
Courage and Sacrifice of Bhishma in the Mahabharata

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Abstract: *The Mahabharata is not an interesting epic but also provides us many teachings for life. Every character in the epic has a certain role to play and serve a purpose. This paper explores the character of Bhishma in epic. He is like a jewel in the treasure of memorable characters of Mahabharata. He was a strong and great personality. He sacrificed his whole life to fulfill his promises.*

Key Words: Sacrifice, strong, warrior, responsibilities

Introduction: Character of Bhishma is the embodiment of bravery, sacrifice and selfless service. He was a Vasu but he descended on the earth along with other seven Vasus due to a curse. For their redemption, Ganga became ready to become their mother. She married to king Shantanu and gives birth to Vasus but as the child is born she drowns that baby in the river so that he could be free from the curse. But when eighth Vasu is born he couldn't get

redemption because he was compelled to stay for very long years due to his sin. This child came to be known as Devavrata. He becomes a great warrior and receives the knowledge of the battle skill and all Vedas. After leaving his son under the protection of Shantanu, Ganga leaves. Shantanu returns back with Devavrata and announces him as his successor. But destiny had something hidden in its womb. One day Shantanu gets infatuated with a fisher girl, Satyawati. But Satyawati's father puts a condition that the future son born to Satyawati will be the king after Shantanu. Shantanu doesn't become ready for this and comes back.

When Devavrata comes to know about this, he goes to the father of Satyawati. He promises him that the son of Shantanu and Satyawati will become the king after Shantanu. Further, he announces that he will never marry so that he nullifies all the future possibilities of becoming his king. He takes this severe vow to remain celibate throughout the life so that his father renames him as Bhishma. He also obtains a boon of, "Ichha

Mrityu” from his father which gave him the power to choose the time for his death. This also made him invincible, as no one would be able to kill him unless he chose the time of his death. Bhishma was not only a powerful warrior but was a wise, skilled and talented administrator. He had all the qualities of becoming an excellent king. But because of his sacrifice for the sake of his father he lost the chance to serve his kingdom by this way. So the story takes a turn and course of events change.

Satyavati gives birth to two sons Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Chitrangada had been killed by a Gandharva, “... after Chitrangada was slain, his successor Vichitravirya being a minor, Bhishma ruled the kingdom, placing himself under the command of Satyawati” (Ganguli Adi Parva. 102.219). When Vichitravirya grows up; Bhishma takes the responsibility of finding brides for him. He reaches to the Swyamvara of the daughters of the king of Kashi and abducted all his three daughters, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, for Vichitravirya. He also defeated other assembled suitors of the princess. The eldest princess Amba was in love with king Salva and she had decided to choose him as her husband but he was also defeated by

Bhishma. She requests to Bhishma to let her go. Bhishma agrees and Amba goes to king Salva. King Salva refuses to marry her because she has already won by Bhishma after defeating him. Amba returns back to Bhishma and tells him the whole situation. Now infuriated Amba asks Bhishma to marry her as he has not left any other option for her. In this stage, she can't go to her father's kingdom and king Salva has already rejected her. Now Bhishma's oath of celibacy comes in between so he refuses to marry Amba. She even appealed to Parashurama, but he also failed to give justice to her. Neglected and insulted Amba decides to take her revenge. Bhishma's this step settled the life of Vichitravirya but ruined the life of Amba. Perhaps his promise to give his selfless service to the throne of Hastinapur motivated him to do this act. He was so dedicated to his duties that he sidelined every other aspect. Amba realizes that Bhishma can't be conquered. She considers Bhishma the root cause of her misfortunes so she enters the forest and starts severe austerities. After passing twelve years in severe penance she gets the boon from Lord Shiva to kill Bhishma in her next birth. Then she prepares her pyre and enters in it. “...Upon this, that faultless maiden of

the fairest complexion, the eldest daughter of the king of Kasi, procuring wood from that forest in the very sight of those great Rishis, made a large funeral pyre on the banks of the Yamuna, and having set fire to it herself, entered that blazing fire, O great king, with a heart burning with wrath, and uttering, O king, the words,--(I do so) for Bhishma's destruction!" (GanguliSambhava Parva.190.363)

Vichitravirya and Chitrangada die without producing any heir to the throne then Satyavati requests Bhishma to sire children on her widowed daughters-in-law. But he refuses and says

O mother, what thou sayest is certainly sanctioned by virtue. But thou knowest what my vow is in the matter of begetting children. Thou knowest also all that transpired in connection with thy dower. O Satyavati, I repeat the pledge I once gave, viz., I would renounce three worlds, the empire of heaven, anything that may be greater than that, but the truth I would never renounce. The earth may renounce its scent, water may renounce its moisture, light may renounce its

attribute of exhibiting forms, air may renounce its attribute of touch, the sun may renounce his glory, fire, its heat, the moon, his cooling rays, space, its capacity of generating sound, the slayer of Vritra, his prowess, the god of justice, his impartiality; but I cannot renounce truth.' (GanguliSambhava103.223)

Hearing this Satyavati discloses the secret of his son Vyasa to Bhishma. Bhishma with joined palms says, 'That man is truly intelligent who fixes his eyes judiciously on virtue, profit, and pleasure, and who after reflecting with patience, acteth in such a way that virtue may lead to future virtue, profit to future profit and pleasure to future pleasure. Therefore, that which hath been said by thee and which, besides being beneficial to us, is consistent with virtue is certainly the best advice and hath my full approval.' (Ganguli Sambhava Parva.105.227)

Vyasa thus fathers Dhritarashtra by the elder widow, Pandu by the younger one, and Vidura by a maid. Dhritarashtra couldn't be the king because of his blindness so Pandu gets the throne. Bhishma selects Gandhari for Dhritarashtra and Kunti for

Pandu. He is well aware that Dhritarashtra is blind but he is also well acquainted with this fact that Gandhari has received the boon of hundred sons from Lord Shiva. Bhishma does that whatever is beneficial to the throne of Hastinapur. After marrying Pandu to Kunti, Bhishma searches another union for Pandu. He marries Pandu to Madri and makes another alliance. Bhishma was firmly bound to the throne so that he never tried to break his promise. That's why he fails to convince Duryodhana to stop the *Dyuta* game. He couldn't stop the insult of Draupadi in Kuru Sabha. He feels helpless in stopping the war. Bhishma becomes the commander-in-chief of Kauravas because of his loyalty towards the kingdom. His heart is always with the Pandavas, but he feels duty bound to serve the Kauravas. He successfully leads the Kauravas army. Pandu realizes that if they want to win then they will have to eliminate their grandfather 'Bhishma.' So on the ninth day of the war, late that night the Pandavas and Krishna visit Bhishma's camp and Yudhishtira asks the Bhishma to show the way for his elimination. Bhishma tells the Pandavas that he is unconquerable in battle. He can only be defeated when he lays down his bow and weapons. Once he had taken a vow that he

would never hurt a woman or someone who had once been a woman. Shikhandi was born a woman but later changed her sex. If Shikhandi appears in front of Bhishma then he would not attack him then Arjuna would get a chance to kill Bhishma. The following day, Arjuna places Shikhandi in front of him and pierces Bhishma with arrows. Bhishma falls from the chariot, not on earth but on a bed of arrows. Arjuna notices that Bhishma's head was hanging down so he shoots three arrows into the ground and lifts his grandfather's head and places it on the pillow of arrows. Although he had been pierced through arrows, he didn't die. He lies upon the battlefield through the end of the war and chose the moment of the winter solstice to pass away.

Conclusion: Bhishma devoted himself completely to the welfare of the kingdom. He pays his duties without any second thought that's why he had to face the anger of Amba and she becomes the reason for his death. He is duty bound to his responsibilities towards throne and the king of Hastinapur but by heart, he is with Pandavas because he knows that they are right and fighting to establish Dharma, that's why he guides them to eliminate himself. He suffers a lot in his life due to his nature of

truthfulness and doing sacrifices. In war, he tolerated the ultimate pain for the sake of Dharma. “What does one make of this extraordinary figure who lived his life for the sake of others? He certainly managed to create a huge problem of succession. His vow of celibacy turned out to be a curse on the Bhārata dynasty that led eventually to a horrendous war of succession. Is the *Mahabharata* telling us that even selflessness has its limitations? ” (Das 123)

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