

The Tradition

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It was a usual summer morn. High above, the welkin was fast loosing the last of its night-watchers as the sun has started to spread its spear headed rays around.

Having completed his morning worship of the benevolent Almighty, Drona came out in the courtyard of his shack. In spite of the glow of piety and divinity of worship, his face was clouded with anxiety. He could hear Ashwathama, his son, crying in the kitchen. "Oh God", in a tone of added grief, he said, "I can't even provide milk for my son!"

But soon Ashwathama came out in the yard happily carrying a glass of milk. Drona patted his son's cheeks, looked at heavens and smiled. Today again his life partner, rather a sharer of his griefs, Krupi, had given Ashwathama a glass of *sattu* (gram flour dissolved in water), under the pretext of milk.

"How long...." Tears welled up in Drona's eyes. Just then he heard the neighing of horses. He turned and saw that, in front of his hut, the chariot of Krupacharya has pulled up leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. Drona wiped his tell-tale tears and saluted him in the customary way, "Pranam".

Krupacharya too smilingly greeted back, "Pranam".

A cuckoo struck a note of love deep in the mango groove.

With his arm around Krupacharya shoulder Drona escorted him inside and called out his wife, "Krupi, look who is here!"

Krupi quickly came out, "Oh brother, it is you!" She was overjoyed to see her brother. She made obeisance to Krupacharya. He gave her a basket saying, "Take these sweets and give to my friend."

Drona asked, "What's good news you have brought?"

"Can I have a seat first, if you permit?" Said Krupacharya smilingly,

"Oh sure, here...please be at ease". Drona too responded with a grin.

Krupi too sat near them and asked impatiently, "Now tell us."

Krupacharya told them. "Drona has been chosen to train the Pandav and Kaurav princes."

"What?" exclaimed Drona.

Krupi was delighted and excited by this news. With great effort she controlled her exhilaration and asked, "So suddenly, why?"

“Not suddenly. Didn’t you tell her?” Krupacharya asked Drona.

“What was there to tell!” replied Drona.

Sporting a big grin Krupacharya said, “Oh yeah, it was nothing for you”.

“Oh God! Will you tell me too or just go on with your coded communication”. Frowned Krupi, loosing her patience.

“Okay, so now I will have to narrate the entire Ramayana (figurative for the story). It happened a day before yesterday”. Krupacharya began narrating the incident. “The princes were playing tip-cat on the ground. Their peg (short stick) bounced and fell into a dry well. All the princes rushed towards the well and tried to retrieve it. In that endeavour Duryodhan’s ring also fell in the well. They became more worried and tense. Drona happened to pass by. Seeing the disconcerted princes, he asked them what the matter was. Arjun told him that their peg and Duryodhan’s ring had fallen in the well and they have to retrieve both. Drona, with his small bow, shot an arrow in such a way that brought out their peg. He again shot an arrow that got them Duryodhan’s ring.”

Krupi laughed.

“All the princes were happy”, continued Krupacharya. “They narrated the entire incident to Bhishma Pitamah who instantly decided that Drona would be the most suitable teacher for the princes.

Tears flowed from Krupi’s eyes. She got up taking the basket of sweets and called out, “Ashwathama....see, your uncle has come.”

Her voice was reverberating with ecstasy which made Drona uneasy. Ashwathama came out running.

He too made obeisance and touched Krupacharya’s feet.

Krupacharya blessed him with a long life and took him in his arms.

Krupi came with a plate of sweets. Ashwathama jumped with joy to see that. Krupacharya put a piece of sweet in Ashwathama’s mouth and got up to leave.

Krupi insisted, “Stay for some more time.”

“No, I have to go to the Court.” He said.

Drona was silent.

“What are you thinking?” asked Krupacharya.

“Nothing,” he replied getting up and asked, “Shall I assume it to be a Royal dictum?”

“No” smiled Krupacharya, “I just came to convey the good news to you, my friend. You will be summoned to the court in a day or two”.

“All right”, Drona sighed. Krupacharya blessed his sister Krupi and departed.

“God has answered my prayers”. Krupi murmured.

Drona was gazing at the sky. A few scattered clouds were slowly moving towards the Eastern horizon.

It was late in the evening that, Drona took his bow and quiver and left for the forest. Krupi, as usual, waited for him. Ashwathama, in her lap, was trying to sleep. “Mother..,” he whispered, “Sing a lullaby to me.” Krupi smiled and began singing,

“Who relieves the sorrow but Raam?

Who fills the ocean but the rains?

Who is respected sans wealth?

*Who except the mother.....”*Krupi stopped abruptly, thinking what sort of song had she begun.

Her son completed the line. “*Who except the mother serves the meals?*”

Tears welled up in Krupi’s eyes. She hugged her son close and assured him, still crying. “Yes my son, now your mother will serve food to you. Be assured.” The ensuing silence seemed aggrieved by the sobs of this helpless mother.

Still there was no sign of Drona.

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After a week Drona was invited to the Royal court. Throughout the week Krupi was brimming with expectation and joy. One reason was that Drona had not refused this assignment. Next day she got up earlier than usual, took bath and prayed to her family deity for a very long time. When Drona got ready to leave, she offered him a spoonful of curd, as a good omen. He didn’t think it appropriate, then, to ask how she had got it. He kissed his son’s forehead and started for the court. On way he felt as if his teacher, Parshurama accompanied him and was instructing him in the details of the art of warfare. At the palace gate he told the sentries the purpose of his visit. One of them went inside and sought permission and respectfully escorted him to the court.

Each and every corner of the resplendent court of the Arya King gave evidence of his pride and glory. The Emperor Dhritrashtra, on his imperial throne, was smiling proudly. On his right was Bhishma Pitahma, sporting a long beard and white attire, looked an incarnation of sobriety and dignity. Next to him was the tall Vidura, his face emanating knowledge and wisdom. On the left side humbly sat Krupacharya. In saffron clothing he seemed to signify purity and holiness. Drona bowed and saluted them all.

“We welcome you in the court of Hastinapur”, boomed the harsh voice of Dhritrashtra. “Please be seated.”He added.

Drona thanked and sat in a vacant chair.

“What is your name?” asked Bhishma.

“Drona”

“Who taught you the skills and technique of warfare?” was the next query.

“Bhagwan Parshuram”, replied Drona pronouncing his teacher’s name with great reverence.

“Oh!” said Dhritrashtra happily thumping his thigh. “Pitamah is right. If there is anyone who can train the princes of Bharatvansh rightly, or can be their teacher, it’s none but you.”

Drona thanked with folded hands.

“Hey Drona,” said Mahatma Vidura, “The Emperor wishes that you shall take all the princes of Bharatvansh as your pupils and impart the best kind of education to them.”

“It’s an honour to me.” Drona said half-heartedly, but only to show his respect for the prevalent customs of the court.

“Congratulations.” Said Krupacharya, getting up pleased.

“Just a moment, Acharya.” Spoke the shrewd Shakuni as he entered the Royal court, tossing his dice “Long live the King.” He hailed as per the court manners and added, “If the Emperor permits we should discuss an important aspect of this meeting.”

“Surely” Giggled Dhritrashtra. But on Krupacharya’s forehead appeared a few lines of anxiety and tension.

“Dronacharya, now you are going to become a part of this great kingdom. Let’s, therefore, clarify about your share of donation to the Royal treasury.” Shakuni spoke stressing each and every word.

Dronacharya exclaimed, “Donation? From me? This poor Brahmin doesn’t possess any thing except his talent and skill.”

“We demand only what you have.” Said Dhritrashtra.

“O King, my full store of skills is at your disposal. I will train the princes and turn them into the best warriors of the world.” Offered Dronacharya reverentially.

“That you have to do.” Laughed Shakuni, “But donation is also a must.”

Now totally upset Dronacharya asked, “Why does such a great empire needs my donation?”

“It is the Tradition”, Bhishma’s voice echoed. Krupacharya was nonplussed.

“Dronacharya,” said Vidura, “Traditions are the marks of identity of a society. We must respect them. Therefore you must

“How?”, broke in Dronacharya, “ how? This is not donation but clearly a

“Dronacharya ,” interrupted Krupacharya, sensing his drift, “You can have some time to think over it.”

Dhritrashtra’s face changed expressions.

He said, “If the disciple of Bhagwan Parshuram does not agree to pay donation then we too are helpless. We cannot give up our Tradition for anything or anybody.”

Dronacharya got up to go. A cordial meeting seemed to be ending on a bitter note.

“Dronacharya,” said Bhishma approaching him, “What are you doing? Such chances don’t come often. Don’t be adamant. At least think of Krupi and Ashwathama, if not for yourself.” Baffled, Dronacharya sat down in the chair. How helpless does a family man become before the circumstances. His throat got dry and sore.

After a few moments, he pulled himself together and said, “As you wish.” Dhritrashtra instantly took donation from him. There was no question of going over one’s word.

While leaving the court Dronacharya was offered a gift of five hundred gold coins. He asked one of the court servants to deliver the gold coins at his home. But he himself went and sat alone in a deserted place.

Today was a peculiar day in his life. He was lost in an unknown valley of bewilderment. The whole day he sat on a stone slab braving the hot sun. Dronacharya got up to return, only when the heat of sun was mellowed down by the advent of Evening goddess, who herself succumbed to the might of dark night.

Krupi was waiting for him since the evening. She had prepared seven choicest dishes. Ashwathama had had his fill and had gone to sleep earlier than usual. Upon reaching home, Dronacharya’s exhaustion vanished as he saw the beaming face of his wife. He first took bath and sat down to eat upon Krupi’s insistence. She served food and started fanning. But, as Dronacharya extended his hand to eat, she got a shock of her life. The right thumb of Dronacharya was chopped off.

“What’s this...!” She screamed in agony.

“See Ashwathama is enjoying a sound sleep”, said Dronacharya, ignoring her query.

What else he could say?

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