

MAHABHARATA – Part 1

(Bhishma's Vow)



Once there was a sage named Veda Vyasa. He was not an ordinary sage! In fact, he was one of the greatest saints of all time! He was the great grandson of Rishi Vasistha, who was guru to Lord Rama. Veda Vyasa saw very clearly all the problems mankind would face in the future. He wanted to convey all that in a story to the people of India, which is also called Bharat. The story would show the lives of good and bad people. Those who carefully listened to those stories could then know the difference between right and wrong. In fact, this story belongs not only to India but to the World too. It is a parable of the human race, and carries a universal message – victory comes to those who stay on the righteous path. It eventually became a huge story, made up of eighteen parvas (books). Maha means great, and the story was called the Mahabharat.

It was an extremely lengthy story. There weren't tape recorders or video machines at that time, which was more than 5,000 years ago. Veda Vyasa wanted someone to write down his story while he dictated it. He was looking for a capable person. One day, Saint Narada, the great devotee of Vishnu, visited Saint Vyasa. He suggested Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, as a scribe or writer.

Veda Vyasa approached Ganesha and politely asked him to serve as his scribe. Ganesha said that he would do it, but only if Veda Vyasa never paused while he dictated. "What a challenge this will be!" thought Veda Vyasa. So he said "Yes, but you have to understand everything I dictate before you write new lines." This little negotiation made it possible for Veda Vyasa to get some pause between dictating lines, while Ganesha thought about the verse just dictated. While Ganesha contemplated the meaning, Veda Vyasa mentally composed new verses.

Our story starts in Brahma's heaven, called Brahma Loka. As you remember, Brahma is the creator of this whole universe. Brahma's heaven is very beautiful and blissful. Humans who do a lot of good in this life get to go live in Brahma's heaven for some time. How long they stay depends on how much good they did. The more good you do, the longer you stay. Once all your good deeds, called merit, run out, you have to be reborn on Earth again.

One time there was a very righteous King, King Mahabishak. He attained Brahma Loka, as a result of his great penance and good deeds. Ganga, the goddess of River Ganges, came to Brahma Loka to pay her obeisance to Lord Brahma. Mahabishak cast his glance on Ganga and was lost to her charms. At the same time, goddess Ganga looked at Mahabishak, and was attracted by his handsome personality. This exchange of glances in the presence of other gods and sages present in Brahma Loka, spoiling the atmosphere, greatly annoyed Brahma. He cursed them to be born on earth, live as a couple, and return to Brahma Loka.

At the same time, another drama was playing out. There were eight gods called the Vasus. These Ashtavasus are responsible for managing certain areas of creation. These eight Vasus went on a picnic with their wives. They came across the ashram of Vasistha, the great Rishi. Vasistha wasn't

there at that time, but his divine cow was. His cow was named Nandini and was most delightful! Nandini is known to materialize and bestow anything that is wished from her. The wife of Prabhasa, one of the eight Vasus, wished to own Nandini, and asked Prabhasa to steal it from the sage. Prabhasa said "It belongs to Vasistha! We cannot take it!" But she kept pestering him. Finally, he gave in. When the eight Vasus left, they took the cow with them. They had to drag the cow because it did not want to leave the ashram.

When Vasistha returned, he wondered "Where is my sweet Nandini cow?" Being a great rishi, Vasistha decided to meditate. He found out what happened through his yogic insight, his ability to see the unseen by looking inside himself. His cow had been stolen! He decided to teach the eight Vasus a lesson. Because he never told a lie, whatever he said would become true. He cursed the eight Vasus so that they would have to leave heaven and live on Earth as humans! Because heaven life is so delightful, and Earth life filled with so many problems, this was a very bad punishment.

The Vasus learned of the curse, and brought the cow back, saying they were very sorry. Once a saint makes a curse, he cannot withdraw it. But he can modify it. Being a nice man, Vasistha told them – because you have apologized, I will modify the curse. Seven of you will be born as humans but not live very long. Only Prabhasa, who stole the cow, will have to live a long life as a human.

Let's get back to the story of Mahabishak and Ganga. Mahabishak was born in the city of Hastinapura as King Shantanu. One day, Shantanu went for hunting to a nearby forest, and saw a beautiful woman near the banks of river Ganges. He was completely spellbound at the very first sight of that woman's grace and divine beauty, and asked her to be his wife. The woman was the goddess Ganga. She said "I will become your wife only on these conditions: You will never ask anything about my personal life, and you must never oppose what I do or ask me why I do it. If you ever question my actions, I will leave you." Shantanu was totally gripped by the maiden's beauty, and immediately accepted her conditions. Immediately, they were married, and lived in happiness together for sometime.

The time came when Ganga and King Shantanu's first child was born, a little boy. Knowing that the boy was one of the Vasus, who wanted to go back to heaven, Ganga took the boy and drowned him in the Ganges. Being a goddess, Ganga knew everything. But being a human, King Shantanu did not remember anything from his previous life, or understand what was happening. He was very upset. But having vowed never to question his wife, he said nothing. This happened seven times! After the eighth baby was born, Ganga took the baby, and was about to drown him in the Ganges. Do you know what is most precious to parents? It is their children! King Shantanu could not stand to see another of his children die. He told Ganga "Stop! What are you doing?" Ganga looked at him and smiled. "I told you I would leave you when you questioned me, so I am leaving." Then she left him.

Many years later, when Shantanu was taking a stroll on the bank of the river Ganges, Goddess Ganga emerged out of the river with a young boy, Devavrat, who was their eighth son. He was 14 years old,

and studied under many great Gurus. She handed over the boy to king as the Vasistha's curse is still due on Devavrat, and disappeared. King Shantanu happily brought the prince to the palace, and celebrated his advent by declaring him the crown prince of his kingdom. Devavrat was very brave, and his archery skills were unmatched, and so he was labeled as the bravest warrior of his time. As he was growing, he started expanding the Kuru dynasty in all the directions.

King Shantanu was very lonely after Ganga left him. He would dream about the lovely times they had together. No other woman could match her. One day, he was walking along the river. He smelled a wonderful fragrance. There was a woman, named Satyawati, from her the beautiful perfume like smell came. By a special boon, a lovely fragrance came from her body wherever she went. King Shantanu's heart stirred. "Here is a woman who could be my companion" he thought.

King Shantanu approached Satyawati's father, a fisherman, and asked for Satyawati's hand in marriage. Her father thought about it. He was worried that if Satyawati married Shantanu, their children would not get a chance to rule the great kingdom since his son, Devavrat, was first in line for the crown. Looking out for his daughter's well-being, the fisherman placed a proposition before Shantanu that Devavrat would have to forfeit the throne, or else Shantanu could not have Satyawati's hand in marriage.

Shantanu was very hurt by this proposition because he knew that it was Devavrat's right to be the next king. Knowing he would be doing injustice to his son, he tried to forget about Satyawati. However, being away from Satyawati caused Shantanu to become depressed. Devavrat, through his father's charioteer, came to know of the reason behind his father's depression, and decided that as a son, he should help his father regain his happiness. Devavrat arranged a meeting with the fisherman. Devavrat promised Satyawati's father that he would let her children rule the kingdom. However, this generous offer was not enough for the fisherman. He was worried that there was still a possibility that Devavrat's future children may challenge the right of Satyawati's future children. To quell the fisherman's fears, Devavrat vowed to practice eternal celibacy (he will never marry, and will have no children). Devavrat's will to help his father astonished the gods in the heavens, who immediately showered flowers upon him, shouting "Bhishma, Bhishma, Bhishma!" Bhishma means "one with a terrible oath or difficult vow" and so from then on, Devavrat was referred to as Bhishma. Hearing about his son's immense sacrifice, Shantanu first shocked, and then granted him the boon of "Ichha Mrityu", the power to choose his time of death.

Thus king Shantanu and Satyawati were married due to Bhishma's unselfish dedication and love towards his father. In due course of time, Queen Satyawati bore two sons, Chitrangada and Vichitravirya.

Questions:

Why did Vyasa want to write a story?

What is this story called, and what does the name mean?

Who wrote down the Mahabharata for sage Veda Vyasa?

Under what conditions was it written?
Was there some bargaining on the conditions? Why?
What is Brahma's heaven called?
Who is Lord Brahma?
Can you humans visit Brahma Loka? How?
How long can people stay in heaven?
Then what happens to them?
Why did Lord Brahma ask King Mahabishak and the goddess Ganga to leave heaven?
Who were the Vasus?
Why did Prabhas steal Vasistha's cow?
Do you also sometimes have someone pressure you to do something wrong?
Is stealing wrong? Why?
How did Vasistha find out?
Why is stealing wrong?
What did Vasistha do to the Vasus?
What is a "curse"? Can it be withdrawn?
How can rishis curse people and it happen?
Under what condition did Ganga agree to marry King Shantanu?
What did she do to the first seven children they had together?
What is most dear to parents?
Why did Ganga leave King Shantanu?
Was King Shantanu lonely.
How did Prince Devavrata convince the fisherman to let his daughter Satyawati marry King Shantanu?
After that, how was Devavrata called? Why?

Stotras for this week:
MahaLakshmi Ashtakam

**Namstestu Mahamaye Shripithe Surapujite
SankhaChakra GadhaHaste MahaLakshmi Namostute (1)**

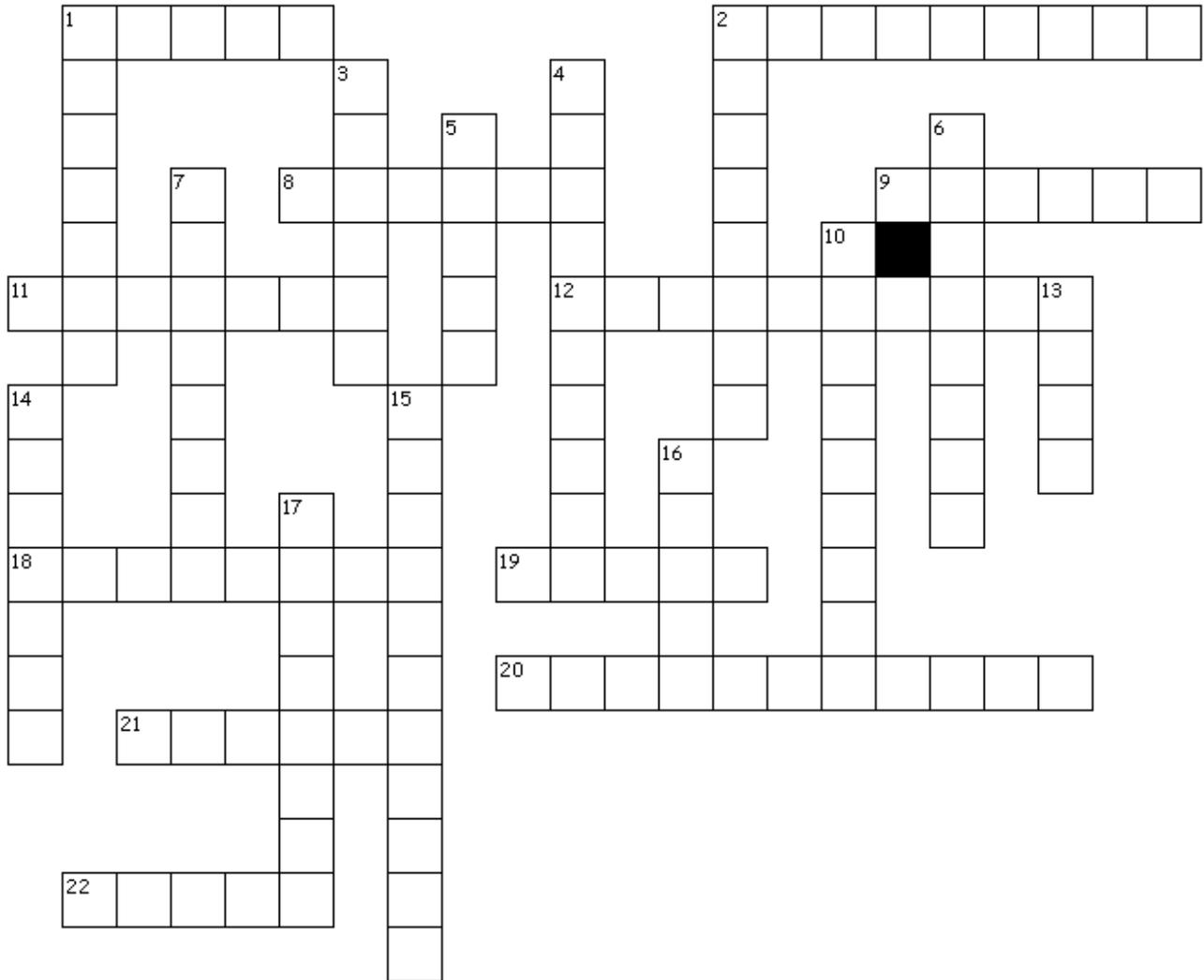
*Salutations to Devi Mahalakshmi -
Salutations to the Mahamaya (the Great Enchantress), Who is Worshipped by the Devas in Sri Pitha (Her Abode)
Who has the Conch, Disc and Mace in Her Hands; Salutations to that Mahalakshmi.*

**Namaste Garudarudhe Dolasura Bhayankari
SarvaPapaHare Devi MahaLakshmi Namostute (2)**

*Salutations to the One Who Rides the Garuda, Who is the Terror to Kolasura,
The Devi who Removes All Sins; Salutations to that Mahalakshmi*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Pg1RoMJP4>

CROSSWORD:



Across

1. Maha means
2. Shantanu's other wife
8. who recommended Ganesha name to Vyasa?
9. Narada is a great devotee of
11. Devavrat's Title
12. Whom Ganga met in Brahma Loka?
18. Shantanu's eighth son
19. Santanu's wife
20. Satyavati's son
21. Creator of this universe
22. Mahabharata Author

Down

1. Who wrote Mahabharata?
2. Bhishma's father
3. India also know as
4. Brahma's heaven is called
5. Other name for book
6. Mahabharata total Parvas
7. Vyasa's Great Grandfather
10. What is Satyavati's father?
13. Shantanu's dynasty
14. Vasistha's sacred cow
15. Shantanu's kingdom
16. How many Vasus are there?
17. Whose wife asked to steal Nandini?

Coloring exercise: Lord Ganesha

4to40

