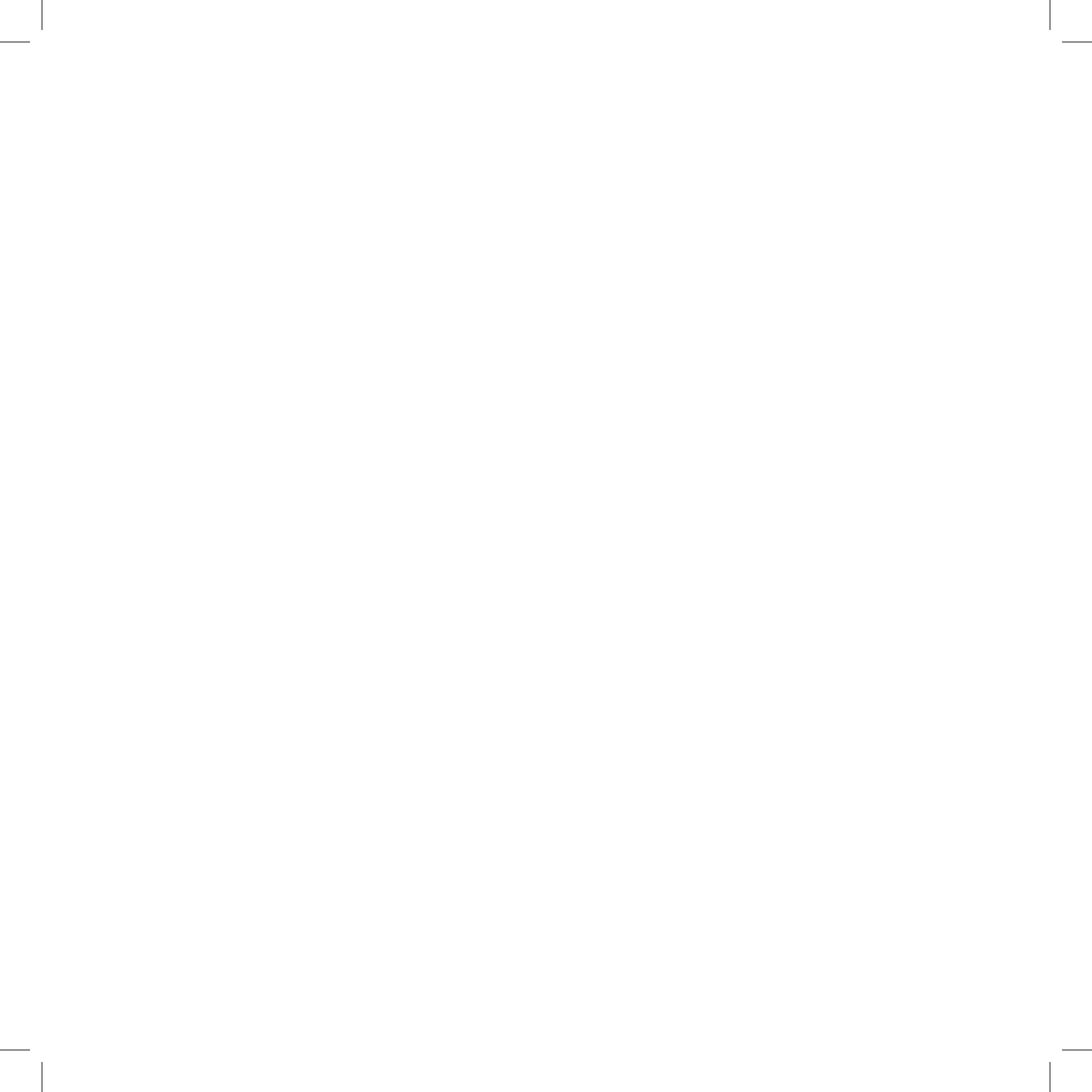


MAHABHARATA
FOR CHILDREN



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ARSHIA SATTAR

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 juggernaut

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The Beginning

Deep in the forest that is filled with singing birds and darting deer and curious hare, you can hear the distant trumpeting of elephants and the roars of lions and tigers. But the soft water-music of streams will lead you to pools filled with lotuses that are surrounded by trees hanging low, laden with sweet fruit. The fragrance of flowers fills the air, gentle breezes rise and fall in the early mornings and late evenings, following the sun as he marks day from night in his journey across the sky. The forest is peaceful, the forest is a place where we can be close to the world that the gods made, the forest is a place where even time stops to breathe.

A group of sages lived in a forest like this. They ate what the forest gave them, they bathed in the cool waters of the lotus pools, they focused their minds on what was true and good and beautiful. And in the evenings, they gathered to talk about the past, the present and the future. On one such evening, a young sage named Ugrashravas, who had just returned from the city, had a great story to tell.

It is the story that we now call the Mahabharata. It is a story of a great war, of a family torn apart by greed and ambition and jealousy, a story of kings and princes and brave heroes, a story about queens and fearless women who fought for what they wanted, a story about a man who held god within himself, a story about how good people do bad things and how bad people are honourable, it is a story about who we are and who we can be. It is a story that we still tell today.

In that quiet gathering of sages who already knew the best of things and the worst of things, Ugrashravas took a deep breath and then he spoke in a voice that was clear as a bell.

Ugrashravas said:

In the rich and prosperous city of Hastinapura, King Janamejaya was conducting a sacrifice like no other. It was a grand ceremony that would give him what he wished for. Hundreds upon hundreds of priests recited the sacred words that brought the gods to earth, thousands upon thousands of people came to enjoy all that the city had to offer – the marketplaces that overflowed with silks and jewelled ornaments and spices from faraway lands and wooden toys painted in bright colours and glass bangles that caught the light of the lamps at night, the acrobats and clowns and jugglers and actors and singers and dancers, the cattle and horse fairs and the bazaar of strange animals.

It was a time of celebration but the sacred ritual itself was dark and bitter. Janamejaya wanted to avenge the killing of his father by the snake Takshaka, and so he was performing the sarpa satra, a ceremony that brought the snakes from the three worlds into the burning fire pit at the heart of the sacrificial altar. Helpless against the powerful spells and mantras uttered by the priests, snakes who lived on land and in water, in the deserts and in the places where nothing grew, those who





lived underground and in deep mountain caves, those who had their homes in trees and in the grasslands came – none of them could fight the magic words that were pulling them to their horrible, painful death.

Along with their wives and children, their families and their old parents, the snakes slithered and tumbled into the flames of Janamejaya's sacrifice, hissing in agony.

It was there, at this sacrifice, that I heard this story from the wise Vaishampayana who heard it from Vyasa, the greatest of all storytellers, who saw it all unfold before his very eyes. It is said that when Vyasa wanted his great story to be written down, it was elephant-headed Ganesha himself who descended from the heavens to write it as Vyasa recited it.

Let me tell you what I heard from Vaishampayana.

Vaishampayana said:

Once, long ago, there was a good and just king named Shantanu. He was born in the line of the great Bharata kings and ruled from Hastinapura, the city of his forefathers. One day, when Shantanu was

wandering in the pleasant lands outside his city, he saw a woman standing by the banks of the river Ganga. He was curious about who she was, alone and far from where people live. As he drew closer, he became certain that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. His heart pounded loudly in his ears and his mouth grew dry because he realised that even though he knew nothing about her, he was going to ask her to marry him.

He bowed to her and said, ‘Lovely lady, you have captured my heart. I know that I cannot live without you. Marry me. I am the king of Hastinapura, I am rich and powerful but it is my love for you that will give you the best of everything on earth.’

‘I can marry you only on one condition, good king,’ said the woman. ‘You must never ever question anything that I do. Can you agree to that?’

Noble Shantanu stood tall and squared his shoulders. ‘My lady, it shall be as you say. I will never question you. This is the promise I give you as I ask you to be mine.’

The woman placed her hand in his without any hesitation. It was as

soft and as delicate as a flower. Shantanu took his new beloved back to his palace and they were married with all the rituals and ceremonies that ensured their happiness, their long lives and the birth of many sons.

Shantanu and the woman he had found by the river were, indeed, happy together and soon she gave birth to a beautiful boy. Shantanu was overjoyed. He showered his wife with gifts and looked forward to teaching his son how to become a great warrior and a good king. But when the child turned a year old, his mother took him to the river and drowned him. Grief burned in Shantanu's heart and made it difficult for him to breathe, but he recalled the promise he had made and said nothing to his wife. Year after year, a sweet, smiling boy would be born to Shantanu and his queen and, each time, the queen would take their son away and drown him.

This happened seven times and finally Shantanu couldn't bear it any longer.

When their eighth child was born, Shantanu cried out, 'What kind of woman are you? Which mother drowns her own children? How can you do this? Give me my son!'

‘You have broken your promise, my husband,’ she said quietly and her eyes filled with tears as she turned to the man she had loved for so many years.

‘I don’t care about my promise to you! How can I not question you when you are doing something so heartless?’ replied Shantanu, trembling.

‘I will tell you why I have drowned our sons,’ she said. ‘I am the goddess Ganga. These boys born to us are the Vasus, celestial beings who accompany the gods Indra and Vishnu. They were cursed to be born on earth because they were mischievous and stole sage Vasishtha’s cow. I was appointed by the gods to give birth to them and let them live only for a year. By killing them, I have been setting them free so that they can return to their homes.’

Shantanu placed his head at her feet. ‘How could I have known, sweet wife, great goddess!’ he whispered. ‘Forgive me. I will never question you again.’

Ganga smiled sadly as she raised the king from the ground. ‘I, too, must leave you now. My time on earth is done, I have fulfilled the task I was set.’

Shantanu wept and begged her not to go. Ganga consoled him and said, 'Our last son, the eighth Vasu, must live on earth for his entire life. His curse was different from that of the others. I will take him with me to heaven now. But when he has learned all that he must, I will send him back to you. He will be the living symbol of the love we have shared and he will be with you for as long as you live.'

Ganga gently wiped the tears from Shantanu's face and then she picked up her infant son and vanished.

Shantanu continued to rule his kingdom wisely and well but there was no joy in his life. He often walked by the river, remembering the woman he had loved. Years passed in this way and then, one day, Shantanu noticed that the river looked different. Instead of the clear deep waters that he was accustomed to, the river appeared shallow and muddy. He followed the river's course and came to a bend where he saw a boy shooting arrows into the water that blocked the river's normal, smooth flow.

The youth shone with an inner light, his eyes were clear and his arms were strong and steady. Shantanu hailed him. He asked him who

he was and what he was doing. But before his astonished eyes, the boy disappeared. In a flash, Shantanu understood that this was his eighth son, the one that Ganga had taken away with her. Raising his voice to the heavens, Shantanu called out to his wife.

Ganga appeared, as lovely as ever, her presence as soothing as her cool waters on a hot day. The boy was with her. She said, ‘This is our youngest son, Shantanu. Take him back to Hastinapura. He will grow up to be a wise man and a great warrior – the divine sages have been his teachers.’

Shantanu embraced his son and together they returned to the city, where Shantanu anointed him heir to the throne. He called him Gangadatta, ‘the gift of Ganga’, so that he would always remember his wife. The people rejoiced when they saw their beloved king smiling again and they welcomed their new prince with open hearts.

Years went by and Gangadatta grew into a fine young man. He was calm, he was learned and, with his great strength and many skills, he was unrivalled in battle. His reputation spread far and wide and he was admired by all. Gangadatta had a quiet love for his father, he

noticed his moods and took care of his needs. And so Gangadatta was concerned when he saw that Shantanu was looking pale and thin, that he had lost interest in the affairs of the kingdom. He seemed not to eat or sleep and he sighed heavily all the time.

Gently, Gangadatta said to him, ‘Father, is there something wrong? The kingdom is prosperous, our people are happy, no enemies threaten our borders. But you are troubled. Tell me what is on your mind.’

Shantanu kissed his son on the forehead and said, ‘You are a good man, my son. But there is nothing you can do to ease my cares.’

Gangadatta said, ‘Tell me, father, tell me so that I can find a way to help you.’

Shantanu sighed. Staring at the ground, he spoke. ‘The other day, I was walking by the river, as usual, and I was overcome by a heavenly fragrance. I had never smelled anything like it, it took over my senses, it made my hands shake, my legs quiver. I followed that divine smell and found a young woman, a fisherman’s daughter, sitting by her boat. The smell came from her, the air around her was so heavy with it, I nearly fainted. I fell in love with her, son, I knew I could not live without that

fragrance in my life. I asked her father for her hand in marriage and he agreed. But the woman said that she would marry me only if her sons would inherit the throne and rule Hastinapura after me.'

'What is the problem with that?' asked Gangadatta.

Shantanu raised his eyes to look at his son. 'You will rule the land of the Bharatas after me, Gangadatta, you are my firstborn son. I have anointed you my heir in public. You are the worthiest successor any father could ask for. This is your kingdom. I cannot take it away from you.'

When Gangadatta smiled, he looked like his mother. He said, 'Father, this kingdom means nothing to me. I give up all claims to the throne from this moment onwards. Take me to your lady of the heavenly fragrance. I will tell her myself that her sons will be kings and that I shall never challenge them for the throne.'

Shantanu said, 'But what about your sons, my son? Whatever you do, your children will always have a right to the throne. And what about the sons of your sons? Your solution could place our family in danger for generations to come. I cannot accept your offer. It will make me happy now, but what of the future?'

Gangadatta placed his hand on his heart and said, ‘Father, I swear upon my divine mother and upon my love for you, I shall never marry, I shall never have children. There will never be any rivals to the sons of the fisherman’s daughter for the throne of the Bharatas!’

The earth shook when he finished speaking, flowers fell from the sky and a chorus of voices rang out. ‘Hail, Gangadatta! The world will now know you as Bhishma, the Awesome, because of the difficult promise that you have made. The gods respect you and the entire world will hold you in great esteem. Bhishma, the gods grant you a boon: you can choose the moment of your death! Live in glory, Bhishma! You will be remembered forever.’

The very next day, Bhishma went with his father to claim the fisherman’s daughter as the king’s new bride. When the woman came to the palace of Hastinapura, she was known to everyone as Queen Satyawati.