

The Terrible Vow of Devavrata

This story that I'm delighted to share is about Prince Devavrata. It is one of the most important stories of the great epic, the Mahabharata. It sets up the story that follows it. It is a story of sacrifice, much drama, and sadness. It is a masterpiece of a scene that occurs during the epic. I feel that no matter who listens to it, my rendition of it will get across the importance of the greater good (someone else's happiness in this case) versus one's own ego/pride. (Myself)

The narrator of the story is Vedavyasa, a great sage whose name in Sanskrit means 'one who divided the Vedas'. He is narrating this story to Lord Ganesha who is able to write down what he understands at the pace of oration given by Vedavyasa. The narrator is not personally involved in the events of the story itself. The story is about Devavrata who is the heir apparent aka. Prince of the kingdom of Hastinapur. His father is King Shantanu who is longing for a very pious fisherman's daughter. Her name is Satyawati. (Myself)

The story is about Devavrata renouncing his right to the throne in a dramatic fashion and vowing celibacy. He does so after figuring out his father was madly in love with Satyawati but she would only marry him if she made their child the prince. Even though Devavrata was known as the strongest and most powerful kid in all of Hastinapur, he realized that to fulfill Satyawati and her father's wish, it was necessary to make sure he never kids. Once he does this and vows in front of her that he will choose celibacy for life, flowers are showered upon him from the sky and cries of "Bhishma, Bhishma" come crying out from the skies. Bhishma in Sanskrit means "one who undertakes a painful vow and fulfills it". He takes Satyawati back to his father who ends up marrying and having kids with King Shantanu. (Myself)

This story takes place at two locations. The first location that is introduced is in the forest along the banks of the very famous Indian river, Yamuna. The other place this takes place is in Hastinapur which is a city today in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in northern India.

(Myself)

This event takes place not long after Bhishma is born as Devavrata. The estimate for when this text was written and preserved is somewhere around the 8-9th century BCE. In Hinduism there is a concept of eras or epochs known as yuga's. A yuga is a time period that is characterized by the definition of the name it's given. The Mahabharata is said to have taken place in the Dwapara yuga which is the one before our current period of time known as the Kali yuga.

This story is told for multiple reasons. It helps to set up and explain the interesting family dynamic that comes about from Bhishma giving up the throne to the next person. The allowance for another "dynasty" to take power creates multiple divisions amongst the royal family and ultimately leads to the major division amongst the Pandavas and Kauravas. The idea behind telling this story might also go to talk about the larger ethical principles behind the book such as dharma, or duty. Within dharma the idea of sacrifice of pleasure, or kama, is important and Bhishma embodies this principle of giving up lust for the happiness of others. It also sets up an interesting conflict whereby he is respected by both the Pandavas and Kauravas very highly even though both groups are at war. (Shastri, Ajay Mitra).

Bibliography

1. Shastri, Ajay Mitra. *Mahabharata, the End of an Era (yuga,, nta)*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study and Aryan International, New Delhi, 2004. Print.
2. Myself. I have studied the Mahabharata since the age of 10. I started out just reading the cartoon book as a little child but within the last 10 years I progressed to reading the full long work as well as multiple translations, interpretations, and psychoanalytical papers on the work as a whole. The story is a pillar of my family tradition as well as all other Hindu texts and as such my family and I have all well studied, learned, and discussed these great epics of Hindu literature.