

Mahābhārata
As Taught by Swami Dayananda Saraswati

This is the sixteenth part of the serial article, continuation from Nov 2024 edition.

Purocana took the Pandavas to the new house and Bhima immediately smelled wax. He said the house smelled of wax. The Pandavas could see that this house was made for destruction. Yudhisthira knew that the plan was to eliminate the family altogether, and Bhima was furious. Bhima wanted them to abandon the house and to expose the entire plot to kill them. But Yudhisthira asked him to wait, because they did not have any real evidence of Duryodhana's intention. They knew Duryodhana would have already ingratiated himself with the citizens of Hastinapura and that the Pandava plea would not be heard. Yudhisthira advised patience so that the family could survive the exile and gather strength over time. Dhrtarashtra controlled the kingdom and the army. Yudhisthira said to wait, because Duryodhana would not light the fire until some time had passed and he could be sure that he would not be suspected of having planned the conflagration. Duryodhana and his henchmen would not torch the house until the citizens of Hastinapura had forgotten about the Pandavas. Yudhisthira asked his family to move into the house and to wait until he asked Vidura what they should do next.

Purocana shadowed the Pandavas. He had built a moat around their house and said that it was to assure their privacy. Bhima saw the moat not as a means to deny intruders but as a way to deny the family escape if there was fire. Bhima wanted out, but Yudhisthira pacified him, "The same Lord who kept you from being poisoned will take care of us."

Dhrtarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura were brothers. Vidura sent a messenger to the Pandavas princes living in the wax-walled house. The code word for the messenger Vidura sent was in a language other than Sanskrit. Yudhisthira trusted the messenger was from Vidura because the message was delivered in dialect. Yudhisthira learned that the messenger himself was a miner, one who could dig a tunnel out the back of the wax house to a safe place some distance from the struc-

ture. The Pandavas decided that to conceal the tunnel job they would need to find a way to take Purocana out of the house daily. Yudhisthira made a point to go out and about daily; he knew Purocana would follow him as a matter of course. Purocana took care to know where the Pandavas went and who they talked with.

Every day Purocana would follow whichever Pandava went out - to the forest, to the temple for meditation, to see the sights. In time the miner announced that the work was done and the escape tunnel was ready. A small trap door lead underground from one of the back rooms. The tunnel had been dug from the room where Purocana stayed. Purocana would often have family members, women and children, come and share the room.

Months passed while the Pandavas settled into a routine. Then the word from Hastinapura came to Purocana that the house was to be set on fire on the next dark night before the new moon day. Nobody would suspect arsonry if the house burned down now. On the thirteenth day of the fortnight, Purocana prepared himself. He made sure that no one from his family was not there when he turned the house into a raging inferno.

Every day before the fire Bhima made sure that the trap door to the tunnel was open and the way was clear. The Pandavas planned and agreed that after the burning they would not let anyone know that they had survived the fire. They did not want anyone chasing them after they made their escape from the conflagration of wax and oil. They would make it look like they had been caught in the fire. They would wait for the right time for them to reappear. Their decisions were in line with the words of strategy that had been sent by Vidura. The Pandavas saw the logic of his arrangement, and they followed his counsel.

They could not stand up in the tunnel, and they had to carry Kunti. Hurrying along the path that Vidura's hidden message had advised, they were guided away from the raging fire and into the open by the light of the stars. At the end of the tunnel the Pandavas were met by another cohort who also spoke in the dialect. Vidura had sent someone to assist them and had prepared a boat that was to take

the Pandavas to the far bank of Ganga. From there the family was to make its way to the nearby town Ekachakra, selected by Vidura. Looking back at the wax house, the Pandavas saw the total destruction and the fate they had escaped.

Bhima carried Kunti out of the tunnel and then some distance to a grove of trees that they thought to be safe enough. Kunti said that she was very thirsty and tired. She did not want to go any further. Bhima made a bed a leaves and put his mother down. Everyone else rested while Bhima went to bring water. He found a beautiful pond with huge lotus leaves and fresh flowers. The water was clean and Bhima drank deeply. He thought he would take a dip to refresh himself. Then he made a large cup out of a lotus leaf and carried water to his family. After drinking the water the others slept while Bhima rested and thought about Kunti. Kunti was the sister of Vasudeva. Vasudeva, in the *vr̥ṣṇivam̐śa*, was the father of Krishna. Kunti had married into the Kuru family as the wife of great Pandu. She was the mother of these five great sons, though two were born of Madri. Thinking of this, Bhima became despondent. He came to appreciate and to question the *karma* that had now brought Kunti to this lonely situation and a shabby place in unfamiliar territory.

Bhima wrestled with his thoughts and watched his family sleeping. The forest they were in was the property of a *rākṣasa* called Hidimba. Hidimba loved human flesh, and anyone who came his way was a potential dinner for him. Hidimba lived with his sister Hidimbi. From his perch in a treetop, Hidimba smelled humans, and looking down he saw the Pandava group resting in the grove. Hungrily, Hidimba asked his sister to go and kill the people he saw below and to bring them to him. That was Hidimbi's job; she could not escape her brother's spell. He was her master. She came down from the treetops and saw there the *deva*-like Bhima. It was love at first sight. She was infatuated with Bhima. All her evil thoughts disappeared, and she no longer wanted to kill Bhima. She changed her form and appeared before Bhima in a white sari. She looked like an *apsara*, a celestial.

"Who are you?" Bhima asked.

“I am Hidimbi, sister of a *rākṣasa* who is in charge of this forest. My brother does not let go of anybody who happens to pass this way. He is waiting for me to bring the bodies of you and your friends. He sent me here to kill you. But when I saw you I changed my mind, and now I want to marry you. I want you to be my husband.”

Bhima laughed, “What?”

She said, “We should get out of here, you and me. I will carry you to a safe place. I can take many forms. I can fly. I can do many things. I am a *rākṣasī* you know. I have all these powers. Let us go before my brother comes.”

“Let him come,” replied Bhima.

“He is a *rākṣasa*. He will kill you,” said Hidimbi.

“I am really not too worried about a *rākṣasa*. He is just another pest,” said Bhima.

“You talk as though you think you can handle him,” said Hidimbi.

“I cannot go anywhere,” said Bhima, “Look, here is my mother. These are my brothers. There is Yudhisthira, my oldest brother. He is like a god to me. How could I leave them?”

“All right,” said Hidimbi, “we’ll bring your mother along with us.”

“Everything you say is *adharma*,” declared Bhima, “You can just forget your weird plan. I’ll just wait and see what your brother is up to.”

Hidimbi’s brother was already there. His sister had not returned, and he was curious about the delay. Seeing the humans had made him hungry. Hidimba approached the pair.

“He may kill you when he gets here; he can you know,” proclaimed Hidimbi to Bhima.

“You do not know my strength. He cannot kill me. You will see what these

two hands can do. This forest will be free of this menace. Your brother will be gone," said the Pandava prince.

"All right," said Hidimbi, "after he is gone will you marry me?"

Hidimba had heard everything. He stormed up on his sister and Bhima, "You want to marry my dinner? This fellow is my dinner. First I will eat, then I will deal with you, sister."

The two combatants faced off and the fight began. As the noise and ruckus grew, Bhima said, "Say, would you quiet down a bit, my mother and brothers are sleeping. Don't disturb them." But the family woke up, and they saw Bhima fighting this huge mass of flesh, this *rākṣasa*. They were of course amused at the titanic wrestling match. Then Kunti saw the girl in white standing nearby.

"Who might you be? Are you a celestial? What are you doing here in this forest?" asked Kunti.

"I am this *rākṣasa's* sister, unfortunately," said the *rākṣasī*, "I came by here and saw your son and I was taken by him. Please tell your son to marry me." Yudhisthira and the others laughed out loud when they heard this.

"Bhima, you must be tired after all you have been doing. Why don't you leave this fellow to me? Why not take a rest?" inquired Arjuna.

Bhima said, "No, no, no, I will finish off this guy. I feel fresh after my bath. You just take it easy."

Arjuna advised, "Well, do it now, because the sun is setting and you know these *rākṣasas* gather strength in the nighttime. It becomes very difficult to fight against them. Get it over with, otherwise I will take care of it."

To be continued...