



**Shakuntala - the Epitome
of Beauty, Patience and Virtue**

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*"Nirjaney cha vaney yasmaachakuntaihi parirakshitaa
Shakuntaleyti naamasyaaha kritam chaapi tato mayaa"*

*"She was surrounded in the solitude of the wilderness by Sakunta birds
Hence, I name her Shakuntala, the one protected by Shakuntas"*

The above were the words uttered by sage Kanva in the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata. He was the one who found baby Shakuntala alone and abandoned in the forest.

Introduction



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SHAKUNTALA

Indian mythology is vibrant and colourful and presents some of the world's best ever romantic legends. Sanskrit literature, especially, is a rich treasure trove of love tales that are sensuous and passionate and rouse the romantics in each of us. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata comprise several charming stories of love between mortals, kings and queens, Gods and Goddesses. The divine and undying emotion of love is further celebrated by great poets and writers of ancient India.

One such legend is that of Shakuntala, the daughter of sage Vishwamitra and the beautiful Apsara, Menaka. This tale revolves round the love of Shakuntala and the mighty king, Dushyanta. Originally mentioned in the Mahabharata, the story of Shakuntala has been immortalized by way of the Abhijyanashakuntalam, written by the great poet, Kalidasa.

Brahmarishi Vishwamitra

Shakuntala was born to sage Vishwamitra and the heavenly Apsara Menaka. Menaka had been ordered by Indra, the King of the Devas, to travel down to earth and distract the great sage from his mighty and powerful penance.

Indra was well aware of Vishwamitra's powers and feared that if he grew any stronger spiritually, he would easily be able to usurp his own throne and start ruling the Devaloka. Before we go into the actual story of Shakuntala, let us first look at the life and times of her parents, Vishwamitra and Menaka.

Brahmarishi Vishwamitra is one of the most revered rishis of ancient India. Also a great scholar, he is credited as the author of much of Mandala 3 of the Rigveda, including the Gayatri Mantra. According to the Puranas, Vishwamitra is the first among only 24 ancient rishis to have understood the actual brilliance and meaning of the Gayatri Mantra. Vishwamitra's mentioned is also found in several legendary stories and in different works of the Sanatana Dharma.

Vishwamitra, a descendant of the mighty King Kusha (not Lord Rama's son), was also called Kaushika. He was originally a king of ancient India. Vishwamitra ruled the earth for many thousands of years. The story of Vishwamitra appears in various Puranas, with slight differences in each one of them. He was the son of Gadhi, one of the four sons of Kusha.



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GAYATRI MANTRA WITH OM

Vishwamitra Meets Vasistha



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KAMADHENU

On one of his expeditions, Kaushika, along with his soldiers, decided to rest in Rishi Vasistha's ashram (hermitage). The sage welcomed him wholeheartedly and fed and took care of the entire army. The king wondered as to how it was possible for the humble, simple ashram to take care of all the arrangements to feed an entire army. When he expressed his surprise to the sage, Vasistha told him that his little calf, Nandini, had provided the food to the entire entourage. Nandini, the daughter of the holy, wish-granting cow, Kamadhenu, was a gift from Indra.

Kaushika immediately started thinking of possessing the calf and how beneficial it could prove to him and the country at large. He requested the sage to hand over Nandini to him. Vasistha was polite, but refused the king's request, saying that he would never be tempted by any amount of wealth that Kaushika could offer him. He knew that Nandini could offer infinite

times that wealth if he so wished.

This angered Kaushika, who poured verbal insults at Brahmarishi Vasistha. He then ordered his soldiers to seize the cow, and drive it to his kingdom. However, the great Vasistha, with his Yogic powers, called forth an entire army of warriors to fight Kaushika's army. The latter's army was completely routed and Kaushika was captured and presented before Vasistha. The sage pardoned Kaushika, spared his life and sent him back to his own kingdom.

In another version, Vasistha destroyed the whole of the army with the chanting of Aum. Kaushika then undertook penance to appease Lord Shiva, who granted him the knowledge of celestial weaponry. Filled with pride and arrogance, Kaushika went back to Vasistha's ashram, only to be quashed again with the power of Vasistha's Brahmadanda or sacred wooden stick.

Vishwamitra Becomes a Brahmarishi

The defeat made the king realize how great spiritual power was. Taking the name Vishwamitra (a friend of the World), he then renounced his kingdom and undertook penance in order to become a greater rishi than Vasistha. After many years of severe penance and austerities, he finally attained the title of Brahmarishi and that too, from sage Vasistha himself. This immediately ends their enmity.

Interestingly, it was also at this time that he met Menaka and then sired Shankuntala. Vishwamitra's love for Menaka was known to be extremely intense and passionate, much beyond human imagination.

Vishwamitra, the Compassionate One

As a king, Kaushika had been arrogant and haughty, with a vile temper. He had not lost that temper even when he became an ascetic. But as a former king, Vishwamitra also had a lot of compassion for all around and was always willing to help those in trouble.

The Story of Trishanku

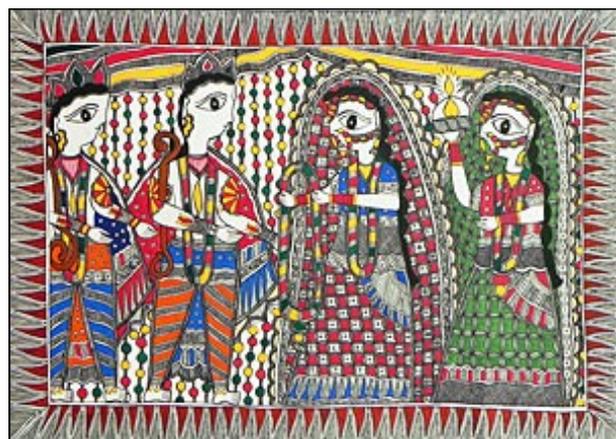
King Trishanku had been cursed to become a Chandala or untouchable. He was hence transformed into a person with an ash-smeared body, clothed in black, wearing jewellery made of iron. Trishanku asked his guru, Vasistha, to send him to heaven while in his own body, but the guru told him that this was not possible. So Trishanku made the same request to Vishwamitra, who conducted a great yagna, knowing well that this act would also rob him of all the punya (good karma) that he had gathered in his lifetime of penance.

When none of the Devas accepted Trishanku into heaven, Vishwamitra decided to use his Yogic powers and ordered him to ascend to heaven. Trishanku did rise to heaven, but was rejected by Indra. Enraged by this, the mighty Vishwamitra created a different heaven for the king, called the Trishanku Swarga. He stopped only when Brihaspati ordered him to do so. Ultimately, though, the king did not enjoy his exclusive heaven and was then transformed into a constellation.

In the Ramayana

In the epic Ramayana, Vishwamitra featured as Lord Rama's guru. He gave both Rama and Lakshmana the knowledge of advanced religious principles and also of the Devastras or celestial weaponry. Using this knowledge, Rama defeated and slayed Tataka, Maricha and Subahu.

Vishwamitra also influenced Rama to go to Sita's swayamvara and win her hand in marriage, which Rama finally does.



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RAMA WEDS SITA

Menaka, the Beautiful Apsara



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APSARA

Menaka was a stunningly beautiful Apsara who captured the hearts of the Devas, Suras and Asuras alike. An Apsara is a celestial nymph or a celestial maiden, with spiritual powers. Youthful and vibrant, they are also well-versed in all the fine arts. They are married to the Gandharvas and serve Indra in his court, by singing and dancing to the music created by their husbands.

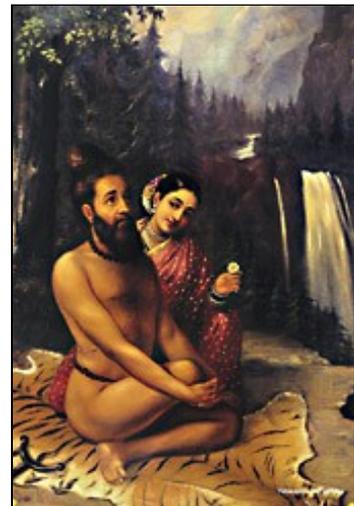
Apsaras are believed to be capable of changing their shape at will. The four most famous Apsaras are Urvashi, Rambha, Tilottama and Menaka. Out of them, Menaka was the one who was the most beautiful, as also the most powerful.

Fearing that Vishwamitra's steep spiritual rise would enable him to overthrow Indra and rule Devaloka, Indra ordered Menaka to go down to Earth and break his penance. Accordingly, Menaka appeared in front of Vishwamitra and tried her level best to distract him with her dance and music.

Finally, Vishwamitra gave in to her charms. He felt lust and passion well up inside him when he saw her swimming naked in a lake near the waterfall. He left his penance to be with her and the two of them made love for years together. Though Menaka had come with a mission, she herself fell deeply in love with Vishwamitra and the two shared a passion experienced by none else.

Vishwamitra came to know of Indra's devious trick and was enraged at his cowardly act. However, he was well aware of Menaka's genuine love for him and therefore, he merely cursed her that she would be separated from him forever.

Menaka left for the heavens and there, she discovered she was pregnant with Vishwamitra's child. She gave birth to Shakuntala and left the infant at rishi Kanva's ashram.



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VISHWAMITRA WITH MENAKA

Shakuntala

Shakuntala's Birth



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**VISHWAMITRA REJECTS MENAKA
AND THEIR DAUGHTER**

Vishwamitra was enraged to find out how he had been duped by Menaka and the Devas and he also felt ashamed of himself that he had lost all the virtue he had gained through his many years of penance and ascetism. He distanced himself from the mother and child and got back to his penance.

Knowing that she could not leave the child with him, and wanting to go back to the heavens, Menaka left her newborn in the forest. It was here that the infant was found by Kanva Rishi. Naming her Shakuntala, Kanva Rishi took her to his ashram, on the banks of the Malini River which is located near the Shivalik hills of the Himalayas.

Shakuntala's childhood was spent happily roaming around in the greenery of the hills, along with her two closest friends, Anasuya and Priyamvada. She grew up to be a strikingly beautiful young woman, who radiated youth and elegance, though simply clad in cotton garments and flowers for ornaments. She had a sweet voice and equally sweet and sober nature as well.

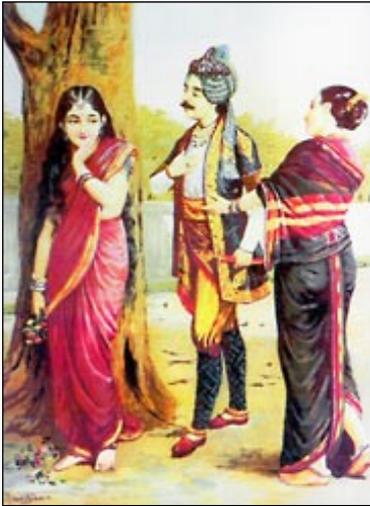
So gentle and soft-spoken was she, that even the birds and animals residing in the forest were drawn to her. In fact, Shakuntala is often portrayed petting deer, who are considered to be some of the most timid animals, fearing all human contact.



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SHAKUNTALA

Shakuntala Meets Dushyanta



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**DUSHYANTA AND SHAKUNTALA
LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT**

Shakuntala's life turned around when she happened to lay her eyes on Dushyanta. Dushyanta was a great King featuring in Indian mythology and classical Indian literature as well. He is the central male character of Kalidasa's great play, *Abhignanashakuntalam*.

His name appears in the *Mahabharata* as a mighty, powerful and just ruler who fought and won many a battle, thereby gaining power over many states of India. Dushyanta was the son of Ilina and Rathanbara. His rule is believed to have spanned from Gandhara (now, Kandahar in Afghanistan) to the Vindhyas and from Sindhu (now, Pakistan) to Banga (now, Bangladesh).

King Dushyanta first encountered Shakuntala while travelling through the forest with his army, in pursuit of a male deer, injured by his arrow. He happened to enter the ashram, when he saw Shakuntala and instantly fell in love with her. Begging her forgiveness for harming the deer, he also spent some time at the ashram.



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DUSHYANTA ENCOUNTERS SHAKUNTALA



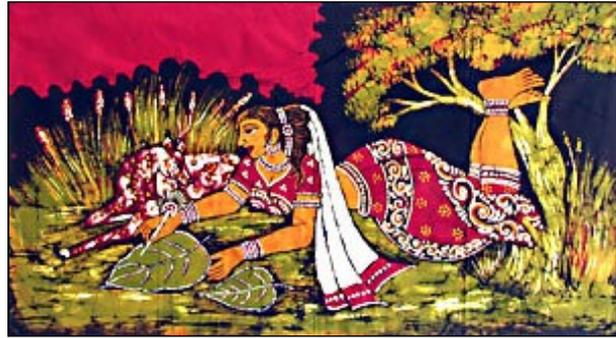
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SHAKUNTALA WITH DUSHYANTA

When he expressed his love for her, he realized that Shakuntala too reciprocated his feelings. The young couple spent many happy hours with each other. Dushyanta then secretly married Shakuntala, in accordance with the Gandharva Vivaha tradition prevalent then. Dushyanta stayed overnight in the ashram and then left for his capital city, promising Shakuntala that he would return soon to take her back to his kingdom, as his lawfully wedded wife. Before leaving, he gave his precious ring to Shakuntala, as a sign of his love for her. He also particularly asked her not to lose it under any circumstance.

Durvasa's Curse

After Dushyanta's departure from the ashram, Shakuntala spent much time dreaming about him and was often in her own dream world, neither eating nor sleeping properly. One day, rishi Durvasa, who was infamous for his nasty temper, came to the ashram. Lost in her thoughts, Shakuntala failed to notice the sage and greet him properly.



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SHAKUNTALA WRITES A LETTER TO DUSHYANTA

Enraged by this insult, Durvasa cursed Shakuntala, saying that the person of her dreams would forget about her altogether. As he was about to depart, one of Shakuntala's friends explained to him the real reason behind Shakuntala's distraction and that it was never her intention to insult the rishi.

Understanding Shakuntala's state and realizing that she was truly innocent; Durvasa modified his curse saying that the person who had forgotten Shakuntala would recall everything if she showed him a personal token of love that had been given to her.



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SHAKUNTALA PINES FOR KING DUSHYANTA, WITH PRIYAMVADA AND ANUSUYA

Time passed by and Shakuntala started wondering why Dushyanta did not return for her. In a few weeks' time, Shakuntala panicked when realized that she was pregnant with Dushyanta's child. Very soon, her condition would become obvious to one and all around. She confided in Kanva Maharshi, who immediately decided to send her to her husband, Dushyanta.

Shakuntala Loses the Ring

It was the day for Shakuntala to leave for the capital city. Dressed in beautiful silk attire, Shakuntala left the ashram along with her foster father. On the way to the kingdom, Shakuntala and her entourage had to cross a river by a canoe. Attracted to the sheer beauty of the river, Shakuntala ran her fingers through the deep blue water. At this moment, the ring given to her by Dushyanta slipped off her finger, without her realizing it. A fish swimming in the river swallowed the ring.

Dushyanta Forgets Shakuntala

When she reached Dushyanta's court, a message was sent to the king about the arrival of a woman who claimed to be his wife. Unfortunately, Dushyanta had lost his memory, due to Durvasa's curse. He did not recall anything at all about Shakuntala and their wedding. Hence, he refused to accept Shakuntala as his wife. Shakuntala tried to remind him of their meeting, the hours they had spent in each other's company, the night he had stayed on in the ashram and so on. But Dushyanta remembered nothing.

In a final bid, Shakuntala told him about the ring he had given her and raised her hand to show it to him. Only then did she realize that it had fallen off somewhere and that she

had lost it forever.

Shakuntala Gives Birth

Utterly humiliated and dejected, Shakuntala returned to a remote part the forest, where she, in due course of time, gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. Bharata, as she named him, was one day destined to become one of the most powerful icons of Indian history.

Bharata gradually grew older and turned out to be a strong, handsome youth. Having been raised in the forest, he moved around with the wild animals there and grew to be fearless, healthy and extremely active and agile. He used to ride the wild animals and often made a sport of opening the mouths of lions and tigers in order to count their teeth.

When the time came, Shakuntala taught him the art of archery and also the use of weapons. She also acquainted him with the Vedas and the Upanishads. Bharata soon grew to become a handsome and intelligent young man - veritably, a prince in exile!

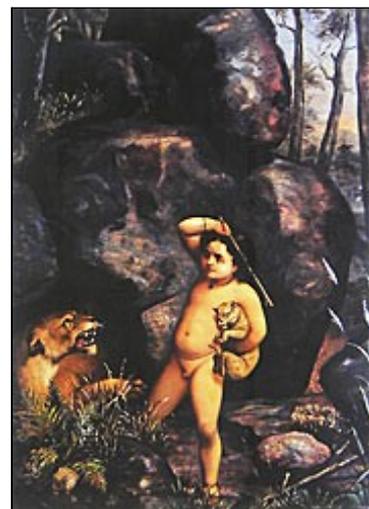
Dushyanta Regains His Memory

In the meantime, a fisherman was utterly surprised to find a royal ring inside the belly of a fish he had caught. He found the ring when he cut up the fish and recognizing the royal seal, he took the ring to Dushyanta. As he held the ring, Dushyanta immediately recalled his past - his love for Shakuntala, the wonderful time spent with her and the memories of his lovely bride. He felt very bad about the way he had rudely driven away his own pregnant wife from his court, insulting her in front of one and all present there.

Dushyanta Meets Bharata

Wasting no more time, Dushyanta immediately set out to find Shakuntala. Arriving at her father's ashram, he realized that she had left there. He decided to move deeper into the forest to find her. He then suddenly stopped when he came upon a surprising scene - a young lad had pried open the mouth of a lion and was counting its teeth!

Utterly amazed, Dushyanta asked the boy his name. More surprise was in store for him, as the boy said that he was Bharata, the son of King Dushyanta. Then, at Dushyanta's request, the boy took him to Shakuntala. Dushyanta narrated to her all that he had been through in the past few days, how he had lost his memory and how he could now remember everything. Finally, he asked her to join him again and thus, the family was reunited.



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**BHARAT PLAYS WITH LIONESSE
AND HER CUB**

Another Version of the Story



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MENAKA TAKES SHAKUNTALA TO HEAVEN

There is yet another version of this story. It goes on to narrate how Menaka took Shakuntala back to Heaven when Dushyanta refused to accept her as his wife. Shakuntala stayed on there till she gave birth to Bharata.

Meanwhile, Dushyanta had to wage war against the Devas - his reward was to be reunited with his wife and son. He emerged the victor in this battle and after that, he had a vision, which surprised him.

He saw a young boy counting the teeth of a lion. His kavach (armour) had fallen off his arm. The Devas told Dushyanta that only Bharata's mother or father could tie it back on his arm. Dushyanta successfully tied the kavach on his arm. Surprised and confused, Bharata took the king to his mother Shakuntala and told her that this person claimed to be his father.

Shakuntala was amazed to see Dushyanta again and told Bharata that the king was indeed his father. Thus the family was reunited in Heaven. They then returned to earth to rule for many years before the birth of the Pandavas.

The Story of Emperor Bharata

Bharata, the son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, went on to become a legendary Indo-Aryan emperor of India, who was given equal importance in both Hindu and Jain mythology. Belonging to the Kashyapa clan of Hindu Brahmins, he is considered to be the ancestor of all those belonging to Kashyapa lineage.

Bharata was a mighty emperor who conquered all of Greater India, unifying it into a single entity, which was named after him, as the Bharatavarsha. According to the Mahabharata, Bharatavarsha spanned over the entire Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan,

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgistan, Bactria and Persia. Today, the term "Bharatavarsha" officially implies only the Republic of India.

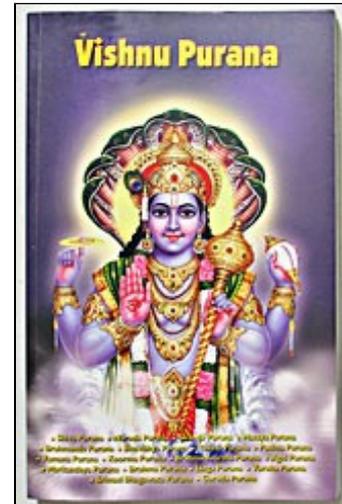
About Bharatavarsha, the Vishnu Purana says:

*"Uttaram yatsamudrasya himadreschaiva dakshinam
Varsham tadbharatam naama bharti yatra santatihi"*

Translated in English, this means:

*"The country that lies in the north of the ocean and in the
south of the snowy mountains is called Bharatam. Therein
reside the descendants of Bharata."*

According to some other Puranas, the Bharatavarsha implies the whole of Planet Earth, and not just India.



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VISHNU PURANA

Etymology

The name Bharata in Sanskrit, stands for "the cherished one". During childhood, Bharata was also referred to as Sarvadamana, which means, "the one who subdues all". This name probably came to be because even as a young child, Bharata loved to play with the fierce animals of the forest, seizing and restraining them with his bare hands. It is also believed that since Dushyanta supported his son after receiving the celestial message, the boy came to be called Bharata, "the supported". Of course, there is no historical or mythological evidence to prove the theory. This sometimes shows up in some dramatized versions of Kalidasa's Abhigyanashakuntalam.

Bharata Becomes Emperor

Bharata, who became King in his youth, ruled long and virtuously, earned great name and fame. His empire was named Bharatavarsha. He soon grew from strength to strength and earned several titles, including "Chakravarti" (emperor) and "Sarvabhauma" (the omniscient one).

The Bharata Vansha (Race)



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THE MAHABHARATA

The Bharata Vansha is very significant in Indian mythology, as the Pandavas were descendants of the mighty king Bharata. Here is an account of the great Bharata Vansha through the course of many centuries, leading into the Mahabharata:

- Bharata wedded Sunanda, the daughter of Sarvasena, the ruler of Kashi.
- Bharata had in all three wives and nine sons. But none of them were like him. The mothers of the children were very angry and disappointed by this and hence, slew all their children. Bharata then conducted a great yagna called "mourisoma" and, by the grace of the sage, Bharadwaja, begot a son he named Bhumanyu. He named this son his heir-apparent.
- Bhumanyu wedded Vijaya, the daughter of Dasarha and they had a son named Suhotra. Suhotra later married Suvarna, the daughter of Ikshvaku and they begot a son named Hasti. Hasti founded the city of Hastinapura.
- Hasti got married to Yashodhara, the princess of Trigarta. They had a son named Vikunthana.
- Vikunthana, in time, went on to marry Sudeva, the princess of Dasarha. They had a son named Ajamidha. Ajamidha had four wives Raikeyi, Gandhari, Visala and Riksha. By his wife Riksha, Ajamidha begot a son, Samvarana.
- Samavarana married Tapati, Vivaswat's daughter and begot a son named Kuru. This great ruler went on to create the Kurukshetra sacred by practising asceticism there.
- Kuru married Shubhangi and they got a son named Viduratha. Viduratha in turn married Supriya and they had a son named Anaswan.
- Anaswan got married to Amrita and they had a son called Parikshit. Parikshit then married Suvasa and they had a son, Bhimasena. Bhimasena in turn married Kumari and their son was named Pratisravas. Pratisravas' son was called Pratipa.
- Pratipa got wedded to Sunanda and they had three sons. Because the eldest son adopted the life of an ascetic, the second son, Shantanu, ascended the throne.
- Shantanu became one of the most important characters of the Mahabharata. He married Ganga, who bore him a son called Devavrata, who was later referred to as Bhishma. Shantanu also married Satyawati later and got two sons. Out of them, Vichitravirya ascended the throne. Satyawati had already had a son by sage Parashara, named Vedavyasa (also known as Dwaipayana).
- Sage Vedvyasa had three children, Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura.
- The 100 sons of Dhritarashtra were collectively referred to as the Kauravas, while the five sons of Pandu were called the Pandavas.
- The Mahabharata starts off with the story of the Pandavas and the Kauravas and their hatred for each other. The Pandavas married Draupadi or Panchali, as she is also known. Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, had many wives, one of which was Krishna's sister, Subhadra. By Subhadra, Arjuna begot Abhimanyu, who died fighting in the Chakravyuha formation during the great Kurukshetra war.
- Abhimanyu married Uttar and they had a son called Parikshit, who took the Bharata Vamsa further ahead after the Pandavas' time.

This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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