

Chapter 24. Parikshith is Cursed

Parikshith listened to sage Vyasa's description of the deep devotion and steady faith of the Pandavas. He was thrilled when he heard of the unbounded grace that Lord Krishna showered on them. The king was so immersed in joy that he scarcely realised whether it was night or day! Suddenly, he was awakened by the sweet chirping of birds and the loud crow of the cock. He heard the songs with which his subjects daily welcomed the gods at dawn and the temple bells ringing around the palace.

Vyasa also realised that it was the beginning of another day. He said, "Son! I must be going now." Taking the water pot that he carried while journeying, he rose and blessed the king, who fell at his feet in great sorrow. "Alas! Dawn broke so soon! I have yet to grasp fully my grandfathers' grandeur and glory! I have yet to fathom completely the depth of their devotion and sense of duty," he lamented.

Parikshith goes hunting

Parikshith turned over in his mind the incidents he had heard and tasted their uniqueness. He was so filled with exaltation that he couldn't turn to the affairs of the kingdom. In fact, he avoided entangling himself in them and sought to be alone. He decided to go hunting in the forest, as an alternative. He instructed that arrangements be made for an expedition into the jungle.

Very soon, the men at the door brought the news that everything was ready; the huntsmen and others had gathered in full strength. With a heavy heart, he dragged his body toward the chariot and placed himself in it. The attendants, with their equipment, moved on, both before and after the royal chariot, as was their wont. For some reason or other, the king felt that so many need not accompany him, so he asked some to return. When they advanced, a few herds were noticed moving about, and this stirred the king to activity. He got down from the chariot and, with the bow kept in readiness, stalked the animals with a few men following him. The herds scattered in fear, with the huntsmen in hot pursuit. The king had his aim fixed on one group of fleeing animals, and he sped behind it, unaware that he was alone, cut off from his attendants, who had gone on different trails.

Parikshith, in a fit of anger, throws a dead snake on sage's neck

He had trekked a long distance, but couldn't bag an animal. A fierce thirst began tormenting him; he was exhausted beyond endurance. Frantically, he searched for water. Luckily, he espied a hermitage, a cottage thatched with grass. Highly expectant, he hurried toward it. There was no one in view! The place appeared empty. He called out very distressingly, as loudly as he could manage. With his feeble voice he shouted, "Thirst, thirst," plaintively. There was no reply from the cottage. When he entered, he found an ascetic engaged in meditation. He went near him and addressed him pathetically, "Sir, Sir." But the man was so lost in the depths of meditation that he gave no response.

At this, the king was overcome by resentment and a fierce gust of anger. Having come to a hermitage and seen the hermit, he was still helpless with hunger and thirst; this wounded his pride, for he was the ruler of the realm, and the hermit had dared to dwell within himself when he came before him and called out for him. He became blind to the rules of propriety, for he could hardly control his anger. His feet trod on some rope on the floor, and he discovered it was a dead snake. That put a wicked idea into his head, quite by a twist of fate. He threw

it round the neck of the hermit, sitting like a statue, heedless of other's distress. Then he left the hermitage and walked away fast, to seek some other place to slake his thirst and get food.

Sringi curses Parikshith to die of snake bite

Some boys saw him emerge from the cottage. They entered the place to find out why he had gone in and what had happened there, for he looked like a stranger and he gorgeously dressed. They saw a snake around the neck of the sage Samika! They went closer and examined it and found that it was dead. They wondered who could have done this atrocity. They surmised it must be the handiwork of the man who had just left the hermitage. So, they ran out and informed Samika's son, who was engaged in games with his comrades. The son wouldn't lend his ear to their story, for he thought that no one would insult his father so. He busied himself with the game. But the boys repeated the tale and insisted on his verifying its veracity, seeing the plight of his father with his own eyes.

Amazed at their insistence, Sringi became afraid that the incident might actually have happened. He ran into the cottage and found out that the unbelievable had indeed happened! He sought to find out the perpetrator of this atrocity against his revered father. He learned that a person in royal robes had gone in and come out and that no one else had been around since morning. The boys concluded that it must be his handiwork. Sringi ran in the direction pointed by them to catch him,. Before long, he saw the person in regal clothing, and his anger knew no bounds. He threw a handful of water at the king, slowly walking before him, and pronounced the curse, "May he who threw the dead snake round the neck of my father be bitten by a snake on the seventh day and die that day of the poison."

The boys around him appealed to him not to, but he threw the curse at the king. Then, he went back to the cottage and slumped on the floor in a corner, with his head aflame with anger.

"Alas, that my father had to suffer this ignominy while I was alive and about. I could well have been dead. What use is a live son who can't prevent someone from insulting his father?" He condemned himself thus and bewailed his fate most pitifully. His companions tried to pacify him. They abused the wrongdoer roundly and tried to console the disconsolate boy.

Samika is horrified by his son's curse

Meanwhile, the sage emerged from his inner bliss and entered the realm of consciousness. His eyes opened. He unwound the dead snake from his neck and placed it beside him. He saw his son weeping in a corner and beckoned to him. He asked the reason for his grief and got from him the tale of the stranger and the dead snake. Samika smiled and said, "Poor fellow! He did it out of ignorance, and you reveal your ignorance, weeping for it. I'm not concerned with honour or dishonour. The knowledge of the *Atma* enables a man to keep himself on an even keel, neither rising when praised nor falling when blamed. Some boor must have played this silly prank. Since you are still boys, you exaggerate it into a big crime; you are undergoing a mountain of grief over a molehill. Get up and go to the playground," he said. He made his son sit on his lap and gently stroked his head, so that his grief might abate a little.

Sringi told his father, "This is no prank played by a boor. This is a terrible sacrilege committed by an ego-intoxicated fellow, in the garb of a king."

Samika asked, "What do you say? A person in the garb of a king? Did you see him? Did the king commit this

stupid misdemeanour? This silly thing could never enter a king's head.”

Sringi's comrades joined in and testified that they too saw the person responsible for this sacrilege. “Master! We saw the dead snake, and we ran to Sringi and brought him here. Sringi got so angry that he took the water of the Ganga in his hand and threw it at the person, who was walking very fast. At the same time, with appropriate ritual formulae, Sringi cursed him: Let the person who placed the dead snake die of snake bite on the seventh day from today.”

The recluse who curses is no recluse

Samika was shocked. He was astonished at his son's behaviour. He pushed him out of his lap onto the floor. “What! Did you throw a curse like that? Alas, that the son of a sage should have behaved like this? What a calamitous curse for this trivial offence! Yours is a wrong that can never be atoned. You are a disgrace to the group of comrades around you, for you can't bear with fortitude such a silly, insignificant prank! I'm ashamed to say that such a boy is my son. You have no strength of mind to bear such little affronts. O, what a pity! Alas, that your childishness should plunge all sages and ascetics into ill-fame —people will say they haven't got even elementary patience and fortitude! Don't show me your face; to see it is a sacrilege. To punish people for wrongs done is the duty of the king, not that of the recluse in the forest. The recluse who pronounces curses is no recluse at all.

“Moved by the yearning to achieve the vision and the presence of the Guide and Guardian of all the worlds, the recluse gives up all attachment and establishes himself in the forest. He lives on fruits and roots, and he denounces all catering to the senses as detrimental to spiritual progress. That such horrid curses born of impatience and egotism should come on the tongue of a recluse is a sign of impending doom. It marks the dawn of the Iron Age of untruth,” Samika said.

“Alas! What a great sin you added to your burden today,” he remarked. He described to his son and his comrades the heinousness of Sringi's act.