

Chapter 2. The Imperial Line: Raghu

In the immaculate, pure Solar Dynasty was born the highly mighty, the far famed, the strong armed, the intensely loved and revered ruler Khatvanga. His rule showered supreme bliss on the immense population under his throne and persuaded them to pay homage to him, as if he were himself God. He had a “one-and-only” son, named Dilipa. Dilipa grew up, shining in the glory of knowledge and virtue; he shared with his father the joy and privilege of guarding and guiding the people. He moved among his subjects, eager to know their joys and sorrows, anxious to discover how best to relieve pain and distress, intent on their welfare and prosperity.

The father watched his son grow straight and strong, virtuous and wise. He sought a bride for him so that, after marriage, he could place part of the burden of the sceptre on his shoulders. He sought her in royal houses far and wide, for she must be a worthy companion for the prince. At last, the choice fell on the Magadhan princess, Sudakshina. The wedding was celebrated with unsurpassed pomp and exultation by the people of the court.

Sudakshina was endowed with all womanly virtues in ample measure. She was saintly, simple, and a sincere votary of her husband. She served her lord and poured love on him, as if he were her very breath. She walked in his footsteps and never deviated from the path of righteousness.

Dilipa, too, was the very embodiment of righteousness; as a consequence, he saw that neither want nor disappointment affected him in the least. He held fast to the ideals and practices of his father as far as the administration of the empire was concerned, so he could slowly and without any dislocation take upon himself the full responsibility of administration. Thus, he was able to give his father rest in his old age. Khatvanga rejoiced within himself, contemplating the great qualities of his son and observing his skill, efficiency, and practical wisdom. Some years passed thus. Then, Khatvanga directed the court astrologers to select an auspicious day and hour for Dilipa’s coronation, and on the day fixed by them he installed Dilipa as the monarch of the realm.

From that day, Dilipa shone forth as the Lord and sovereign of the empire, which stretched from sea to sea, with the seven islands of the ocean. His rule was so just and compassionate, so much in conformity with the injunctions laid down in the scriptures, that rains came as plentifully as needed and the harvest was rich and profuse. The entire empire was green and glorious, festive and full. The land was resonant with the sacred sound of the *Vedas* recited in every village, the purifying rhythm of the *mantras* chanted in the *Vedic* sacrifices performed throughout the land; every community lived in concord with all the rest.

Nevertheless, the king was apparently overcome by a mysterious anxiety; his face was losing effulgence. The lapse of a few years didn’t improve matters. Despair wrote its deep lines firmer on his brow. One day, he revealed the cause of his gloom to his queen, “Darling! We have no children, and sadness is overpowering me as a consequence. I am even more affected when I realise that this Ikshvaku dynasty will terminate with me. Some sin that I committed must have brought about this calamity. I am unable to decide how to counter this malign destiny. I am eager to learn from our family preceptor, the sage Vasishtha, how I can win the grace of God and make amends for the sin. I am very much agitated by grief. What do you suggest as the best means to win grace?”

Sudakshina did not take time even to think out the answer. “Lord! This same fear had entered my mind, too, and caused me much grief. I had not given expression to it. I smothered it in the mind for I cannot, I know, reveal my fears, without being prompted by you, my Lord. I am ever willing and eager to support and follow implicitly

what appeals to you as the best means of overcoming our sorrow. Why should there be any delay? Let us hasten to consult revered Vasishta.” Dilipa ordered the chariot to be brought for the pilgrimage to the preceptor’s hermitage. He directed that no escort or courtier should accompany them. In fact, he drove the vehicle himself and reached the simple cottage of his beloved *guru*.

At the sound of the chariot, the hermits on the outskirts of the hermitage went into the cottage and made known to their master the arrival of the ruler of the empire. Vasishta showered his blessing on him as soon as he saw him near the door and lovingly inquired about his health and the welfare of his subjects and his kith and kin.

Sudakshina fell at the feet of the sage’s consort, the famed Arundathi, embodiment of all the virtues that adorn the noblest of women. Arundathi lifted her into her arms and fondly embraced her, prodding her with questions about her welfare. She led her into the inner part of the hermitage.

As befitted the monarch of the realm, Dilipa asked Vasishta whether the rituals and sacrifices the ascetics had to perform as part of the cultural tradition were being carried out without any handicap, whether the anchorites were experiencing any difficulty in acquiring food and carrying on their studies and spiritual practices, and whether their sylvan campuses were terrorised by wild beasts. He was yearning, he said, to make their studies and spiritual exercises progress well without any distraction due to adverse environment or counter-influences.

When the king and queen entered the cottage and sat down, with the assembled sages and seekers, Vasishta suggested to the latter to move into their own hermitages and then asked the king why he had come accompanied by the queen and no one else. The king told his preceptor the nature and depth of his grief and prayed for the only remedy that could remove it, namely, his grace.

The curse of the sacred cow

Listening to that prayer, Vasishta was lost in deep meditation. Perfect silence prevailed. The king too sat in the lotus posture on the bare floor and merged his mind in God; the queen attuned her mind with the Divine.

At last, Vasishta opened his eyes and said, “King! The will of God can be thwarted by no person, whatever their might or authority. I have no power to override the decree of the Divine. I cannot manifest enough grace to confer, through my blessings, the son you desire. You have drawn on yourself a curse. On one occasion, when you were approaching the capital, during your journey home, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow Kamadhenu was reclining in the cool shade of the divine, wish-fulfilling tree, the Kalpataru! Your eye fell on her, but caught up in the tangle of worldly pleasures, you ignored her and passed on, in pride, to the palace. Kamadhenu was pained by the neglect; she was hurt that you had failed to honour her; she felt that your people would start dishonouring the cow, since the king himself had failed in his duty. When rulers who do not revere the *Vedas* neglect the cow, which sustains humanity, continue to rule without restraint, she argued, there will be no *dharma* in the land.

“Kamadhenu cursed you that day that you should have no son to succeed to your throne; she declared, however, that when you take the advice of the *guru* and start in humility and reverence to serve the cow and worship her in gratitude, the curse will be rendered infructuous and you will be rewarded with a son and heir.

“Therefore, worship the cow from this moment, with your queen, as laid down in the sacred texts, and you are certain to have a son. The hour is near when cows start returning home from the pasture. My treasure, the divine cow Nandini, is fast approaching the hermitage. Go, serve her with devotion and steady faith. Give her food and drink at appropriate hours. Wash the cow and take her out to the pastures and see that no harm comes to her

while she grazes.”

Vasishta initiated the King and Queen in the ritualistic vow of “cow worship”; he sent them into the cowshed with holy water and offerings for the worship and himself walked toward the river for ablutions and evening prayers.

One day, while Nandini was grazing happily in the jungle, a lion spied her and followed her in order to allay his hunger. Dilipa saw this. He used all his skill and might to foil the lion from pouncing on her. He resolved to offer his own body in exchange. The lion, though feline and ferocious, was a strict follower of *dharmā*. Moved by compassion at the sacrifice that the king was willing to make, it released the cow and the king from its clutches and left the place.

Nandini was filled with an inexpressible sense of gratitude and joy at Dilipa’s self-sacrificing gesture. She said, “King! This moment the curse that afflicts you is lifted! You will have a son who will subdue the whole world, support the principles and practice of *dharmā*, earn renown on earth and in heaven, enhance the fame of the dynasty, and, more than all, continue the Ikshvaku line, wherein the Lord Himself, Narayana, will one day take birth! May this son be born soon.” Nandini blessed the King. Attended by the King, the sacred cow returned to Vasishta’s ashram.

Vasishta had no need to be told! He knew all; as soon as he saw the faces of the king and queen, he surmised that their wish was fulfilled; he blessed them and let leave for the city. After Dilipa and Queen Sudakshina prostrated before the sage, they returned to the palace, full of joy at the happy turn of events.

Emperor Raghu’s ideal rulership

The child grew in the womb, as the blessing guaranteed. When the months had run their full course, at an auspicious moment, the son was born. When the happy tidings spread over the city and kingdom, thousands assembled before and around the palace in great joy. The streets were festooned with flags and green leaves; groups of people danced in glee, calling on all to share in the thrill and waving camphor flames to mark the occasion. Huge crowds exclaimed “victory! victory! (*jai jai*)” and moved on toward the palace grounds.

Dilipa ordered the minister to announce the birth of the heir to the empire to the multitude gathered in the vast grounds of the palace, and when the minister did so, the joyous acclamation of the throng hit the sky. The applause was loud and long, and the hurrahs echoed and reached from one street to another. It took many hours for the gathering to disperse and reach home.

On the tenth day, the King invited the *guru* and celebrated the rite of naming the newborn. The name Raghu was selected, on the basis of the asterism under which he was born. The child gave delight to all by its prattle and play; he was liked by all as a bright and charming youngster; he crossed his teens and became a brave, resolute, efficient helpmate of his father!

One night —no one could guess why the king felt so— while conversing with the Queen he said, “Sudakshina! I have achieved many a grand victory! I have succeeded in celebrating many a great ritual sacrifice. I have fought many a grim battle with mighty invaders and triumphed over them all, including even ogres and subhuman Titans! We are blessed with a son who is a precious gem! We have nothing more to gain.

“Let us spend the remainder of our lives in the adoration of God. Raghu is the repository of all virtues; he

is fit in all respects to take up the burden of ruling over the Empire. Let us entrust the realm to him; we shall retire into the silence of the forest, live on roots and fruits, serve the sages who lead austere lives filled with godly thoughts and godward aspiration, and sanctify every moment with listening to the sacred teachings (*sravana*), meditating on their inner meaning (*manana*) and practicing the path laid down (*nidi-dhyasana*). We shall not yield for a minute to sloth based on dull and ignorant (*thamasic*) qualities.”

As soon as it was dawn, he called the minister to his presence and directed that arrangements be made for the coronation and marriage of the prince. Full of the spirit of renunciation, he asked the queen what her plans were. She shed tears of joy and gratitude and said, “What greater good fortune can I gain? I am bound by your order; proceed with your plans.” Her enthusiasm and willing acceptance strengthened the emperor’s resolution.

Dilipa called his ministers, scholars, and sages and told them his intention to celebrate his son’s coronation and marriage. They wholeheartedly agreed, and the two functions were held with great pomp. The father then gave the prince valuable advice on governance, emphasising the need to promote the study of the *Vedas* and the fostering of scholars learned in *Vedic* lore and to lay down laws that would promote popular well-being. After this, he moved into the forest, with the queen, bent on acquiring the grace of God.

Emperor Raghu ruled the kingdom from that day in accordance with the directives given by the pundits and with twin objectives: the happiness of his subjects and the promotion of righteous living. He believed that these two were as vital as breath, and he spared no pains in pursuing these ideals and making his ministers also adhere to the path. Though young, he was rich in virtue. However tough a problem happened to be, he grasped it quickly and discovered the means of solving it; he made his subjects happy and contented. Wicked kings were taught severe lessons by him. He won them over by a peaceful approach and clever diplomatic tactics, or by fielding a little army in order to win them over, or by openly breaking with them and defeating them on the field of battle.

He was engaged in activities that ensured the people’s welfare and promoted the culture enshrined in the *Vedas*. All classes of people extolled his rule, regardless of age, economic status, or attainments. They said he was proving himself superior to his father in physical prowess, courage, righteous conduct, and compassion. Everyone said he brought lasting significance to the name he bore.

Raghu paid special attention to the care and comfort of the hermits engaged in asceticism in the forests; he saw to it that they were saved from harassment and himself supervised arrangements for assuring them protection and encouragement. So, he received their blessings and grace in ample measure.

One day, the student hermit Kautsu, disciple of Varathanthu, came to the Court after finishing his studies. He prayed to the King to help him in securing the thanks offering that he had to submit to his preceptor. Raghu gave him the money he wanted. Kautsu was happy that the gift he received was pure, collected from the people without causing them any distress and paid by them gladly and gratefully, for Raghu did not collect even a paisa more than was absolutely needed, since his main goal was the grace of God. The money was handed over with great love and consideration, so Kautsu was overwhelmed with joy and gratefulness. His heart was full, and he spoke lovingly to the King. “May you be blessed soon with a son who will achieve worldwide fame.” With this he left the ruler’s presence.

King Aja

True to his words, ten months later, Raghu was blessed with a son, dazzling like a diamond! The rites of

baptism and naming were performed by the palace priests; he was named Aja. He was a very charming babe. He grew into a sprightly boy, eager to learn all the arts and sciences. He became an adept in each of them. His fame as a great scholar and a very accomplished lad spread throughout the land.

In the course of time, Raghu also felt his father's urge to place on the prince's head the burden of the sceptre and retire to the forest for the contemplation of God. He too called on the ministers to arrange for the transfer of authority by means of the rite of coronation and to synchronise that rite with the marriage of Aja with a suitable bride. Indumathi, Bhojaraja's sister, the ruler of Magadha, was chosen to be Aja's life partner. After the installation of Aja on the throne, the royal parents left for their forest hermitage.

Aja, with the queen as his loving partner, won the loyalty of the subjects by his wisdom and sympathy: they scrupulously followed the advice given by Raghu on the ways and means of administration. Aja loved and revered the world and its inhabitants as the reflections and images of the Indumathi he loved so deeply, so he was full of happiness and exaltation. They used to spend days and weeks in beautiful sylvan retreats, admiring the glory and grandeur of nature.

Meanwhile, the queen gave birth to a son. The parents were overjoyed at this happy event and had the news communicated to their revered preceptor, Vasishta. They wanted ceremonial rites to be done for the newborn baby. He was named Dasaratha.

Dasaratha was the pet of everyone who saw him and who had the privilege of fondling him. The child waved and tossed its limbs about as if he was all vitality and joy. He appeared as if fed on spiritual bliss (*ananda*) and lived only for imparting spiritual bliss to all.

One day, Aja and Indumathi betook themselves into the forest, as was their wont, for recreation in nature's lap. The silence and the sublimity of that day were even more appealing than on other days. They sat in the shade of a tree and conversed endearingly, when a wind rose heavy and strong. It brought a fragrance, sweet beyond description. And, they could hear the captivating strains of divine music! They rose and searched all around them for the cause of these mysterious gifts. They found high above their heads, between the clouds in the sky, Narada, the "mental son (*manasa-putra*)" of Brahma, moving fast somewhere. Even as they were watching him, a flower from the wreath he was wearing on his tuft unloosened itself and, wafted by the wind, fell right on Indumathi's head. Aja was amazed at this incident and shocked to find that the queen fell instantly on the ground in a faint and closed her eyes forever!

The secret of Indumathi's death

The death of the woman he loved as intimately as his own breath caused desperate grief to the ruler; his lamentation shook the forest from end to end. The earth quaked in sympathy; the trees stood still, rooted in wonder at the sorrow that filled the royal heart and overflowed it.

Narada heard the wail of the king —his sobs and groans— as he wept over the corpse of his beloved. He came down to console his agony. "King! Sorrow is of no avail when death strikes; the body is prone to birth and death. What brings about birth brings about death too, and to seek to know why they happen is an exercise in insanity. The acts of God are beyond the chain of cause and effect. Ordinary intellects cannot unravel them; they can at best guess the reason, as far as their faculties can reach. How can the intellect grasp something out of its domain?"

“Death is inevitable for each embodied being. However, since Indumathi’s death is resonant with strangeness, I have to tell you its reason.” Narada drew Aja near and said, “Listen! In former days, the sage Thrinabindu was engaged in extreme asceticism, and Indra resolved to test his attainments and the depth of his equanimity. He despatched a divine enchantress, Harini, to attract him into the world of sensualism. But the sage was immune to her wiles and remained unaffected. He opened his eyes and said, ‘You do not seem to be an ordinary woman. You are perhaps a godly damsel. Well, whoever you are, you must suffer the penalty for resolving to execute a foul deed, a nefarious plan! Be born as a human being, fallen from heaven; learn what it is to be a mortal human.’ Cursing her thus, the sage closed his eyes and plunged back into meditation.

“Harini shook with fear and shed profuse tears of repentance; she prayed for pardon and for cancellation of her exile from heaven, she pleaded pathetically for the removal of the curse. At this, the sage melted a little and said, ‘O weak one! It is not possible for me to take back my words. But I shall indicate an occasion when you will be released. Listen! The moment a flower from heaven drops on your head, your human frame will fall and you can return to heaven.’ Indumathi is that divine damsel and she has found her release this day. When a flower I wore fell on her, she rid herself of the curse. Why grieve over this? It is of no avail.”

Narada spoke of the duties of a monarch, his responsibility, and the example he must set before all; he spoke of the evanescent nature of life and the mystery of death, the ultimate fate of all beings that are born. Then, Narada wended his way across the sky.

Unable to save his beloved, Aja performed the obsequies and went home. He was heavy with grief, and only Dasaratha could give him some consolation and renew his will to live. He spent his days in morose dreariness. Since Dasaratha was now a full-grown youth, Aja made over the kingdom to him and sat on the bank of the Sarayu river, bent on fulfilling the vow of “nonacceptance of food”. Denying himself the sustenance to continue, he caused his life to ebb away.

When Dasaratha heard the news, he hastened quickly to the Sarayu bank and bewailed the loss of his dear father. He arranged for the funeral without delay and felt some relief that his father had given up life through a ritualistic vow. He drew some strength from this fact and resumed his duties as the ruler, with full mastery of all his varied faculties.