

BACKGROUND OF EVENTS LEADING TO THE MAHABHARATA

There was a king named Shantanu. In his previous life, he was a celestial being and in love with Ganga. They were sent down to Earth. Shantanu requested Ganga to be his bride. She got married to Shantanu only after he agreed to her term, that he would not interfere with her activities, or else she would return to heaven. Actually, she had descended to Earth to relieve eight *vasus* of the trouble of the cycles of life and birth. She succeeded in putting seven of her children in the river soon after their birth, but Shantanu interfered and stopped her at the time of the eighth. Ganga kept her word and returned to heaven. Their son, Devavratha, lived to become a fine warrior prince.

Shantanu subsequently wanted to marry Matsygandha, who put a term that her son would inherit the throne. Devavratha on learning this immediately came and made a promise, to never marry and to always be on guard to see the safety of anyone who occupied the throne. At this great noble promise and huge sacrifice, his name was changed to Bhishma and his father gave him a boon that he would die only when he wished to die.

Shantanu's son, Vichitraveerya, born of his marriage to Matsyagandha died early. Vichitraveerya's sons were Dhritrashtra and Pandu. They were sent to school to learn the use of "shastras", the science of weapons and "shastra", the science of spiritual knowledge. When they returned, a decision had to be taken with regards to the throne, as there was no one occupying it. Bhishma was only guarding it and awaiting a proper appointment. Dhritrashtra was the elder son and had full claim to be king, except that he was blind from birth. This was supposed to be drawback to a proper appointment. How could a person incapable of defending oneself be able to defend the country?

The younger brother, Pandu, was appointed the King. After a few years, Pandu, with his two wives, Kunti and Madri went for a long vacation to the forests and asked the elder brother to take care of the throne. During the sojourn in the forest, were born to Kunti three sons – Yudhisthira, Bhima and Arjuna. To Madri were born twins Nakula and Sahadeva. It was fated that Pandu died along with his wife Madri in the jungle and Kunti brought the five children to Hastinapur. The five sons of Pandu were known as the Pandavas.

Meanwhile, Dhritrashtra's wife Gandhari was having trouble in delivering her child. A miscarriage took place, but the scientist saint Veda Vyasa kept the product of conception in incubators and ultimately one hundred healthy boys and one girl were born. They were known as the Kauravas. The eldest brother was Duryodhan.

The Kauravas resented these Pandavas very much. During their school days, under the tutelage of Guru Dronacharya, Bhima was poisoned and pushed into the river to drown. They tried to kill the whole family by burning a house made of inflammable material where the Pandavas were to spend the night. Luckily, they escaped unhurt.

The intense rivalry continued and ultimately the problem of nominating the “*yuvraj*” or the next in line of the king cropped up. Duryodhana could not have it, as it rightfully belonged to Yudhishthira, the eldest son of King Pandu. In order to settle the dispute, there was a division of the state. The most barren land on the hills was given to the Pandavas and Yudhishthira was crowned King. By the grace of Lord Krishna, this area became fertile and soon a new capital Indraprastha was made.

This further infuriated the Kauravas. They schemed with their uncle Shakuni, who invited the Pandavas to a game of dice, of which he was a master trickster. The Pandavas had to lose everything. Draupadi, the wife of Pandavas was humiliated in front of all courtiers. The Pandavas were made to go to the jungles for twelve years and spend one year incognito. Even after fulfilling these terms, the Kauravas refused to return anything to the Pandavas, which rightfully belonged to them (Pandavas). Lord Krishna himself went to broker peace on behalf of the Pandavas. This was because His father Vasudeva and Kunti were cousins; also the Pandavas respected Him very much. He felt that the Pandavas were on the righteous path and that the Kauravas were “*atatais*”. Persons committing any of the six heinous crimes (attempt to take the life of a person, poisoning someone, setting house on fire, robbing of wealth, dispossessing rightful ownership of land and abduction of women) are known as “*atatais*”. The Kauravas had committed all of these six crimes. It is said in our shaashtras that killing of such demoniac persons, “*atatais*”, would be considered a boon for mankind and hence a religious duty.

In a final effort the Lord said that the Pandavas would be satisfied with only five villages. The haughty Duryodhana refused this point blank, saying that not even a piece of land accomodating on the tip of a needle would be given, without a fight.

Thus, the stage was set for the world war for which both the sides had been planning for long.

The Lord expressed His desire, not to fight in the battle. Arjuna requested Him to be his charioteer in the battle. The two armies opposed each other at the battlefield of Kurukshetra (a place 100 kilometres north of New Delhi) about the year 5000BC.

The Kauravas were more in numerical strength, but there were more “*maharathis*” or great warriors on the side of Pandavas, and of course their greatest source of strength was Lord Sri Krishna.

At the appropriate time, the blind king, Dhritrashtra, became inquisitive to know about the events taking place at Kurukshetra, and asked his minister, Sanjaya, who was granted the boon of “tele-vision” by sage Ved Vyasa, to report to him. This forms the opening verse of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita, the celestial song divine, consisting of seven hundred verses.