

Shakuni



# Shakuni

Master of the Game

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*To*  
*Aai–Baba, who introduced me to the world of words*  
*and*  
*Late Dileep Jadhav, who was the first reader*  
*of this manuscript*



I have run out of patience. There's a limit to everything, including trying someone's patience. I have been silent for years, for centuries. But can this go on forever? Why have I been convicted? Why have I become synonymous with deceit, duplicity and dissimulation? A person who keeps his word, no matter what, should be regarded in high esteem. Why is that not applicable to me, then? I once pledged to do something and I kept my word, even though it cost me my life. Why, then, have I earned only scorn? Where is the respect I deserve? I am not the man who pawned his family in the name of duty. I am not the man who abducted a woman. I am not the man who shared his wife with others, the wife who was once bravely won. I am not the mother who pulled her newborn away from her breast and sent it floating down a raging, roaring river. I am not the husband who gambled away his wife. I am not the man who called a woman a whore in a full courtroom. I am not the teacher

who asked his disciple to cut off his thumb. Then why am I considered the vilest of villains in this epic? I am the prince of Gandhara, Shakuni, now a synonym for guile and treachery. I am the villain you have hated all your life.

And this villain wants to tell you something today. What can Shakuni who, in the ancient times, transgressed all boundaries of sin and morality have to say in these modern times? Well, I shall not offer any clarification, explanation or justification for my deeds. I will tell you, instead, about the role I played in this epic and how that had come to be decided.

## My Gandhara

The kingdom of Gandhara was situated in north-western Aryavarta, or what you today call the Indian subcontinent. My land was surrounded by mighty mountains, and we had very little interaction with the rest of Aryavarta. Gandhara never found it necessary to reach out to its neighbours. The cold winds blowing in our land all year round made agriculture next to impossible. Yet we could always produce enough to feed our own people. Although ours was a small kingdom, the talent and tenacity of our men had earned us a good reputation in Aryavarta. Woollen garments, made from the fur of the finest sheep of our land, were popular in all parts of the world. People wanted Gandhara's strong,



sinewy horses and camels in their armies. Gandhara had also made a name for itself in medicine. We hardly had any vegetation in our dry mountains and arid deserts, but the herbs that were found in Gandhara were perhaps as potent as the cure-all, death-reversing sanjeevani. Our herbs had magical properties that could enhance beauty and heal incurable diseases. Our mountains and mines were storehouses of gems and stones so precious that even the grand Chakravarty kings coveted them. Ours was a small but prosperous kingdom.

My father, Subala, ruled over this kingdom. He was well loved by his people because he always thought about their welfare. Even though I was the crown prince of Gandhara, I was less popular than he. I thought very differently from the way he did. For the king of Gandhara the wealth, comfort, affluence and opulence of his subjects meant everything. He did not worry too much about the military strength of the kingdom. But I firmly believed that fortifying our land was necessary to ensure that we lived with pride and dignity. I often had heated discussions on this issue with my father. He always argued that Gandhara had no enemies in all of Aryavarta and that no king would ever gain anything by invading this land of vast deserts and formidable mountains. Therefore he never established a strong army. We did, of course, have an official regiment, but it only had to combat criminals and bandits in the surrounding areas. In fact, the king was so confident

about the security of his land that I, the crown prince, received only the most basic training in the use of arms and weapons.

I knew how to handle the bow and arrow, the sword, the javelin and the mace, but I was no expert in the use of weaponry. I was not particularly skilled or strong, but I was definitely attractive. Born in Gandhara, my body had a natural radiance, and even though I did not think too highly of my complexion, my mother was extremely proud of my fair skin. When I was a child she would put a black mark on my cheek after bathing me. I remember her saying, 'There can be no boy as handsome and fair as my Shaku in all of Aryavarta.' Of course, every mother considers her child beautiful. Though I must confess I was very fond of my eyes. They were light brown, like my mother's, and I thought they made me look as beautiful as her. Little did I know that one day light eyes would come to be regarded as windows to a world of fraud and trickery.

I had a physical disability, which I was often told was the reason I was not trained in the martial arts. History remembers Shakuni as a crippled man, but I have never considered myself disabled. What people thought was a limp, to me was my natural gait. For I never had any trouble walking or running for miles on end. I could even scale high mountains. Why, then, would I consider myself a man with a handicap?

We had very hot summers and very cold winters in

Gandhara. Back in those days, indoor games were as popular as outdoor sports. One such board game that I really enjoyed was backgammon. This game of dice was a test of a player's dexterity and luck. I had no equal when it came to rolling the die deftly and then strategically moving the pieces on the board. But I was still drawn to the martial arts and weapons. I often begged my father to allow me to gain expertise in archery, but he never did.

It was my duty to obey my king and my father, even when I did not agree with him, and so Gandhara continued to be governed according to his principles. The kingdom was flourishing, and I soon began to believe that my father's stance on its military needs was probably right. Gandhara with its vast deserts and towering mountains probably did not require a large army for its defence. It was then that the unforeseen happened one day, and it changed not just my life but also the history of Aryavarta.

It was spring in Gandhara after a long, bitter winter. Spring was an important season for commerce in our kingdom. People who traded in cattle, clothes and jewels had either already headed south for business or were preparing to leave. That was when we were informed by our subjects in the eastern fringes that they had seen a massive army approaching the kingdom, loaded with arms and ammunition.

I immediately went to King Subala with the missives brought by the messenger, worried and impatient. 'Sir,

my worst fears have come true.’ The king looked calm even though he could see the pained expression on my face. ‘What’s wrong, Shakuni? Why are you so agitated?’ The question left me stunned. There were alien soldiers at our borders. Was the king entirely unaware of the situation? What kind of a king was he? How could he not be concerned about the safety of his land? The king was also my father. I could not argue with the monarch, but as his son I took the liberty to express my dissatisfaction with him. I asked him, ‘Father, are you completely unaware of the threat to our kingdom? Or do you now find secret messengers as unnecessary as large armies?’ My father smiled to see how angry I was, and said, ‘Prince Shakuni, I have already heard the news that you have brought me. So you need not worry about my network of secret messengers. As far as the situation at our borders is concerned, my experience leads me to assume that the people threatening us belong to a group of bandits who want to steal our cattle. I might not have invested in a large regiment, Shakuni, but I do think that the army we have is quite capable of tackling a fringe group of miscreants. All necessary information has been sent to the commander of the eastern regiment. The monarchs of Takshashila and Purushpura have also been notified to be on their guard. Do not fret, Shakuni. The commander, I suppose, will arrive any minute now with news of the complete extermination of the bandits.’

The king’s words got me thinking. Was I worrying

needlessly? He was probably right: a few bandits ganging up was not a big problem, after all. Soon we saw a messenger on horseback galloping towards the palace. He had been sent by the commander of the eastern regiment with a letter. King Subala began to read the letter calmly. As he did so his confidence appeared to fade and his expression started to change. Clearly, then, the letter did not bear the information the king had been expecting. The men at our borders were not lowly criminals. They were decorated officers of a well-trained, well-equipped army. I was furious. I barked at my father, 'Sir, do you still think Gandhara does not need soldiers to defend its borders?' The creases on his forehead indicated he was indeed worried. He tried to regain his composure and said, 'Prince Shakuni, this is not the time for disagreement. Instead, we need to find out where the army has come from. Which king wants to invade Gandhara.'

The messenger said, 'The leader of our eastern troops sent a few spies to gather information on the enemy as soon as he received your word, and then started readying for battle. After some time, he set out with a cavalry of five hundred armed men to fight the bandits. However, along the way, he realized that he would have to consult you before taking the next step. On the pretext of taking their cattle out to graze, our men had gone quite close to the tents and saw a large feast being prepared. It was evident from the well-stocked kitchen, the fine quality

of the tents and the garments of the soldiers that they were not poor bandits but members of some organized regiment.' I could not wait for the messenger to finish his narrative. Cutting him short, I said, 'Which kingdom have they come from? Tell us at once! How many men could you see there? Why have they come to Gandhara?'

'I beg your pardon, Prince Shakuni. We do not have this information yet, but the commander of the eastern regiment will be coming to this court shortly to discuss the gravity of the situation.'

King Subala was turning increasingly pale. He had initially felt confident about the men at the boundary being bandits, but he had been wrong. The situation had suddenly taken a grievous turn. To break the deathly silence that filled the courtroom, the chief minister asked the messenger to leave. The king's councillors broke into a vigorous discussion on the situation. The minister said, 'Sir, not only do we have amicable relations with all our neighbouring kingdoms, but it is also my firm belief that these kingdoms are not strong enough to attack Gandhara. We might not be the most powerful state in Aryavarta but we are definitely more tough than most of our neighbours. Those kingdoms depend on Gandhara for their trade and commerce. Therefore they will never launch an attack on us.'

The king agreed. He asked, 'Whom do you think this army belongs to, then?' No one in the hall had an answer to that question. Then the minister said, 'Sir, from the

description of the soldiers it seems to me that they have come from some mighty kingdom. Magadha, Chedi, Kashi, Kosala, Panchala, Hastinapura, Matsya and the Yadavas have the resources to possess such extensive armies.' The king considered his minister's words and replied, 'Why would the kingdoms of Magadha, Panchala or Hastinapura be interested in Gandhara? I have not received news of any king performing the grand horse-sacrifice ritual, either. This armed campaign makes no sense to me at all.' Before the discussion could go any further, the leader of our eastern troops entered the royal hall, gasping for breath.

Customarily, entering the hall without proper permission was seen as a breach of decorum. However, the commander did not consider following any such code of conduct, and the king and his ministers took no exception to it either, given the situation. Everyone was hungry for the news. The commander greeted the king and said, 'The army camping outside our kingdom is much larger than we had imagined. We could not see the end of their line. The soldiers look well trained. I presume there are a hundred thousand men in their cavalry. The goods carriages parked near their makeshift kitchen have more grain than all of Gandhara's granaries can ever hold.' I sensed fear and impatience well up in King Subala. He told the commander angrily, 'Chief, are you here to give me their details or to sing their praises in my court?' The commander, unperturbed by

the harsh words of the king, usually known for his calm temperament, said, 'I beg your pardon, my lord. It is my duty to ensure that my king receives the information that he needs. Everything that I have said so far is true and there is no bit of exaggeration in those details.'

I was beginning to lose my cool. It was evident that the army standing outside our walls was not there to extend a hand of friendship. That our own army was not prepared to fight was the consequence of King Subala's strange administrative policies. Ever since I became an adolescent and was crowned prince of Gandhara I have emphasized the need for our kingdom's military expansion and the importance of the use of modern technologies of warfare. But the king, who had always considered me naive and foolish, would laugh my suggestions off. And this king was now needlessly losing his patience with the commander. I intervened and said, 'Sir, it is natural for our commander to be impressed by the might of a massive army since you have always prevented the growth and development of our own army. Do you still stand by your rigid principles?' My words were dripping with disdain.

'This is not the time, Shakuni, to discuss my principles and policies regarding our armed forces.' When my father spoke to me, I did not hear the earlier bitterness of the king's words.

'Well, sir, this is not the time to chastise the commander either. I can clearly see who is responsible



for the situation that we are in today. However, I do not want to waste time discussing such matters now. Our primary concern should be to find out which kingdom the army belongs to. Who is their ruler? Chief, you may continue . . .’ My words were so harsh they might have sounded indecent and arrogant, and could well have been misconstrued as animosity towards the king. However, I could not be bothered about impressions then. I had spontaneously, most naturally, taken charge of the reins of the kingdom in that hour of need. The commander addressed me and not the king this time. ‘Prince Shakuni, thousands of tents have been set up by that army. There is a small white flag flying high on each tent. While these flags have no symbols, the large flag atop the largest tent has the insignia of the Kuru kingdom. I could clearly identify the royal flag of Hastinapura.’

The king was completely overwhelmed. Cutting the commander short, he said, ‘What rubbish is this? Why on earth will Hastinapura attack Gandhara?’ The commander, seemingly encouraged by my behaviour towards the king, responded rather sharply. ‘Sir, I am not qualified to remark on how kings behave and which king will choose to attack which kingdom. I am only describing what I have seen. I am requesting you to pay heed to this information and to arrive at some decision as soon as possible.’ While the commander was not disrespectful towards his monarch, I was heartened

to see that he had taken my words seriously. I was used to summary rejection of most of my suggestions and proposals in my father's court. The commander addressed me again. 'Prince Shakuni, the person leading those troops is an elderly man. His hair is white as snow, but he is tall and agile, and his movements are as swift as those of a young man. For a person his age, he can lift bows, arrows, spears and javelins with so much ease that these heavy weapons of destruction appear as though they are bouquets of flowers. The old warrior is clad in white and is wearing a crown on his head.'

Hastinapura was one of the strongest kingdoms in Aryavarta, and though it took time for news to travel from there to Gandhara, we knew everything about the Kuru clan. From the description the commander of our eastern troops had given it was clear that the army from Hastinapura was being led by the unparalleled Bhishma, son of Goddess Ganga.

## **Bhishma**

There was not a single person in all of Aryavarta who had not heard of Bhishma. This venerable man had been the shield of the Kuru dynasty for several years. Though Bhishma had never been the official ruler of Hastinapura, he had held the reins of the kingdom ever since the reign of King Shantanu. It was because of the brave Bhishma that the throne of Hastinapura, even

though empty for many years, had not been usurped by another ruler. It was said that no warrior on earth was strong enough to defeat Bhishma. In fact, Bhishma had also overpowered his teacher, Lord Parashurama, in a fight. I think there were only two warriors in the world who, though advanced in years, fought like virile young men – Bhishma, and the king of Magadha, Jarasandha.

I was lost in deep thought when King Subala's voice jerked me out of my reverie. He was addressing the commander of the eastern regiment. 'Chief, are you quite certain that the man leading the army is Bhishma, son of Goddess Ganga?' The commander replied, 'My lord, I have never seen Bhishma before, but the men in that army were addressing their leader as "Your Majesty". That leaves very little room for doubt, sir.'

The king turned to his chief minister and said, 'Sir, as far as I know, Bhishma is a noble and just person. He is not likely to attack another state without reason.'

The king's words infuriated me. I said, 'My lord, don't noble and just men expand their kingdoms? It seems to me that you are still in denial. You refuse to acknowledge that there is an army at our doorstep and that war is imminent. Despite everything that the commander has told you, you do not seem to want to prepare your men for battle. It is very unlikely that Bhishma has come all the way from Hastinapura with his army to celebrate the harvest festival with us this spring.'

'Calm down, Prince Shakuni,' the chief minister said.

‘Firstly, Gandhara does not have an army that can face Bhishma’s soldiers; and secondly, if it were Bhishma’s intention to conquer our kingdom then he would not have set up tents outside our borders and given us time to prepare ourselves for war. He would have attacked us directly and reached our capital by now. Think about this: why has the Kuru army not entered our premises yet? If we go out of line now and attack them, can you imagine what the consequences of that move might be?’

There was truth in what the chief minister had said. Yet I chose to disagree with him. ‘So, what do you suggest we do now? Cross our legs, sit here, and wait for their next step?’

‘Of course not, Prince Shakuni. My suggestion is that we caution our soldiers and ask them to prepare for the worst, and in the meantime send an official messenger to Bhishma inviting him to our capital for a dialogue.’

We had no other option, and so it was decided that the chief minister would go to Bhishma bearing the missives of the king of Gandhara. It would take the minister at least three days to go east, talk to Bhishma and return to the court – three days which to me felt like three years.

Father considered Bhishma a conscientious man. He was certain that Bhishma had not come to rule over us, or plunder and loot us. Gandhara’s resources were insignificant when compared with the net worth of Hastinapura. I too was convinced that Bhishma did not intend to gain dominion over our land, cut off as it

was from the rest of the world. If territorial expansion were his design, he would have attacked the other major and minor kingdoms that lay between Hastinapura and Gandhara. Why was he here, then?

My mind wandered to the history of the Kuru dynasty. They were a strange people. It was believed that Bhishma was born of Goddess Ganga. Can ancient rivers assume the form of beautiful women and take birth in our world? I believed that the gods often took different forms and appeared before men in this, our weary, world. People worship the rivers they consider holy, such as the Ganga. It is quite possible that Bhishma or his biological mother worshipped the Ganga too, and that is how he came to be called the son of Goddess Ganga. However, I had little to do with Bhishma's birth and his lineage. The problem facing Gandhara would not benefit from an analysis of Bhishma's origin. Why was I wasting my thoughts on things that did not matter? I shook my head to bring myself out of the thoughts that looped back into my head, but to no avail.

My attention was now on Bhishma's father, King Shantanu. Blinded by his love for Ganga, Shantanu had lost seven children. It is said that Ganga agreed to marry him on two conditions. The first was that he would never question any of her actions. The moment he did, she would leave him, being the second.

So when she was about to surrender her eighth child to the river, Shantanu could not hold back and he

asked her why she was doing so. She explained that her infants were *vasus* from heaven who had been cursed to be born as humans by a sage. She was relieving them of this curse, but now that Shantanu had broken his promise, she would have to leave and the eighth child would have to endure an earthly existence. This child was Bhishma. What had the infants done to deserve being drowned in the currents of the raging river? Had this never occurred to King Shantanu? Sometimes I doubt the veracity of that legend. It was, possibly, a figment of people's overheated imagination. I do not think any man of flesh and blood can allow his wife to kill seven of their children just because he had once pledged never to question her. Also, can a man in his right senses choose to couple with a woman who had killed their children? Can he ever think of making more children with the same woman? It seems to me that the great Kuru king Shantanu, driven by lust, had learnt no lesson from his experiences.

And then at an age when men customarily retire from family life to attain *moksha*, Shantanu chose to abandon his kingdom, his son and his subjects, because he was blinded by passion for yet another woman – Satyawati. Shantanu had to assure Satyawati's father that only her sons would inherit the throne of Hastinapura in order to marry her. Not only was Bhishma required to give up his claim, but he had to ensure that none of his offspring would stake claims to the throne in future.

When Bhishma heard of these conditions, he readily swore an oath of celibacy for his father's happiness. Shantanu might not have forced Bhishma to renounce the throne and remain celibate all his life, but as a father he should have stopped his son from swearing to do so. I delved deeper into these thoughts until I surrendered to the honey-heavy dew of slumber.

### **Preparing for Bhishma's arrival**

The chief minister had returned with news. He had been treated respectfully and amicably by Bhishma, who had also sent my father expensive gifts and expressed his desire to meet him. When asked what the purpose of his visit to Gandhara could be, he had said the reasons were entirely personal. King Subala felt relieved, but I was still not comfortable. What kind of personal reasons could bring the leader of Hastinapura to Gandhara? And, if indeed the reasons were private, why did Bhishma bring such a large army with him? Even though Bhishma was only the commander-in-chief of the Hastinapura army, in effect he was no less than the monarch of that state.

Since the death of Vichitravirya, the throne of Hastinapura had been empty. Bhishma was regarded as the guardian of the young princes and the subjects of Hastinapura. No prince who was of age but unmarried could be instated as king. Could the prospect of a matrimonial alliance have brought Bhishma to

Gandhara, then? Even though Bhishma had sworn to remain celibate, in the past he had gone out of his way to abduct women for the princes of Hastinapura. He was the man who had kidnapped the three daughters of the king of Kashi to get them wedded to his stepbrother, Vichitravirya. The resources of Gandhara could never be compared with those of Hastinapura. However, we had somehow forgotten that Gandhara had a gem whose beauty and exquisiteness was talked about by everyone in Aryavarta. That precious gem was my younger sister, Gandhari.

I broke into a cold sweat. King Subala had lovingly named his daughter Gandhari, princess of Gandhara, but I fondly addressed my sister as Shubha. No woman in Aryavarta could match up to Gandhari's beauty, talent, purity and intelligence. She was so beautiful that many kings had offered their hand to her in marriage. As her elder brother, I had suggested to my father to arrange a swayamvar for Gandhari so that she could choose a suitable husband for herself. However, my father thought the prince of Purushpura was a good match for her. He had often told me that Gandhari had given her consent to be wedded to that prince. Yet, before we could finalize their marriage, Bhishma had appeared at our doorstep with his entire army. I was convinced that Bhishma had come to win from us our precious jewel. I did not know much about the princes of Hastinapura, but it was common knowledge that one of them was blind from



birth, and the other a weak, pale, jaundiced young man. Neither was suitable for Gandhari.

I decided to take up the matter with my father, but soon realized that he was not the sort of man who would indulge in such discussions without getting to know the facts first. Also, I did not have much faith in his ability to analyse situations and prepare for the future.

On the advice of his finance minister, my father resolved to give Bhishma a grand welcome. However, he could not decide whom to send to escort Bhishma to our court. It would not befit a king to ride to the fringes of his kingdom to welcome a guest. Our chief minister had already been sent as the king's emissary, earlier. King Subala did not want to use the services of his commander-in-chief or his finance minister either. It thus fell on me to greet Bhishma on behalf of the king and escort him over. By then I had realized that Gandhara, as well as my beloved Gandhari, were in grave trouble. The king was in no position to save his state and his daughter from doom. I was, therefore, left to play the part of an efficient prince and a caring brother.

### **My first meeting with Bhishma**

That was my first meeting with Bhishma. His massive body was clad in white and appeared like a mountain from a distance. His arms were strong and sinewy, more powerful than any virile young man's. His flowing white