

Hari Om

Academic Achievements of Bhishma

In the Kuru dynasty, Bhishma was a noble and powerful personality. He was highly learned as well as foremost bowman. His original name was Devavrata. He was the offshoot of King Shantanu and Bhagirathi. (Goddess Gangadevi). King Shantanu's original form was God Varuna's form. Both of them were born on earth due to the curse of Chaturmukha Brahma.

It so happened that on one full moon day Brahmadeva was sitting on the seashore after completing his sea bathing. At that time, Varuna and Ganga were sporting in the water without noticing Brahmadeva due to their deep attention and involvement in the sports. During their sporting in the water, water was unnoticeably sprinkled on Brahmadeva. Having seen this, the couple disregarding his presence, Brahma cursed Varuna to be born as a man and Ganga to be born on earth in the divine form.

Varuna was born twice. First time as Mahabhishak and second time as Shantanu. Shantanu was born in the human form and Ganga remained in the divine body. The name Shantanu is a short form of Shantanu. This means "be calm".

Since Brahma ordered the ocean (Varuna) to become calm, he got the name as Shantanu when he was born on earth.

Another explanation of this name, by the touch of Shantanu, old people used to regain their youth and be happy. “Sham” means happiness. “Tanu” is giver. Therefore he was known as Shantanu. He got a son known as Bhishma.

The birth of Bhishma has an interesting background. Bhishma is one among the eight vasus known by name “Dyu”. He was the eighth vasu. He was also known as Prabhasa and Vibhavasus. His wife was Varaangi. She had a friend by the same name Varaangi. The wife of Dyu asked her husband to get the divine cow Nandini for her friend, so that with her milk she could get long life and retain her youth permanently. Dyu ie. Vibhavasus went to sage Vasishta’s ashrama along with 7 other vasus and tied Nandini. This was not liked by Vasishta and cursed them to be born as men. He particularly cursed the 8th vasu ie. Vibhavasus to live as a man as long as the duration of 8 men’s life. He further cursed that Varaangi, the wife of 8th vasu who instigated unholy act be born as Amba and become a male ie shikhandi and be responsible for the death of her husband Vibhavasus born as Bhishma. This curse was actually given by Brahma present in Vasishta.

The vasus let out the cow Nandini and appealed to Brahma to help them not to be born from the womb of a human being. The vasus came to know that Ganga was going

to be the wife of Shantanu without assuming the human body. They went to her, requested her that they would be born as her children. Ganga was told that they would be killed as soon as they were born and she should not get any sin for this act. However, one of them would live long, she said.

Goddess Ganga put certain conditions to marry Shantanu. One day king Pratipa, the fifth descendant of Kuru was relaxing on the bank of Ganges. Ganga Devi saw him and she went to him in the form of a damsel, went near Pratipa and sat on his right thigh. Usually daughter or daughter-in-law sit on the right side of a man. To this Pratipa said, you may be my daughter-in-law, I have a son Shantanu, you marry him. She also stated three conditions before she marries him.

1. Your son should not ask me as to who I was.
2. He should not prevent me even when I do something wrong.
3. He should not ask why I was doing wrong thing.

If he broke any one of these conditions, she would leave him. King Pratipa agreed and informed his son Shantanu in due course.

Ganga begot 8 children. She killed 7 of them one after another. When she proceeded to kill the 8th child, Shantanu asked her as to:

Who she was?

Why she was killing the children?

He prevented her from killing the 8th child. Thus he violated the three conditions laid by her. Therefore she left him, took her 8th child and gave him to Brihaspati (Devaguru). The boy learned Veda and other sacred literature from Brihaspati for 50 years. Then Ganga sent him to God Parashuram. He continued his studies of spiritual literature for another 50 years and studied the use of weapons for 25 years and listened to the spiritual discourses for 300 years and returned to his father.

Once Shantanu proceeded for hunting and saw a beautiful girl Satyawati. Earlier she was Acchoda, the daughter of Agnishvat belonging to Amrita Pitru Gana group. Lord Vishnu had blessed her saying that he would be born as her son. She was now born as daughter of King Vasu and was brought up at the residence of a fisherman. Shantanu was attracted by her and asked the fisherman to give her in marriage to him. But the fisherman put the condition that her son should be made the successor for the throne. Shantanu remained silent since Devavrata was already a son for him.

Shantanu returned home, spent some days without talking to anybody in a melancholy way. Devavrata got inquisitive and asked father, he didn't reveal anything. But remained the same. Devavrata through his charioteer of his

father pursued the matter and found out that he visited the fisherman's house. There he spoke to the fisherman.

Devavrata having got the clue, went to the fisherman, spoke to him and learnt all the details. Devavrata after knowing all the details, he assured the fisherman that he would relinquish the throne. He also took the oath that he would remain a bachelor throughout his life so that the question of his progeny claiming the throne would not arise. Because of such a strong oath he took, he was called Bhishma.

Shantanu gave him the boon that he would die only when he desired to die with free will and he will be invincible in the war. Thus he brought the girl to his father. They were married and Satyawathi begot two sons by name Chitraangada and Vicitravirya. Shantanu died when the two children were still young. Chitraangada also died before marriage. Bhishma installed Vicitravirya on the throne and looked after the kingdom.

Later with passage of time, the events so developed that there was a war in the kuru dynasty between the cousin brothers famously known as the Kauravas and Pandavas. Bhishma was on the side of Duryodhana ie, Kauravas. On the other side, after king Pandu's death Yudhistira was eldest and fit for throne. In the war, after 10 days of being senapathi on the Kauravas side, Bhishma was killed by Shikandi and Arjuna. He was lying on the bed of arrows made by Arjuna, for nearly a month and a half waiting for uttarayana.

After the war, Yudhistira had to ascend the throne. He got a serious doubt, that he had done a grave mistake by killing men and animals in the war. He felt he was unfit to ascend the throne with that terrible sin. Although his brother's wife and Krishna tried to console and convince him, it was futile. Finally Krishna decided to take Yudhistira to Bhishma who fought from the opposite side and take his opinion about Yudhistira's feelings as a sinner. Yudhistira and his brothers consulted Bhishma who was lying on the bed of arrows. Yudhistira expressed his problem to Bhishma, asked him a number of questions relating to the dilemma. Yudhistira was still not convinced and still continued to ask questions. Bhishma gave one solution. By reciting Vishnusahasranama, he will be free from sins lingering in his mind. (Vishnusahasranama appears in Anushaasika parva of Mahabharata).

Shantiparva and Anushaasika parva of Mahabharata are full of precious knowledge and solid proof of Bhishma's knowledge.

Each and every question posed by Yudhistira was answered appropriately by Bhishma with illustrations. If one goes through these two parvas, one will wonder as to how Bhishma could provide that huge number of illustration for every answer. It readily tells us that his lengthy academic achievements could be the background for this. It is also said

that Lord Krishna stood inside and inspired Bhishma to answer this volley of questions.

Thus, one will admire Bhishma's achievement in academic as well as his sacrifice for his father.

Even today, Bhishma is remembered.

Every year, in the month of Magha (February), eighth day of the bright half is called "Bhishma Ashtami". On that day, Tilanjali (tarpana) is given in his name taking his gotra Vaiyagrapada and father's name as Shantanu. Further details are given in panchangam. That is how he is remembered and honoured even today.