

Advanced Course in Performance Traditions of the Mahabharata in Tamil Nadu- 2

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Lecture 11

SHANTANU AND THE BIRTH OF BHISHMA [33 MINUTES]

“The externalisation of that emotion which makes an appeal to the heart is the source of rasa. The body is suffused by it, as dry wood is suffused by fire”
Abhinavagupta

The storytellers would begin the narrative of each king by narrating their genealogy in the Lunar Dynasty. Shantanu was the next great king in the Lunar dynasty

Chandra's son was Budha, Budha's son was Pururavas, Pururavas's son was Ayu, Ayu's son was Nahusa and Nahusa's son was Yayati. Yayati's son was Puru, Puru's son was Janamejaya, Janamejaya's son Prachenan. Prachenan's son was Sayati, Sayati's son Sarvabhauman. Sarvabhauman's son Jayatsenan

Jayatsenan's son was Suraveedanan, Suraveedanan's son was Bhauman. Bhauman's son was Ayutanayin, Ayutanayin's son was Akrodhana and Akrodhana's son was Devaththi. Devaththi's son was Urusikan, Urusikan's son Arikshanan. Arikshanan's son was Dhidan and Dhidan's son was Nilan

Nilan's son was Dushyantana, Dushyantana's son was Bharatan. Bharatan's son Bhuman, Bhuman's son was Suhotran. Suhotran's son was Astikan, Astikan's son was Nigumban. Nigumban's son was Asamelan

Asamelan's son was Samvarnan, Samvarnan's son was Kuru. Kuru's son was Parikshit, Parikshit son was Pradipana. Pradipana's son was Shantanu. This dynasty ruled the land for centuries.

Shantanu literally means 'he who has a good body'. The people were very happy with Shantanu's rule and the only problems that they faced were from the wild animals of the forest which would encroach on their land causing harm to both life and property. The people wanted Shantanu to go on a hunt and kill these wild animals.

Most stories in the Mahabharata start with the narrative of a King going on a hunt. Shantanu went with his army to the forest and killed the wild animals there. At the end of the day he

was tired and went to the river to drink some water. There he saw a beautiful woman and immediately fell in love with her. It did not even occur to him to ask who she was, before he proposed marriage to her.

Shantanu goes on a hunt to the forest and feeling thirsty goes to the river Ganga to quench his thirst.

Near the river he sees a beautiful woman. Dazzled by her beauty the King even forgot about his thirst. Shantanu wondered “Is she Bhoomidevi, the Goddess earth? Is she Parvati, the beloved of Shiva? Is she the Lakshmi, the one seated on the red lotus flower? Or is she Saraswati, the white complexioned, repository of rich and varied arts, the goddess of learning? Who could she be?” Wondered a confused Shantanu

Shantanu declares to the woman that there can be no greater person than him on earth. I am the Emperor of fifty six countries. He says he is Shantanu and boasts about himself to impress the beautiful woman. He told her that if she was unmarried, she could not find no better suitor than him compatible to her beauty and youth.

The beautiful woman accepts to marry Shantanu but she has her own demand to make. She says that Shantanu was the only person she could ever think of getting married to. But she also says that she will only remain his wife as long as Shantanu does not question any of her actions. She said that some of her actions might seem horrific to Shantanu and if he agrees not to question them, she would be his wife. But she says, the moment that Shantanu questions any of her actions she would leave him.

A besotted Shantanu agrees to her demand not realizing its implications. They soon get married and live happily.

Ganga tells Shantanu “Scary, even hideous my acts, whatever that I choose to do, you should tolerate all of them. Agree to this and I will be your wife. That day you are aghast at my actions and question me with remorse, I will leave you forever!”

They lived together happily and soon Ganga became pregnant and she delivers their first son.

Living together for some days so compatible, the lady with deer like eyes conceived. Shantanu was happy, eagerly waiting to see their son. Even as the world watched she buried the son deep into the river with dashing waves a son, whom she bore in her womb for nine months.

Shantanu was elated at the birth of his first son, but a girl comes running into his court, crying. Shantanu asked her that when everybody else was rejoicing at the birth of his heir, why she alone was crying?

The girl wailed to Shantanu Oh King!...It is true that a son was born to you and the boy was as beautiful as a golden statue. Usually when a mother delivers her first child she would clasp the child to her heart and feed it milk from her breasts. The mothers that we have seen would then sing gentle lullabies to their child. Alas Oh King! Once the queen awoke from her swoon, she looked angrily at the child like the goddess of destruction, Kali! She strangled the child and threw him into the Ganges.

Shantanu was shocked by the brutal actions of his wife but remembering the promise he had made to her, he remained silent. They still live happily together and six more sons are born to them. His wife kills all six and all that Shantanu can do is watch helplessly. When the eighth son is born, Shantanu is unable to remain silent anymore and rushes to prevent his wife from killing the eighth son also.

Shantanu says "Please forget your anger and let this son live! Do not leave me for questioning you! Listen to me, even if you are angry, you should show mercy! Let this child live, let the lineage continue, I beg of you. Shantanu fell at the feet of his wife, pleading for the life of their eighth son.

The moment when he sang 'Nirkuga' asking his wife to stop, the lineage of Chandravamsam also ended.

This song 'Nirkuga' in Villibharatham has Shantanu asking Ganga to stop killing their son. Either the contemporary story teller or Nallapillai say that the Lunar Dynasty ended with this statement of Shantanu because Bhishma was the last alive direct descendent of the Dynasty. In the Mahabharata, the Kauravas and their cousins the Pandavs are celebrated as being of the Lunar Dynasty.

When a king died without leaving a progeny behind it seems to have been accepted practice in the times of the Epic for his wife to continue the Dynasty through intercourse with a close

relative. This seems to have been a common practice and the son born of this union would be recognised as the son of the king.

Shantanu had seven sons born to him and all seven were killed by his wife. Now the eighth son was born and he was Bhishma. The lineage continued from father to son for many centuries but Bhishma did not have any children and Chandravamsam ended with Bhishma

Only when Shantanu is aghast at his wife trying to kill their eighth son does he question as to who she really was. Ganga says that Shantanu in his previous birth was actually Varuna the God of the oceans and she was Akasha Ganga, the heavenly Ganges. As Varuna she says, Shantanu was in love with her

Once, she had visited Indra's court and she was the only woman in an all male assembly. Varuna had asked his friend Vayu, the God of wind, to dishevel Ganga's clothes. All the men in the assembly excepting Varuna closed their eyes in deference to Ganga. Only Varuna unabashedly looked at Ganga in her dishevelled form. Brahma noticed this and cursed Varuna for his immodesty. He said only human beings are capable of such behaviour and cursed him to be born on earth. Ganga too had been cursed to live on earth for some time and the guardians of the eight directions, the Vasus who were also cursed to be born on earth requested Ganga to be their mother.

The stealing of the heavenly cow Kamadhenu is another leit motif running through the epic. Once, the guardians of the eight cardinal directions, the Vasu's, Analan, Anilan, Dharan, Abhatsaivan, Dhuruvan, Soman, Pratiusanana and Prabhasanan had wandered into Vasishta's ashram, tired and hungry. Kamadhenu had given them some delicious food the likes of which the Vasus had not eaten before.

Prabhasanan, who was an uxorious husband had taken some of the food to share with his wife with whom he was madly in love. His wife, once she ate the food wanted the cow for herself. Prabhasanan said that as it was Vasishta's cow, he could not ask for it. His wife gave him an ultimatum either she gets the cow or she would leave him.

Prabhasanan with the reluctant support of the other seven Vasu tries to steal the celestial cow. Vasishta stops this attempt and says that the cow did not belong to him but was really a celestial being. He says Kamadenu would come when invoked by sages like him out of respect. He curses the eight Vasus to be born on earth as such acts of theft were only done by human beings. The other seven Vasu's protest saying, that they only participated reluctantly in the theft, at the insistance of their friend Prabhasanan.

Vasishtha grants them a boon saying that they would die as soon as they were born but says that as Prabhasanan who was actually responsible had to live for a long time on earth. Because he had acted at the behest of his wife in his birth on earth he would be celibate all through his life.

Ganga says the eight Vasus had requested her to be their mother and seven of them had requested her to kill them as soon as they were born. The eighth son Ganga says, she will take with her, raise him and return him to Shantanu once he reached adulthood. Ganga disappears from the river with their son leaving a desolate Shantanu on the riverbank.

One day Shantanu again went on a hunt and he again reaches the river bank where he had first met his wife. He laments saying “Dear Ganga! This is where I first met you! That it was here that I first held your hands and spoke to you!” He laments calling out the name of his wife “Ganga”. In the same place there was a boy, with a bow in hand, practicing his skills in archery. The King noticed the boy and was struck by his beauty and wondered as to whose son he could be?

The boy is practicing the skills he had learned from Sage Parasurama. The boy noticed that the King was lamenting calling out to Ganga and got angry. The boy was angry that the King was calling out the name of his mother ‘Ganga’ He was furious and wondered what right the King had to call out to his mother. Without realizing that it is his father, he drew his bow and shot the great warworthy Mohanastra with appropriate mantras. He shot it to pierce the king’s chest deep and disappeared like Indra’s bow, the rainbow disappears in the skies like a droplet of water that falls, disappears in river Ganga the King also fell on earth.

The boy did not know that the man lamenting his mother was actually his father so he gets angry as to what right this King had to invoke his mother’s name. Furiously he shot an arrow called ‘Mohana Kanai’ at Shantanu. The moment the arrow ‘Mohana Kanai’ struck Shantanu he fell down unconscious and the boy dived into the river.

He rushed to his mother and said that some King was crying, invoking her name and that he had rendered him unconscious. Ganga wondered which King could have invoked her name and wondered whether it could be her husband Shantanu. Wondering thus she rushed to the river bank to see her husband lying unconscious.

Ganga hands over their sixteen year old son whom she has named Devavrathan. She says that he has learned knowledge from Vasishta and weaponry from Parasurama. Ganga says that Shantanu will never see her again and asks him to forget about her and again disappears into the river. Shantanu returns to his kingdom with his son by his side.

Shantanu introduced Devavrathan to his court saying, that he was his son and immediately crowned him as the Crown Prince of Hastinapura. Shantanu abdicated his throne and placed the responsibility of governing the Kingdom on his young son's shoulders

A retired Shantanu travels across several lands. One day in his travel he reaches the banks of the river Yamuna. Shantanu roams all across the country and one day reaches Yamuna River. An unknown heavenly fragrance draws him towards Matsyagandhi who is now known as Parimalagandhi because the fragrance emanating from her permeated the entire landscape. As he goes towards the fragrance he hears melodious music and he sees a beautiful woman ferrying a boat across the river

Shantanu immediately falls in love with her. He finds that she is the daughter of the king of fishermen, Dasharaja and sends his charioteer to ask her hand in marriage for him from her father. The chariot raced towards Dasharaja's residence. Shantanu asked his charioteer to ask for Satyawati's hand in marriage for him from her father Dasharaja

Noticing the King's chariot approaching the King of the fishermen walked up to the chariot. The charioteer said that Emperor of fifty six countries King Shantanu wants to get married to your daughter. Dasharaja said that the elder son of Shantanu, Devavrathan was the crown prince and said that if he gives his daughter in marriage to Shantanu will her son be crowned King?

When the charioteer returned Shantanu asked whether Dasharaja had agreed for the marriage. Charioteer said I asked for his daughter's hand and he said that Shantanu already had a son who was the Crown Prince and wanted to know whether his daughter's son would have rights on the kingdom.

A disappointed Shantanu just asked his charioteer to drive him back to his palace again the chariot races back. Shantanu requests his charioteer not to say anything of this matter to his son. A lovelorn Shantanu does not eat or sleep well and keeps losing weight. Devavrathan

notices his father's pale looks and asks him whether he was not feeling well and should he call for the royal doctors.

The Royal physicians examine Shantanu and are puzzled as to the cause of the King's sickness. Devaratha remembers that his father started ailing only the week after he returned from one of his expeditions. He knows that the person who went with his father would know the cause for his father's sad looks and calls for his charioteer.

He asked the charioteer whether anything unusual happened on his father's last expedition? Devavrata meets Dasharaja and asks for his daughter's hand in marriage for his father. Dasharaja refuses as he wants the son born to his daughter to be the king and as Devavrata was the crown prince that would be impossible. Devavrata immediately renounces his kingship and promises that Parimalagandhi/Satyavati's son would be the future king.

Still Dasharaja is not convinced as he says that Devavrata's children might contest the throne with her daughter's children. Devavrata takes another vow of eternal celibacy and says he will not procreate any children. In Indian traditions to die without leaving the progeny behind is the ultimate sacrifice to make

Seeing the sacrifice Devavratan made all the gods in the heavens praised him and called him 'Bhishma! Bhishma! Bhishma!' A voice from the sky pronounced him Bhishma or 'the person who has taken a terrible vow'.

When he saw the Crown Prince willing to make such an enormous sacrifice Dasharaja could not refuse his daughter's hand in marriage to Shantanu anymore. He accepts Shantanu's offer for his daughter's hand. Devavratan, now Bhishma took the girl Satyavati also known as Parimalagandhi to his father.

Seeing Satyavati, Shantanu was overfilled with joy and told his son Bhishma that there could not be any person in all the three worlds who had made such a sacrifice as he had done.

Satyavati and Shantanu were married and all the guests who had come for the marriage were full of praises. Who were they praising? They were praising Bhishma for the sacrifice he had made. Shantanu who is pleased with his son's sacrifice grants him a boon that no one would be able to kill him. Bhishma could only die when he chose to.

After the wedding, Dasharaja tells Satyawati's story to Shantanu. He says that Satyawati was not really his daughter, but the daughter of the King Vasuraja. He speaks about the magical birth of Satyawati from a fish.

Dasharaja says that Satyawati also comes from a Royal family and she has finally reached where she was really destined to be. Dasharaja says that Satyawati only grew up in his house and she has reached where she was destined to reach. Saying this he entrusted his daughter to Shantanu and parted with his daughter after giving her some paternal advice.

Shantanu lived happily with his young wife Satyawati and soon Satyawati conceived on an auspicious day she went into labour. On that day, Satyawati gave birth to twin sons, like Surya and Chandra. On that day, Satyawati gave birth to twin sons, like Surya and Chandra. Satyawati, appeared as if she was the soul of Shantanu and whose large eyes extended till her big ear studs

On that day, Satyawati delivered twin children from her pregnancy. The poet describes one son as Surya and the other as Chandra. Why the poet makes this comparison was because Surya, the sun, rises in the morning and sets in the evening. Chandra, the moon on the other hand slowly grows to reach his full brilliance in full moon only to slowly wane away to new moon and finally disappears. The poet says that one son's life would be brief like that of the sun and the other child would wane away like the moon

Shantanu named his first born son Chitrangadan, the second son was named Vichitraviryan. After the birth of their twin children, Shantanu dies of old age. Bhishmacharya as he had promised to Dasharaja, crowns Chirangada the king. A Gandharva by the same name, kills Chitrangada at night under cover of darkness. His younger twin, Vichitravirya is now crowned king.

The king of Kasi has invited all the kings of the land for the marriage ceremony of his three daughters, Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Kashiraja is in a dilemma. As he knows that Bhishma has taken a vow of celibacy he does not invite Hastinapura for the Swayamvaram. Bhishma is angry and he attends the Swayamvaram with his younger brother Vichitravirya. On seeing Bhishma and Vichitravirya enter, the other Kings who had come for the Swayamvaram of the three sisters were dispirited. Vichitravirya shone brilliantly among the Kings like the moon shines amidst the stars.

The three sisters enter the court with garlands in the hands. As the girls are being introduced to the various kings in the court, an angry Bhishma asks his younger brother, Vichitravirya, to abduct the three girls before they could garland any of the Kings. Before they could choose their husbands, on Bhishma's instructions Vichitravirya abducted the girls and placed them in their chariot. The chariot raced away from the palace towards Hastinapura.

All the assembled Kings are unsure as to what to do as they were all scared of Bhishma. Only one King among the lot gets furious seeing this act of Bhishma. His blood boiled in rage. He got up from his seat angrily and asked "In this assembly where Kings from the Solar, Lunar and Fire dynasties have assembled this Bhishma abducts the girls even before they could make their choice of a husband and all of you are sitting silently watching this! Get up, let's fight him like men! This was said by the King of Salva, Brahmadata. Once Brahmadata said this, the rest of the Kings were also provoked and said "Hey Bhishma first stop and fight us!"

Bhishma had instructed that the chariot they were travelling in should not be stopped for any reason.

Bhishma turned away from the direction the chariot was travelling and took his bow and stood up to fight the challenging Kings. The Kings who had come to fight Bhishma all fired the arrows at the same time on Bhishma. All the challenging Kings were humbled by Bhishma and lost their chariots, their weapons and even the right to be called Kings. All the Kings fled defeated by Bhishma.

As the chariot was about to reach Hastinapura, one of the three sisters Ambai stood up. She said her two sisters intended to choose Vichitravirya as their husband but I am in love with my cousin the Salva King Brahmadata. Without knowing this you have wrongly abducted me along with my sisters. Bhishma said if Ambai had declared this before Vichitravirya touched her, they would have left her to make her own choice. He said that his younger brother would not marry a woman who was in love with another man and asks her to go to her lover Brahmadata and marry him.

Ambai goes Brahmadata and says that Bhishma had sent her to him as she had said that she would only marry the man she loved. Brahmadata refuses to accept her as he had fought for her and lost her to Bhishma in fight. He asks her to go to Bhishma and ask him to marry her.

In front of the sacred fires, with great aroma, Bhishma conducted a grand marriage making his beautiful brother Vichitravirya the husband of Ambika and Ambalika, with their consent.

Bhishma says that he has taken a vow of eternal celibacy and cannot get married to any woman and asks Ambai to go back to Brahmadattan and plead with him.

As Brahmadattan again refuses Ambai goes to her father for help. Her father says that Bhishma would not listen to anybody and Parasurama is her only recourse. Parasurama was Bhishma's teacher and her father thought the teacher might be able to persuade his disciple. King of Kashi tells Ambai that Bhishma would not listen to anybody, but he might listen to Parashurama, who was his teacher. So he asks Ambai to appeal to Parashurama and says that he was her only hope. So Ambai went from her father's palace to Parashurama's ashram. She fell at Parashurama's feet and cried. The moment he saw the girl's tears Parashurama did not even question whether his student Bhishma could have erred. But he declared as Bhishma was his student and would listen to him and promises to get her married to Bhishma himself.

Bhishma heard that his teacher Parashurama was coming to meet him. The teacher who taught him archery, Parashurama, was offered a golden seat by Bhishma. Bhishma says "It is my good fortune that you have come here, what a honour" Parashurama sat down and said enthusiastically "This lady, Ambai, with dark and wide eyes, wearing a necklace of pearls, with heavy bosoms, let her become your bride, with love".

Bhishma says that his teacher must have come to meet him to do him some good and he bowed to his teacher. Parashurama points to Ambai and says "Wearing a necklace of pearls, with heavy bosoms this lady with dark and wide eyes" He says that he has given his word to Ambai that he will get her married to Bhishma. So he asks Bhishma to get married to Ambai. Bhishma tells Parashurama that he considered Parashurama to be a deity as he was his teacher, and nobody can refuse to obey their deity! But you yourself have said that a man can break anything in his life except the promise he has made.

So Bhishma asks Parashurama how was it possible for him to break the solemn pledge he had made.

Bhishma says that if his teacher wanted, he would willingly give up his life for him! But says he cannot get married to this girl. An angry Parashurama disowns Bhishma as his student for refusing to listen to him and get married to Ambai and calls him out for a fight!

Parashurama and Bhishma who refused to marry Ambai fought furiously, non stop for ten days with great strength. The terrible war raged and the strong Bhishma with his bow and arrows drained Parashurama of his strength. People who saw the battle thought Parashurama was scared by Bhishma who fought like Rama once had fought Parashurama! Parashurama

and Bhishma fight furiously for ten days. Parashurama loses to his own disciple and is soon forced to flee

A humiliated Parashurama now takes a vow that henceforth he would not teach any Shatriya warfare as a Shatriya had defeated him. This vow of Parashurama has consequences much later when Karna hides his Shatriya identity to learn weaponry from Parashurama. Parashurama when he realises that Karna was actually a Shatriya curses him saying that all that he had learnt from him would prove useless to him when he needed it the most.

Ambai now practiced severe austerities to avenge herself against Bhishma. She did Tapas to Goddess Durga. With one leg folded and placed on the other, lifting up the bamboo like shoulders folding the hands and bowing down touching the legs keeping the sword like eyes open in the reservoir of water she did great penance that seemed equivalent

Her Tapas lasted twelve years which was equivalent to the twelve days of the Devas

The Goddess appeared before her and asked her as to what boon she wanted Ambai said Bhishma had destroyed her life and she mistakenly asks for a weapon with which she could defeat him. She should have actually asked for a weapon with which she could kill him.

The Goddess gave her a garland and said that who ever wore that garland would be able to defeat Bhishma easily. Ambai took the garland to many Kings but all were scared to stand up against Bhishma. Frustrated with the fear shown by the Kings, Ambai takes a vow to kill Bhishma in her next life. She hangs the garland on a wall in the Panchala Kingdom and immolates herself.

But sadly, even in her next life she was born again as a woman. She remembers the vow she had made in her previous life and so takes the garland from the wall and wears it herself. As soon as she wears the garland everyday she starts losing her femininity and shows masculine traits.

Now she, as Shikandini, is neither a man nor a woman and becomes the ultimate cause for Bhishma's death. When her last recourse Parashurama had also failed, Ambai practices severe austerities before Durga and invokes her for a warrior brave enough to kill Bhishma. The Goddess appears before her and gives her a garland. In the garland the seeds of Bhishma's eventual demise are sown.

