

**UMPTEN TALES FOR EDIFICATION**

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Mahabharata is a sacred epic with ennobling legends, tales, fables and parables to ennoble man and keep him away from sin and evil doing. Even birds and beasts, talk and perform deeds of merit as well as evil. The tales preach.

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Our age old, celebrated and considered divine epic *Mahabharata* is veritably a treasure-trove for it contains tales which reveal the eternal wisdom of ancient sages, seers, visionaries, *drashtas* and even blessed birds and beasts. Sage Vyasa, whom we worship as Bhagavan calling him Vyasa Bhagavan with the deepest reverence, gave us a compendium of eternal verities and the subtly compiled ethical jurisprudence. For students of English literature, to a large extent, the Greek and Roman epics like the works of Homer, Virgil, and the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides are not altogether unknown as works of sublime knowledge. This sumptuous volume gives a key to the locked in treasures in our premiere epic, almost a scripture. The tales have a message and this exegete includes in his narration the relevance and applicability of the messages to the contemporary mind. P.C.K Prem, the poet,

literary critic and translator, chose thirty-nine prominent tales for his *Selected Tales from the Great Epic Mahabharata* written in Sanskrit (*devbhasha*) centuries ago. The epic was rendered into our regional languages some time later.

These tales, call legends, if you will, inspired by visionary thinking reveal to us what Carlyle called the *vaters sacer*, sacred seers, envisioned in an inspired effort to illumine what in us is dark. These are pathways to instil faith in the Supreme Being. The tales show time and again what should be viewed as good and what its grave opposite is. We think the two are relative terms but the sages know intuitively – by God's grace – what these two are best left for His judgement. These concepts are the basis of the unwritten spiritual jurisprudence for all mankind for all time. From the consequences of deeds *paap* and *punya* come in the dynamics of faith



which is also termed *bhakti*. The concepts are complex and intriguing because of the lack of proper understanding and lack of candid exegesis.

A panoramic view of human aspirations embedded in different characters - may be men or women, birds, beasts or reptiles - in desires and acts noble, mundane, thoughtless, emotional or deliberate are revealed in Mahabharata. Beyond all these, there is TIME which goes on and on without let up. This is God's own averment in the Gita. The global scriptural unwritten spiritual jurisprudence is shown in different and multitudinous ways in the tales of Mahabharata. Understanding the subtleties enlightens and edifies. Dharma has affinity with the most complex legalities humans cannot understand as the highly initiated personalities.

Prem is an exegete explaining the intricacies of the logic and justification in the redemptive consequences. His schema is clear: this is the order – story outline – intent- exegesis – divine dispensation. In all these tales there is an explanation with deep deliberation. Only a few tales could be taken up in this study.

In the introduction there is the *raison de etre*: "Ancient tales teach man the art of life and speak of the purity of the (belief in) *karmas* and *dharma*." In this work an effort has been made to arrive at the precise meaning of these concepts. Prem also says "When one highlights various noteworthy features and aspects of this ancient wisdom, one finds unique oneness in contemporary consciousness." The growing evil, animosities and corruption are not new but it is time litterateurs try to put the train of human actions on rails, no matter, to however little effect.

In the very first tale 'Lord of Death and Sage Gautama' Yudhistir's turbulence of mind (*vyakulata*) and Bhishm Pitamah's answers give us an idea of the responsibilities of kingship. "A king should behave properly and keep stately dharma following the principles of dharma." In modern times too elected leaders being 'rulers' in a different way should stick to dharma.

In the tale 'Brahmadatta and the Sparrow' Pujni reveals the wisdom of the bird which enlightens the king. The king's little son plays with the baby bird

and kills it. Pujni tells herself she'd wreak vengeance on the boy and pierces the prince's eyes with her claws. The king sees and realizes the justice in the deed. When the bird wants to leave the kingdom, the king tells her that she can stay since retribution unburdens a man (or a bird) from sin and crime. But this is what Pujni tells the king: "He who does wrong and is aggrieved can never reconcile and it gives trouble to both." (p.21) The swallow tells the king that the king is a collective image of mother, father, protector, preserver, fire, mammon and Yama. The readers are told that the wisdom of Pujni forced the king to think about his country, statecraft and good governance. The swallow's words bother the king's mind for a long time.

There are fables and parables in Mahabharata. Pristine narrative genres, they have been edifying sugar-coated pills. An identity is given to birds and beasts and they speak everlasting truths. A cruel king was born as a jackal, the most despicable birth, guzzling cadavers. Even though a jackal he remembered his earlier sins, lived a life of righteousness and became a king's minister. But owing to the jealousy of other evil ministers the king orders his death. However he relents after his mother's words and asks the jackal to stay. Using his wisdom the jackal goes into a forest, fasts unto death and goes to heaven. This is the tale of 'The Holy Jackal'.

The parable 'A Mouse and a Cat' is one related by *pitamah*. Prem tells us: "If one goes into the import of the tale (the mouse saving itself even against heavy odds) one understands its contemporary relevance in the human scenario today. Faith and reposing Faith have lost any significant meaning. Self-interest binds all living beings. Striking a note of intelligent and wise compromise in hours of crisis leads one (as it did to the mouse) to learning the intricacies of practical behaviour acceptable to *dharmic* tenets.

'The Fox and the Monkey' is another fable. This is about the principle of charity to *brahmins*. Acts of charity to them satisfy gods but deceit or breaking a promise of charity leads to heinous birth after one's death. Some may wonder if this is a manipulation of caste Brahmins. Caste system is anachronistic. Prem



concludes his narration thus: "Unfortunately, the more the present day thinkers try to eliminate such distinctions, the more strongly they get entrenched in the attitude of men."

The legend of Mandapal who marries a bird to have offspring quickly to reach the celestial world is extremely fascinating. He is denied entry into heaven for the reason that he did not have offspring. He gets four children from Jarita. Into the tale is woven the episode of the fire deity burning *Khandava vana*. Even the little birds, display exemplary wisdom in the way they pray their mother to run away to safety since she could beget children again even if they get burnt. Lapita, Mandapal's wife, shows her rancour and jealousy but Mandapal ignores her. The comment in the exegesis is valuable for the modern man whose thinking goes very often awry. The author writes; 'Mandapal offers new dimensions to humanism a man harbours. Questions of genuine help and sacrifice highlight features of mortals and immortals equally. ... At another level, family relations are minutely examined. If love, warmth and genuine sympathy guide relations, families, societies and nations, peace and harmony prevails even while others adhere to duties as a matter of *dharma*. (p.93)

The tale 'The Fox and the Monkey' is another parable. In the epic birds, beasts and reptiles have great qualities as well as foibles and weaknesses of the humans. Sin always attracts retribution to every one. For refusing the promised charity for *punya*, merit, *daana*, one has to take birth as a fox. For stealing the fruit of a pious *brahmin* one has to be born as a monkey. Refusing or forgetting charity promised to a *brahmin* attracts punishment of even that scale. This is the tale Bhismpitamah narrated to no less a man than Yudhistir also called Dharmaraja. The exegete explains that this is not the manipulation of the crooked or selfish *brahmins*. He concludes: 'Unfortunately the more the present day thinkers and rulers try to eliminate such distinctions, the more strongly they get entrenched in the attitude of men. Long talks are just cosmetic and a deliberated and shrewd working in politics strengthens divisive forces so that a man never lives

an integrated life, showing charity to the *brahmins*, not withstanding.'

'Jaratkaru and the Dead' is another very brief tale. Jaratkaru was a devout *brahmin* who remained a bachelor always contemplating and never coming out of his *tapas*. He saw in a forest several *brahmins* hanging from trees head downward and feet upward. He was told that they were his forefathers and for his not getting offspring they were not allowed to go up into heaven. He vowed to marry a woman with his name and married Vasuki's younger sister Jaratkaru. (Vasuki was a snake.) He later deserted her for awakening him from his sleep. Years later their son Asteeka went to King *Janamajaya* who was about to start a *yaga* burning snakes, called Sarpasatra and requested him not to burn snakes and won the king's heart. Thus he saved his manes, forefathers or *pitres*. The exegesis has great moral implications. 'Many times, a man saves his forefathers from the clutches of curses, poverty and hunger,' (p. 266)

King Kalmashapaada is one of the kings of the Ikshwaku dynasty. His egotistic act with the sage Shakti, son of Vashishtha, leads him into severe travails and tribulations. Just for not leaving him way and whipping him badly, the sage imprecates the king to become a demon eating human flesh. The king relents and seeks redemption. Later, owing to a curse the king asks Madayanti to bear him a son through Vashishtha. She bore to the sage a son who later became a king called Ashma. When the sage sprinkles sacred water on the king the demon in him delivered the king from the curse. Then the curse of a woman prohibits the king to have union with his queen.

The king has to suffer the consequences of the imprecation for twelve long years. The *brahmin* Shakti's curse and the curse of a woman later were so powerful. It is only his father's mercy that saved the king.

The exegete explains thus: 'A dreadful curse never allowed physical relation to the king and therefore sage Vashishta blessed the queen and the king with a son – an heir to the throne. Had the king not whipped up the poor Brahmin (Shakti), had he nor offered human flesh to a hungry Brahmin and



had he not disturbed union between a Brahmin and his wife, he would have also lived a life of fulfilment. However, one has to face consequences of one's acts eventually. None can avoid a crisis in life, for destiny plays its role.' (pp. 323-24)

'Lord Indra and the Parrot' is again another brief tale. The parrot loved a tree so much that even after it was dead he did not go to another but stayed near it in hunger and destitution. Indra is surprised at the psyche of the bird when he (the bird) recognized him. The bird told Indra that it was because of *tapas*. When asked why he did not abandon the tree he replied: 'O King of Gods, I took birth in the tree and learnt many good qualities. ... To show empathy and compassion is the greatest *dharma* of saintly people.' (p.347) Surprised and pleased Indra asked the bird to seek a boon and pat came the request: 'I want the tree green as it was before.' Indra granted the parrot's request. After demise the parrot went to heaven. The exegesis goes: 'If a man cultivates the qualities of dharma, truth and compassion, he gets all his wishes fulfilled in due course of time.' (p.348)

'Sage Mandavya' is a tale of the highest excellence of human thinking. Owing to the stupidity of the king's men the sage was produced before the king for abetting thieves. The king ordered his death by impalement and the order was executed. Other sages went into the prison as birds and asked the sage why he suffered that. The impaled sage only said that no one had committed any crime. Shortly afterwards the king's men submitted to the king their mistake and the king rushed to the prison and got the sage released. The piece of iron, '*ani*', inside the body could not be removed. The sage went on with his *tapas*. When the sage asked Yama what his sin was to deserve that retribution, the sage was told that he had driven a straw into the anus of an insect. Asked when he had done it, Yama said that he did that as a child. Quoting the laws that a child should not be given such punishment, the sage cursed Yama to be born of a *shudra yoni*. Yama was later born as Vidura, the wisest of all, to a *dasi*. Here is the exegesis of the author: 'Here, one gets sufficient hints of a philosophy of life. ... In fact, *karmas* often determined the caste of a man. .. He (Vidura) was the

strongest man of wisdom with the power to contradict even the great Bhisma *pitamah*. The wise men Dronacharya and Kripacharya also listened to his sagacious and wise counsel without murmur'. (p.415)

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