the road. Maids, lamenting the terrible events, brought them relief. Some ventured even into the forest but had to return fast after encountering the horrors of the wilderness. When dust storms rose, many citizens placed the dust reverentially on their foreheads, taking it to be the dust of Dharmaraja's feet. Thus, passing through bush and briar, the brothers soon got out of sight. What then could the people do? They returned to Hasthinapura heavy with unbearable grief.

The Pandavas stuck to the vow of death. The vow required that they should neither eat nor drink anything on the way, that they shouldn't rest, that they must proceed straight on in the northern direction until they fell dead. This is the vow they observed, so grim and tight.

The Pandavas journeyed along with their eyes fixed straight ahead, awaiting the moment when their bodies would collapse out of sheer exhaustion and death would finish their earthly career. Their hearts were filled with emotions centering around Krishna, His play and pranks, His grace and glory—they had no room for any other emotion or thought.

Droupadi and the Pandavas achieve immortality

Droupadi, their queen, dragged herself along for a considerable distance, but she became too weak to continue. Her lords didn't turn back even when she appealed. Highly intelligent and devoted as she was, she realised that they were engaged in a terrific uncompromising vow. She decided that the bond that tagged her to them so long had loosened and she had to meet her end. She fainted, fell, and breathed her last, with her mind fixed on Krishna.

The Pandavas walked on in staunch discipline and met their separate ends at the times and places in which each had to shed his body. The body became dust, but the soul merged in Krishna. They attained immortality, losing themselves in the immortal essence of Krishna.