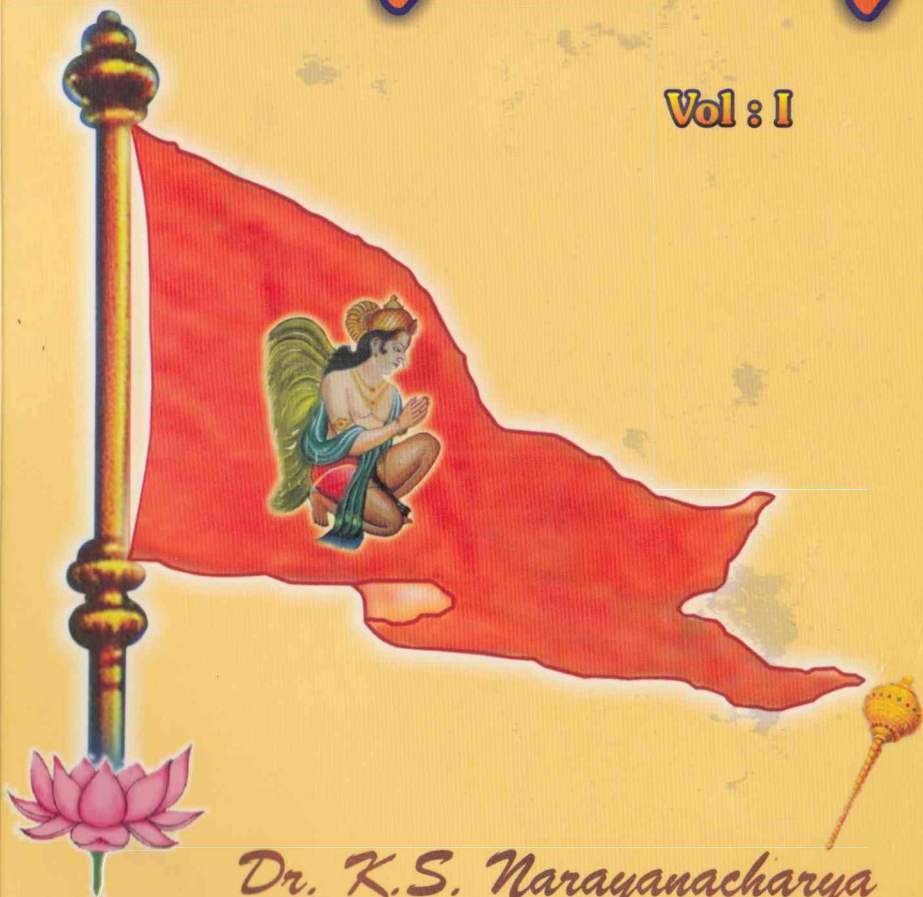




Those Eighteen Days

Vol : I



Dr. K.S. Narayanacharya



THOSE EIGHTEEN DAYS

(Novel based on the Saga of the *Mahabharatha* war,
as narrated by Veda Vyasa in that Immortal Epic)

Vol. I

Author : Dr. K. S. Narayanacharya

[Original in Kannada, re-written &
rendered into English by the author himself]



**Kautilya Institute of
National Studies
Mysore - 5**

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elaborated and rendered into English, from the Kannada original.

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THE COVER

Those Eighteen Days

THE COVER

The ordinary reader would think that it is Arjuna who is the main architect of victory in the Mahabharatha war for the Pandavas.

On deep study you would find that it is Sri Krishna behind the heroes, in their minds, and through their instrumentality who waged this war to eliminate forces of Adharma.

So the cover has His emblem, the divine Eagle-Garuda-on his flag, and his other insignia in the four corners, the Conch (Panchajanya) the Disc (Sudharshana), the Mace (Kaumodaki) and the Lotus (Padma) indicating the Lord's powers of knowledge, Creativity, Power of Assertion over evil and Compassion.

The scenes below, at the bottom, highlight those scenes, that bring this out.

ABOUT THE KAUTILYA INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL STUDIES

This is a voluntary organisation formed to discover and unfold the legacy of social, scientific and spiritual vision of the ancient culture of Bharata. The very present generations, kept ignorant and indifferent to our own values so as to promote a capitalist attitude among the masses, an exaggerated suspicion of disinformation, denigration and distortion of our past. We need to know better, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "We are an ancient land. Gandhi was an ancient man. We are an ancient land."

DEDICATION

*To the memories of
the forefathers of*

Sri H. N. Anantharaman and

family

(Sponsors of this work)

Let us wake up to the dangers and defend these short-sighted cynical forces. Our only instrument is knowledge. No ill-judged nationalism. That is our path.

TRIBUTE

*“Krishna Dwaipayanam Viddhi
Devam Narayanam Harim |
Kohyanyo bhuvi Maitreya !
Mahabharathakrit bhavet ?*

- from Vishnupurana

*“Maitreya dear, know thou that Krishna
Dwaipayana (Veda Vyasa) is verily Srīman
Narayana ! who else can be the author of (such
a stupendous work as) the Mahabharatha?”*

(Tribute from sage Parashara)

ABOUT THE KAUTILYA INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL STUDIES

This is a voluntary organisation formed to discover and unfold the legacy of social scientific and spiritual vision of the ancient culture of Hindus for our present generations, kept ignorant, callous, and indifferent to our own values so as to promote a vandalistic attitude among the masses, an anti-cultural campaign of disinformation, derision and disrespect among people that ought to know better, in the interests of the future of this ancient land. Gandhiji once called such generations 'educated rascals' in moral indignation. To be anti-national is respectable and 'secular' in our suicidal attempts to suppress facts and hang on to falsehoods being perpetrated by vested interests! The task of reversing this trend is enormous, but noble. Ours is but an humble step. The Institute has no animosity for anyone, no disrespect for differences of views, and no dislike for any segment of humanity, ancient or modern, no dogma or bigotry or prejudice. It is simply interested in bringing together all the best from all quarters, that is necessary and vital to make our life collectively safe, beautiful, enjoyable, meaningful in a forward flow that providence has set for it so strongly that inimical forces are doomed for extinction by nature as it were. The beautiful, hopeful and meaningful vision of a glorious Indian Renaissance held by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Netaji, Swamy Dayananda and millions of martyrs has been frustrated by false men, usurpers, 'men of straw' in the past sixty years.

Let us wake up to the dangers and defeat these short-sighted cynical forces. Our only instrument is **knowledge**. *Na hi Jnanena Sadrisham*. That is our faith.

INTRODUCTION

Brief interludes of joy, creativity, relaxation and hopes of a bright future, in history, in the evolution of man, somehow, add only to the more general sense of grimness and the tragic situation of mankind, which is yet to emerge into a decisive victory over evil, violence, and senseless power-struggles between the blind but strong, Titanic forces of Darkness and the vision-possessed but weak *Sattvik* forces of light. But they are not unimportant for that reason. A student of history cannot afford to become a cynic. The comfort or consolation that such interludes, however brief, are possible at all, must build up into a sustaining vision and motive-force for the achievement of that desired, lasting peace, victory, and a life of harmony based on cooperation rather than conflict, which our Vedic Rishis entertained, espoused, expounded and expanded in their literature vouched to us of today. Modern-day sages like Maharshi Sri Aurobindo tell us that such an age of 'Supra-Mental' consciousness, (corresponding to our conception of 'Satya'-Yuga) is around the corner, and *Tapas* is needed to get it actualised into a reality. Meanwhile modern versions of *Duryodhana*, *Karna*, *Shakuni* among our present day war-mongers, people wedded to the doctrine of 'kill, conquer, convert and loot', under military, commercial, technological expansionist programmes, pretending to have religious sanctions for

selfish plots, have to be defeated. Will they be ?

That is the contextual relevance for the rendering of this part of the story of *Mahabharatha* in this fiction form !

The Mahabharatha is a never ending story from an idealistic view-point. It will never become stale, or outdated in its message or in its allegorical layers of meaning, political, social or spiritual. That is the difference between Western Epics like the Iliad, Odyssey, Paradise Lost, the Divine Comedy and numerous others and our National Epic which is an encyclopaedia of *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* concepts and justly hailed for this reason as the Fifth Veda. The only other National Epic of ours which nears the Mahabharatha in size, complexity of meanings and characters as well as quality, is the Ramayana. These are not merely "tales of Kshatriya war and love" as many in the West once conceived ! They are more. They are our eternal lights in the often enveloping darkness, both self-created and inflicted on us from outside. We read them everyday for inspiration and enlightenment. It is necessary that we understand the scale of enormousness of Evil surrounding us, before we attempt rescuing Good from its clutches. A critic of Shakespeare once described King Lear and the Evil unfolded in it as an 'Apocalypse'. The description befits the Mahabharatha, a hundred or thousand-fold times more suitably, in its scale of representation, on the readers. All the portrayal of Evil of all Western writers in Drama or Novel form or in Epic, will come nowhere near the one we come across in the Mahabharatha. But the vision here is not that of a tragedy. Good does triumph over Evil.

But we have enough of catharsis in the portrayal of a Draupadi, a Kunthi or other good characters. This is because God is a colourful character here unlike in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Sri Krishna's is a mighty role, colourful, fading into mystical or fabulous altitudes beyond our final understanding, grasp or estimate or analysis. This provides the necessary base not only in this Epic story, but in all vicissitudes of history for all time, our own time and beyond. This is a unique feature of our Epic. The God of Christianity or Islam is a mere 'vapour', a mere 'abstract faith', artistically a virtual 'non entity' in so far as He does not manifest in their stories. Here ! What colours!! What romance!! What fascinating interventions!!! Direct patches of 'Gospels' without intermediaries or Messiahs, without room for misinterpretations or interpolations, in what are called "*Sri Bhagavan Uvacha*" can be tallied with similar portions elsewhere both in the Epic and elsewhere in our Eighteen Puranas, to ascertain the proper meanings, their veracity, free from ambiguity. More. You can bring in Vedic passages also into comparison, confirmation. This catholicity of views, this freedom to interpret these passage yourselves is a wonder you will find nowhere else in the so called world-scriptures.

Further : you do not require a Verity, a Dowden, a Wilson Knight, a Saintsbury or a Bradley for interpreting or construing the proper meanings or imports of the world of teachings of the Mahabharatha. The characters themselves mutually interpret such contexts saving you that labour or need. It is rarely that the text drives you to a commentary. Even if that happens, it is only to enhance your appreciation and deepen your grasp. The

Mahabharatha is a text which you will never 'finish' understanding. It is a world of stories, each within another in continuous, contextual threads, which only an expert weaver or garland-maker can make. There can be only one Vyasa in this way !

Story, Drama, Metaphysics, Ethics, Moral Codes, Public Administration, guide lines, Jurisprudence, sheer poetry, word-riddles, puzzles, word-pictures-all woven into delectable poetic mould—that is our text, the Mahabharatha!

No wonder it has moulded the Hindu character, morals, national ethos, and given us the definite concrete shape of our prized culture and nationality, in all these millenia since it ever came into being. This is, too, the envy of many other nations and societies. In those days of lack of mass-communication or public media like our modem T.V, mobile phones, newspapers or magazines; how artists and savants of Hindu culture could achieve this cultural synthesis and national integration is what we have to wonder at!

A word about the present work : It was an earnest desire of mine, ever since nature endowed me with the little literary and artistic talents that I now possess and my discovery of it, to present our National Epics, the Ramayana, The Mahabharatha and Srimad Bhagavatha in the mould of fiction, in novel form, for easy grasp, understanding and appreciation of our younger, newer generations, since 1947. The year is remarkable, for it was after our achievement of freedom from the British, that we relapsed into a stronger bout of self alienation and colonial mentality gripping us again, instead of our getting

liberated from it as expected, with Sanskrit and Hindu values being deliberately neglected by those that began to rule over us, under abnormal notions of cultural inhibitions, and artificial ideologies like pseudo-secularism and aberration against all local, national, time-hallowed traditions ! To those who ought to be its guardians, Sanskrit was a dead language and interest in Hindu values, 'revivalism' and 'communalism. Maulana Azad was our national Educational minister along with Nehru who was patron to these mischiefs. I read in newspapers in those days, the fifties, of strange, pervert 'information' about our cultural roots, prevailing in intellectual circles or at least in circles and cadres that ought to know better ! In a *viva voce* at the final I.A.S exam, a candidate is questioned :

"Do you know the name of the author of the Mahabharatha ?"

The candidate's answer :

"C. Rajagopalachari, known as Rajaji."

Elders of my family who had already developed a cynical attitude to the coming events in the post Nehru era, would point out such examples and incidents to prove their being justified in their cynical attitude! my elder brother would chuckle:

"Thank God! the fellow at least knew the name of Rajaji, author of the famous abridged English rendering of our national, cherished epic!!"

In fact, Rajaji wrote his works on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha* for this de-Hinduised, anglicised, 'secular' class of readers who would infest this country

thereafter ! That was my surmise. The dreaded thing happened !

“Why should I not go beyond – beyond simple narration – or sum up and recreate the original in terms of lively narration admixed with dialogues and descriptions, with patches of lovely teachings, imports in suggestive language, so that our new generations would read them very much like present day stories?”

This trend of my inner urge, forced me to an in-depth study of the original texts, with all available commentaries in Sanskrit, and adapted versions in Drama, Champu*, Epic and other literary forms in the few languages I knew, Tamil, Kannada and Sanskrit besides English. This silent preparation enabled me to become a succesful discourser on the Epics since 1961, when I settled at Dharwad, as a teacher of English literature at the famed Karnatak Arts college, of Karnatak university, and moved all over Karnataka in the summer and winter vacations, taking the epics to all cities, towns and villages, wherever I was invited, lecturing for days and months together at a stretch! People thronged in their thousands everywhere, but the more ‘enlightened’ among my colleagues and ‘patrons’ pitied the plight of an English teacher ‘degenerating’ to the ‘depths of medievalism’, shunning English culture and keeping all Western influence like a pair of shoes at my doors. (I am quoting one of them who pitied me!) I told them that I had become no Englishman for all my love and knowledge of or proficiency in English literature, and even if I claimed so, no Englishman would accept me

* A composition peculiar to Sanskrit literature in which poetry and prose coexist in lovely intermixture.

as such! I reminded them of the fate of Nirad Chowdhury and the contrast in an Aurobindo! after all, in the post-independent India, it was Nirad Chowdhuri 'sab' that triumphed, while Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo and other renaissance-savants died 'cultural' deaths ! Thanks to Nehru and the new role-model !!

I was sound in cultural roots that 'clutched', (to use a phrase of T.S.Eliot), and it mattered a lot to learn that traditional India was in tact for all the 'cosmetism' that apes were introducing and selling among themselves. This could not percolate into the Hindu psyche - thanks to our Rishis, both ancient and modern - while the naked emperor and his gang paraded themselves nude, in protected areas of Moghul gardens, in their cocktail parties and noon-time dinners.

My studies and discourses were encouraged without interruptions, throughout. Then something happened; a famous editor of a popular Kannada weekly by name *Taranga*, met me at the instance of a mutual friend, as if by accident, though I find a divine dispensation now, behind the event. It was late in the night. I had just finished writing a manuscript on the "Characters of the Mahabharatha". (I was already an author of twenty or more books, ten volumes being on the Vedas, "*Veda Samskriti Parichaya*", and the remaining on *Ramayana and Bhagavatha*, with constant and insistent encouragement from eminent poets like Dr. D. R. Bendre and other luminaries of Dharwad. The meeting commemorated an immortal moment in my life, as I now look at it from hindsight! Mr. Santosh Kumar Gulwadi, that editor, took away that manuscript from me, under an irrepressible lure

and serialised it in 'Taranga' for nearly a year, week after week. The readers responded with resounding enthusiasm and welcome. (The book has since been printed and has run into the fourth print now.) More work was in store for me as a consequence. At the insistence of Sri Gulwadiji, I wrote a lengthy serial covering up the events of the great war of *Mahabharatha*, covering up the five great books of the Epic known as the *Yuddha Panchaka*. This became an eye opener for the Kannada public, who were used only to pervert Kanada versions of the Epic, distorting its characters and events, perpetuating misinterpretations and deformities on an enormous scale for some dozen centuries or more! It meant a rediscovery of the original for a people famished of ancient Hindu values, as the art of undistorted discourses and depiction in writing and on the stage, had practically died for long. Some would not have believed the original or my representation ! They blamed me, abused me, and were answered befittingly. All this is in print! more work was assigned to me by Providence. I am now an author of a nearly a hundred works on *Vedas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharatha*, the *Bhagavatha*, the literature of the *Alvars and Haridasas*, *Kautilya's Arthasastra* and works attending to Semitic attacks on Hinduism as replies and taking the ball to their own courts (in English); and the project still continues.

Last year another thing happened by Divine Dispensation, as I look in retrospect :

Sri H. N. Anantharaman and Sri H. S. Mohan Kumar of "Smt. Alamelamma Patel Narayana Iyengar Trust" of Bangalore met me with members of their family at the

residence of my son in Bangalore. Sri Anantharaman is a noted builder of eminence at Malleswaram and there are few who may not know him as a philanthropist and patron of activities cultural, spiritual or social. He is an ardent devotee of Lord Kodanda Rama, of Hiremagalur temple, to whose renovation he has donated liberally and done the task under his own supervision. He has been known to me closely for many years, attending some of my discourses and sponsoring them also. This elderly gentleman of pious habits took me by surprise by placing at my disposal a fabulously enormous amount, importunately 'commanding' me to use it to translate any of my works into English, for circulation among Indians who have settled abroad, and who long to discover and own their roots of culture. The proceeds would be again with my just started Kautilya Institute of National Studies to continue similar work, promoting my works into English as and when I thought it proper.

At first I declined to accept this responsibility in my failing health-condition and age, in addition to the pressures that were already operating on my mind in terms of literary projects of my own choice. But other friends prevailed on me and so I bowed down.

Another elderly friend of mine, also pious and equally well-wedded to philanthropic works of the same kind, Mr. G. K. Srinivasaiah (a reputed businessman) persuaded me to pick up this work, whose Kannada version, he himself had published, soon after its serialisation in '*Taranga*'. I conceded. Here is now the result in the hands of the readers.

Mr. Srinivasaiah fixed up the printers also. My esteemed friends Sri Umesh Bhat (Industrialist, who is running five branches in various parts of this country) and Dr. K. R. R. Rao (of B.A.R.C. retired) and scientist attached to the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, after retirement, have shown great interest in the supervision and proof-reading of the text and have relieved me of much pressure in this regard. My esteemed friend (and ex-colleague at Karnatak Arts College at Dharwad), Prof A. M. Jalihal and my long-standing family friend Sri S. R. Sharma (classmate in the undergraduate and graduate days at Mysore) have also helped me in several ways, and by continued encouragement.

I must add : My wife Smt Kamala was the first to read this work, as usual, in manuscript, as and when the chapters began to be written, and she has also assisted me in the final proof-reading of the text. Her encouragement, timely and guarded suggestions have helped me to avoid overlappings and repetitions and involuntary errors which are otherwise natural in a narration of this length and intensity. She has been my first critic, scrupulous and straight-forward, both in the reading of my texts and in listening to my discourses and comparing the two. How lucky I am!

My thanks are due to all these. If in spite of such care and devotion, errors have crept in, I alone am responsible and I crave the indulgence of the generous readers.

A note on the relevance of this work for today and its justification may not be out of place. I have already

said something to this effect in the beginning, and what I add is only for emphasis.

Great men with good intentions can also mightily contribute to the misery of manind and might escape being branded as villians in contemporary histories! The examples of Bhishma of the story, and that of Mahatma Gandhi stand profound comparisons in this regard in so far as both committed the same blunders of partitioning the Nation, and appeasement of Evil. Few seem to have realised this unforgettable lesson. The character-analysis of Bhishma is worth examination and attention of the readers from this angle.

Perpetrators of dynastic rule of those days stand eminent comparison with those of today. It is odious to name them in contemporary history.

Eliminators of evil-men were blamed then. They stand 'condemned' in the public court of unenlightened 'common man' of today! What Arjuna did to Bhishma, What Bhima did to the sons of Dhritarashtra, what Dhrishtadyumna did to Drona, or Krishna to Karna, Saindhava and a hundred others directly or indirectly has been done to modern villians of the unfolding Mahabharatha of today. No more. You may not yet identify or accept them, as you are too near them, or as they are wrapped up in unrealistic praise or disproportionate contempt for which history will not forgive you or me. If I say that the sacrifices of a martyr like Veer Savarkar are greater and more marked than those of a Nehru or Gandhi, you are likely to be shocked ! That is the proof of the fact that we are as yet unprepared to accept Truth as Truth! When will India accept a Bhagat Singh, Jhansi Rani (or

even “an ecentric” Nathu Ram Godse ?) Do not get startled!! Eccentrics are eccentrics whether they are villians or heroes! Men and women catapulted to positions of power and mischief do not become ‘honourable’ just because they hail from much advertised family-backgrounds! Nor do such become mean or undesirable if they hail from humble backgrounds. Have we paid yet our dues to an Ambedkar or a Netaji ? If you hold a pervert view of contemporary history, you can only fool coteries around you; not the history or the forces they generate! Think of the ‘tragic’ circumstances of Ganhi’s death, Mrs Indira Gandhi’s death or Rajiv Gandhi’s assasination. Did they not generate those very forces that took their toll, whether consciously or unconsciously? They say that history simply happens, leaving neither a lesson for a future, nor arising out of rational facts or courses! Nothing can be more irresponsible than this, if you are an intelligent student of life or history.

You have your *Shakuni-s* and *Karna-s* today also, in plotters and casteists. Organisers of political murders, and managers of disinormation campaigns, promoters of communal disharmony for selfish ends are all still in our midst.

The dialogues and descriptions of this narrative are so designed as to enable you to discover them for yourselves, as the art-form here forbids me to identify them openly. There were Arjun Singhs, V.P Singhs, Laloos and various brands of traitors, both local and imported, then too, to suit those firm in saddles of power, suffering yet from a persecution mania! Why does humanity suffer and tolerate maniacs and bigots of all kinds in power ?

We have to find an urgent answer for this from the *Mahabharatha*. Does this book of mine help you by some degree at least ? I wonder !

There is nothing like 'idle history' or an idle study of history! History is a powerful torch in the hands of responsible travellers on the path to the future, as it is charged with wisdom-cells made of unalterable facts that give us meanings from moment to moment. If it is condemned into 'academicism', and to 'arm-chair reading', it can only promote ignorance which we have aplenty already. They use the phrase, sometimes, that "History will not forgive you..." "if you do this or that now." Phrases like this are not idle-born! History must be a living force if it can 'forgive' or 'punish' you. What history can be more powerful than the *Mahabharatha*? If my present work can make you realise this in some measure, my efforts will not be in vain.

My best wishes are with all those that have this faith that better futures can be constructed with lessons from the past.

Mysore

K. S. Narayanacharya

23.07.07

FOREWORD

This is a unique literary work by Dr. K. S. Narayanacharya, the Kannada version of which is well known to all readers of Kannada literature. We knew the Acharya for long, his talents in discourses and writing, and were wondering how to make Indians settled abroad, our own children, friends and relatives among them, benefit from his enormous scholarship and amazing talents of expression in speech and writing. We approached him with our request, and he kindly accepted our token offer and has produced this masterpiece. It will be evident to any reader, what amounts of energy and time have been spent on this stupendous work which is now in your hands.

The Acharya is an authority on the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, our *Epics*, *Puranas*, the works of *Alwars* and *Acharyas* like *Sri Ramanuja* and *Vedanta Desika*, besides being well versed and versatile in most allied literature in history, Indology and Hindu moral sciences.

The present work is a minute description of the events of the *Mahabharatha* war, day by day, hour by hour to the finest details, as found in the original, except where imaginative details are added to make the picture fulsome, colourful and graphic without violating or distorting the original.

We are grateful to him and the printers as well as our other friends who have all made this possible and have contributed towards its materialisation and success.

Bangalore
15.7.07

H. N. Anantharaman

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CHAPTER 1

BHISHMA'S FINAL DECISION

It was Ashtami night of Kartika in the darker fortnight and the star was Makha. Bhishma had to make the most difficult of decisions in his life on that fatal night. He felt the night tedious and long, unusually trying. He was too old to endure mental tensions, though bodily he felt he was equal to the challenges demanded by time -participation in the impending war. His decisions earlier, throughout his life, were not comforting either to himself or others, for that matter. Bhishma reviewed them rapidly, to seek some comfort which had eluded him all through: self-abdication of heirdom to the Royal Throne, for the comfort of his father Shantanu; waging war with his preceptor Bhagavan Parashurama, rather than marry Amba, the Kashi princess, whom he had abducted at the svayamvara, in vain, for the sake of his half brother Vichitravirya; his none too responsible and ambiguous 'ruling' on the question of Draupadi, Yajnyaseni, whether Yudhishtira could still stake her as a pawn or prize after pawning away himself, earlier in that most shameful and suicidal gambling, at the end of Rajasuya; or the still earlier partition of the empire, appointing Yudhishtira as King of one-half of it, while he himself had crowned him as Emperor of the undivided whole, after Pandu; and many other questionable

decisions which had either his silent approval, or mute participation. He had never crowned the blind Dhritarashtra, yet had accepted him as 'King' in a way, and had suffered him making his own royal decisions.

The present decision he had to make was rendered most complex of all, either because of these earlier ones, or the alternatives he had avoided consciously or unconsciously.

There was a background to it, a divine pointer also, which was gnawing into his sensitive heart; he could see it clearly, but he could neither accept it nor reject it easily, in any indifference to consequence, as before. He knew where it pinched him most.

On the earlier Panchami day, the star being Pushya, Bhagavan Sri Krishna's royal embassy at Dhritarashtra's court was a failure. War was now a certainty between the rival cousin families and their supporters. Bhishma said to himself that he had tried to prevent it, by doing or saying his best. Everyone knew that Duryodhana was unwilling for any negotiated settlement, peacefully. That was not what irritated Bhishma now...that did not come under his personal account; there was another silent happening that was eating into his heart steadily, surely and subtly tending to rob him of his self-confidence, self-judgment and self-righteousness. Sri Krishna was no mere royal messenger from Yudhishtira. He was God Incarnate; as he had maintained and expounded on numerous earlier occasions; Sri Krishna was his personal Deity, to whom he had offered his everything mentally and spiritually. Such was Bhishma's expectation that this time he would camp with him, dine with him and

exchange pleasantries. But the Avatari did not even glance at him! He had flatly refused becoming his guest!

Now what did all this mean? ...Bhishma knew it too well to be told by someone else. Besides, who else was there to interpret its meaning? Sri Krishna had bracketed him with others that were against Dharma and God or Goodliness that proclaimed to the world at large in 'eloquent silence' that Bhishma's worship of Sri Krishna, orally and ritualistically was all humbug, a mere show and pseudo-devotion. Sri Krishna was now on his way to Upaplavya so that Bhishma could not even meet him on request, if not on protocol.

What was he to do now? Was he to remain in the Kaurava camp and fight Sri Krishna? Would that not mean that he denied justice being on the side of the much-harassed Pandavas? What would the world think of him now, if he switched over to their side, all of a sudden, having been with the Kauravas, all along? Would history forgive him either way? Never before was a polarisation of alignments on the decisive scale, and never before was he called upon to exercise so exclusive a choice, which would be wrong either way? How was he responsible for it? Was his tendency to procrastinate causing this mess? Which way did peace lie personally and for the race and mankind? What was the course for it, now before him? Following justice would mean betrayal of the throne and those who sat on it, a clear breach of his own vow; deserting them now, at the hour of their need, would smack of opportunism?

Bhishma's mind avoided a third alternative of

honour somehow; that was Vidura's way of playing neutrality, by going on a pilgrimage. Consciously or unconsciously, Bhishma never even once entertained it in his otherwise resolute mind, perhaps as a cowardly course. It was all right for Vidura, as he was no warrior; yes, a warrior's choice was what he needed and that choice never unfolded before his mind's eye. Perhaps this choice that was now eluding him was a foregone conclusion because of his first choice to stay with the Kaurava Princes. Whoever knew that it was going to be so fatal, so deterministic and foul?



Bhishma was now reclining on his bed after the evening ablutions as a routine but an unrelishable duty. The cook had brought him fruits and milk as usual, but it was lying there untouched before him. His mind had no time for them in the tumultuous condition he had found himself in. He was determined to find his sense of 'duty'. The war was a certainty, mocking at all his efforts for peace. He could share with none his turmoil or could ask none for advice. Bhishma wept like a child and remembered his mother Ganga, and she appeared on the screen of his inner mind:

Ganga: "Son, dear! Did you call me? You appear to be tired and forlorn? What is on your mind?"

Bhishma: "Gracious mother, will you enable this unfortunate orphan to take a final, firm decision on a difficult question, of loyalty? Is character or truth more important in the last analysis? Is it loyalty or righteousness that finally matters? Is there a way

of combining both and remain what I am, as what I am known to be all these years?

Ganga: "My child! You are the repository of all sciences and arts, moral and spiritual wisdom; you know that such decisions by nature have to be taken at the personal, responsible level only. None can assist or impose in such matters of final accountability. You know this, surely!"

Bhishma: "You are the mother of all living things in all the three worlds. You are their purifier, untired in this task of washing them away of all sins. You are blessed with a special relation to Lord Vishnu's holy feet also. You show the auspicious path of deliverance to all - mother! Can you not show me too, a way out?"

Ganga: "All that I can say, my son, is that the path-finder for all, is my path-finder, as well as yours! You know well that even I myself am not above the law of Karma. I was born of Lord Vishnu's foot during his Trivikrama Avatar, true; but the Divine poet¹ describes me as "one that forsook his feet, or one who slipped out of that divine position"! That is my misfortune, to be so fallen away! See my present position I carry all dead bodies, remnants of bones and hair and ashes. People call me 'Wife of the sea' and 'Wife of Shiva' in the same breath! Does that mean that I have several husbands to serve? Lord Vishnu shook me off his feet and brought me to this miserable condition! But he also

¹ *Vishnuadachyuta*, a reference to Sage Valmiki's description in the *Ramayana*, Bala Kanda, Ch 50 Verse 25

endowed me with a boon that good souls, people above attachments, Godly and world-purifiers, will wash me off the sins that I receive, from those who bathe in me.² My power to wash sins is thus laid in the powers of those that can so purify me! Do I understand this mystery or Maya? So, meditate on that Super Mystery-maker, Mystery-unraveller; He may show you a way out! for it is he who induces us into action, as well as delivers us from them.”

Bhishma: “Mother, dear! Your case is different, in my view. He let you ‘off’ his feet for a perceptual noble cause, I would say, but I have been denied service to His feet, and denied even a loving glance or touch, for what holy cause, I fail to understand! He would not even talk a few non-political, non-diplomatic words to me! Would you say it is my Karma? My present inability to decide on the right course, would you attribute this to His mystifying mysterious powers? or to any lapses, drawbacks in me, in my own actions?”

Ganga: “I am surprised that you ask me this question! Are you not the one who can alone answer this personal question? How can God act on no cause, the cause lying in our hands, in our selfish motives, and wrong earlier choices? If one does not have absolute, unflinching faith in his fairness, what use are scriptures, your studies? Try to know what you

² *Sadhavo nyasinah shantah brahmishtah lokapavanah |
Harantyaigham teṅga sangat, teshvaste hi aghabhid Hariḥ ||*
- Sri Bhagavatam (9.9.6)

have done to earn that distancing from him, search your own heart; or ask him, himself. Is he not of easy access to His dear devotees?"

Bhishma: "I must thank you for this guidance. Possibly, I am a sinner too. I shall confirm this for myself from him."

Ganga disappears. Bhishma prays in tears, singing this praise, in a mellow voice:

*Namo naraka santrasa rakshamandala karine |
Samsara nimnagavartha tarikasthaya Vishnave||*³

Now Lord Sri Krishna appears on the mind's horizon of Bhishma:

Sri Krishna: "Kurupitamaha, what ails you?"
(He beams a smile so bewitching in its effect, that an already disturbed Bhishma is further endlessly distracted in that endless beauty!)

Bhishma: "Lord! You visited this capital; but not me! You taught inimitable, nectarine words of wisdom in that assembly full of headstrong fools and obscurantists; was my place less fit for your visit? You visited cunning, stubborn, villainous wicked men; was I worse than those? You did not accept me as a devotee, in this! You left for your other devotees straight from the Royal court. What is my sin? What shall be the role I am to play in the war

³ I pray to that Supreme Lord, Vishnu, who can raise circles of benevolent protection to those that are tormented by fears of Hell, and who acts like logs of wood for those being wafted in the quick waters flowing down, as instruments to save them from being drowned.

that you failed to avoid? You have now materialised in my mind by a mere remembrance of mine; that is your mercy or magnanimity. I cannot accuse you of partiality. Please guide me in the matter of the side I have to take in the war. Tell me, why this magnanimity was not shown to me by visiting me, this time."

Sri Krishna : "Should this torment you as a big problem to you, who have vowed to protect the Kaurava race?"

Bhishma is apparently wounded by this piercing reference to the 'Kaurava race', which identifies him on the wrong side, in Sri Krishna's view; the already wounded mind receives a further severe jolt by this innocent looking reference; Bhishma weeps like a child, sinking in courage. But he proceeds after a pause.

Bhishma : "Lord! Do you think I am unaware of the fact that the Pandavas too belong to the Kaurava race, or that my loyalty is to that race in a cynical, narrow sense that is unavoidable now? Am I not an equal well-wisher to both the rival branches?"

Sri Krishna : "Grandsire! Do not feel anguished by a mere casual reference of mine, which meant nothing more than an identification of glory. Now, if you grant that the term has a larger connotation as you admit, are you not answering your own question also in that way? Do what is good to both sides : it is still not too late, I suppose!"

Bhishma is now thrown into a terrible, complex bundle of confusion. What did he mean by 'not too

late'? was he mocking at his plight that did not bring honour or justice to the side of the Pandavas? How could he please both sides at this too-late-an-hour and do justice to both? Honour and justice seemed to elude him all these days of waiting and patience. Sri Krishna knew this, he thought. But somewhere Bhishma's conscience was pinching, and he either did not know what it was or could not face it, if he knew. In this silent dilemma, Sri Krishna continues:

Sri Krishna : "You are the tilak, the mark that adorns the forehead, of the Kaurava race. Is it not reasonable to expect that he who creates the problem shall solve it himself? What logic is it to expect that God alone shall solve the problems that all kinds of human beings create or raise, in their cunning, crookedness or contrivance? Are you not aware that this is the position of anti-Godly Philosophers of the Sankhya school? Do you have to imagine such an unreasonable God, only in order to discard Him?"

Bhishma : "Lord! Tell me, whether the situation, where you talked to all those villains, responsible for the present mess-up and where you avoided me, is my creation? My own creation? If that is your studied stand, why did you grant me this vision, as soon as I remembered you in my heart of hearts? If there is no objection for this mental vision, what otherwise was there for you to be directly before me then?"

Sri Krishna : "Do not mix up, and reduce two questions into one only. If you make a tangle, no one can clear it!"

Bhishma : “It is a tangle, I agree; but I do not know how many questions are caught up here. Let them be infinite. If you will answer me, they do not matter in number.”

Sri Krishna : “Let me emphasise one thing very clearly: Following policy principles and etiquettes is as much binding on princes and politicians as on God, even if He incarnates as a ruler. That is the inviolability of Raja Dharma - Cosmic Duties meant for all rulers as law, moral and spiritual, combined into one. This concerns social and political matters. Then there is that other philosophical, Vedantic question, which you raised, in the same context, and here is my answer : God is always available for all in daily direct perception. Only a few can see Him. The difficulty is not on His side; but on our side - our inability, our lack of readiness, our lack of instruments and perhaps also our insufficient urge to have such vision. There comes in, our Karma. God does not create special circumstances out of the way or arbitrarily for anyone's elevation or downfall. They come to us all, in the course of our choices - karma - but as His gifts with His grace. Some use, others don't. That is all. This concerns the individual's freedom of choice or what the wise call 'initiative'. You know all this yourself, too well, to expect any answer from me; am I right?”

Bhishma : (grasping in a flash a ray of light) “Oh! I see!... you said in the assembly that one must neither dine with a hater, nor invite him for

food⁴... in the context of Duryodhana it may be all right... But this is a clever answer by any standards, oh, Keshava!... or, do you include me also in that category of Pandava-haters? Am I not common or equal to both? Speak your heart clearly as to where I stand in your view.”

Sri Krishna : “I am not including anyone anywhere! Why should I? It is for the individual to decide as to where he/she belongs. Do not transfer your problem to my account. This is a matter of individual choice, as I said. I advised Karna to give up the company of Duryodhana; did he listen? So what use is my advice, or my counsel? Are you answered? After having decided where to belong, all these years, you are still asking me a redundant question! It is yours and yours alone.”

Bhishma : “Then, am I against the interests of the Pandavas? Have I so conducted myself anytime, anywhere?”

Sri Krishna : “Sir, again, you have to search your own heart for an answer in this regard This is urgent, if the future should not be a perpetual regret; or else, history will answer it for you when it relegates you and your deeds into the irrevocable past.”

Bhishma feels a dense darkness enveloping his vision and is nonplussed by this suggestive answer. Claiming to be a devotee of Sri Krishna, he still feels at a loss to know where he has gone wrong. Did he

⁴ *Dvishadannam na bhoktavyam dvishantam naiva bhojayet |
Pandavan dvishase rajan! mama prana hi Pandavah ||*

slip in his professed equality or neutrality? Where? Where did fate make him place the false step? If wrong steps were not placed, why this equation between him and Duryodhana, in Sri Krishna's eyes? Bhishma faints and stretches in the bed with no control on his limbs. Sri Krishna, continues with a smile, to speak searchingly:

Sri Krishna : "Grand sire! Let me give you a clue. Who is the real heir to the throne after your father? And who is heir after that? Who is really indebted to whom? Think for a moment; you have your desired answer. If you had not abdicated the throne, would all these miserable consequences have arisen? Let there be no self-deception on anybody's part. Let us grant that it was your generosity to have fulfilled your father's unexpressed desire to be united with that great lady, once the princess of fisher-folk. You have surrendered yourself for this pleasure, comfort and desire of your father. Good. This is a personal angle. Look at it now from a broader angle. What have you really given up? Mere comfort? Mere right to the throne? No! You have given up your duty, the larger duty to the nation, to the people, to the society, - your 'Kshatriya ordained' Cosmic Duty - for a private, personal cause. Is this expected of a responsible prince? Can everyone give up responsible duties in this way? Therein you have set a bad example and so you have landed up in this mess by your own voluntary act! Can love for your father swallow your duty to the nation? That is a major first count. See then this other complication you have added. You

crowned Pandu as the Emperor of the undivided Empire, after you rightly ruled that the elder Dhritarashtra cannot sit on the throne, for reasons of his born - blindness. Good. Should this not mean that the Empire should go to Yudhishtira undivided, after Pandu? Did you not see this logic of justice when you yourself took that right step when Kunti arrived from the forest with her children and after their completion of education at Drona's hand? Why then did you divide the empire after the Pandavas escaped the firetrap at Varanavata, toured the country incognito and arrived here after wedding Draupadi? Does this not mean appeasement of the evil? Were you really afraid of Duryodhana and his father? Was there a challenge to your moral authority or fear of its transgression? Was this coincidence or dull-wittedness? Why was your vision so blurred? Check up your conscience whether this was equality, neutrality, or equanimity. To this day, how does Duryodhana hold the other half of the empire without being crowned? or his father? or Karna, who was crowned King of Anga, by one who was himself uncrowned and in your own presence? Was there your silent consent for this illegality? Then again, at the infamous gamble scene, why should there have been so marked differences between your conduct and that of Vidura, in the matter of right ruling? Both of you studied in the same school and under the same teacher and the same code - Brihaspati! Sir, is it not the height of arrogance to be deluded into thinking that you are the throne-keeper, its protector? Is not Vidura equally duty-

bound? Why is he so completely detached unlike you? I am not questioning your loyalty, but its excesses; your infatuation for the evil - minded villainous cousins of the Pandavas. A Kshatriya is duty-bound to protect the weak, orphaned, disabled but righteous followers of justice and law. Even now, can you promise me that you will not lift up your bow and quiver against the already much-shattered cousins of those to whom you have been temperamentally indulgent thus far? Will you accept it as a kind of equality or neutrality? Do you expect God to tell you all this and guide you? Besides, even if he does so, do you dare follow his guidance? There is yet another thing I have to tell you, concerning your good and worldly welfare..."

Bhishma : "Tell me, Lord."

Sri Krishna : "Does Duryodhana trust you? After all your attempts to appease him and his gang, have you really earned his confidence? Tell me the truth. Relations cannot be one sided; they have to be mutual. This is a metaphysical truth, which is all the more important to be observed in political wisdom in strategic matters of national interest!"

Bhishma : "That is not my concern. It is all one to me whether he trusts me or doubts me. I just do my duty as I am doing it even now."

Sri Krishna : (With a derisive smile) "The silkworm weaves a cocoon, a golden shell of coveted thread, around itself, without thinking whether it can be a death trap or a deliverance door! Poor creature! It has no brains! But should a wise, learned, brave

warrior like you do the same unthinkingly? What use is learning or wisdom, then? What can Vedanta teach such a man? or God? Tell me the truth, grandsire, whether you are really so unconcerned about Duryodhana? To the real point of true detachment? Have you not made illegal concessions to him out of mental clouding, which you mistake for love? Are you really indifferent to his responses? Don't you think that it is the Pandavas who are really so detached, after all their attempts, to please you by good behaviour, and have failed? Have you really been just to them? Do you deserve their confidence in you, even now? Have you ever tried to understand what they expect from you in the course of justice that you often talk of? Suppose, tomorrow, they come to pay their last respects to you and seek your blessings to fight against you in the impending war - does nothing happen to you, your conscience, or self-confidence at this moment? Can you still be loyal to Duryodhana, after that?"

Bhishma's heart breaks, and in tearful sobbing, the old warrior is unable to control his surging feelings. He sees the truth of Sri Krishna's analysis, step by step, and views himself as a culprit in the court of his own mind, and God as justice there, delivering his judgment. But still he hesitates to accept the verdict out of mental habits developed all these wasted years. He bows down his head, and silently weeps.

Sri Krishna : "I have not yet concluded : I shall inform you of something you may not have observed. Ever since I visited this capital, Duryodhana's spies have

tightened their watch on you, more than ever before. That crooked fellow expected me to influence you directly or indirectly to divide your loyalty, which he never took for granted. Suppose I had visited you, your life would have been in danger; your character would have been assassinated and blackmail tactics would have started. You know nothing of all this! Do you not now see the justification for my avoiding you, even from this angle of political sagacity?"

Bhishma : (surprised by this startling revelation), "I do not care, I am not afraid of personal dangers. But tell me what is my duty."

Sri Krishna : "I have already told you that the choice is your own."

Bhishma : "You have excellently analysed all my lapses, wrong doings, weaknesses and failures without enlightening me on the present duty, the way before me to honour and justice, please help, Lord!"

Sri Krishna : "There are chiefly two ways before you; if there is a third, you have to think of it yourself. One way is to die on the side of Duryodhana. It does not matter now whether it is right or wrong. It gives you consistency at least, and that is the solace open to you on this way. You will be branded as the enemy of the Pandavas. You will not have justice on your side in this. Or else join the Pandavas. You may not like this now. In addition, you will be branded as an opportunist or as an old senile soldier. These will be the liabilities on this way."

Bhishma : "What is that third alternative you spoke of ?"

Sri Krishna : "I have drawn your attention to it also in a way; that is the path whose landmarks are still not known to you, as you have never followed it all these years. If you have courage for this, the future will admire you, and history will have an honourable place for you. Be neutral. But the present and future partialists to Duryodhana will blame your behaviour permanently. That very prospect might break your heart at present! That is what I compared to the situation of the silkworm in the cocoon. Coming out of it, or getting boiled in it, are both choices still in your own hand. Don't blame God. Either way, you will stand condemned to blame by the world. You will have to choose one only, by necessity now. You will not think of a fourth way, open to cowards in your plight - committing suicide! It will wash off all your achievements here, so far, in this world, and acts as an obstacle on the way to the other world also. Your service to the throne, your celibacy, your fight for truth, your righteousness, moral courage, - all will be wasted as vain. You cannot return to the other world without discharging your assigned duties also."

Bhishma : "That is exactly my problem, my lord! What is that assigned duty, I am not able to concentrate on?"

Sri Krishna : "Are you aware of what is going on in the inner circles of the palace ?"

Bhishma : “If there is anything other than war preparation, tell me, kindly.”

Sri Krishna : “Why do you seek my kindness for this? A little intelligence and penetrative insight will bring it to your notice. If Duryodhana crowns Karna as chief of army, what will you do?”

Bhishma : (relieved) “That will be a good opportunity for war-renunciation and neutrality. I shall never take commands from Karna or fight under him. Duryodhana knows it too well to risk.”

Sri Krishna : “Then, Duryodhana has an additional reason to offer this chance of leadership, first to you alone!”

Bhishma : “What is that?”

Sri Krishna : “Testing your loyalty, your trust in him! If you prove it, he will succeed and be happy that you have destroyed the Pandavas. If you do not fight, with all your heart, he will succeed in showing to the world that you are a traitor, an opportunist and that at least will be his satisfaction. The world will blame you for the evil of Duryodhana. Will you accept the first Generalship under either of these inevitable consequences?”

Bhishma breaks into sobs and tears, again... His mind becomes clouded and deformed, more than ever before. The conflict seems endless and Bhishma feels mentally tired and at the end of the path; and at last says:

Bhishma : “What shall I do?”

Sri Krishna : “See this from a metaphysical angle and there may be a way out. The soul and body have opposite and exclusive natures or characteristics. Only God has organically united them in this human personality, by His extraordinary power of doing the ‘impossible’ from the human angle. How far this combination runs or works is dependent on the Karma of the soul, alone. Is there no answer for you here somewhere, here ?”

Bhishma : “I fail to understand, Lord !”

Sri Krishna : “Let me try again. When the personality formed of this impossible union ends and there is what we call death, the soul does not carry this body beyond this world. Does it? Besides even the body does not suffer unitedly in its complex decomposition. The elements making it are refunded into their original sources - fire unto fire, water unto water and so on. There is refunding, repatriation and in military language, ‘returning to the stable’. Do you now understand?”

Bhishma : (Bewildered) “How is this any answer to my question?”

Sri Krishna : “Dear great Vedantin - warrior, sir! Shall I attempt yet again? For a prapanna, that is for one who was surrendered his all to God, how the body ends is left to the law of Karma; and where the soul goes is left to the law of God’s Grace; either way there is nothing one can do here, or weep for. Weeping for the body’s end will result in atheism; weeping for the soul will stultify surrender. A body nurtured in the service of evil lords is of no use

for the service of the Godly. That is the law. Such service shall not be relished by that body fed with the fat of evil doings. Tender coconut water is not relished by a drunkard; similarly, the forefathers, the manes in the other world, do not relish liquor or such other intoxicating drinks! Do you see the point? Both may be products of the same coconut tree, but the effects are radically different, because of the way, the process, the duration in which God as Time cooks them both. So actions' effects vary in the process of Karma. Tell me whether you are fit for the service of the Pandavas, in your present make up, your complex locus of actions till now and in your final balance sheet of eligibility?"

Bhishma : "I now understand, sir! I am destined to failure and frustration either way. No other way. But one question still remains. If I die in the service of Duryodhana, finally, how will this act give me peace of mind or satisfaction?"

Sri Krishna : "Satisfaction? Must it come to all? Do not people die without caring for such consequences?"

Bhishma : "But I want to die in your service, whatever side I may take. Is that possible, Lord?"

Sri Krishna : "God knows how to take service from good, evil, and indifferent hands. He has that unique skill. If you stand on the side of the Pandavas, there will be one kind of polarisation, as most good warriors and princes will follow your example and desert Duryodhana's camp. Peace may come on the earth, by this isolation of Duryodhana

and avoidance of war. If you decide, however, to stay on the side of Duryodhana yet, all those evil minded warriors of this world may rally round you and him for a different kind of polarisation, in which the Pandavas may not be totally isolated, and the war would be fought to eliminate evil on a large and decisive scale. You will be the pivot or hinge of this polarisation and God may use you as a fulcrum!! Will that not serve God? Are you answered? He knows how to take service, even if you do not know how to offer it to him? Yes?"

Bhishma : "Have I no concerns?"

Sri Krishna : "A prapanna - a surrenderer - has no such concerns finally. You will remain a committed servant of God here and hereafter with no personal concerns, after leaving them all to God. Do you not know all these things without my telling you?"

Bhishma : "Sir, shall I ask you one more final question?"

Sri Krishna : "Go on."

Bhishma : "Why have you talked of God, so far, impersonally? Are you not that God, yourself?"

Sri Krishna : "What use is it to tell one who knows the truth? Does he need it? What use is it to tell one who does not know it? Will it help?"



Summons come from the palace quarters to announce that Duryodhana wants to meet the aging warrior.



CHAPTER 2

DURYODHANA REMEMBERS

On the same Ashtami night of star Makha, elsewhere in Hastinavathi, Duryodhana is grossly absorbed in endless disturbing thoughts. Past memories come thick, crowding his clouded mind endlessly and the prince is closely checking where his reckonings went wrong and why. He counts the strength of his army again and again for comfort that is now eluding him. He tries to analyse the mind conditions of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna and others, to see how far he can depend on them for their hearty cooperation in the coming war. Who should command his combined forces as the joint general, is a question that is agitating his mind. It was not easy to decide by any means. Seniority, caste, loyalty, prowess, youthfulness, skill were all involved in this most tangled problem. Unanimity was most important, he knew. But consensus was difficult for various reasons. His own choice was difficult without convincing advice. Counsel with Karna, Shakuni and trusted brother Dussahasana had ended yielding no result. He was now alone on his peace-less bed rolling restlessly, and often getting up briskly to walk to and fro to the rhythm of his beating heart. Bodyguards waited outside the bolted doors. Two of his trusted servants lay hid behind the massive pillars of the royal bedroom awaiting unexpected

errands at ungodly hours of haste; he did not notice them; nor did they rest in spite of bouts of sleep in patterns of disturbance by soft feet strolling near about, or rumblings in the soft bed in that stillness of night.



It was a right step by the father to have sent Sanjaya as the royal ambassador to the Pandavas. The message sent was also clear and flawless, clever and crisp - that the cousins should better retire to the forests than wage a war with heavy odds at stake and powerful and invincible warriors on the opposite side. Was not the forest their birthplace, and where they sought comfort in difficult times, again and again? Undisturbed life there was more peaceful and without the expenses of life and blood of elders like Bhishma and Drona, even if these could be eliminated somehow by that cranky, crafty Krishna, at the end of a comfortless war, peace and justice being eternally elusive and ephemeral. Wah! What a diplomatic stroke by the blind father! Duryodhana laughed with a mild body-vibration to seek small comfort. But the reply that Sanjaya had carried back was a boomerang, piercing his brittle heart with sharp words by Krishna, so unexpectedly and firmly, shattering hopes of any easy victory even in that strong moment, as he had thought. He had the numbers, all right. He was sure of the help of the world's mightiest warriors, including Shalya, the maternal uncle of the Pandavas, - all right. But of their single-pointed unity? Of their strict loyalty? Of their integrity? He was not certain. His was a divided camp - Bhishma and Karna did not like each others. Drona's contempt for Karna was well known. Karna's anti-Brahminism had acquired notorious

proportions during the siege of Virata's capital, so as to receive powerful oral snubs from even an otherwise mild mannered Ashvatthama. Kripa's mind was unfathomable, in his endless silence that had no meaning in wartimes and in Duryodhana's impatience.

Sanjaya was expected to break the unity of the five brothers by the message he had taken, if all had gone rightly. The information was that the Pandavas, at the end of their exile, open and incognito, had quarreled amongst themselves all through in two or three groups. Bhima and Draupadi on one side, Yudhishtira and Arjuna on the other side and the twins neutral in this wordy feud. That Krishna of inconceivable cunning had spoilt all his expectations by uniting them for an uncertain war as the only final, irrevocable final settlement. Did he not see which way lay might and usage? Why should he have interfered in a family feud where he had no concern? What were his words? "When Draupadi cried for help in that helpless state seeking succour, praying to me by various names like Govinda, Dvarakavasin and so on, I was unable to avoid that situation, but could only help her regain her honour indirectly; that debt even now remains still in my mind without being discharged with grown up compound interest, as it were!"¹. Why should he view it so, when I had done him no personal harm or crossed his self-interests? If only that cunning, clever, crooked, crafty Krishna was on his own side! Ah!! He is a traitor to Yayati's race! It was his message back that had now destroyed even the little unity that had prevailed in his

¹ *Govindeti Yadacrandat Krishna Maam duravasinam |
Rinam pravridham iva me hridayaannaapasarpati ||*

camp till now. Father Dhritarashtra had been felled with one masterstroke of this Krishna! Now this unfirm-minded father and this Krishna were his two undisposable challenges, instead of one only, as earlier. Krishna is for mischief, surely. Father means well, but dares not antagonise Krishna or Bhishma; none can predict how he will ruin all the plans of Shakuni, at the nick of time, in this fickle condition. There is that Vidura, son of a bitch, to add to the accruing difficulties, passing on unwanted advice at odd moments to weaken the resolve of the group-of-four, without being a camp-follower, as he ought to, being in the pay-roll of the King. He is like a cancerous growth from within his own body.

Now one good thing is that he has the might of the Eleven Divisions of army to his back, in spite of all these shortcomings. What mighty rulers, and what strategists! Those bastards who had paid taxes to Bhima and Arjuna, being chicken-hearted then, and itching for revenge now, were all in his own basket, thanks to the strategies of Shakuni, his uncle! There is no fear of a break up of their loyalties now. Each of them has a grouse against the Pandavas or their mentor Krishna, for one reason or another - first that Bhagadatta of Pragjyotishapura, from the 'eastern most city to receive the sun-rays, as he rises' whose father Naraka was slain by this Krishna in a treacherous and humiliating manner. His elephants and his 'yellow'² army - who could defeat them now? Next, there is Bhurishravas, with another division, protected by Tapas, penance-power, in addition

² Yellow, because Bhagadatta was a 'Chinese' and his army had soldiers of that skin-hue; China was part of Bharata Varsha in those days - says the Epic.

to the physical, an unusual combination of two-fold strength. Here is Shalya, prince of Madra³, and the uncle of the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva! Perhaps Yudhishtira could never have dreamt of this in his wildest dreams, an uncle deserting him in the moment of his dire need! This adds a third division of army onto his side. Fourthly comes Kritavarma, the Yadava chieftain, with another division of army called Narayana-Sena drawn from Krishna's own den, as it were! What a marvel of strategy to have drawn him on his side! This time even Krishna was deceived for the first time perhaps! Let now Krishna stand alone unarmed on the side of the hapless Pandavas and his hundred tricks will not be of any avail to him. Fifthly, there comes Jayadratha, the great Saindhava, our own son-in-law, a great devotee of Lord Shiva, with yet another division of army. No question or fear of his deserting his side. The sixth warrior is the King of Kambhoja, Sudakshina; he comes from the 'Shaka' clan or dynasty with a formidable division of army. The seventh division is of the Avanti Princes, Vinda and Anuvinda, twins, who have been wronged by Krishna, who abducted their sister Mitravinda, at a selection-wedding, Svayamvara. How can the princes forget or forgive this shameful act of Krishna? Then there is Nila (Dhvaja) of Mahishmati, who has Agni the Fire God for his son in law, with a terrible army, which will be the eighth in his counting. The five Kekaya princes of the northwestern states are there, constituting the ninth division. Minor rulers, forest chieftains, and traditional followers constitute the rest of three more divisions. So the army-position is

³ Modern Iraq.

great and unassailable. What if Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama have no armies of their own? Bhishma's prowess is a world record; he defeated an Avatari, Parashurama, in single combat, and is blessed with the boon that he shall die of his own will and not be killed by anyone! Drona has the power of penance, of the Vedas, as well as of armours. Kripa is again blessed with long life that can end only when he wills. Ashvatthama is precious and sharp-aimed, even if short-tempered. Each of these is equal to several divisions of army put together. Then comes the most loyal Karna, who is the version of Arjuna on this side; blessed with divine missiles by Bhagavan Parashurama, and whose might is testified to by the entire world.

Let this be; but how could these despicable Pandavas have collected even as many as seven divisions? This was well beyond his own expectations! Mere forest dwellers of one time, to collect so many? Fellows who were out of power for thirteen precious years, and still so many rulers to support them, expecting nothing in return ! This cannot be! This is frankly strategic failure on his own part, not to have isolated these vagabonds completely! But who are these traitors, he must still keep a watch on? - first, the Yadava chieftain Yuyudhana with more than a division, not part of Narayana Sena under Kritavarma; it is a complete army equipped with all latest weapons. Then there is Dhrishtaketu, son of Shishupala, serving the Pandavas under the fear of Krishna, perhaps; next comes Jayatsena, alias Sahadeva, son of Jarasandha, also in this camp under a similar restraint. Each of these has a mighty army amounting to more than a division, as is the report. Should these

fellows now join the murderers of their father, instead of using this occasion for a revenge ! Fools !! That way, his calculation had gone completely wrong ! Strange psychology ! Fourth comes the southern chief of Pandyas, while all the rest of southerners were on his own side. He is the sworn enemy of Nila of Mahishmati, in addition. It is too late and difficult to win him over. Besides, he is a blood relation of the Pandavas too. Virata and Drupada have two formidable divisions too. Then there are Chekitana, Kasi King, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, Shaibya, Yudhamanyu and other terrible warriors with considerable mighty armies behind them. Now this combination was against all his expectations ! Had he been able to finish off these sons of Kunti while in forest, as exiles, this situation of today would not have arisen. Krishna came in his way every time ! Every time!!

One consolation even in this desolate plight is that Krishna will not wield any weapons; but still what tricks he will be upto, none can predict in advance. If only Bhishma can finish off the war quickly, all will be well. He can, if he wills, destroy all this ill-assorted army of the Pandavas in a day. But the cunning old man has his own unreasonable reservations. He seems to have vowed not to destroy them and Karna from within his own camp ! What shall he do with such internal enemies? Duryodhana went on remembering all these bitter memories and odds against him.....



No doubt, Bhishma did not object to Karna being crowned as King of Anga, during the exhibition of

prowess of the Kaurava and The Pandava princes on the Arena. Perhaps he was taken by surprise and there was no time to think or protest. He would not have consented to it in a cooler moment, with advance information. That act might well have been one of the reasons for the old man's Karna-hate. The grandsire also knows well how much Karna is his trusted friend, and a close adviser; he knows perhaps that his trust in Karna is deeper than that in the old man himself. Could that jealousy, by any means, be a second reason for his Karna-hate? Karna has also added to it, off and on by his braggart nature and Brahmin-hatred as instanced often, in his own presence.....Duryodhana now remembered that aggressive scene on the outskirts of the Matsya capital in that 'Cattle-Capturing' cursed episode called 'Go-grahana'. It happened like this : First Arjuna appeared as 'Brihannala', the Eunuch, as the charioteer of Prince Uttara. Drona identified him and beamed ecstasy, out of love and partiality for his disciple. Even Bhishma shared that moment of Drona's bliss. They talked to each other in a codified language⁴

⁴ This is a koota sloka reading as follows:

*Nadi jalam keshava nariketuh nagahvayo nama nagari sunuh|
Esho anganaveshadharah kiriti jitvava yam neshyati chadya
gavah ||*

This way of reading yields no meaning, as River, Water, Keshava, etc are not mutually connected. For a coded way read as :

Nadija ! Lankesha vanari ketuh ! nagahvayo..... (rest as before)

Meaning: "Oh river-born Bhishma, here is Arjuna, with his monkey-banner, come to the rescue the cows. Let us be protected from him.

Virata Parva (39-10)

whose meaning was known only to the two ! Karna could observe that there was some treachery, some backbiting in this and flared up against Drona, quite justifiably:

Duryodhana : “Grandsire ! Wherefore are you hilarious?

This is no time or occasion for private jokes, or relaxation; even if the God of Death were to appear before us, we are going to fight and not be frightened or flattered by jokes or diversions. No question of returning without a fight.”

Karna : “Dear friend ! Why worry when I am here with you ? Let us keep out this Acharya and fight in his own presence. He is our internal enemy, always sprinkling cold water on our war efforts and enthusiasm to win. At the mention of Arjuna’s name, he gets mesmerised, and forgets the entire world around him. The neighing of a horse, the sound of a gusty wind or any other natural phenomenon is enough for him as a superstition to discourage us, and dissuade us from our forward, noble efforts. What other silent or latent desires he nurtures in his heart, God only knows, or else he is suffering from some unknown fear, or, complex. After all, he is the common preceptor of both branches of the family and loves our enemies for his own reasons, best known to himself. Who can dive into the hearts of crooked Brahmins, or trust them ? Especially when one is in danger ? These parasites shine well in so called assemblies of scholars disputing the inessentials in grammar, semantics, philosophy, or in telling stories and fairy

tales to ignorant audiences who can be thrown into bewilderment by wonderful memory-exercises or in wordy-duels that only among themselves, some few can understand or in such other idle prattles. They are no good on war-fields. Ask them to find faults with faultless men, they are ready and exercised ! Ask them to flatter the unpraiseworthy, they are ready with stuff by heart, made in advance ! And to the occasion !! They may even be good at rearing cattle or cooking and eating; but war is not their field for praise or action!"

Duryodhana, at that time, neither restrained Karna, nor comforted Drona ! This diplomatic behaviour on his part was too costly to be borne later on, as this was a kind of encouragement for Karna to continue with Drona-baiting, as and when opportunities arose. Karna, then continued :

"These people have no mind for war. I shall alone face Virata ! Am I inferior to Arjuna ? I shall get you his dead body now and fulfill my promise to you ! I can conquer even Indra with weapons granted by my teacher Parashurama. Drive ye away, Virata's cattle fearlessly to our capital or stay in your chariots and silently watch, what goes on here after. I shall end up the war in a few minutes."

Kripa : "You ! Radheya ! What do you know of the ways of war, its contexts, consequences and experiments ? This is murder in the last analysis and so not elevated as a way of living, anyhow. If you jump into it without weighing the consequences or studying its antecedents, you will

ruin yourself and all of us too ! Arjuna is far superior to you and is unique among world warriors. He faced Indra alone and offered the Khandava forest to the God of Fire, and alone ! Have you done a similar feat in your life ? He engaged himself in a straight dual fight with Lord Shankara, won and obtained the Pasupata missile; can you dare repeat a similar act of daring ? He caught the villainous Saindhava, when he was running away after molesting Panchali, privately, like a coward, and taught him an unforgettable lesson. Have you anything to match this in your life ? He carried away Subhadra and faced the wrath of Baladeva and the Yadava forces; he married her later in his own presence and got his applause. Can you show me one such instance in your life like this ? During the fake 'Counting-the-cattle' ceremony (Ghosha Yatra) when Chitrasena, the Gandharva chief took your friend Duryodhana for hostage and kidnapped him in your own presence, what were you doing? Monkey-watching ? Was it not Arjuna that rescued him and saved the honour of the royal family? Tell me in which war you have won, alone or as leader, assisted by any army ? Do not rush forward and be killed by Arjuna : Let us all jointly attack him and see what best can be done." That was mild Kripa !

Ashvatthama, the firebrand, exploded, without containing Karna's gross insult to his father and the community of Brahmins :

Ashvatthama : “Thou Sutha⁵, we have not yet won the war, and taken possession of the cattle; in fact we are yet to start it; win it, and return to our capital victoriously; are you wagging your tail in advance? Even victors with justification cannot brag like you! Fire burns, the Sun shines, and the Earth carries us all silently. Nature is not given to bragging like you ? The Varna order, or the Ashrama-order criticised by you, in a foul-tongued manner, is neither my creation, nor yours. Is it not God ordained ? You and your wicked friend here, Duryodhana, assisted by the deceptive Shakuni, imposed an unfair defeat on the innocent Yudhishtira - let me ask you, to which of the duties of Varna or Ashrama, does this ‘noble’ act, belong? Even butchers do not brag like you, after killing innocent animals ! Hunters are better than you in modesty and humility, silently carrying on their inherited vocations, without norm-violations like you. Will you tell me, in which battle you have vanquished Nakula and Sahadeva, let alone Bhima or Arjuna ? Let alone Yudhishtira’s ! When you suggested to your ‘esteemed friend’ Duryodhana, that Panchali shall be exposed naked before all - tell me, at the end of which victorious war, you wanted this shameful trophy ? And for what brave end ? Do you think Arjuna will forgive you for this barbarous act, - that too in her helpless state?

⁵ This refers to a caste, (product of Brahmin mother and Kshatriya father) in which Karna was brought up, though son of Kunti in reality. They were inferior in status to warriors and priests, but still respected otherwise.

She was in her periods, dressed in a single saree, and you showed no chivalry, which was expected of even a mean warrior, whose duty was to rush to her help! You ignoble fellow ! Do you not know that God has brought down Arjuna on earth to destroy foul fellows like you ? After destroying all the Kauravas, will Arjuna spare you ? What should he spare you for ? For another gambling ? For another exposure of Panchali ? For another bragging? My father did no more than give the due when he praised Arjuna ! It was neither partiality nor praise of the unworthy - take it from me, the son of that noble teacher. When I am not jealous of him, why should you feel so, and with what merit or worth in you ? Arjuna is equal to only Krishna in bravery, archery and prowess. If my father loves him, after me, for his virtues, why do you suffer from heartburns ? Do you still want to go to war with Arjuna, right now? Hear, you, Duryodhana : Tell your uncle Shakuni and command him to defeat or kill Arjuna ! Don't you think your uncle is the greatest warrior on this earth knowing all the duties of a Kshatriya, to the minutest details ? Let the world know, and you shall know too - that Arjuna does not throw dice; he only delivers arrows; and arrows unlike dice, do not have digital markings on them to deceive anyone; they fly straight into the hearts of the enemies openly; they will decide your fate like fatal planets in your horoscope, with your full knowledge, without playing foul behind your backs, or contrivances cooked up in secretive plans; understand? Gods like Agni, Yama and

Varuna, might know some mercy - not the arrows of Arjuna ! Understand ? Brahmins are brave in words - let me grant; should not a true Kshatriya be brave in acts ? in fight ? and in valour? Tell me Karna, whether you are a Brahmin or Kshatriya? Let all the world know you in your true colour and mettle !”

Duryodhana could not endure this bolt from the blue any longer. He was in no mood to appeal to either party or appease either; he had to swallow his words.

It was now Bhishma’s turn to join issue with Karna:

Bhishma : “You fool! Why do you blame the Acharya? He has measured the skills and abilities of Arjuna, properly, after all ! Remember, that this is time for war, not waste of words. Ashvatthama, swallow your justified anger and forgive Duryodhana for his helpless muteness. Drona, Acharya Sir, you are a living embodiment of true Brahminhood and Brahmastra as all the world knows. What if an ignorant person of jealousy backbites ? You can vanquish the enemies both by your Vedic enchantments and arrows aimed in bows at the same time and you are unmatched in this. Duryodhana, know thou that your Acharya is no braggart but a man of action, unlike your friend Karna. Who can excel him in archery on this earth, other than Drona’s teacher Parashurama ? We shall all fight together and keep out this Karna, if he is not interested in war, as he seems not to be. Let us not kill Karna, by pushing him, unwillingly on his part, as fodder for Arjuna’s arrows or missiles!

Come, come, let us not quarrel amongst ourselves and be laughed at by our opponents.”

Duryodhana had now to apologise to Drona and Ashvatthama, to the dislike and discontent of Karna. How could Duryodhana forget all this at this hour?



On Sanjaya's return from Upaplavya carrying Krishna's thunderbolt-like reply-message, again there was a wordy clash between Karna and Bhishma. The old fire was not still extinguished; how could it be ? the fire of mutual hate ? Bhishma had advised Duryodhana for a peaceful and honourable settlement, even at that late hour, much to the chagrin of Duryodhana. The advice was passed on to Dhritarashtra also for proper initiative and peace with the Pandavas ! Duryodhana was non-plussed, as never before and fumbled for words of retaliation then and there, in helpless anger. Bhishma had gone on a long discourse on his favourite Vedantic theme that Krishna was Vishnu, Narayana, Vasudeva, who came on the earth, to relieve its burden. Arjuna was his counter-part, Nara, complimenting that task, as the Vedas say. He had warned that Duryodhana would certainly remember these warning words when he would see Narayana and Nara appearing in the same chariot before the world, Narayana leading Nara to annihilate all the evil fellows, sparing none. He had told Duryodhana, without mincing words : “Your brothers will not transgress you in thoughts, words or action - all the ninety-nine of them. If you agree for peace, you will spare all of them and millions of innocent lives too - warriors, horses, elephants,

and would-be widows! Why do you not take this healthier second look at your own now wicked decision? You seemed to be innocent at one time to me; but let me tell you that it is this Karna, Sutaputra, and your brother Dusshasana who are egging you on for this misadventure. There is that Shakuni also to add to this sum total of evil woe.”

This adverse reference to himself was not liked by Karna; he could pocket this open insult neither before all nor swallow his pride and anger privately. He retorted and rebuffed the grandsire in the foulest words of his life:

Karna : “Grand sire ! You are going out of bounds, you are the real braggart; you let no chance slip in blaming me, and discouraging my innocent friend here, Duryodhana, who trusts you so much. Time will tell the world who is his real friend and who else foe. It is true that I deceived Guru Parashurama about my caste, in order to learn archery. It was by no means foul or for a bad cause; I had no selfish motive though ambitious of becoming a world-class hero. My Guru forgave me too; he gave me special missiles and taught me inner secrets of archery as a vidya. Those are with me, still. My teacher has been highly pleased with me for service, devotion and valour and also dedication. If he has cursed me, it is on a different account and it shall not affect me seriously.”⁶

⁶ *Prasaditam hyasya maya monobhut |
Shushrushaya svena cha paurushena |
Tadasti chastram mama savishesham |
Tasmat samartho'smi mamaisha Bharah ||*

Bhishma : “Fellow, let me tell you and the world in advance, that even the Shakti which you obtained from Indra, in exchange for the ear-rings and coat-of-arm born with you, will not remain in your hands for proper use at the proper time because of your thoughtlessness, unguardedness and lack of foresight. Not only this, even the Sarpasra (the Naga missile) still being worshipped by you, will leave your hands in vain, in untimely excesses and your stupid vows serving no one. I am sure Krishna knows every way of protecting Arjuna from you and your weapons; you will surely die at Arjuna’s hands. What use are you to your friend Duryodhana, whom you have egged on to this unwanted war ?”

Karna walks out of the council hall in fury protesting in loud and uncontrollable voice :

“Grand sire. Let the world know this for once - I shall not participate in the war, until you die; this hand of mine will not lift up my bow or arrows as long as you live ! Friends, ye all, know this firm vow of mine!”

Everyone, including Bhishma, had been stunned, by this, each in his own way for different reasons - Bhishma for Karna’s barbarity and lack of manners, his aggressiveness and deep hate; Duryodhana for fear of its consequences, and the short temper of Karna, who had so spoilt all his efforts for unity, in one stroke of thoughtlessness. He wouldn’t call it ingratitude however, in his partiality for his friend, which could not be rationalised even in cooler moments; even Karna’s friendly courtiers had been upset by this loss of temper by Karna at so crucial a meeting requiring one voice, one resolve, and one determination.

At the end of this session Bhishma loomed large in Duryodhana's mind as a big question mark, whose loyalties, intentions or commitments he could not find out or trust. "Two so called 'well-wishers' fighting so shamelessly or aimlessly - how could they be of positive use ?" - The prince was lost in this dilemma into the bottomless quagmire, never again, to rise up till after all the war was over !



Later still, the latest episode also had revealed cracks in the fabulous might and 'unity' of the Kaurava forces. Duryodhana, for his own personal satisfaction, had wanted to know who were the Rathis, Ardharathis, Maharathis, Atirathis and Rathathirathis and so on. The scale, measured in those terms in those days, to show how many one could kill in the war, how many days one took to see the end of it; what divine weapons and missiles one had, to achieve this end etc. The count included plus points in the hero's life and achievements, as well as minus points, so that a balance-sheet would show where one stood. Though subjective by nature, the measurement was inevitable to build self-confidence, as well as count the real stakes waged in the war's unpredictable nature. Not all knew all modes of fight, all weapons, and none possessed all the skills in totality. There was nothing unusual in Duryodhana asking his grandsire to tell him these confidential details. Was not Bhishma the grand commander of the combined forces?

It was a confidential meeting from which Karna could not be precluded, even for tactical reasons. Not that Duryodhana had possessed the much needed tact

at that time, as never before. Wisdom and impetuosity rarely go together! The question resulted in an unmitigated disaster : For Bhishma, though in truth, highlighted the virtues of all others and pointed to Karna's weaknesses and lapses to count him as less than an Ardharathi , without including him in higher grades. That inclusion, even hypothetically, would not have altered the situation either. Bhishma was not given to cajoling or peroration; Karna was not used to truth being told without embellishment, and Duryodhana was not accustomed to hearing unpleasant truths. The three conjointly produced a conflagration that not all waters of Varuna would have quenched or brought down. Bhishma went on :

“This Kritavarma is an Atiratha. Shalya is one too. Bhurishravas, surely is one other. Saindhava is twice as mighty as the Rathis. Kambhoja King, Sudhakrishna is a mere Rathi. Your son Duryodhana, and your brother's sons are allowed as Rathis by me; Kripa is an Atiratha. Shakuni is mere Ratha; the five Trigarta princes can be counted as Rathis, along with Nila of the South. Ashvatthama is, no doubt, a Maharatha . But there are drawbacks in him. He loves life more than death, which is a disqualification for a Kshatriya ! Here is a Brahmin playing that role by a twist of destiny that renders him ill-qualified for the description I mentioned and so I can count him neither as a Maharatha, nor as an Atiratha or even as a Ratha. Drona is in a different category; though Brahmin by birth he excels even Atirathas. Though aged he has the skill of youth and the enthusiasm for war, unusual for his age. But he loves Arjuna more than he loves his own son ! Yet he can

give his own life too for his son. It can be a weak point on his side in this war. Karna's son, Vrishasena is an excellent warrior too. Now this Karna here ! How shall I describe or count him ? It is he who is always egging you onto war. He is very uncouth in words and manners; very rough and unpolished; impolite and impetuous. He is a braggart of the first order and is ready for any mean act unbecoming of a noble warrior. He is now your unofficial counsellor, minister and guide, commander-in-chief also in a way ! You have honoured him more than he deserves, and elevated him to posts unworthy of him. He cannot be classified as a Ratha or Atiratha either. For, he is dispossessed of the divine ear-rings and armour on his chest, which he had by birth. He is too unthoughtful in generosity and can give anything to anyone, anytime. His compassion is thus a drawback in him. Added to it is the curse of his preceptor Parashurama, so that he cannot remember the proper 'mantras' for the right missiles at the hour of his need. What use is he for you now ? At the most you can count upon him as half a Ratha."

There was nothing factually, analytically wrong in this estimate. But Karna's pride had been deeply hurt, touching his psyche. The tone of Bhishma, the way he had thrown those words at him, and the context and company had all given Karna a totally different import. Truth can hurt more than falsehood, can it not ? Karna had retorted most violently :

"Pitamaha ; I have never wronged you in my memory. Search your own heart too; but you hate me with no reason; I can only call it malice. I had tolerated your tauntings all these days, for the sake of my friend,

Duryodhana. For that matter, you are that Ardhharathi, of which you are accusing me. Being partial to our enemies, the Pandavas, you have always been unfair to Duryodhana and he does not know it yet. He trusts you too much, in spite of your treacheries. When you so abuse me and others on Duryodhana's side, loyalists in truth, what can be your real intent other than pull our legs, meanly ? Is this not a traitor's real characteristic? Do you think that one becomes Maharatha only by age or blood-bond? For a warrior, might is the only measure of standards. You have become too senile and infirm to be trusted or honoured anymore. Have you not heard that the seniority of Brahmins depends on learning, character and the power of manthras, just as for Vaishyas, it is capacity for trade and the wealth amassed that determines priority ? It is only for Shudras that age or seniority by birth is considered proper. By bringing this unjust standard into our midst, you are causing confusions and confoundments. You are an agent of the Pandavas in disguise, in our midst. Rest for a while and see with your own eyes, how I shall destroy the might of the Pandavas and settle this war in my friend's favour, without your participation."

Karna then throws a side-glance at Duryodhana and vows : "My friend, let this old hag die first, doing you no more harm. Only then, I shall fight to finish this war. That he shall die soon is a truth in my view."

Bhishma : "Get out you fool ! I have defeated my own Guru in war, unlike being cursed by him like you! The world knows who is who."

Duryodhana had to ask for Bhishma's pardon, to the chagrin of Karna.

It was a past episode, with pregnant significance for the present and the future. Duryodhana could not know where this disunity would lead him. He stopped moving to and fro and lay down on his bed.

The night was slowly giving way to daylight in its tireless war, in the scheme of time also ! The star at day break was Purva Phalguni, and had been thought proper for the choice of a leader for war on his side, by consensus. His servants were reciting the usual praises as he was still in bed, in musical voices, to the tunes of instruments, pleasantly in harmony. He got up and honoured them with jewels and ornaments as usual.

An errand boy came to him, on his way to the bath, to tell him that his brother Dushshasana was waiting to be closeted with him.



CHAPTER 3

WHO WILL COMMAND THE FORCES ?

Dusshasana bowed low and stepped aside with a downcast face indicating that the job he was entrusted with did not yield positive results; Duryodhana inferred as much, and was perturbed. He walked silently to the council chamber, with his brother following him without a word. Guards kept their watch outside while Duryodhana went about that chamber to make sure that there was no spy inside, and then the talk began :

Dusshasana : “Brother dear ! My efforts have failed totally. I could not persuade Karna to join the fight under Bhishma, as he stuck to his vow taken in haste after that final frustrating, irritating situation. He will not be of any use for us, in this war at all, it seems. He says that this is a matter of personal prestige and that there is no compromise on this. He is upset that Bhishma could not appreciate his loyalty to our cause all these days and is sure that there is no further possibility of the old man realising it, let alone appreciating it ! Who will comfort him other than the old man himself ? He says that both of them are already one foot in their graves!!”

Duryodhana : “What did I hear ? Are they possessed of the death-wish, and are not confident of victory on our side ? This is a bad omen ! See the tight corner in which I am caught. It looks as if I have to lose one of these heroes on my side. If I crown Karna as grand commander, Bhishma will definitely use this pretext to renounce arms at last, as he is already half-hearted. Or, at least he will unnecessarily talk about the desirability of peace and rapprochement even at this late hour. His platitudes of ‘equality’, ‘cooperation’, ‘unity’ etc will destroy the morale of our father and of the army also. If Bhishma opts out, Drona and Kripa too will lay down arms. Ashvatthama will follow suit. Shalya and Kritavarma are unpredictable as opportunists, as there is no binding reason for them to be on our side. This will destroy even the little unity our army has. So I cannot afford to antagonise Bhishma and push him to the option of neutrality. Karna does not have a big following anyhow, and so the damage will be less if he keeps out in spite of my persuasion. Let him join at his will, and we shall wait, and see if time can heal his wounded feelings. I have done him no wrong personally anyhow, anytime; on the contrary, I am perhaps his only solace in his desolate life so far. I shall wait therefore.”

Dusshasana : “Brother ! Can you not call the grandfather and make him say something that may look like apology for Karna ? cannot he personally request Karna to join us in the war ? Will that not solve our problem ? Do you think Karna will sulk even after that?”

Duryodhana : “Brother, if life were all theory, we could have solved all our problems on the black board! In the first place, I cannot call the grandsire to where I am; that will be violation of protocol, and at this age, the old man feels insulted even with slight variations. In the second place, he will take no suggestions from anyone. He can only issue orders. In the third place, he is the last person to apologise even obliquely. Fourthly, he has such a lot of contempt for Karna that he does not want him under him even as an obedient camp follower. So where does our problem get solved ? Besides, I have already begged of him of a similar step on an earlier occasion. Do you know what he said to me, then ? ‘Duryodhana, your stupidity knows no bounds. You have never listened to any of my advices all these thirty-six years, because of that friend of yours, who has brought you to this situation. Do you think it proper that I should ask of him this forgiveness that you suggest, now ? Why should I demean myself at this age, for anyone’s sake ? What do I care whether he remains in your camp or leaves it? I am not your servant; do you expect me to be your friend’s servant, even after this realisation by you ? I am bound to the throne of Royalty of Hastinapura because of my word to my parents only. You seem to have misunderstood its spirit. Perhaps long life is a curse on me. I am with you only because of a straight jacket of a tangled situation of irony and not out of any soft consideration for you. Do not rake up the past, or irritate me too many times. Enough is

enough. Let that Sutaputra be first crowned as Army General and die first. If Arjuna spares any of your army for the second day, then I shall take over, and do what little can be done !' After that, do you think the old man is still negotiable ? He is the least enthusiastic of our warriors. He can only fight mechanically with no determination to win the war for me. If I speak more, he will resort to his usual tactics of lecturing on Dharma to my impatience and aversion. That will spoil my mood also. Let us try something else. Have you requested at least Karna's sons, followers and friends to join us ? At least this he shall not prevent?"

Dusshasana : "I have tried all that; they all insist on Karna's being sworn in as Grand Commander first, as a condition for their joining us. They talked of the old man in abusive words ! 'What wisdom is there in crowing first an unwilling old man on the verge of death, when there is an enthusiastic hero ready to bring victory for sure ?'. What can I say more ?"

Duryodhana : "What did you answer ?"

Dusshasana : "I said that propriety requires age to be respected first; that is the priority always, I said. I even praised the old man to support my view by quoting his plus points and war records."

Duryodhana : "What was his response ?"

Dusshasana : "He was further irritated !"

Duryodhana : "Let us leave Karna now to his wisdom and discretion. We cannot antagonise or lose the

old man on any count in our present set up. Tell Karna that whatever may be his reservations on the war participation, he must attend the war council, as otherwise it may demoralise our cadres."

Dusshasana : "That I shall ensure."



Duryodhana again walked towards the bath. The sun was rising on the horizon... a servant brought an urgent message :-

"Sir ! Prime minister, Vidura, is going on a pilgrimage within a few moments from now."

Though this did not irritate the prince as an unexpected news, and so did not upset his poise, the timing made him deeply pained as it was not a good omen. Duryodhana changed the course and straight went to Vidura's place. The wise man had finished morning ablutions, and was distributing charities, in a deeply absorbed mood, so that he did not even notice the prince approaching him or standing by his side. Vidura's composure, piety and disinterestedness brought envy to Duryodhana's mind. Then the Prime Minister noticed him.

Vidura : "Come, Prince. I would have come to you, had you but sent a word to that effect. Why did you take all this trouble ?"

Duryodhana : "Sir ! I heard you are on a sudden pilgrimage; is it fair that you forsake me at this hour on such a pretext ?"

Vidura : "Prince ! I am happy that you have

condescended to call on me. But let us see reason: I am anyhow a useless burden on you. I am only for name's sake your Prime Minister; you have others unofficially in that capacity, already. They will never forsake you until death. I am an old man, of old times and policies, forsaken by you at every step, in this now deeply tangled question of war and inheritance of power. What use am I even if I postpone the pilgrimage ? Your bad times have not arrived like a bolt from the blue, all of a sudden. They have been specifically, fatally invited by you and your camp, almost with a plan to perfection, not only for you, but also for your race and all the mankind of the entire world. I have never forsaken you; you have ditched me in other preferences and brought upon this disastrous war. Why do you accuse me of desertion ? I am still prepared to stay back and abandon the idea of pilgrimage, if you promise me that you will arrive at an honourable settlement with your cousins even at this late stage. I shall be your ambassador this time instead of your other ones. Let us all, elders, then together leave on pilgrimage, leaving politics and administration to younger, wiser, hands.

Duryodhana : "Nobody can prevent the war !"

Vidura : "In that case why do you come to me to stop me from a programme, so dear to me ? Am I a warrior ? How can I help you militarily ? You have rejected my diplomatic services to you ! Now Bhishma, Shakuni, Kanika, Karna and others will jointly look after whatever your needs may be.

Perhaps you do not require them even, as you are able to do the needful all by yourself ! I cannot remain as a mute citizen to daily, avoidable deaths, in their millions to report to your blind father. Others can do it better for some consideration. Let not history blame me. If you do not want to live, at least allow me to die in my own way. Are not our ways different hereafter ?”

Duryodhana : (Enraged) “Are these the words of one in the payrolls of the Hastinavati administration? Does not a Prime Minister have a duty here ?”

Vidura : “God knows, who is on whose payrolls ! Arrogance is no good for anyone. Salt consumption leads to drinking more water ! That water need not be of the capital only. I wanted to save you and so stood by, all this while. Even now I stand, as I said. But death-wish is what none can save one from. A man intent on suicide, throws himself into the sea, with a heavy stone tied around his neck, but calls upon someone on the shore to save him! Does he have brains ! sir ? Are you serious in saving yourself ? Paradoxical talking on the doorsteps of death is not uncommon. I pity you, boy.”

Duryodhana : “Go to hell then, or wherever else you please.”

Vidura : “There was no need for you to come all this way to my place so to advise me ! I am going to pilgrim centres, after all, and not to Hell. Hell is in Kurukshetra; so tell me who is going to Hell?”

Duryodhana : (Scornfully) “A woman in a housewife’s position but with a harlot’s mentality, cannot be prevented from foul sex-play even by a well intentioned, liberal or tolerant husband ! What can I do to wean you back ? Go, go.....your own way.”¹

Vidura is deeply stung by this vulgar comparison and retorts with an equally powerful metaphor.

Vidura : “I am reminded, too, of a sixty year old saintly Brahmin and his teenaged wife, with a bad character. She does not relish chastity, as her mean mind craves for lewd or lecherous sex contacts; what can the husband do ?”²

Vidura turns away from Duryodhana, and re-engages himself in distributing charities, without lifting up his eyes. Duryodhana had appeared to his visionary eyes as a mere breathing corpse, and so Vidura began shedding tears, for his inability to save the family and the cousins. Duryodhana misunderstood this as the immediate reaction to his piercing words, and so escalated his abusive words to his heart’s content, to none of which Vidura would reply, even by a single word. Duryodhana was on his way to bath for the third time to be prevented again.



¹ *Sa Yatrecchasi Vidura ! Tatra gaccha |*
Susantwita hyasati stri jahati ||

² *Na shreyase niyate mandabuddhih |*
Stri shrotriyasyeva grihe pradushta |
Dhruvan na rochet Bharatarbhasya |
Pathih Kumarya iva shastivarshah || (Udyoga Parva)

There was another message there with more bad news!

Duryodhana : "What breaking news ?"

Messenger : "Baladeva, too, is on a pilgrimage, Sir !"

Duryodhana : "What sayest thou ? Has everyone gone mad ? Why do these fools resort to pilgrimage at this odd, vicious hour ? Who set them this moment as auspicious, uniformly ?"

Baladeva himself comes that way to meet Duryodhana, to inform him of his resolve, personally. Duryodhana wondered with fear for more inauspicious news, and his heartbeats went up. Baladeva begins the talk :

Baladeva : "Duryodhana, you seem to have chosen war, at last ?"

Duryodhana : "Not at last ! It was decided long, long ago by fate ! Master, I am in no way responsible for it, you know."

Baladeva : "I know nothing. Nowadays I do not understand anything of whatever is happening. Leave me to my pilgrimage, anyhow."

Duryodhana : "Teacher Sir, do you prefer pilgrimage to assisting me in my hour of need, this war-time?"

Baladeva : "I do not like this stupid war at all ! Why should you decide upon this dangerous and unpredictable war as the only course of honourable settlement ? I am to expiate for an unknowingly committed sin of mine. To me this is more important than assisting you."

Duryodhana : “What did you say ? ‘Sin ?’ Did you commit one ? When ? Where ? How did it happen? Who prescribed this expiation for you ?”

Baladeva : (Looks around to see if no one is within the ear’s reach, and then proceeds with a heavy heart, slowly): “Yesterday morning, I was doing physical exercises as usual near that pond outside the town. I felt like easing my bowels. I went aside and sat to clear myself. From somewhere, a decrepit old cow ran towards me in mad rhythm, as it were. I had done it no wrong, but it wanted to pierce me with its horns as it were. I felt for something round me, to threaten it with and drive it away - a stick, a stone, a piece of rubble - anything. Nothing was within reach except a dried piece of clay-lump, a piece of hardened earth, brittle though. I grabbed it and threw it at that cow !”

Duryodhana : “What happened ?”

Baladeva : “The cow died then and there, perhaps even before that lump of clay touched it !”

Duryodhana : “Shiva, Shiva ! So you killed a cow!!”

Baladeva : “That is what my brother Krishna also said; but see....”

Duryodhana : “But why should Krishna also say the same thing ? How did he know it ? ”

Baladeva : “Because I told him what had happened, soon after ! He thought over it deeply and said, for one who had committed cow-slaughtering as a sin, the only way open for self-purification is

pilgrimage for a long time...But see, that I did not actually kill it. Do you believe a dried piece of earth, can kill a cow ? Is it a weapon ? It was no more than like a piece of straw ! I just wanted a threatening gesture in a closed hand at it, and thoughtlessly caught what was available. But the mysterious cow died ! Should it have ?”

Duryodhana : “Why do you say mysterious cow ?”

Baladeva : “Because it was not there on the spot, soon after I washed myself and came there to see, if it had really died !”

Duryodhana : “How unbelievable ! Are you sure, someone else did not dispose of it while you were washing yourself with your back to it ?”

Baladeva : “Absolutely.”

Duryodhana : “There is some magic or sorcery in this! (slowly realising its significance): Did you say Krishna prescribed this purificatory act ? Where was he when he so advised you ?”

Baladeva : “Krishna came on that very spot in a few minutes, as I was in my bewilderment ! I told him all and he said that.”

Duryodhana : “Now I understand all !”

Baladeva : “What do you understand ? What is there to think about it ?”

Duryodhana : “There is everything to think about if one wants. See things sequentially this way : Here a war is decided, with the actual date to commence to be fixed shortly. I am your disciple. You are

unpredictable of temperament. Possibly, you would join sides with me, now that Kritavarma and his army are on my side too. Then this happens - you go to clear bowels; this mysterious cow, from nowhere, springs a surprise on you, by materialising in a moment of your helplessness, to be killed with a pinch of dried up dust. Soon, it disappears from the surface of this earth. Then comes Krishna at that very spot, in that most ungodly hour and prescribes your exile in the guise of pilgrimage.....don't you see a planning ?”

Baladeva : “I fail to understand the head or tail of what you are saying ! Do you think this is Krishna’s magic, Krishna’s trick ?”

Duryodhana : “I leave the inference to you !”

Baladeva : “What use is it for me to draw the inference in your suggested way ?”

Duryodhana : “What is there otherwise, for anyone with common sense ?”

Baladeva : “Keep your common sense to yourself, let me begin my pilgrimage tomorrow morning, alone.”

Duryodhana : “Sir, is it proper for you to leave me to my own fate and run away like this ?”

Baladeva : “You have your excellent company in Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Shalya, Shakuni, Ashvatthama, Kritavarma and Bhurishravas ! You do not require me at all. Besides, I shall not fight against Krishna, as I have never questioned his wisdom anytime. If I stay back at all by any

miraculous circumstance, I shall fight necessarily your forces, by being on Krishna's side, or abstain at the most. Let it be clear."

Duryodhana : "Then you had better hurry up with your plan of pilgrimage."

Balarama : "I do not need anyone's permission or approval."



The war council of Dhritarashtra is in full quorum and in full swing. The old blind King, though uncrowned, is seated on the royal golden throne bedecked with the choicest of gems and jewels. He is like a blot on it, in his external and internal blindness, and with his sense of fairness put out completely; no one notices this incongruity, there; for, all seats there, are more or less in similar conditions only - unworthy men on worthy seats ! Bhishma, Drona and Kripa on one side; on the other side, the empty seat of Vidura stares at all, even in its blankness. Karna, Shakuni and Kanika are on the other side. Karna sits for a few seconds and gets away on some pretext, so that there are two empty seats there to stare, with none to fill them both factually and symbolically. The Division Commanders are distributed on either side. Duryodhana sits near his father, just one step below, but above all others, to be within the whisper of the King. Now starts the council.

Dhritarashtra : "Prince. Tell us of our preparations for the war and name all the Divisional Commanders and sum up the positive points in a highlight, briefly. Then we shall formally appoint them in

their posts and offer royal gifts and honours. Let this assembly know who the Commander-in-Chief is.

Duryodhana : “Yes, sir; there is nothing to fear; nothing that anyone would pity us, for not possessing. We are capable of defeating the enemies and win the war decisively and quickly.³ Your good self has no ground for doubt or despair. Our army is in excellent form and morale to defeat the enemy and kill their leaders. See the way, the terms Yudhishtira offered for peace, for instance. He said he would be contented with five villages to withdraw from this war. As if we were willing to offer even that much ! It shows the demoralised condition of the enemy’s mind. He has not enough divisions of army on his side; he does not have one good, world-famous warrior to lead that even ill-assorted army for name’s sake. Even Krishna’s army is on our side; thanks to our diplomacy. An old imbecile Krishna cannot wag his tail as all his tricks are exhausted; He is a spent force by any account. Our enemies are famished what with long bouts of exile, and consequent hardships. They do not have trusted friends, except a few old, helpless blood relations, who would any day die, even without participation in the war. Bhima is there, you would say. But he is not given to practicing like me all these thirteen years. Besides, he is not sharp. His roughness is actually a weakness. In a mace fight, it is not might,

³ *Na bhetavyam maharaja, na shochya bhavata vayam |
Samarthasma paranjetum balena samare vibho ||*

but skillfulness that matters. I possess all these and more qualifications. Who can defeat Bhishma, who vanquished his mighty teacher Parashurama himself? He can leave his mortal body only on his own free will, in addition. So no question of killing him or defeating him. Drona is born of no woman, like Kripa. He has the power of the mantras also in addition to the power of bow and arrows. Karna is the equal of Bhishma and Drona and has won the appreciation of Parashurama, even. Karna, now possesses a shakti in the name of Indra for the pair of useless earrings and the coat of armour; this latter is a matter for some apprehension. But he has the serpent weapon, with its own romantic history which all of us know too well for narration here. Bhurishravas has the power of penance in addition to traditional weapons of warfare. Saindhava is blessed by Shiva, Lord Rudra. Our combined forces mean eleven divisions. Brihaspati prescribes that one should fight with an army, one-third the size of one's own. We shall leave aside the exactitudes of theoretical prescription. In strength, in equipment, in strategy and in sheer numbers, we are superior by all standards. Now to some metaphors; Yudhishtira is going to be the sacrificial animal in this war, looked at from a ritualistic angle. Myself and Karna are the Dikshits - the hosts playing this sacrifice. The chariot is the altar. The sword is the left laddle ; the mace is the right one, its counterpart. Our armours are the skin covers, made of deerskin. Bhishma, Drona and others are the officiating priests, calling upon the gods to

arrive, propitiating them with offerings, and pleasing them with Vedic songs appropriately. Arrows are the Darbha grass to be scattered over everywhere. Then we have an additional force- namely that of occult power, of black-magic and incantations to bring about the desired results from gods under compulsion if not under sweet impulsions. The Pandavas, our enemies do not have it. Then come to Krishna. He is like a cobra without fangs now. All his army with us, by a thoughtless choice he threw at me by his own free will. The Pandavas are emaciated, have lost popularity and army power. However long the war may drag on for some unforeseen reason or unexpected experiences, it cannot last for more than a month at the most. Where are the food and weapon supplies of the enemy to pull on for so long ? Victory is ours, as Pitamaha has assured."

Duryodhana continues : "Drona gives two months for the war; if responsibility is thrust on him. (With a meaningful side-glance at Ashvatthama) This friendly fiend claims only ten nights to finish, if the responsibility is entrusted to him ! Karna is otherwise engaged today, so his absence here is understandable. He thinks five nights are enough for him to eliminate the enemy."

(Bhishma roars with disapproval and eyes the speaker as if he would burn him then and there for this bragging.)

(Karna's supporters reply to it with a mightier collective roar to outwit Bhishma, having waited so long

to show their disapproval of Bhishma being chosen for this first honour of leading the army. As if this meaningful-roar and counter-roar affair is lost on him, Duryodhana proceeds calmly) :

“I have given you the picture as it is, of our position in contrast to that of our enemies. Armies are on the march. Several contingents have already assembled around Kurukshetra, and more will arrive shortly. The chieftains and strategic segments of the army will move there in auspicious moments from our capital.”

Duryodhana paused, looked at the Divisional Commanders and then proceeded slowly but firmly :

“Warrior - Chiefs par excellence ! I know each one of you is by yourself fit enough to be chosen the chief of the armed forces ! But practicality requires one only to be so chosen. That is time’s constraint, and I am really sorry.” (He winks his eyes towards a waiting servant, to give the signal:)

Well dressed orderlies carry trays containing precious gems, jewels and Tambula and other auspicious offerings, move about rhythmically to the tunes of war songs, to the accompanying beat of drums, and approach the divisional commanders. Maidservants follow them and bring costly silks and other royal presentations in a queue before the prince. Duryodhana comes down, applies Tilak on the faces of each of those leading warriors and offers all those presents and symbolic offerings to signify the royal recognition, by special offers of well dressed swords to them. They bow down to the blind King in a ceremonial parade and go back

to their seats. The spectators are thrilled by this once-in-a lifetime scene.

Now who is that lucky chief of Army ? Everyone waits eagerly. The followers of Karna are seen with downcast heads, meaning what it should to all ! The choice is already made, and it is unpleasant to them, signifying Karna's absence from the scene !! Drona, Kripa, Ashvatthama beam smiles of satisfaction, to increase the sense of humiliation felt by the followers of Karna, very unbecomingly, of course, showing a divided army polarised on caste bias; truly Dhritarashtra was blessed with blindness, for once, not to have known this mute drama and its meaning.

Duryodhana waits for the most silent and calm moment to make the announcement. Others are all now looking only at him for that moment. Here goes he:

“You are all anxious to know that chief's name : Who else could it be other than Bhishma Pitamaha !! In a way, curiosity ought not to be entertained in any quarters - as justice and honour belonged only to him, our grandsire. It was a mere formality on my part to have confirmed your expectations.”

(All clap for long, in endless waves of joy.)

Bhishma has tears in his eyes, as if to acknowledge the faith the council has in him; and the non-betrayal by Duryodhana, as he had feared, in preference for Karna. Silent parleys had indicated erratic choices, earlier. To Bhishma this was a matter of personal prestige rather than the consequences hereafter in the council hall or the war-field. Not that he was not

enthusiastic about the job so given to him. But others had doubted that because of his old age. Now the agony was at an end.

Dusshasana heaves a heavy sigh, signifying the end of a crisis. Only Shakuni is cynical and expects penal consequences from the other side. He takes care not to open his closed eyes, for the last half-hour, lest someone should read his fathomless mind. His son Uluka, is seemingly indifferent, knowing his father's nature, and affecting equanimity and usualness.

Duryodhana : "Friends, do not mistake this honour to the old sire as mere formality, or the offering of a mere ornamental position as at the end of Rajasuya, where Krishna was honoured. There it was inconsequential; here it is a terrible responsibility entrusted to the most worthy of warriors assembled here. Now all the rest of us, including the King, and myself are all required to be obedient to the sire."

"Victory to Bhishma" - the assembly shouts. Bhishma is extraordinarily honoured with shawls, silks, ornaments, jewels and gems and a glittering sword by the prince. He hands over the Royal Seal also here. Bhishma's glory is sung by the court-bards in appropriate songs made for the occasion, by royal poets. Arati is held to the old man's face by the royal womenfolk. The divisional commanders kneel before Bhishma, swear loyalty, touch his feet and their swords, and take oaths of secrecy of army secrets and absolute obedience and co-operation.

Conches blow and war-drums and kettledrums beat in chorus, conveying this news to heavens, as it were.

Duryodhana, settles in his seat, heaving a relieved sign to signify that his worries are at an end, and that Bhishma has now no reasons to back out of responsibility.

Dusshasana recedes into the sides, silently. Shakuni is still not satisfied, completely, perhaps. Drona and Ashvatthama do not seem to be untouched by any of these rituals.

The Assembly awaits the speech of Bhishma, eagerly. He gets up slowly but with dignity. He glances at the empty seats of Vidura and Karna; he knows what they mean now. Bhishma slowly begins :

“Even before I start, I would like to know if there is any one here who opposes my nomination, or elevation to this honour.”

He sits down !....a pause.... uncomfortable moments..... At last a voice : “I oppose...not Bhishma’s choice; but the war itself.”



CHAPTER 4

YUYUTSU EXPELLED - BHISHMA'S VOW

The voice repeated : "I oppose the war. Bhishma's choice is redundant. The prince has misled the house by giving false, bloated and one-sided information. Elders gathered here will be appreciated if they make efforts to avoid the war, and not engage in it. Mine is an insider's voice and not that of the enemy. Since Bhishma threw the choice open for anyone to speak, here I am on my feet."

Everyone could now recognise that it was Yuyutsu - the only son of Dhritarashtra outside the royal circle of family, speaking. He was born of a Vaishya woman and so kept outside the hundred other sons, though affection, good treatment, upbringing and respect were not wanting in the palace. All respected him for his wisdom and sanity of views, though they did not like him for his 'head-long' attitude, which meant straight-forwardness in the saner views of others. Bhishma had great regard for this hundred-and-first son of the King and had often wished that he should have been the first-born to claim Prince-hood. Dhritarashtra listened with eagerness :

Bhishma : “Speak my boy, without fear or anxiety.”

Yuyutsu : “Sire ! Everyone expected you to be so chosen as the grand commander of the army. But since you threw the occasion open for different views, here I am, respecting your wise step. Sir, I submit this view : We have put the Pāndavas through unspeakable hardships, including attempts to murder, molestation and deprivation of their all, by dubious means. Gambling is no war and no dignified activity. At least now, we should honour our own word and return to them what they have been robbed off, all these thirteen years. Fairness of deal alone can avoid this wasteful war, in which millions of innocent lives are unnecessarily going to be lost, for the sake of one man’s false prestige and headstrong-ness. Sire, you are morally powerful and if you raise a strong voice against it, even at this late hour, I suppose we can avoid the disaster. Secondly, Sire, let me ask you, whether you would like to fight the Pandavas, in your heart of hearts? Ask your conscience and speak. Sire, Drona, are you ready to kill your dearest disciples ? Sires, Kripa and Ashvatthama, do you really approve of this evil act - fighting with the already too-much-oppressed ? Is it Dharma for you ? Thirdly let me put the record straight. Karna has not attended this meeting, not out of any other valuable engagement; how could there be one, in this town ? But because of his dislike and disrespect for the grand sire. He has vowed that he is not available on the war-field till you die or lie down ! Does this mean well for us ? Karna is under the curse of his own Guru -

all the world knows it too well to forget. How can we win, when the elders cannot put their hearts into this bloody war, and the braggart that has egged on the prince suffers from curses without remedies? Lord Krishna has been grossly underrated by the prince. This is a fatal miscalculation. Krishna is God, and he needs no weapons to eliminate evil. He can do so by his mere Sankalpa or will. He has no selfishness, or partiality. We have already attempted humiliating him once, in the Royal court, when he was here as our cousin's ambassador. Arjuna is the greatest hero on the earth at this moment, possessing Divine Weapons, without number. We have had tastes of defeat at his hands plentifully in the immediate past memory of our misadventures to humiliate them. Besides Arjuna, Bhima and Panchali have uttered severe words of vows to avenge the wrongs perpetrated on them. Does anyone think they would forget or forgive ? Did the Yuvaraja calculate or deliver a correct picture of these wronged heroes? Nakula and Sahadeva have conquered two quarters, one each in recent times ! Why does not the prince mention these plus points on our opposite side ? Let us not count the strength arithmetically. It is not army strength or strategy that is going to win ultimately. It is the backing of Dharma, of God alone, that counts. Shall I still count other minus points on our side ? Shikhandi - brother of Panchali - is Amba incarnate, with the vow of eliminating Bhishma; Dhrishtadyumna her other brother, is destined to kill Drona, as the oracle said at the time of his birth.

Arjuna has Karna as target in his well known vow. I shall let out the ultimate secret of defeat in this war, by a bombshell of a revelation - Karna has vowed that he will not kill the five Pandavas, particularly the four others than Arjuna!"¹

Duryodhana disbelieves it ! Others are stunned !! The followers of Karna vociferously declare that this is a blatant lie !!! Yuyutsu stood there holding his ground both literally and metaphorically expecting new challenges. He was watching Duryodhana all the while. No one knew how Yuyutsu came to possess this secret if he did ! Yuyutsu proceeds :

"If what I say is not true, let Karna be summoned here, and let him deny it in the name of truth. I shall provide proof then. Until then this oral denial by others, however much well orchestrated or fabricated is of no use. Let me proceed. So...that is why all our so-called war heroes are terribly afraid of touching the Pandavas, or even near them. Reason ? Dharma is on their side! Grandsire, Maharaja, Do not pay attention to this insane prince's words. If he is certain that Dharma is on his own side, let him answer where is the need for necromancy or occult power to be used! Our forces are weak, incomplete and unjustified in their cause. Time is still not too late to act to prevent this war. Let the Pandavas be summoned, and justice meted out to them."

¹ *Yudhishthiram cha Bhimam cha Yamou cha Arjunadrite |
Vadhyam vishahyam va samgrame na hanishyami te sute ||*

*Nirarjunah sakarna va sarjuna va hate mayi |
Na te jatu na shishyanti putrah pancha yashaswini ||*

(Udyoga 146-20)

Most in the assembly appreciated this balanced estimate and advice, full of self-restraint and reason. But nobody had the audacity to clap. So the speech went without a physical gesture of appreciation.

Bhishma was deeply impressed with the youth's performance and had tears in his eyes. Duryodhana's anger rose loudly, first because of the unwanted speech and secondly because of Bhishma's admiration for it, which had spoilt all the effects he had carefully built up with his concocted speech full of lies and exaggerations. Shakuni was highly impatient and unlike his usual self, he was about to rise to snub the youth. Duryodhana now rose to fulfil that hint.

"Grandsire ! We have crowned you as chief of the army; you have accepted this honour also. The divisional Commanders too have been appointed and honoured. Nobody had invited this headlong youth to oppose the war or permitted him so to speak. His words are totally irrelevant here. Those that like his words and views shall go out and chalk their course. Only others shall remain with us here."

Yuyutsu was satisfied that he had just done what his conscience dictated; and without regret walked out with his followers. He too was a warrior, as nobody knew, and had a considerable consignment of an army. Only Duryodhana had heard about it. Now he could see this miracle, as a foretaste of many more to happen, perhaps. He knew too that in the hour of his need, Yuyutsu and his army would not be helpful to him. Though he pretended that this walk-out or banishment was no loss for him, he could not avoid feeling that

this was a bad omen, right in the beginning, signifying what such omens did.

Dhritarashtra felt perturbed, as his conscience told him that what Yuyustu had said was true; but he wanted truth to be otherwise and pleasant on his side; that was not to be - to be wicked and yet be happy! Now Bhishma stood up to speak : -

Bhishma : “Oh, King, Prince, ministers, Divisional Commanders, well-wishers of the Kuru-race, there was nothing improper or out of the way in what young Yuyustu said. It is unfortunate that our Prince does not like it, even at this last moment. This war preparation, this crowning of me as the Army Chief - all this has not brought any satisfaction or peace to any sane headed person wishing well by us. I have never shunned duty if it is God-ordained and come to me naturally on its own. God is not the prime initiator of any actions. That initiative is in our hands only. God prompts us to proceed, and then punishes or rewards us individually and then counter-balances our efforts in the direction of the world's well-being as an after-act. Otherwise, sin and merit would accrue to Him only and land Him in blemishes of partiality or hard-heartedness. So do not say that this evil war is thrust on us by Him. Then, how has it all happened is what all of you know, all these years. I am not blaming myself or you at this stage. This final scene is complex, complicated and above our best understanding and is perhaps God-ordained in its present form. That is why attempts to avoid it by last minute appeals

and attempts to set right our thinking behind it, are repeatedly failing. We have done our best in one direction, but things are happening in the opposite direction only. No use discussing this any further. At present, you have all unanimously reposed your faith in me, by approving of my leadership, and I thank you for it. My thanks are due to the Prince and the King too. I am old, but strong, as the world knows. It is long since I participated in a war, true. But my daily bodily exercises, and practice of use of weapons has gone on without interruption, daily. This body is owned by the Kaurava race and is prepared to fall and spill its blood in its service, in its defence and in its glory. Except Sri Krishna, none in the opposite camp can stand before me. Arjuna, at the most, may come up to me and stand for a few seconds. But he cannot win over me. So I shall do my very best. You all know too that I can die only of my free-will and no one can force it on me. That is my father's boon. Now Yuyutsu asked me some valid questions and I have to answer them to clear confusions and state my position openly, straight and beyond misunderstandings. I also would like to make some oaths in the presence of the entire world as represented by this assembly. Let no one blame Bhishma here or here-after. I gave up the claims to kingdom for the sake of my father and vowed to remain celibate and beyond political ambitions and I have kept my vow, justifying my acquired name of 'Bhishma - the terrible', though my original God-given name is 'Deva Vrata'. I am under no one's obligation,

fear, favour or prejudices. I follow only my own conscience and am responsible only to myself and to God in my decisions. Now hear me:

- (1) I vowed to stand as Protector of the throne, not under any external compulsions, but as consequential to my vow, my promise to my father. *Let not the prince here misunderstand my loyalty to the throne as loyalty to him. The two are different.* The other branch of the family, The Pandavas, is related to me in the same equal way. It is good and providential that they are on the path of Truth, self-sacrifice and Goodness. But I am in no way responsible for their present sorrowful plight, in spite of their inborn goodness. That story is not relevant here. But you should all know my scope and limitations on taking sides in the war, after this knowledge. I have promised to fight on this side but the other side must also be treated equally. I am however caught up in a spiritual crisis in discharging my duties equally.² Though I can destroy all mankind, all beings of all the worlds in a single moment, it is not fair. This crisis and how I resolve it come under my own account, in God's book of Justice and not another's. So, after weighing all consequences, all causal factors, all personal accounts and spiritual considerations, impartially and equally, I have come to this unalterable decision:-

² *Yathaiva hi bhavanto me tathaiva mama Pandavah ||
Samyoddhavyam tavarthaya, yatha me samayah kritah ||*

- a) I shall not kill the Pandavas under any circumstances!³

But

- b) I shall eliminate no less than a ten thousand of their soldiers by fair fight everyday⁴
- 2) Now, hear my second vow and also for the sake of reconfirmation of what most of you know already. I shall not fight a woman, a man dressed as a woman, a man with a woman's name and so on. There is such a figure in the army of the opposite side. If you all take care to see that that figure does not appear before me, it is well for our army. Otherwise, I have to lay down my arms and be rendered unfunctional thereafter. My long use is thus in your hands, now and hereafter."

Pitamaha sat and wiped his sweating face.

Duryodhana felt like struck by lightning!

Bhishma went on and dropped another bombshell:

"If these conditions are not acceptable to the Prince, he is at liberty to offer my present position of leadership to Karna, as he is a close competitor of mine as instanced quite often"⁵

The audience was stunned and sat still, with no response. Duryodhana was nonplussed and shrank into himself in an endless reverie to check where his calculations had gone wrong:

³ *Na tvevotsadaniyo me Pandoh putrah, Janadhipa ||*

⁴ *Tasmat yodhan hanishyami prayogena ayutam sada |*

⁵ *Karno va yudhyatam purvam aham va Prithvipate |
Spar dhate hi sadatyartham Sutaputro maya rane ||*

What use is it if Pitamaha goes on killing all other warriors and spares the five Pandavas ? How will the war come to an end ? In what form ? Will the Pandavas keep quiet all the while, meanwhile ? He cannot be questioned about it in the open assembly, after his own praising of that old man, thus far. Karna is lost on his side, anyhow, for the length of time Bhishma is on the war-field! Is it true that Karna has, too, similarly vowed to spare the Pandavas ? Why would Yuyutsu tell a lie? What is this mystery about Karna ? Is it merely a blackmail tactics by Yuyutsu ? Is he a spy ? a double agent ? Why has Karna not told him this truth so far? Now Karna cannot be questioned, too, as the war nears: Now Bhishma's conditions must first be rendered null, at any cost - Shikhandi must be engaged elsewhere, throughout the war. Let others kill the Pandavas, under Bhishma's direction, at least, if he cannot himself do this. Strategies should so be worked out. Bhishma shall at least catch the five brothers, captive, if he cannot kill them. This will not violate his vow. Bhishma should not be allowed to do anything that will help the Pandavas indirectly. Or else, Bhishma must have meant to destroy the armies of the Pandavas and send them to the forest again ! Clever old man! We should be helped and his name must also not receive a cloud of doubt or blot! That must have been his idea. Let the future be undecided at this stage, success being neither in the hands of the old man, nor in the hands of Krishna; there is Shakuni to take care of its direction and goal. Bhishma shall be left to himself.

While this reverie went on, the King got up and the session ended, all dispersed without the actual date of the war being fixed. The camp of wicked 'three' -

Shakuni, Duryodhana and Dusshasana, went into a separate secret closet.



That night was impassable for the blind King and Vidura was not available for consoling words of confidence, as he had left for pilgrimage. The King could not grasp the real intention of Bhishma, the sire. He could have followed Vidura's way, easily. Did he mean helping the Pandavas while being within his own camp, as a secret agent ? What would be the consequences? There was no comfort in an unpredictable future, compared with which the irrevocable past was even more terrible! What to do ?

Dhritarashtra sent for Sanjaya through the door boy. Sanjaya, the trusted charioteer appeared and sat at the foot of the King:

Dhritarashtra : "Sanjaya, I am disturbed... how may the war end ?"

Sanjaya : " Maharaj! Why is your good self so much worried about its end, when it has not yet started? Why this agitation ?"

Dhritarashtra : "What will happen to my sons ? What omens do you see ? What is your interpretation of them ?"

Sanjaya : "Maharaj! War is no picnic, and all soldiers are going to be wiped out. Gandiva, the bow of Arjuna, seems to be the instrument of God in this catastrophe. What if Lord Krishna does not use the Discus ? Have you ever heard of three Divine Fires

assembling on one chariot ? Arjuna, Krishna and Gandiva ?”

Dhritarashtra : “ What can I do now ? What is my duty ?”

Sanjaya : “Stop the war, Sir, stop it! It is not yet too late.”

Dhritarashtra : “ That is ruled out; my son will not listen to me.”

Sanjaya : “Do not say that sir; an evil fellow must be controlled with all means open - even punishment or banishment; anything.⁶ Thirteen years ago what happened, Sir ? When Panchali was pawned? as a lifeless object or a dumb domesticated creature, Sir, you were happy like an unthoughtful, irresponsible fool of a youth! You wanted to know if your son had won her away, even before the dice was thrown! It is the fruits thereof you are suffering from, now.⁷

Dhritarashtra : “Did I behave so shamelessly ? I was not aware! Let it be. But you have seen the Pandavas’ war preparations, their enthusiasm, and their army strength directly. You are well aware of lapses and drawbacks on our side too. Tell me, tell me, in comparison and reasonable guess, how may this war end ?”

⁶ *Sarvopayaiah niyantavyah sanugah papapurushah |*

⁷ *Idam jitham, Idam labdham, iti shrutva parajitam |
Dyutakale, Maharaja ! smyase sma kumaravath ||*

“This wager is won over, so much has been obtained” said Shakuni and having heard this, O King, you smiled and felt happy like an idiot boy.”

Sanjaya : “Certainly Sir, I can answer you, here and now; but I am sure this will enrage you and destroy even the little peace you have. Besides, you may develop malice for me for speaking the truth. I shall therefore speak out my mind if Guru Vyasa and queen Gandhari are here with you, when you hear me. Please arrange to have them here.”

Dhritarashtra's anxiety increases; so he sits up straight from the bed and rings the bell near his pillow. A maidservant appears from behind a pillar and says: “Glory be to the King. What is my duty, Sir?” The King says loudly : “Call the queen here.” In a little while, she arrives by the side of the King in haste and confusion to know what emergency has taken place. Sanjaya does not lift up his bowed head. The King remembers Veda Vyasa, in rapt contemplation and the sage appears before him. The room gets illuminated in a moment by the electrifying personality of the Saint and all stand up in reverence. The King is helped and the queen too, to stand up. The sage clad in forest clothes and deer skin wears a water-gourd in one hand and wooden sandals on feet and shines like the Sun, or several lightnings bunched in one. Sanjaya touches his feet and prays for blessings. Gandhari says something to that effect orally and bows down, followed by Dhritarashtra. All sit down now.

Vyasa : “Son! Did you call me ? What is the matter?”

Dhritarashtra : “Sir, I put a question to Sanjaya and he said that he would answer it only in your presence. I had no alternative.”

Vyasa : (Smilingly), “What sort of a question is it to require me as a witness for Sanjaya to answer ?”

(Looks at Sanjaya) : Dhritarashtra repeats his question and Sanjaya’s conditions for the answer he knew.

Vyasa : “Is that all ? Why so much anxiety for so simple a question ? A wise man is one who thinks of pros and cons before launching on a course of any action. Political sagacity requires this presence of mind all the more. Instead, if one starts something rashly, mechanically, selfishly and without a thought of future consequences, he will come into deep troubles. How many times should I tell you this precious truth ? (Looks at Sanjaya.) Sanjaya, answer the King’s question freely without fear. Let me see what it is.”

Sanjaya : “Preceptor blessed ! My respects to you. This is all that I can visualise by your grace. Lord, my King, do not ask me such risky questions again and again. I see the entire world on one side of this war. Sri Krishna alone is seen on the other side; and he weighs heavier in the scales than that other side in the balance. Where there is Truth, observance of Cosmic laws and respect for it, where God-ordained limits and finite rules of cooperative living are not violated - only there stays this Govinda, Sri Krishna. That is to say that victory is on that side only where Krishna belongs; Krishna’s belonging is conditional thus on Truth, Laws, Morality and other Primordial Values. He is the Creator, Preserver and Reabsorber. Now.... He

wishes to destroy all the Kauravas and their camp. That is clear in my mind's eye. This is none of my subjective interpretation or wishful thinking - It is what I clearly see on my mind's horizon⁸. Do not be under the illusion that He does not handle the dice, this time. He is handling all the wheels of Time, the rotating Worlds, and the Cycles of Progress and Regress, by the sheer urge - Sankalpa - eternally. That is what Yogins say is Atmayoga - which means His Divine Nature, Divine Purpose and Divine Function.⁹ He applies relations proper to Death, Time and the accumulated Karma of individual beings and nature to roll them all in a direction, which only He can endow, to world-flow for his ultimate purposes, which are unquestionably in the direction of auspiciousness only. It is like a farmer who ploughs the fields, sows seeds, grows corn, cuts the grown yield and cooks grains to eat them. Each act and step leads to the next, leaving nothing disconnected or into meaninglessness. Nothing is negligible or ignoble in his view - even Death, War and Devastation. The most trivial of our acts are all mopped up into a grand complex of orderly, meaningful, interconnected links and so what we mourn as loss, violence, disaster and separation loses these human colours, when seen from His angle. It is strange and ironical that this work-a-day world views upon this Lord Krishna as

⁸ *Adharme niratam mudham dogdhumicchati te sutan |*

⁹ *Kalachakram jagacchakram yugacchakram cha Kesavah |
Atmayogena Bhagavan parivarthayate anisham ||*

one among our own mortals. Does he have to make efforts to destroy the world ? ¹⁰ I speak this truth here and now. He is the Lord of all, life and death, living and nonliving entities. But still He works like a farmer (or carpenter) with other accessories so that the ordinary, uninitiated folk are fooled about His Truth or Personality. Only those that surrender to him can tear through this veil of mystery (illusion or Maya) and see Him in His own identity.”

This complex reply involving symbolic language and metaphysical truth is hardly understood by Dhritarashtra. But one perplexity bites into his heart: If Krishna is God as Sanjaya is maintaining, how is it Bhishma does not know ? If he knows it, how can he fight against Krishna in the opposite camp ? Why can't he himself understand all that even Sanjaya is able to know ? This mystery haunts again and again the old King with no resolution.

Dhritarashtra : “Sanjaya, I do not understand why so much fear has filled your fragile heart to tell me this simple truth. It is not that I do not know this at all. But your conviction, beyond the wavering vagaries of the mind is not what I possess. How could you achieve this firmness of mind, and how do I not have it, is a mystery that eats into my

¹⁰ *Kalasya cha hi mrityosch jangama sthavarasya cha |
Ishate Bhagavan ekah satyametat bravimi te |
Ishannapi Mahayogi sarvasya jagato Harih |
Karmani arabhate kartum kinasha iva vardhanah |
Tena vanchayate lokan maya yogena Keshavah |
Ye tameva prapadyante na te muhyanti manavah |*

heart. Actually, I am the son of Vyasa. While you are only his disciple - how come you are more finely tuned of heart, than my poor self?"

Sanjaya : (With eyes filled with joyful tears), "Lord, you must neither be angry nor envious of me in this regard. I do not know deceptions; nor do I entertain malice for anyone; I am neither ambitious nor depressed because of non-possession of things that you have. That may be one qualification of mine for God's truth being firmly rooted in my heart. Vedantic wisdom may be easy of access but difficult to keep. If the mind is full of the holes of desires, hatred, lust, avarice, infatuation and ignorance, this wisdom gets leaked, leaving the mind empty then and there. All learning is of no use for a heart so deprived of strength and character. Dharma is not for show, but for practice. External, exhibitionism, ostentations cannot fool God. One requires the eye of the Veda, the true Sastra, too, in addition to uncorrupted devotion to know Krishna as God Janardana and not mere man.¹¹ You may have also studied the same scriptures. But learning must mature into wisdom of the Character of Intuition or Direction to vision - Sakshatkara - to yield Experience. This is what I have, due to my guru Vyasa's blessings. The rest of the inference, is for you to make."

Dhritarashtra : "Do you say that I have no devotion to Keshava ? Am I wicked and given to showy

¹¹ *Mayam na seve bhadram te na vritha dharmam achare |
Shuddha bhavam gato bhaktya sastrat vedmi janardanam ||*

practices ? Am I crooked of soul and ill-intentioned to others ? What are you suggesting ?”

Sanjaya : “Sir, these are questions for which answers must be searched in your own heart and by you alone ? How can I speak for you, Sir ? Bhagavan Vyasa is here before you and me; Decide before Him in your own true heart.”

Dhritarashtra is silent and exposed; he is heart broken; Gandhari is struck with fear at the suggestion of the elimination of all her sons in the war, as Sanjaya tells, and silently leaves the room.

Vyasa speaks : “My son, Dhritarashtra, what Sanjaya has said is all true. He has intuited God, no doubt, unlike you. God is available in experience only by pointed, undistracted devotion. This path is called Ekayana¹². A fellow discontented with God, given positions of power and wealth, can only get into the mouth of death. How can such fools lead others, being themselves blind ? Think well of these words of advice. If you want the impending disaster to be avoided, have a course to God, follow His guidance and with firm faith.”

Vyasa disappears. Sanjaya remains with the blind King, who keeps on weeping throughout the night.



¹² Esha ekayanah pantha ...

CHAPTER 5

DHRISHTADYUMNA AS PANDAVA CHIEF OF ARMY

When the royal mission of Sri Krishna failed, Yudhishtira lost all hopes of peace and honourable settlement. Sri Krishna had narrated in detail all the foolish words of Duryodhana and Duryodhana's attempts also to imprison him in vain :

Sri Krishna : "Yudhishtira, do not think I had gone there with any illusions that my advice would be heeded or that they would see reason. I just wanted to do my duty with that one last attempt, so that later on I should not be blamed for that lapse, otherwise on my part. Efforts must be made against catastrophes even when hopes wear out; that is wisdom.¹ But those fools stuck to their stupid untenable positions".

Krishna had narrated how he had set out on Kartika Revati star on that Dwadashi day of the brighter half of the month, in the morning; how he had halted at

¹ *Na mam bruyuh adharmishtah mudhah hi asuhrid janah |
Shakto navarayat Krishnah samrabdhan Kurupandavan ||*

"Let not, immoral men say, out of ignorance and unfriendliness, that Krishna, though able to have prevented the war, did not try at avoiding this fratricidal war between Kurus and The Pandavas".

Vrikasthala to receive a grand public reception where Vasistha, Narada, Vyasa, Parashara, Baka, Dalbhya and other sages had assembled to receive him; how in the next halt Duryodhana had, too, arranged for a reception with temptations to draw Sri Krishna on his side, and how he had refused that reception; how in the capital, arrangements for his stay had been made at Prince Dusshasana's palace; how he rejected not only that, but also honours at Bhishma's, Drona's and other camps, to stay with Vidura finally; how Vidura personally went to the blind King's palace to inform of His arrival and pleaded for success of the royal embassy; how at last, Vidura had tried to prevent his going to the court, as vicious attempts could be made to humiliate him, harm him and even eliminate him.

Yudhishtira : "What happened in the assembly ?"

Sri Krishna : "Bhishma put lots of pressure on Duryodhana and his father for an honourable settlement. Duryodhana refused to budge. Bhishma walked out in protest".

Yudhishtira : "Did they not attempt to harm you ?"

Sri Krishna : (smiling) "Why would they not try it? They did indeed! First he tried humiliation and had ordered that none should stand up to honour me as a mark of respect, when I entered there".

Yudhishtira : "Alas! was this in waiting for you, for our sake ?"

Sri Krishna : "But their attempt failed, I was indeed honoured, so".

Yudhishtira : “How was that possible ?”

Sri Krishna : “The King himself stood up to honour me; then all followed suit!²

Yudhishtira : “Then ?”

Sri Krishna : “The world’s mightiest rulers from far and near had all assembled there along with the wisest of sages and saints. Alas! They were not expected, and so there was no seating arrangement for any of them. Their coming, further infuriated Duryodhana, as their presence would add to the pressure I was exerting, and his foolishness published on large scale for all the world to know! But I refused to be seated unless all others were provided proper accommodating arrangements. Bhishma now took the initiative and fulfilled my stipulation. Then they brought for me a golden seat, usually described as “Sarvato Bhadra” , that is, ‘secure and firm in all respects’.

Yudhishtira : “Then ?”

Sri Krishna : “Then I went to be seated.... (Krishna remembers something and is filled with joyful tears!)

Yudhishtira : “Proceed Krishna; what followed then?”

Sri Krishna : “There was spread on it a white piece of wool, covered with soft deer-skin. Vidura, out of grand love for me - oh! Vidura!! - suddenly got

² *Sahaiva Drona Bhishmabhyam udatishthan mahayashah |
Utishtati Maharaje Dhritarashtre janeshware ||
Tani rajasahasrani samuttasthuh samantatah ||*

up, went to it, stopped me and checked up the seat by moving his palms over there, to see if it was free from poisonous insects, pricking material or any other harmful thing like an explosive or occult substance! ³ Nay, he himself sat on it, felt relieved, got up, seated me and then went back to his own seat!!”

Yudhishtira : “Prabhu, Krishna, that possibility was there, now that one sees the sequences, one by one! How wicked of them, mean of them! Tell me then, what happened”.

Sri Krishna : “I told them all that I had to tell - starting from the history of the Kuru race, its greatness, its Dharmic temperament and character, its precedents by royal examples, and the present predicament of its survival or total perishing being in the hands of the present rulers. I appealed for total cessation of hostilities, and the need for cooperation and collective efforts to strengthen the empire. I even drew the picture of how even Demons and Danavas and Asuras could not vanquish a united Kaurava force comprising the sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. Then I held another angle and argued that millions of innocent army men, horses and elephants shall not be killed because of the stubbornness of one man, and the world filled with widows and the world washed in the deluge of their hot tears. Lastly, I argued for your case and made a list of all your sufferings at their hands. I warned that the

³ *Viduro manipithe tu shuklaspardhyajinottare |
Samsprishan asanam Shoureh , mahamatirupavisat ||*

Cosmic laws of Dharma would assert themselves sooner than later as the Age of Kali was approaching and that it is better to bow down to that law, one and all.

Yudhishtira : “Did uncle Dhritarashtra listen patiently? What did he reply ?”

Sri Krishna : “He pretended fairness and feigned advice to his son. Bhishma and Drona too advised the arrogant Prince”.

Yudhishtira : “Then ?”

Sri Krishna : “What else then ? Duryodhana could only be angered by all this unwanted interference in his arrogant and foolish position, already taken, and vented that anger on me. He asked me : ‘Why do you all prescribe peace only for me ? Why don’t you tell Yudhishtira the same ? Can he also not avoid war on his side, by resorting to the forests?’ - he roared. He asserted that justice was on his side, and denied any violation of Dharma at all. He wagged, too much, his tail to boast that he was ready to face even Bhishma, Drona and Karna on the other side, of the Pandavas! His army, he claimed, was strong in good numbers and in sound morale to fight even Gods - he said ! Look at this strange argument! He says that when the nation was partitioned, he was too young and taken for granted. Nobody then consulted him, he says. Now he is mature to see that the act by Bhishma was immoral and that the entire empire belonged to him only, by right, as the eldest son of the eldest brother, namely his own father! So where is the question

of parting with the lands ? Even so much as a point of land that can be pricked with a needle cannot be given to the Pandavas; that is the just position, according to him. He gives to nothing, advice, learning, persuasion, warning, threat or legality!"

Yudhishthira : "There is nothing new in all this old story. Did nobody point out the weak links in this chain of worn-out arguments".

Sri Krishna : "Everything was done, but to no purpose".

Yudhishthira : "How did you end your word ?"

Sri Krishna : "I had to speak sharply and list their attempts to murder you, burn you, molest your wife, and humiliate you in the forest in various ways. 'Was all this Dharma ?', I roared and exposed his wicked intentions to all the assembled wise-men".

Yudhishthira : "That should have been of some consequence at least ?"

Sri Krishna : The consequence was so strong, that the pack of four wicked men feared that Dhritarashtra would announce parleys, summon you all and hand over your portion of the empire back to you! They wanted to arrange a counter plot and it required some time. They walked out of the assembly, and decided to arrest me, and keep me prisoner for life, so that this problem could never again be raked up by any one else. I knew this, and so I suggested a counter step, when they walked out".

Yudhishthira : "Counter step ? What could it be ?"

Sri Krishna : "I had suggested that Duryodhana be arrested and handed over to Yudhishtira : There was quite some possibility that everyone would urge that this was the most proper course to be taken to avoid the war. I wanted to add Karna, Shakuni and Dusshasana also into the list of rowdies to be arrested, so that peace could be made possible. See, Gandhari was ready for this! Would you believe ? She held her husband responsible for all that had happened and actually said so in that august assembly. Duryodhana had to appear, unwillingly there again, for the sake of his mother".

Yudhishtira : "Then ?"

Sri Krishna : "Meanwhile the wicked four had made their plot ready for action".

Yudhishtira : "What was it like ?"

Sri Krishna : "I told you; to arrest me and possibly to eliminate me! because I am behind you, I am behind this insistence on Dharma, and I am behind this war in a way on your side so that evil cannot have its way. Once I am off the scene they expect your voice to be silenced for all time, so that they have their way".

Yudhishtira : "How was this plot met by you ?"

Sri Krishna : "My friend Satyaki, scented it; he informed Kritavarma. This was brought to my notice - all by gesture, while I was still in the assembly and arguing your case. Do you remember that I had carried all my weapons in my chariot

with me, on this risky mission ?⁴ Satyaki was alert and ready for emergencies and was observing the direction of the talks and how it was now drifting. I wanted to finish the war then and there if there was even a mild attempt to start it”.

Yudhishtira : “I know, I know; proceed”.

Sri Krishna : “Interestingly Dhritarashtra also came to know of it somehow; if he was taken into their confidence, I cannot say. But he knew of it. Now all in the assembly began to blame the wicked ones! But they brought forth ropes to bind me. I appeared in my cosmic form to show I am never alone, that all is in me, and I am in all! Excepting Bhishma, Drona and Sanjaya, Vidura also, all else closed their eyes. Fools bound each other as each thought that the other was I! I left the assembly in their confusion. They were not blessed to see me in that Cosmic Light”.

Yudhishtira : “Did uncle see you in your World Form?”

Sri Krishna : “I blessed him with eyesight for that moment, so that he would have his last warning!”

Yudhishtira : “How lucky !”

Sri Krishna : “Do not say that; he did not change even after that ! I left, with no options, returned to this place.”

⁴ *Ratha aropyatam shankhah chakram cha gadaya saha |
Upasanagascha shaktyasch sarvapraharanani cha ||
Duryodhanascha dushtatma Karnasch saha Soubalah |
Na cha shatruh avajneyo durbalo pi baliyasa ||*

Yudhishtira : “How is my mother ? What is her message for us ?”

Sri Krishna : “Actually that was the main purpose of my visit there to see my aunt, your mother. She was very much worried as war was almost certain, and she too knew it. She cursed herself of her ill luck in being born, and her plight both in her family and the one to which she was given away in adoption ‘both of which did not give me comfort, in any way’; she said; she was still a child with dolls in her hand and other playthings when she was ‘gifted away’ to Kuntibhoja, her adopted father, with not a thought as to how the child would respond to the new circumstances. She was forsaken, she said, by her own parents; why should others care for her ? What use was it in blaming all others now ? Brother Yudhishtira, she remembered the oracle at the time of your birth, which had predicted that you were destined to conquer all the earth and destroy all evil fellows of your times, that your fame would reach even heavens, and that your brothers would remain invincible. She believes in Dharma, the Cosmic Law, firmly and its power to assert itself. Do you know her daily prayers ? ‘I pray to that all knowing God, the Embodiment of Dharma’ ‘I pray to that Krishna, the great. It is He as Dharma-incarnate, who protects all creatures on this earth.’⁵ This is her holy mantra daily, in moments of sighs and sorrows, in memories of haunting sufferings,”

⁵ ‘*Namo Dharmaya Vedhase*’ |
Krishnaya mahate nityam Dharmo dharayati prajah ||

The five brothers got lost in the memories of their mother, and her tearful fate throughout her life. The picture that Sri Krishna had drawn up was so realistic and objective that it shook them out of their slumber, so that each one of them wept like a child.

Sri Krishna : “Your mother says that it is not her widow-hood that she regrets so much as separation from her children so long. She quotes texts to the effect that if relations do not meet each other for twelve years, they have to perform annual ‘death ceremonies’ - shraddha; in her case, it is thirteen years since she was separated from you all. She curses herself for being dependent on someone, other than her children, however dear that person may be, dear to them all - Vidura.”⁶

Sri Krishna himself wept now silently. That made the brothers break down too.

Sri Krishna : “See the evil social practices in this country - innocent children are given away in adoption, injuring their sensitivities; in the name of ‘marriage of choice’ called svayamvara, teen aged girls are married to cruel elderly people of political ambitious, while these fellows are already married several times earlier; what would have been the fate Rukmini, had she not asked me for help? Had I refused to rescue her in time ? What would have happened to Panchali, if I had not arranged for that matsyayantra, meant for only you - Arjuna,

⁶ When the brothers undertook life in the forests as exiles what they had done was entrusting their mother to the care of Vidura. This continued in the thirteenth year , *incognito*, at Virat Nagar also.

in consultation with her father and brother? Should Bhishma, such a wise and elderly man, have abducted Amba, not for his own sake but for his brother's sake, and destroyed her life ? Here are barbaric people in power, in this country, who expose crowned queens in open assemblies naked, for sport and enjoyment ! They treat widows in ways worse than animals, or dust under their feet. They force them to suicide along with their dead husbands in their frustrations. Yudhishtira, you pawned away the common wife of all of you in open, shameful gamble ! What shall I speak of other un enlightened, half educated men in power? If all are set to follow your example, what shall happen to morality, order and social norms in this country ?”

Shri Krishna went on, and on, analysing the degenerate conditions of the times in all walks of life. After some time :

Yudhishtira : “What message did our mother send to us?”

Sri Krishna : “First she remembered Arjuna and said:

‘Child, remember the purpose as to why warrior women folk beget male children; your time to fulfill the desires of your mother and father has arrived.’ She wanted to convey this message to you through me. Then, to Yudhishtira, she had this word of caution:

‘Child Yudhishtira, you are too much on the side of Dharma, to be sinned against, more than sinning.

Excesses are bad even on the side of Dharma.' To Bhima, she said : 'Son, I am looking forward eagerly for the time when you are destined to show your might and mettle to the world. Do not waste the God-given opportunity.' To the twins, her message was this : 'It is better to enjoy the fruits of heroic actions earned by one's prowess, rather than live somehow or anyhow as a slave.' Now think over these words of hers."

Yudhishtira : "What did she mean by saying that I am too much on the side of Dharma ? I don't understand that at all! How can there be 'more' or 'less' in Dharma ?"

Sri Krishna : "Here are her additional words that may help you, in that; you should not feel hurt by those words⁷: 'King Sir, your mind works like that of one who mugs up Vedic verses, and whose brains are wasted only in memorising them rather than understanding the spirit behind them or putting them into concrete action, at appropriate, needed moments of life. Do not insist on Dharma exclusively like that idiot.'"

Yudhishtira is deeply pained by these sharp words, as they aptly sum up his character, horoscope as it were! Sri Krishna continues :

"Learning the Vedas does not mean ending up remembering the mantras; memory is necessary; but it is not an independent achievement ! Nothing is isolated in life. 'Dharma' is not bookish memory of codes only.

⁷ *Shrotriyasyeva te Rajan ! Mandakasya avipaschitah |
Anuvahakahata buddhih dharmamevaikameekshate ||*

It includes practice of the spirit of those injunctions. If the occasion for application slips, without activity being inspired by the spirit of Vedic injunction or their interpretations by Sastras, then Vedic learning is of no use for the learner. I suppose you now understand.”

Sri Krishna continued to fill the princes’ silence:

“You are a born-Kshatriya; should your mother be condemned to eat at the hands, other than those of her sons, rather than from your own ? Does not Rajadharma tell you anything in this regard ? It is not a day’s matter.! She has done this for thirteen full years - are you not touched ?⁸ Does not Rajadharma tell you anything here ? Is it not your duty to redeem your mother from this despicable situation ? Do you want your forefathers to sink down to Hell ? - This also your mother said in tear-filled situation.”

Again, Yudhishtira is silent in shame and confusion:

Sri Krishna : “Further, your mother told me to tell you these two stories : (1) In the days of yore, Kubera was pleased with a saintly king called Muchukunda and wanted to gift him all this earth for his rule. But the king refused this unearned kingdom and said he would like to rule over what he had made his own by toil, by prowess, and valour. Yudhishtira, did you understand ? Your mother did not like the idea of your begging even those five villages, you said you would be satisfied with, in stead of this war, or even one village. (2) The other story is like this : There was a queen called Vidula who lost

⁸ *Parapindamudikshe vai tvam sutva[mitranandana |
Yudhyasva rajadharmena ma nimajjeeh pitamahan ||*

her husband dying in battle against the Sindhu king. Her son ran away from the battle field ! The mother chided this fear-stricken son - saying that he was unfit to be her son or his father's. It is better⁹ to live like a flame or a spark for a moment rather than fume or emit smoke for a whole lifetime - she said. That stupid son called Sanjaya did not understand the spirit of her mother's words and mistook her as a hard-hearted woman and asked her : 'Are you going to be fulfilled or satisfied if I die on the battle field ? Do you not want me alive ?'. The mother retorted : 'Then I shall fight in the spirit of your father, even if you run away; I have vowed to eliminate the Saindhavas; go to hell.' These sharp words shaped the boy's future once for all; he eventually fought the Saindhavas, defeated them and reclaimed the lost territories, and did respect the memory of the father dead and pleased the living mother."

It was time for noon ablutions, and all got up.



In the afternoon, the Pandavas assembled again to decide urgent matters. Virata, Drupada, Shikhandi, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Yudhamanyu, Kekaya, Kasi Prince, Vardhakshemi, Uttamoujah, Chekitana, Vyaghradatta, Satyajit, Kshatradeva, Aja, Bhoja, Kshatradharma and numerous other warrior-heads had all assembled there. Upaplavya was a small village, on the outskirts of Virata's capital.

⁹ *Muhurtham jvalitam shreyah na cha dhumayitam chiram |*

A spy ran in a hurry from Hastinapura, and waited outside the conference hall. Sri Krishna went outside to gather the information, and learnt about Bhishma being crowned Army-Chief on the enemy's side. It was not unexpected, though shocking !

The news of Yuyutsu being expelled for his outspoken views, and Duryodhana's impatience also was revealed; Karna's abstention, the reason for it, the rift in the enemy cadres, Duryodhana's perplexities - all were revealed by the agent. He was duly honoured and rewarded for this news.

It was now consultation time for action. Yudhishtira was seated on a high throne, with Drupada and Virata on either of his sides and others distributed in proper seating arrangements. Abhimanyu kept guard at the door. Sri Krishna was seated somewhere at the end, without accepting a prominent place, to avoid conspicuousness. Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva stood as bodyguards.

Upanavasya was not suitable for army deployment and hence only a very small contingent was there symbolically to keep the dignity of the King-in-exile, Yudhishtira. Bhima and Arjuna were there, anyhow, as more than all the world's armies put together. Besides, the Pandavas did not like to reveal all their armies in one place, for strategic reasons. Actually, the different armies, from different directions had already marched in the direction of Kurukshetra, just a few days back.

Yudhishtira : "What now, Krishna ? What is our first job ?"

Sri Krishna : “First things first : It seems that your cousins have elected or selected Bhishma as the General of their combined armies. It is the converse side of this fact - Bhishma accepting this position - against you and me that strikes me with wonder! He knows what it means ! We should also know who belongs where, in the long run, after all professions of neutrality, peace, piety and what not! It seems that sacred terms have lost their meanings, and that is a sure sign of spiritual crisis of which this war is but an outer manifestation. So, on our side, the first equal duty is that of choosing a Commander-in-Chief. You can tell me your views or choices in this open-thinking session. It is not the post that is so much important as lasting victory. What is wanted is unity; strategically someone young, able, enthusiastic, blessed with divine weapons, Grace of God and Guru and possessing values is desirable. Speak your hearts.”

Sahadeva : “Lord Krishna, I propose king Virata; he is senior and heroic and we are in his debt too in our difficult times”.

Nakula : “No objection; but king Drupada, being younger and our senior relation may be given the chance, due, first.”

Arjuna : “Both are elders and deserve the honour richly. But age is a factor not to be forgotten. That goes against them in a strict calculative sense. My preference is for Dhrishtadyumna who combines the qualities of both these elders, and adds a few more. (1) He is no woman-born; (2) He possesses

weapons granted by the Lord of Fire and a coat of armour, unbreachable. (3) The oracle said that Drona is destined to die in his hands; all know of this. (4) He has the best of Drona in him as his disciple (5) This choice will further demoralise Drona and also Duryodhana. (6) He is known as Chitrayodhi.”

Bhima : “I second Arjuna’s views. Let elders feel free without any pressure.. Dhrishtadyumna shall be our leader, but due consultation with elders will go on as and when necessary, so it is as good as their brains, and the youthful arms of this youthful master will lead us to victory.”

Sri Krishna smiled ! Bhima continued :

Bhima : “Bhishma shall die at the hands of Shikhandi. Then Drona shall die at the hands of this Dhrishtadyumna. The rest will be managed, their turns coming up, gradually.”

Now all look at Sri Krishna for the final decision: Sri Krishna looks at Yudhishtira to suggest that it is upto him to okay, as he himself has no objection.

Yudhishtira : “If Sri Krishna approves, that will be our final collective decision.”

Sri Krishna : “What Bhima has said seems to be agreeable both for its rationality and practicality. I feel that this one general of our united army will last till the end, whatever may be the case with our opposite camp. Yudhishtira, now you have the privilege to honour him formally and offer him this position. Let conches blow and drums beat.”

A decorated elephant brought a mighty flower garland and put it round Dhrishtadyumna's neck, after Dhrishtadyumna was anointed, crowned and royal weapons were offered to him on golden plates, along with jewels, shawls and gems.

Draupadi wept in joy to see signs of her oath-fulfillment nearing slowly.

A royal servant brought a strange news and waited to break it open.

Bhima went aside, gathered it and was silent, standing where he stood for long.

Yudhishtira : "What is it ?"

Bhima : "Are we in need of more army contingents?"

Arjuna : "Who says so ? Who could be that belated fool to have sent such a message, if that is it ?"

Servant : "Maharaja Rukmi awaits audience."



CHAPTER 6

THE REJECTION OF RUKMI

Nobody had expected such strange news or happening. The most surprised one was Sri Krishna ! Why did this one, of all fellows, come here, particularly at this odd time? Who had sent for him ? What was the idea ? Was it the intention of rapprochement with Sri Krishna, for his sins of the past, in the episode of Rukmini's marriage ? Then why did he not turn up when his mentor Jarasandha was slain, or his leader Shishupala died that miserable death at Sri Krishna's hands, at the end of Rajasuya ? Why now, all of a sudden ? Was he alone or with someone else in this new move ? Was he self-prompted or acting as the agent of someone inimical?

Bhima had gathered an additional piece of information that there was more than one division of well-equipped army with this fellow, which was tempting to have by all expectations. Not that Bhima looked at it that way, or was in need for additional reinforcement. There were several question marks here now.

The past background was unforgettable : Jarasandha was growing mighty and ambitious of ruling over all the Bharatha Varsha. He was collecting, recruiting faithful followers from all over the country and the

suspects in loyalty and rivals were rotting in his prisons. Some stupid flatterer, in the guise of an astrologer, had suggested the very thing he had politically intended, from a pseudo-astrological angle to predict that if he could cut off and offer one hundred heads of duly crowned princes to Kala Bhairava (the most terrible form of Rudra) he would one day rule over the whole world. Jarasandha had believed it, like all credulous politicians, and had collected some eighty-six of those hapless rulers, by kidnapping them. Shishupala was a trusted lieutenant of his in this; the required number fell short by just fourteen when Jarasandha died at Bhima's hands, and he was not alive to punish that astrologer !

Rukmi was another ambitious upcoming rowdy/ politician in the pay rolls of Shishupala, before both of them died. The old father Bhishmaka was helpless in the hands of his wicked, ambitious sons. Rukmi had planned to give away his handsome sister, Rukmini, to Shishupala in marriage to earn his permanent favours. But the young girl had ably upset his applecart, by writing a bold love letter to Sri Krishna, whom she had loved, without having seen him, for his great qualities, his handsomeness and other loveable traits. That letter clicked; Sri Krishna arrived at the wedding, took away Rukmini by force, as per her own suggestions in that letter ! Shishupala, the scapegoat was enraged, to be comforted by Jarasandha, as copartners in humiliation at Sri Krishna's hands. The most frustrated man was Rukmi, who had in haste vowed not to return to his capital, Kundinapura, unless Krishna was killed and Rukmini brought back. Poor soul ! In addition to a

grand defeat, he was spared of life on the behest of Rukmini and left on the battleground alone ! He had to build a new capital at Bhojakata, after his father's demise to rule from there till now.

He was ignored by most military men and mighty rulers till now, after that ignominious defeat. Now he wanted to regain that lost honour by joining the side of the Pandavas, without earning the love or forgiveness of Sri Krishna, by the mere tempting size of his army.

Rukmi, meanwhile, had acquired specialisation in archery at the hands of the Kimpurusha ruler around the Gandamadhana hill range and had acquired a divine bow called Mahendra, which was considered the equal of Gandiva of Arjuna, and of Sharnga of Vishnu. A warrior or royal sage by name Druma had vouched it to him.

Rukmi was sure of a royal reception and timely acceptance of his offer, by the 'deficient' army of the Pandavas, as he had heard. But Sri Krishna knew that Rukmi was a mere opportunist, and his army was no more than mercenary, as he was bargaining for the lost reputation.

But Rukmi made a wrong approach, in humiliating words of appeal to Yudhishthira, as he lacked in manners or political etiquette. Why should believers in brutal strength care for niceties of values in life ? Rukmi had said this :

"Yudhishthira ! I have heard of your bad plight, and the inability to gather good strength of armies on your side. I have also come to know of your anxiety,

your fear of results being not in your favour, and so you are in need of good, strong support. Here I am with one full division at my back. It is at your disposal. I have also known that your own blood relations, and those earlier helped by you, have all forsaken you at this moment of your need. If you want, take my extended hand of support.”

Yudhishtira was stung to hear words like ‘fear’, ‘anxiety’, ‘inability’ and the very tone of offer upset him. Arjuna could gather this from the expression on the face of Yudhishtira and so tackled Rukmi :

Arjuna : “Prince, thanks for your word of support. But who told you that we are afraid, anxious of defeat?”

Rukmi : “Do I not have so much common sense, Arjuna? Is it ordinary fight to confront Bhishma or Drona ? Even if you shed notions of ‘Grandsire’ and ‘Grandmaster’, to wake up yourself from complexes that are sure to haunt you, are they ordinary soldiers ? Who will not be fear-struck or be anxious ? Name anyone on the enemy side and command me to engage him to death; I shall abide by your orders. Even with mass, general army-men, I am ready to fight.”

Arjuna : “Suppose I name Bhishma or Drona, cannot this be too much for you, if this is beyond our capacity as you imagine ? Where and when have you fought them or such other soldiers ?”

Rukmi : “What can I do if such opportunities have not come to me so far ? Is it my fault ?

Virata, Drupada, Dhrishtadyumna and others were listening to this entertaining chat, with suppressed smiles and laughter with some difficulty.

Arjuna : "Friend, opportunities do not come often, or whenever we want. When they come of their own, if one lets them slip or fails to use them for the better, you cannot blame fighting fate. When Jarasandha and Shishupala were alive, the whole world bristled with opportunities; only a Krishna fought them all. Now Sri Krishna is with us, and Jarasandha and Shishupala are thrown into oblivion. I am not wounding your feelings by reminding you of any past unpleasant circumstances, I hope ! But since you forgot of lost opportunities, I had to remember one for my own reference. Secondly, you are misinformed about us; I feel. I am the scion of Kuru race, son of Pandu and Kunti, not knowing fear all these years of my life. You said Drona ! Yes, Drona knows me as both disciple and as an adversary. Bhishma too. Ask them of the encounter on the outskirts of Virata Nagar. Gandiva knows no fear. When I offered Khandava to Fire and fought with Indra, whose army was with me ? When these very wretched fellows wanted to humiliate us in the guise of Ghosha Yatra, which turned out to be a fight between me and a whole army of Gandharvas, whose army supported me ? Have you heard of Kalakeyas, Nivatakavachas and other demons ? I destroyed them whole and soul! I fought with Bhagavan Shankara alone. Are you satisfied ? I am not boasting but simply bringing some facts that you may not know, or believe as

mere hearsay. Gods Rudra, Kubera, Yama, Agni have all blessed me with numerous powerful missiles, that are unique. Besides, the greatest hero of the age is with me - Lord Krishna. His very presence is enough strength for all of us. Do not mention again 'fear or anxiety' on our side."

Rukmi : (Being taken aback by this unexpected retort), "No, no, my intention was not to frighten you. I had in mind Shalya your maternal uncle, who betrayed you at this hour to join your enemies. Would not this, or a similar thing frighten anyone?"

Arjuna : (With remarkable self control), "Look, Rukmi, I have neither the need nor the patience nor the leisure to analyse the things with you. Strategies, diplomatic moves, selfish motives and sudden vicissitudes are common in army matters. What ambitions prompted Shalya to switch over expected loyalties, only God knows, and would settle. That is not on our account. Lastly, I would like to emphasize our firm stand : it is not the quantity or numbers that matter for a win. It is Dharma, Justice and Truth that count. These are all on our side. That is enough. You have a test if you want to conduct one. You suggested to me that I would hesitate to lift up arms against Bhishma and Drona. Now you ask those heroes whether they are happy to lift up arms against us ! You will find the answer and know who is morally stronger and better prepared."

Rukmi : "We are drifting on unwanted issues. Let them be. Do you want my help or stick to your 'wisdom' "

of losing a whole division of army, in these prattles?"

Arjuna : "Prattling is given to cowards with 'no records' in history; 'wisdom' is not acquiring or losing divisions of armies ; wisdom is silent action, self confidence and truly just moves; Wisdom is not waste of words over what is past; wisdom is plan for the future and plunge into it with an adventurous heart having faith in God and confidence in oneself. Thank you".

Rukmi : "Are you aware of the adverse consequences if I join your enemies, with this same additional one division ?"

Arjuna : "You are free to do what you want. Blackmail will not work in this camp. We will admit here anyone who loves Krishna, loves Dharma and serves as a matter of self-duty to righteousness. On these terms, even you are welcome - not on your supposition that we are fear-stricken and are in need of all sorts of people and their numbers to join us. Each soldier on this side from commander to commoner possesses that faith, and is united with all of us. Opportunists have never mattered to us. What if a Shalya switches sides ? Tempt Dhrishtaketu or Sahadeva and see for yourself".

Rukmi : "Are you telling me that I am not your friend and am but an opportunist ?"

Arjuna : "I am not telling you anything. I am only telling you of the signs of good friendship to be proven".

Rukmi : “Do you think I came here as a candidate for faith-test ?”

Arjuna : “Friend, do not be offended. It is not good politics to join hands with unexamined, untrusted friends, all of a sudden. You might have done the same in my position. Think and see reason”.

Rukmi : “You are insulting me with no grounds for suspicion and no reasons for examination”.

Arjuna : “Shall I tell you of some grounds and reasons?”

Rukmi : “Let me see if they are there and genuine?”

Arjuna : “Your account with Krishna of some thirteen years of a past experience is one thing and should have come to an end, when Jarasandha died and Shishupala had to be eliminated for offences to us also in that way. And our account is slightly is different. When have you shown any interest in us, in all our stress and strain ? Did you meet us even once to comfort us, to support us, and show your faith as abiding in us ? You never once showed sympathy for us when that was needed, nor apathy for Adharma when it happened on world-scale so as to bring us to this precipitate situation! So how do we trust you, if you come to our aid and all of a sudden, without smoothening your relation with our Chief Guide - Sri Krishna ?”

Rukmi had no answer! He was angered by Arjuna's frequent references to his enemy, Krishna, and his being insulted openly in the presence of that sworn enemy. Wielding his mace he walked out in a huff, shouting:

“Arjuna, you will have to pay very dearly for this arrogance and this act of insult to one who came to help”.

Yudhishtira follows him to ask of him forgiveness for any excesses. Bhima gets up to pull back his brother, which Krishna prevents by showing his disapproval on his face. Yudhishtira returns and then the talk is resumed:

Yudhishtira : “Brothers, Why did Rukmi appear so suddenly here, to our consternation ? Who might have prompted him ? What can explain this erratic, inconsistent behaviour on his part ?”

Sri Krishna : “Nobody prompts eccentrics! It is a self-prompted orientation of mind, to seek importance where there is none available. There is very little difference between opportunists and mentally imbalanced ones. Let him go. How he goes away should not matter to us”.

Virata, Drupada and other elders approve of this disposal of Rukmi in the words Arjuna used.

Dhrishtadyumna : “Krishna! May I ask you a question?”

Sri Krishna : “A Commander-in-Chief needs no such preamble. He must command over all even in minor matters”.

Dhrishtadyumna : “Why have I been chosen for the honour in preference to my father and King Virata, who are not after all older than Bhishma or Drona?”

Sri Krishna : “You are wrong. The people here, elders, have put this mantle on you. I am only a silent witness, happy at this choice.”

Drupada : “My son, your being chosen is an honour for all of us. Do not think that it happened by chance, all of a sudden. A lot of thinking has gone into it in the days preceding it.”

All rise up, embrace the hero turn by turn, and offer their respects in the conventional style.

Yudhishthira : “Krishna, whoever may be the commander or follower, we have all absolute faith in you. You are the stage-manager and the inspiration filling breath into each of the lives of this army. Please do not disown that responsibility, even if lapses happen on our side, in confusing situations into which the war may throw us.”

Panchali watches this scene from a distance, in tears and conveys her silent joining in this prayer of her husband. Her brothers and father console her. Even her five sons and Abhimanyu console her.



Rukmi is now in Hastinavati along with his huge army, and is bargaining with Duryodhana, for being included in his camp. Duryodhana is overjoyed, at first, to receive this unexpected help from this unexpected quarter. What an army ! And what time of coincidence!! But, in the next instance, doubts arise as to what Rukmi was doing all these days without joining his camp; or what other loyalties he must have had. That Rukmi was Krishna's brother-in-law, waiting with patience for his time of revenge for the earlier defeat, was an additional reason for including him into his fold. But doubts became stronger and he could not decide alone. Besides,

that power was now vested in Bhishma, the choice to include or exclude fresh forces. So he goes to Bhishma for consultation.

Duryodhana : “Grandsire ! What shall we do ? Include him and give him a chance or keep him away and lose our chance ?”

Bhishma : “Would you want him to strengthen me or supervise over me as your spy?”

Duryodhana : “You seem to be angry with me, Sir !”

Bhishma : “After crowning me as Commander of the army, where is the need for adding contingent after contingent ? If you can decide these things, relieve me of my responsibility.”

Duryodhana : “I am not deciding anything. I just brought it to your notice, that is all. Are you under the impression that I summoned this Rukmi to come here with his army, Sir ?”

Bhishma : “Who cares about these irrelevant details now? Before coming to me, should you not examine his loyalties, or this late-hour offer ? We are already a divided army, Karna being out, because of me ! Do you want more divisions on this account ? Our opponents would be laughing at us and enjoying our plight. Shalya is a hater of Karna, like Ashvatthama! Kritavarma comes from Yadavas, because of a tactical move by Krishna. Even God cannot resolve the existing rivalries and incongruities. Now this fellow, too. If you are still mad after swelling your numbers, search for all of them at once, invite them, and hug them to your bosom.”

Duryodhana : “Grandsire, you are unnecessarily getting heated up and irritated, making too many presumptions. My bringing this matter before you has one weighty consideration - he was a friend of Shishupala and therefore an opponent of Krishna, and so his joining would be with a reason that could strengthen our side; that is all.”

Bhishma : “In that case, bring all Krishna - haters together and assemble them at once, and see if hatred can unite and bring victory to you. You, bloody fool! Is hate, ever, a strong motive to win? Has anyone achieved it on this condition ? Even Karna is not a Krishna - hater, for that matter, in the last analysis ! Do you think I am such a one? Or Drona ? It is your hatred for Krishna, the Pandavas, and whoever else stands for Dharma, that has brought me and the likes of me to this crisis of fighting on your side. Do you think, it is out of love for you or your cause I am here ? Do not irritate me further. Or else banish me and fight for yourself.”

Duryodhana : “Sir, forgive me if I have erred. To the best of my knowledge, I have not offended you to cause this needless irritation. Let us leave this matter here. I shall not repeat this type consultation with you again.”

Bhishma is not pleased at all. Bhishma is wondering how he could win the war with such fickle-minded ‘leaders’.

Meanwhile the head of spies comes, stands at a distance and pays the usual respects by saying “Hail to the Prince.”

Duryodhana : "Well, hereafter you will have to report matters, not just once or twice daily, but on moment-to-moment basis, depending on the serious nature of matters. To our commander-in-chief here also. Now what brings you so urgently ?"

Spy : "Sir, this Rukmi Prince has already visited the Pandava camp, and has been rejected there already. So he is here ! What trick he is up to is not yet clear."

Duryodhana is enraged and feels fooled for once! He looks at Bhishma, and notes the old man's scorn turning into a derisive smile, full of dismay.

Duryodhana : "Did you mean that he is here doing spying for our enemy ?"

Spy : "No, no, Sir. He has gone there, first, with a similar offer or help and has been rejected. So he is here. That is all."

Duryodhana : "Did you find out why the Pandavas rejected him, though short of army - strength ?"

Spy : "That is not clear Sir !"

Duryodhana : "That negative language is not befitting a spy like you. Go and collect all information."

He sends him away with due presentations.



In the afternoon, after Rukmi is refreshed from tiresomeness, due to long marches of the army, Duryodhana summons him, and begins talking :

Duryodhana : “Friend, with such a huge army, should you not have come earlier ?.

Rukmi : “That is not a relevant matter for discussion now. We shall keep it for a different occasion. Tell me, when had Shalya helped you ever before ? Did you ask him, this same question, and then, when he came to you ?”

Duryodhana : “Shalya is another issue. Any kind of alliance is possible in politics.”

Rukmi : “Do I not come under similar considerations?”

Duryodhana : “At least I knew Shalya before. But you! I did not know you before at all, in this direct way.”

Rukmi : “What do you mean, not knowing me ? Come, come !”

Duryodhana : “Tell me why you visited our enemy’s camp first ?”

Rukmi : “Who told you so ?”

Duryodhana : “A king must need to know such things. Nothing wrong !”

Rukmi : (feeling the sting) “Tell me whether you need my help or no. Where I go to, or come from is not relevant here, as I told you.”

Duryodhana : “Friend, do you not know that I am known for pride and prestige ? Even small matters irritate me. That is my nature. I get offended at the least smell of affront. People should not say that I have accepted what is rejected elsewhere. War is like marriage, alliances are like first choices; a

rejected girl is not what a martial prince will accept, however handsome she may be, however good her family background may be and however much blemishless she may be otherwise. Tell me, if you were in my situation, and I had come to you with a similar offer, would you have accepted me ? You made a mistake by going there first. I would certainly have entertained you had you come here first, out of love for me or for my cause."

Rukmi : "To hell with your causes ! You are a proper fool to reject this valuable help, coming to you unasked for. You will regret and repent for this costly mistake, later on. You are not wise."

Duryodhana : "You must have said similar things to Yudhishtira !"

Rukmi walks away in a huff.

Duryodhana is irritated with both these unwanted encounters - with the grandsire and with this eccentric guest. Bhishma's words torment him deeply- the army's disunited condition as the old man analysed; his own helplessness in being outside Duryodhana's camp, and still his talk of peace and compromise, showing him as an unwilling hero; and now this arrogant fellow, whom even the enemy could reject! Duryodhana envies Yudhishtira's self-confidence; Without knowing how to control himself, he sends for Shakuni.



CHAPTER 7

ULUKA'S EMBASSY

Duryodhana : “Uncle, somehow all is not well, says my mind: Rukmi had come to join us with one full division of his army.”

Shakuni : “Did you say, one division ? Ah! What did you do ?”

Duryodhana : “I had to reject him, though! What a pity ? Bhishma did not want him. He had already been rejected by the Pandavas, I learnt. I had to say on my own, ‘no’ to his request, as this was a matter of my prestige. A rejected fellow, joining me would have made me a laughing stock, anyhow. I did not know his intention or loyalties either. Bhishma uses every occasion to snub me. This time he made much of the notorious disunity of our army, blamed Karna, Shalya and others as usual. See, he will not eliminate the Pandavas. We had to lose Karna, for all the time the old man holds sway on the battlefield. We have thus lost two of our stalwarts already. Why the enemies refused the help of Rukmi is also a mystery.”

Shakuni : “Dear nephew, let us forget these old stories and feuds. They will not do any good to us now.

We require absolute presence of mind and should not be lost in inconsequential matters of the past. Rukmi is arrogant. He is also inexperienced in war. His only experience is defeat at the hands of Krishna, which has neither a before, nor an after. That is where he stands. His huge army does no good by dying on either side, as it stands now! When the head of the army himself is a headless fellow, so to say, what are we to do with his followers ? But one thing is a mystery - why our enemy rejected him, though short of numbers ? What could be the depth of their self-confidence? Or was this also part of their strategy ? What is the meaning of it ? I do not understand.”

Duryodhana : “I thought as much too, myself. That mischief-maker, magician Krishna has something up his sleeve. That is certain. When and where his strategies unravel is what none can understand or predict. What a hundred or thousand divisions of army cannot achieve, he can, with one masterstroke of a mysterious plan! - A mere strategy!! It is this that the Pandavas have trusted and are carefree. See, not one of them has any army worth calling so! Drupada and Virata are too old though with sizeable armies. What other ‘force’, or strength have these wretched fellows to trust as instruments of victory? I fail to understand. I doubt my own moves also now.”

Shakuni : “Nephew! There is nothing new in this. Our suspicions are well grounded and have past backgrounds. We cannot do anything to force him

out of the war-field. You should have preferred him to his army to join us. That was a strategic mistake, I feel now. No use discussing it now. Our message through Sanjaya was intended to bear some results. Our expectations failed, there too. Sanjaya is after all a Pandava - admirer. We did not keep a check to hear whether our message was delivered there without distortions; or was effectively conveyed also. There is no witness from the other side. What a message by the King! How cunningly worded!! But it boomeranged. It was sure to hit Yudhishtira and send him back to the forests. But it produced an opposite effect."

Duryodhana : "Uncle! Why not take the chance of sending another message and see what it can do? At least let it destroy our enemy's unity and self-confidence, if not produce anything positively for us. If Yudhishtira decides to retire into the forests out of detachment and remorse, Krishna will be helpless then. Why not try ?"

Shakuni : "There is scope for that. But I feel our message may not work much, in this hour of their full preparedness for war. Even if Yudhishtira wants to back out, others will not allow him to opt out, but force him to the collective decision already made. That fellow from Dwaraka has vowed to discharge Panchali's debts with compound interests, and he will push all of them into this final gamble of war, at any cost, I think. But let us make our final effort too."

Duryodhana : "Uncle! Who will be the messenger this

time ? Vidura has gone away, into the forests, and Sanjaya has failed once ?”

Shakuni : “Do not worry. My son Uluka is there; let me prepare him.”

Shakuni walks away. Duryodhana rises too to meet Bhishma to decide the day for the army to march. Shakuni calls his son and tells him in detail the essentials of a lengthy message in the name of the King, makes him repeat it to his satisfaction. Then he goes to the King to inform him about it.



Uluka was produced before Yudhishtira by the guards. The others there on the occasion were Dhrishtadyumna, Sri Krishna, Arjuna and the twins. All were eager to know the contents of this embassy, crucial before the war started, as there could be a radical shift in the other camp, looking to its unexpectedness, and voluntary nature.

Uluka : “Sir! I am submitting the words of the King, as they were put in my mouth, without mixing words by me on my behalf or anyone else’s behalf.”

Yudhishtira : “Proceed.”

Uluka : “King Yudhishtira, you and your brothers have taken vows and oaths that you will not be able to fulfill in all your lifetimes. Try if you want, and see. You have trusted that Krishna in vain, alas! Oh King, it is all right you have pretended to follow Dharma all these years. Now, how will you be able to slip out of that cover to wage an open Adharmic war ? Have you not lost all, in the gamble, on your

own ? Why try to redeem it now, against your own earlier decision ? This war is not going to be a child's play. Many millions of people will die for your sake. For, the war is not of my choosing. It is your imposition on a nation that loves peace. Why have you kept quiet all these thirteen years, after you gambled away your all, if really you wanted a war ? You could as well have waged it then itself ? Do not mislead the world about your real, unjust, intentions and pretensions. You know the fable of a cat that vowed not to eat mice publicly, but went on eating them privately, leading a hypocritical life ? Prahlada told this story to uphold the necessity of an integrated life. See your incongruities and inconsistencies, your infirmness of mind. Now you want war; just a few days ago, you wanted just five villages to be contented with, in preference to war ! Earlier still, you wanted nothing; so you gambled away everything, your life too - and went as a recluse into the forests ! Tell me one thing consistently - what do you really want? Are you sure, you are not going to gamble away, even if you win the war, your ill-gotten empire? If you had justice on your side, would you have begged for five villages through that cunning Krishna, in that shameful episode of an embassy? I am prepared for peace even now, on condition that you agree to retire to the forests. Oh Krishna, the cunning sorcerer ? You bewitched us all by stealing our attention away unto a 'hallucination', which you claim as your World-Form! Let us see, if you can do this magical act again in the war-

field ! Tricks do not work often, as they trick the trickster himself. Before my solemn and majestic army, you cannot waft your magic wand ! I can certainly produce more lasting illusions than you can, if I choose. Your real originality lies in spreading this type of long - distance popularity on unfounded acts of heroism into the minds of over-credulous, gullible people and not rational minded people like me. Those five eunuchs that follow you are fools to be disillusioned at last ! Tell that overeating bull of an overbuilt body with less than a line of mustache¹ - Bhima - that he is free to attend an open combat with Duryodhana, on a day of his choice. Ask him, who was it that forced him to be a cook at Virata Nagar, if not Duryodhana? What happened to his oath of breaking the thighs of his wife's molester ? Let him kill all the brothers of Duryodhana, now, if he has the daring. Your expertise is in cooking, eating and such other slavish activities. It is proven. Let the twins, and that Eunuch who danced for a year in the harem of Virata, remember how we had the guts to expose naked their wife, in their own presence. See, who is strong ! Oh, Shikhandi, touch Bhishma, if you can, or Drona, you Dhrishtadyumna ! Arjuna, much is made of that supposed oracle at the time of your birth; prove the truth of it now, if you can. How will the war end, unless you win the mightiest of heroes on our side ? What does your Gandiva do hereafter, that it has not achieved so far ? What

¹ The Sanskrit name for such a person is Toobaraka.

can the mace of Bhima do either, for that matter? When you were defeated in that gamble, more than a dozen years ago, I compared you to 'oil-seeds without oil' !² Have I not proved you to be so, so far ? Was it not my father's thoughtless boon that returned to you your lost kingdom and all else, at the end of the First Innings ? Did you win it by any prowess, or could you retain it out of your resolve ? You gambled them all away - Why ? Because you were impotent, and incapable of rule! Arjuna, a woman's dress, long hair, and dance as a profession befit you lots more than the costumes of a worthy soldier on the battlefield. Go, Go. A thousand Krishnas and a hundred Arjunas cannot keep your armies solid now, without melting away like dew at sunrise. Run now for your lives, away from the battlefield. This is your life's chance."

The Pandavas rose with rage, turning red like fire, on hearing this abusive, undignified message, unconcealed in all its vulgarity. They took up their arms and rushed at Uluka, but Krishna prevented them from any rash attack on the messenger. Krishna pointed out that expectations were falsified, as there was no message at all here, and it reflected the mean mentality and abusive nature of the man who had sent it. The attempt was to have cheap vulgar satisfaction. So this was no place or time for action on the mere messenger, and they should await a dignified opportunity to reply on

² *Shandhatila in Sanskrit meaning Gingely oil - seed, with no content, a vulgar comparison for an eunuch or an impotent man, good to look at but incapable of reproductivity.*

the war-field in terms of positive action and proof for all false accusations. Still, Bhima could not be contained. He replied to the messenger from Hastinapura :

“You bloody owl of a man, with the name of an ominous bird! Your name and action match each other. Your father’s too. Tell my this reply to your master on whose alms you and your father live. We tolerated all your humiliations and numerous torturous situations you created for us, only because of our respect for Yudhishthira our eldest brother, and his preventive persuasion from exhibiting tempers then and there. Otherwise, we would have finished you all in one stroke, and not because of lack of prowess or cowardice. You will see proof of this shortly. We sent Krishna on embassy out of sympathy for you, only. Even compromises were made, keeping our demands to a minimum of five villages only, for your own sake. Our oaths have been in waiting, itching us to action and fulfillment, shortly. Even Yama, the God of death or Kubera, the lord of Wealth or Rudra, the death’s doorkeeper will not save you all hereafter. We shall first swallow Bhishma, your main support, and then Drona and others one by one and later on , all of you.”

Arjuna : “You fool! How dare you bring us this foul message of one who does not know war on the battlefield ? War is neither marital bed nor comforts of a wife! I shall reply with my bow and arrows only on the war-field. Tell your master - you are dragging in neutral personalities like Bhishma and Drona, needlessly here! Alas! They shall die for your ignoble acts. You are under the illusion that

I shall spare Bhishma and Drona! You will see how your expectations are falsified. Has that old sire vowed to kill tens of thousands of our soldiers, of the armies of Srinjaya, Shalva, Kekaya and Panchalas? Let him eat his words before I prove him untrue to his oaths. You bloody blind old King! You will learn detachment or its meaning, only after all, whom you trust or love, are no more, it seems! What a pity ? For whose sake will you live thereafter ? Do you want to live till that day when the truth of what I say now, dawns on you ?”

Krishna : “You royal servant! Tell your master Duryodhana, that it is better for him to live like a man and behave like a civilized man first, *Purushobhava*. Prove then your manliness - not in empty taunting words, but in action on the war-field. If you think I shall abjure weapons altogether, you are much mistaken. I never said I shall not fight, or participate in the war; and there are a hundred ways to conduct wars; it is with mind one fights, not with mere weapons! A charioteer is a warrior too. Know that this war will end all Kshatriya race, once for all. Let Yudhishtira or Arjuna permit me, and I can show you how with my indignation alone, at your evil ways and acts, I shall reduce you all into ashes, without the use of any weapons either by me or by anyone else!³ But still why I chose to be a mere charioteer is for a different reason, which none of you will

³ *Nirdaheyam aham krodhat trinenaiva hutashanah
Yudhistira niyogattu Phalgunasya mahatmanah ||*

understand. Even if you hide in the nether worlds, Duryodhana, or fly into the air for a hiding, I shall drive Arjuna's chariot there, and get you eliminated without mercy. Do not be hilarious with joy that Bhima has not yet killed you. He will! He shall! He is just waiting for his time. So also, Dusshasana's blood is waiting to be drunk on the proper day. This silly message you have sent, has not been seriously considered by any one of us here, know thou."

Yudhishtira : "You fool of an ass, Duryodhana, do not measure me by my behaviour from your own mean standards. I am one who does not wish any ill for even ants and worms.⁴ When such is the case, do I ever wish bad things for any of you, my cousins ? I asked for those five villages not in a supplicate manner of a beggar, but in a mood of good will, to save you somehow, by this lowest compromise. But your time of reckoning has arrived at last, alas, by your own invitation! Why can't you understand this, you stupid fellow ?"

Bhima : "You villain, wherever you hide now, it will be your burial ground, whether in Hastinapura, or in the womb of a vulture. And that will be only at my hands. The time for the fulfilment of my oath is fast approaching. But first, I shall kill all your brothers and then finish you off too,⁵ not in a routine war, but by breaking your thighs. Don't have doubts; I shall end you up all."

⁴ *Na chaham kamaye papam api kitapipilayoh |*

⁵ *Sarvesham Dhartharashtrnam aham mrityuh, Suyodhana |*

Similar and appropriate were heroic messages from Nakula, Sahadeva, Shikhandi, Dhrishtadyumna and others.

Uluka was shaken by this stiffness, unity and pointedness of these messages, delivered separately, but total and integrated in their effect. He trembled as he realised that there was a steely edge of a sharp razor in their voices and imagined their consequences immediately. He rushed back to Hastinapura to convey what he heard, what he felt, and what he had gathered and his own analysis of the conditions of minds of the Pandavas. What he could not understand was the cause of this united defiance of his words of message, and the 'behind' of the minds of the enemies.



Uttara Phalguni star on the Tenth day of the darker fortnight next to Kartika, - that was when the Kaurava army was destined to leave for Kurukshetra, finally. The New Moon to follow that event, there was to be a terrible Solar eclipse, as astronomers had predicted.⁶ Most of the army was already assembled there, informally. The contingent from Hastinapura was to complete that formality - side of the army-ritual. That was an ominous day, like the full moon day to follow, with another lunar eclipse also, in the short span of some thirteen days only, as the unpredictable moon had swallowed two full days by the lunar count⁷? Duryodhana knew that

⁶ 10th November 3067 B.C., perhaps.

⁷ It is called tithi in the lunar calendar, the time taken by the moon to go around the Earth. A fortnight has 15, 14 or 16 days, sometimes for the lunation. But a 13 day fortnight is exceptionally rare !

assembling the armies on a single day was an impossibility and so they had been taken out in instalments, and so the armies were in constant movement, since much earlier as Drupada's errand - man had noticed it too.⁸ The messages and counter - messages meanwhile, thus, were only time-gaining tactics, fooling neither party to war.

The armies had occupied banks of the Five Rivers (modern Punjab), Kurujangala, Kalakoota, Gangakoola, Varana, Vatadhana, Yamuna Hills and adjacent places after evacuating villages and towns there and shifting them to other 'safer' places. The upper banks on Hiranvati, a small tributary of Sindhu, a slope downwards on the southern side, had already been occupied by the Kaurava forces, strategically, leaving a comparatively more disadvantageous southern bank for the Pandava forces, which were late in their movements. The upper banks were full with the Trigarta forces on the Kaurava side, the place being hospitable in weather, water, sanitation and food supplies. It was also nearer those allies of the Kauravas. The less hospitable ravaged side was hilly, dreary and not so congenial for movements of elephants and chariots. But it had good protection under hills and boulders, though there were patches of wastelands here and there. Water was scarcer also on this side, and the army exposed to the sun and hot winds. The landscape was uneven and so comparatively more difficult for army movements in quick operations, wherever called for.

To the north west of Kurukshetra was a spot called

⁸ *Udyoga Parva, 19-33*

Syamantha Panchaka, comprising of five sacred ponds of water, associated with Bhagavan Parashurama, where the blood of slain warriors by that God-Incarnate was commingled to offer ablutions to his father, sage Jamadagni, crudely killed by the forces of Karthaveerya Arjuna, in a needless feud with Brahminical forces of the day, he had antagonised out of envy. That was also symbolically significant now, as the impending war was also between Dharmic and Adharmic forces by the reckoning of sages and saints, taking place in that very proximity.

Also, Balarama and Vidura had already visited this spot on the first leg of their pilgrimage tour.

It was also here that the gods had obtained weapons from Mahadeva Shankara, in their relentless war with the demons, after severe penance. That was an event celebrated in the Vedas also.

Another notable coincidence was that the earlier capital city of the undivided Kuru family, under that noble Dharmic Emperor the founder of the race, Kuru, was within the precincts of the present Kurukshetra.⁹ It was by no means known as a bloody war-field, as it was better known for austerity, penance, charity, visualisation of gods, and composition of Vedic Hymnal literature. How tragic, this vicissitude in history, and what a travesty of values ?



⁹ It is even now known as Sthaneswar; that was the capital also of the later Harsha Vardhana and a good many other greater rulers of this ancient land.

CHAPTER 8

THE ARMIES MOVE IN MARKED MOVEMENT- PATTERNS -VYUHAS'¹

Bhishma rose from his bed in the morning appointed for army march, and finished routine morning duties as usual. This time-table of his was never for change in his healthy, though aged physique of thinness and tallness combined, and in rigorous bodily exercises as well as in spiritual practices. He was practically a yogi though in the whirlwind or whirlpool of politics of the day, and though he had undergone a number of trying experiences in decision-making and rescuing of the honour of the race at crucial moments of need. But the present moment was unique and no chance was there for him to skip it to save the factions from this fratricidal war. The results were there for him to see in advance! He did not love the side he had inevitably taken, nor hated the other side he was to fight against. He did not

¹ A *Vyuha* is unknown in wars of later periods in Hindu history and totally alien to chaotic and treacherous wars with neither principles nor morality in Western history. It means arranging the army comprising the foot-soldiers, cavalry, elephant divisions and chariot forces in shapes of a lotus, wheel, whale, conch, the Sun and similar patterns, so that it is difficult to break the pattern as it kept on moving without losing shape, to keep impregnability.

know how he was responsible for this situation or the compulsions of his having to take sides, breaking the balance he had so studiously maintained all through these wasted years, as he looked back now. The gnawing feelings that ate into his vitals now, were of utter dissatisfaction with his own actions, of the cruelty of destiny in pushing him into a camp opposite to Krishna, who was his God, and the wastefulness of his life, and now death - as it served no end, brought no good to either side, to the world, or to himself. Bhishma had recalled earlier moments of crisis now into his mind, and was struck with the enormity of present tasks thrust on him by destiny. The present moment gave him no scope to emerge out of it in better mettle for brighter causes to be served in future. What future was there for a war of this kind, in his old age bordering on death at any moment of his own choice ? The words of Ganga and Sri Krishna rang in his ears continually, though, he could neither decide nor act upon those pieces of advice - the advice being : "Leave the body to the laws of Karma; and leave the soul to the care of Iswara and His mercy". Bhishma had got some solace from these words earlier but there was nothing for him to act upon, except the injunction: 'Leave', which he could not practice, now.

Bhishma worshipped Mahadeva Rudra and his son Skanda. Then he offered worship to Sri Krishna mentally. He then prayed for the victory of the Pandavas, *Jayostu Panduputranam*², like Drona, who was given

² *Ahanyahani Parthanam vriddhah kurupitamahah |
Bharadwajatmajaschaiva prataruttaya samyutan ||
Jayostu Panduputranam ityuchaturandimau ||*

(Bhishma 17-5, 6)

to similar prayers from the very day that war was decided upon. His interpretation of Krishna's advice in his muddled mind was : "Give to the Kauravas your body as a mark of loyalty; and your soul to the Pandavas as a matter of righteous duty". Bhishma was not in a frame of mind to examine whether his interpretation was correct, as this 'loyalty to both' meant, in a way, 'disloyalty to both' also!

Bhishma was now dressed in spotless white clothes; he held a large bow bedecked with Ivory and wore a white headgear, a turban bedecked with pearls. His chariot was drawn by stately white horses³. In his blue coloured flag, there were signs of the Sun, the Moon and of five stars, looking like the sky come down to uphold his broad mindedness, and its divinity. He looked like the white Himalayas crowned with the sky befittingly. There was the royal umbrella, signifying power, over his head, visible to any distance, as he now symbolised the throne of Hastinapura.

Bhishma wore the chest-shield tightly after his morning worship. It was made of gold, and to the size of Bhishma's chest, with threads made out of tiger's skin, tied behind his back tightly, in an artful manner. Servants saw to it that this shield was neither too tight nor too loose for bodily movements, or his age and what little comfort was available on the battlefield. For Bhishma's legs, shafts now protected with skin of

³ *Bhishmaḥ gratah sarva sainyasya vridhdhah svetacchtrah
svetadhanussakhadgah |
Svetoshnishah pandurena dhvajena svetairasvaih
svetashailaprakashah ||*

elephants upto thighs, and he wore similar shoes, artistically made of similar materials. His forearm was too protected similarly leaving room for smooth and comfortable movements. His chariot was filled with weaponry of all kinds, - javelins, discs, maces, extra bows, arrows, poisoned swords that could cut and kill on their three edges, special missiles in reserve, extra-bow - strings, protections, water of course, thorny, throwable-maces, chained weights with numerous thorny points at the ball ends and so on.

Bhishma's most trusted charioteer was already in his seat after routine examination of the vehicle - in the wheels, their bolts, their strength in joints, the flag-mast, its steadfastness, the weapons behind and the special requirements of the master, in keeping with his age, his expertise and preferences for particular weapons, his conches, spare dresses and spare armours, coats of steel etc. He got down now, on seeing Bhishma climb down the steps of his mansion, to help him onto the vehicle, with ready hands. Bhishma smiled at him and looked as if to inquire whether the chariot was equipped and ready for a ride to the war-field. The charioteer beamed an equally assuring smile of satisfaction.

Bhishma's march now started with a five hundred strong battalion of cavaliers, seated on harnesses made of tigers' skins. They wore bows and sheaths of arrows, and were protected with leather coats on their chests made of elephants' skin. They also wore steel helmets.

Behind Bhishma, followed the sons of Dhritarashtra, on horses, as their leader's bodyguards. Dussahasana led them all and others - Durvisah, Durmukha, Dussah,

Vivimshati, Chitrasena, Vikarna and others followed in batches. Among divisional commanders there were Bhurishravas and Purumitra giving Bhishma special protection and among Atirathas there were heroes like Satyavrata, Jaya, Shala and others, each with twenty thousand chariots and Folk Commandants, Forest-Chieftains like Ambastha, Traigartha, Sauvvira and Gandhara, numbering some twelve. They were ready to overtake Bhishma and launch an attack on the enemy, any moment, at the command of their leader.

Besides, Bhishma's retinue included professionals, non-warring assistants like those who were responsible for protecting Bhishma's wheels of chariot, arms - suppliers when stocks got exhausted, special vehicles carrying extra replenishments of those weapons, and those assistants that carry them and load them on to new chariots, as old ones got broken up. There was no end to the number of drum - beaters, bugle - blowers and other war- drum varieties of those days.

There was a small contingent of Elephant force, between the Cavaliers and Bhishma, decorated and bejeweled, symbolising royal glory and befitting the Commander-in-Chief. This was no festival or celebration time, but formality was formality ! It was ironically a procession towards death; the large foot-soldiered army behind Bhishma, in the rear, looked like an ocean in waves, flourishing weapons in the sky, shouting slogans of the victory that was yet to be achieved or celebrated, and enumerating names of their leaders, as if that was a sure formula for that sought-after-victory. There was history in it, heroic exploits in rhythmic narration, and pious wishful thinking in plenty.

When Bhishma's sojourn was about to start, young damsels came in groups, dressed in royal costumes to wave flames of camphor, as a mark of wishing him victory, and as an auspicious omen, pre-arranged. They also waved waters in specially arranged colours of saffron and yellow in golden trays, as marks of advance victory wished well in innocent hearts. These rituals were a must in those days, irrespective of army strength, their rights and wrongs, and the consequences of war.

Duryodhana, surprisingly, was standing bare footed near the Grandsire's chariot, as it was about to start on its onward march. Bhishma liked it as more than a formality by an arrogant Prince who would not normally observe any protocols. The Sire's right hand went habitually on his long white beard that was now tied up into a convenient knot to prevent inconvenient arm movements, and in appreciation of the gesture by the proud Prince, Bhishma said : "Son! I shall do my very best, till there is a last drop of blood in this body. It is indebted to you and shall die for you, logically. I shall not retreat until truth wins and untruth dies."

Bhishma set his right foot first in the chariot, and closed his eyes for a moment to remember Sri Krishna and pay his respects to Him; his Tilak on the face indicated his commitment to Vishnu on his chosen path of salvation, which now lay in action, dedicated to God as yoga. Bhishma now signalled to the charioteer, to move the chariot forward, and at that moment choruses of 'Jai' emanated from a million throats, drums sounded, conches blew, and the unit started a stately movement, slowly and then gathered speed.

There was an alternate route to Kurukshetra on which army requirements, supplies and a different kind of retinue had already started off earlier, by a day or two in another auspicious moment. It consisted of food, cooking vessels, edible oils, fuel, beds for rest, coverings, clothes, drinks, jewels, headgears, wealth for distribution as inducements in emergency crises, armours, weapons, missiles, lamps for night camps, non-edible oils for these, and then lamp - bearers, barbers, cooks, bards, servants to carry vessels, fuel and other materials in such transport, errand boys, flag bearers, indicators to the effect that this was no army to be attacked, doctors, nurses, palanquin bearers, and so on. There was an advance party that examined natural water reservoirs, wells, tanks, pools and other storages to check up that the enemy had not poisoned these, and to get enough water for the army in places where natural facilities were not there, by arranging quick supply in make-shift **camps**, as well as emergency halts. This was a must since hoary times. There were tents to be raised for necessary halts of rest for all the army and neighbouring villagers were co-opted for service under monetary and other inducements. Loyalty was a must on their parts, as otherwise punishments were in plenty by cruel precedents. Bamboo poles, wooden pillars, ropes, and other material were being transported on tamed elephants and camels and under supervisors who kept accounts of all these under higher, stricter vigil.

Bhishma was followed by Prince Duryodhana by an hour's distance, and behind him were Ashvatthama and others. Drona and Kripa followed them. Saindhava Jayadratha was in the vanguard. Shalya had already left.

People from a distance, in neighbouring villages could identify the marching warriors by identifying their large waving flags with particular signs, markings and symbols, on their respective chariots. Thus, for example, Drona's flag bore a water-gourd, Ashvatthama's carried a fire-altar, Duryodhana's was a serpent's and so on. The armies moved in well-structured patterns called *Vyuhas*, as prescribed and practiced by *Gods, Humans and Gandharvas* - known as *manusha, daiva, and Gandharva* in categories. Duryodhana was occasionally issuing instructions to suppliers on the alternate route, wherever they crossed each others, "Let there be distance between tent and tent; let guards be vigilant, let water, food and fuel be available nearest to each tent; let there be no interruption in supplies and services." After a day's march, the army reached the western bank of river Hiranvati and mingled with the larger army stationed there.



Here at Upaplavya also the armies marched on the same day. First marched Bhima's huge chariot, then Dhrishtadyumna's, followed by Nakula's, Sahadeva's, Dhrishtaketu's, then king Virata's, and then Shikhandi's; now came Arjuna's chariot, followed by Yuyudhana's, Yudhishtira's, Drupada's, Abhimanyu's, Satyaki's, Chekitana's and others', with small contingents of armies, and assistants of various categories. Chariot protectors, weapons-carriers, bodyguards, foot soldiers, elephant brigades, cavalier forces and countless chariots followed in perfect order, rhythm, discipline and war-enthusiasm. Here was a united army, in contrast, with no divided

loyalties, and no doubts about its righteous cause and so, naturally enthusiastic without the aids of battle drums and other stimulants. They made all the difference between the armies in their mental make up or resolve.

Before the final march, the situation in the Pandava camp was very touching. Yudhishtira had a good auspicious bath, dressed himself in white clothes and came to the courtyard to receive his brothers. The queens of the Pandava brothers along with Draupadi had also all assembled there to wish them well and wave lighted camphor and coloured waters in clean golden trays. Draupadi looked like Mother Power, the All-Mother when she scattered the magically incanted yellow rice-corn (*akshata*) on the heads of the brothers to say : "Come back victorious, sparing none among the enemies of Dharma." They felt that a force like spiritual effervescence was running through her veins, and she was possessed of a Divine Consciousness, when she uttered those words. Abhimanyu bowed down to all the mothers there to take farewell. Then Dhrishtadyumna came to fetch them, signalling that all arrangements were complete. King Drupada looked like Para Shiva on that occasion and no one could say that he was not young or youthful. Drupada put his long arms each on the shoulders of Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna, accompanying him on either side, and said : "My boys, you are like meteors come on the earth to destroy the two planet-like heroes on the enemy side - Bhishma and Drona. You have the heavy duties of fulfilling those oracles and bring peace on the earth and joy to millions of righteous and right thinking people. May you be successful. There may be no time or chance

on the war - field to meet again and again to discharge this duty of reminding you of your goals, your holy missions, or put spirit into you at moments of need. Destroy the enemy forces mercilessly from today alone and end the operation as early as possible. God bless you, my boys."

Sri Krishna now arrived with Satyaki to join them. Krishna, dressed in yellow robes, resembling the colour of the early morning rays of the sun, was actually more handsome than ever before, as if to reaffirm that he was verily the God of the Upanishads, come down from the Solar orb on the earth, and on the side of the Pandavas, to tell the world at large that this war was against God by the Demons, in the Vedic archetype. Krishna was very handsome usually, but today his personality was resplendent with new shades of Beauty, drawing elements from his unique crown, from underneath which his black curly hair was peeping out to partake of the pleasure of look at that benign face. The bewitching smiles, which he beamed frequently, had the quality of destabilizing the poise of the minds of Pandava-enemies, and frustrating their carefully attempted aims at specific targets. What missiles could not achieve, these smiles did, as a substitute for the weapons that he had vowed not to wield this time in war. How could the enemy anticipate all this, as he had no faith in or use for Divine Aesthetics, and the efficacy of anything as instrument of God, not necessarily in a conventional sense or form? What weapon was there in his hands when he vanquished Kamsa, even as a young boy ? What instruments were used to save Draupadi from public humiliation in that notorious assembly, especially when he was far away

from her? Sages knew that Time was his great instrument; but the Kauravas had no use for the concept of Time as God's greatest weapon.

Draupadi neared him and said : "Dear brother, need I remind you of a vow you took some thirteen years ago, and that the time for its fulfillment has perhaps arrived now ?"⁴ - she mentioned his initial words, and Sri Krishna finished the rest with a reassuring smile.⁵ The two parts of the verse together meant to say :

"Sister Krishnadevi ! Heavens may fall, the Himalayas may lose their ice, the earth may go to pieces, and the ocean may dry up but take it from me, my words will never go sterile. I shall destroy all those that were responsible for your humiliation, or who were spectators of that evil, cruel act, and tie up your scattered curls of hair. You shall become the Queen of Queens. Believe me."

Then Sri Krishna sported a mischievous glance at the Pandavas, and while eyes looked at them, he spoke to Draupadi further :

"Sister, the day I have been looking for, the moment anticipated by sages and saints, all those on the side of Dharma, and the most propitious *muhurtha* awaited by your husbands, has, after all arrived. This time, whoever may spare the evil fellows, I shall certainly not. I shall end them up."

Dhoumya arrives now to bless the Pandavas, and with appropriate Vedic verses, he pronounces the required benediction and blesses them all.

⁴ *Dyauh patet Himavan shiryet prithvi Shakahli bhavet |*

⁵ *Shushyet toyanidhih Krishne! Na me mogham vacho bhavet ||*

Veda Vyasa himself arrives on the spot at this moment to infuse them with the strength of duty as Dharma :

“Dharmaputra, Truth alone can win and not untruth. That is the primordial law. Do not transgress it. It is not the size of the army that decides victory. Yours may be a small army, but it has Right and Justice on its side. See the self-confidence of your soldiers and their enthusiasm.⁶ Even in earlier ages, Narada had pronounced this same truth ⁷ that victory is not the product of mere prowess or strength, but of truth, compassion, law of Dharma and human efforts based on these values. Victory without values is for brutes , short lived and it does not lead to civilization or the happiness guaranteed by goodness, greatness and spiritual wisdom. Go and emerge victorious.”

Vyasa disappeared. The Pandavas were thrilled by this miracle of Vyasa’s appearance and blessings !

Sri Krishna then went out and personally examined whether all was right with Arjuna’s chariot, like an ordinary charioteer - the wheels, the flag staff, weapons to be loaded, the horses, the armours and shields and so on. He beamed a smile of satisfaction while the brothers were still talking among themselves. He then stood near the chariot, to help Arjuna onto his seat, as

⁶ *Alpayam va mahatyam va senayam iti nischayah |
Harsho yodhaganasyaiko jayalakshanamuchyate ||
Na bahulyena senayah jayo bhavati nityashah |
Adhruvo hi jayo nama Daivam chatra parayanam ||*

⁷ *Na tatha balaviryabhyam jayanti vijigishavah |
yatha satyanrishamsabhyam dharmenaive udyamena ch ||*

per custom and protocol. The horses looked at him longingly. Krishna patted them, comforted them, and avoided being licked by them, in the manner of cows and calves of Gokula - saying, "not now; not so soon; wait a bit !" They understood perhaps and stood still as if to mind the task immediately ahead. Then Krishna was the first on to his seat and then He escorted Arjuna to climb up and be seated, with mock-humble words in the mode of ordinary servants : "Your Lordship may please be seated." Flowers poured from the skies at that hour, blessed by gods. Next Yudhishtira, Bhima, Virata, Drupada and all other heroes also rose into their respective chariots. The last to climb was Dhrishtadyumna, after inspecting the front batches and the rear guard. White flags waved everywhere, announcing the movement of the army in steadiness, at the same moment. Sri Krishna now blew his conch Panchajanya. Arjuna followed by blowing his Devadatta. Bhima threw his heavy mace into the skies and caught it in a firm grasp as it came down in a stately fall, to signify that the enemy was now in his grip, in his clasp, inescapable, as the war had, after all odds, materialised, after thirteen wasted years.

As the army crossed the township, and emerged into open space, Dhrishtadyumna arranged it in a Vyuha called "Suchimukha" - meaning the "eye of a needle" or "the mouth of a needle." The army, so arranged, marched on, avoiding burial grounds, temples, temple-lands, hermitages, holy river sides, pilgrim spots, divine groves and parks, and hilly tracts infested with hiding places of enemies, as far as that was possible. Now they were on the southern side of Hiranvati, at Kurukshetra,

and the army quickly converted the river itself into a moat to surround it, to avoid ambush by the unprincipled enemy. The additional advantage of so turning the river was to prevent water from running straight into the army camp, and also water to be available everywhere at the required moment. So a disadvantageous position of nature was turned to advantage by the skilful engineers of the Pandava army.

It was winter and the cold of Kurukshetra was world - notorious. So fires were lit for the comfort of soldiers everywhere, within and without the camps at nights. Enough material as fuel in the form of cornhusks, firewood and hay had been gathered on the way, in addition to stocks that were stored secure. On the first night of final halt, the soldiers bathed in the river, offered evening prayers, had light food and went into a few hours of sleep in full guard of sentries at the gates of the camps.



Draupadi was sent to Kampilya, Drupada's capital from Upaplavya from where the Pandava army had marched to Kurukshetra. (Women were not allowed on the war fields in those days). This news reached the Kaurava camp, and their hopes of the Pandavas taking to forests as recluses, in frustration, proved false.

Subhadradevi, along with Uttara (Abhimanyu's wife) had reached Virata's capital for safety. Similarly, other wives of the Pandavas, and heroes on their side had also moved to safe shelters, before the war started.

Dhrishtadyumna had promulgated disciplinary codes

in army camps so that enemy infiltration could be avoided and secrets not divulged before plans materialised into action in strategies. Entry 'codes' changed every now and then, and army movements in surprise attacks, and sieges came under strict secrecy and close monitoring by the Commander-in-Chief.

Now the two armies were separated by the mere width of that river Hiranvati, and soldiers could see each other in movements in opposite camps. Someone in The Pandava camp sighted Duryodhana's flag flying high on a tent, and blew a conch in excitement! Others joined soon, and soldiers came out of tents to see the cause of provocation!

The opposite camp, already in rest, as they had arrived a day earlier, woke up to this noise and came out to see why there was so much fanfare in the opposite camp. They were totally surprised to see the discipline, preparedness, enthusiasm and the good numbers of the army, which had occupied their sides so silently, so surreptitiously.



Kartika Amavasya (New Moon) day: the remaining army contingents were still arriving with accessories, materials and equipments.

Dhrishtadyumna met Bhishma and the two jointly decided that war should start ten days after the next lunar eclipse occurred, on the full moon day. That meant quite a lot of gap for armies still to assemble, discuss, arrange and plan. The day for the war was fixed for Ekadasi of the brighter half of Margashira, in the

morning, soon after sun rise. Till then no one should indulge in squabbles or stray struggles, wordy duels that could precipitate the war itself - no lifting up of arms on any pretext. When terms like these were mutually agreed upon, and the conditions were consented to, Dhrishtadyumna made it a point to make Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Dusshasana as parties to these in the presence of Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna on his side.

Yudhishtira : “War is no gamble, but a fair game, if it is to yield the desired results, as to who is on the side of Justice and who is on the wrong. That is what we are going to decide here. So we should have a clear and universal understanding, mutually agreed upon - not for convenience’s sake, but as inherited wisdom in practice. If a foot-soldier or cavalier, or anyone insults the other, his counterpart, orally, the reply should be in words only and not in terms of weapons or wounds, befittingly. If someone wants to retire from war, or the war-field, he must not be attacked, but gracefully allowed to retire. No one should hit from behind. A charioteer must only fight a charioteer, a horse soldier with his counterpart, and with similar weapons and so on, for war to be fair and equal. Treachery is to be strictly abjured. One under fear, with scattered hair, torn shield or screaming for help and craving for surrender should under no pretext be attacked. An armless or disarmed soldier needs mercy until he is again equipped. Non-warring army staff like charioteers, arm - lifters, doctors, errand boys, drum beaters, yoke bearers, and so on should not be attacked....”

Bhishma : “Need you enumerate all these minor details? Is not all this understood in a fair war?”

Bhima : “Sire! Days of fair-war, like fair or friendly gamble, are over. That is why we are here, as you too know. If any pretence of fairness is yet to be given a chance for survival, it is essential that we observe rules strictly, major or minor.”

Bhishma : “You are right, after all! I merely suggested that we know all this before hand, too well”.

Yudhishthira : “Another important term : War is only between sunrise and sunset. Night is all for rest. If there are to be extensions, alterations or alternative terms, they should happen only with mutual consent”.

Sri Krishna : “There is a more fundamental consideration: those who break these terms first, have no right to insist on the other side to follow it, thereafter. The affected is at liberty then to return the right remedy to the norm-breaker in his own way at his chosen time and opportunity”.

Bhishma becomes apprehensive for a moment, looks up at Krishna without winkless-eyes, and then stares at Shakuni, Duryodhana and others, as if to ask them in silent language: “Do you understand ?” and then replies :

“Yudhishthira, I can vouch, I shall not allow any violations of these or moral breaches, at least as long as I am on the war-field”.

Bhima : “Let us remember that this is a dignified war field and no gallery for gamble-witnessing or playing”.

Bhishma : “Let us not rake up old history. Why do you say it again and again ?”

Bhima : “Because of experience that should not repeat!”

Bhishma : “It shall not repeat. Try to speak calmly and forget the past”.

Bhima : “The present is an off-shoot of the past only, and unless we make determined joint efforts for a better future, the past will repeat as future, abolishing times’ fruitful intervention. I am neither out-bursting nor overstepping, I suppose”.

Bhishma : “Quite, Quite, my boy!”

Dhrishtadyumna : “Bhima, silence please. Old accounts will be settled one way or another shortly. Why waste words ?

Sri Krishna : “Grandsire, Bhima is just in his well considered words of caution. Did I not myself say, in that assembly, which met to hear me, where you too were present, that- ‘ when an envious person, intolerant of another’s prosperity tries to steal away his everything by force, and fraud, prompted by fate, as it were, then arose the cruel event of war, and to protect the affected party in distress, Gods endowed him with shields, weapons and the bow?”⁸

Bhishma : “Who can deny that, oh Krishna ? Now nobody can hold you or me responsible for the

⁸ *Yada gridhyet parabhoothou nrishamshah vidhiprakopat
balamadadanah |*

*Tato rajnam abhavat yuddhametat tatra jatham varma shastram
dhanusch ||*

present state of affairs. That at least is my comfort. I am responsible for whatever happens hereafter in my leadership”.



On that ill-fated eclipse day - Amavasya - the Yadava and Kuru leaders bathed themselves in the river Hiranvati and offered watery ablutions to their dear departed souls, their ancestors. They met a batch of pilgrims there from Gokula, by chance, who had also come there for a similar purpose. These were surprised to see, Krishna, after a long time, and on the war-field. Vasudeva, Rohini, Devaki and others hugged Sri Krishna and exchanged pleasantries. They also ruminated over the past exploits of Krishna at Brindavan and Gokula. Nobody talked of war, as the situation was obvious and spoke for itself.



Everybody anxiously waited for the next lunar eclipse on the foreboding Full Moon day - with nothing of significance happening in between. Meanwhile armies went on assembling on either side, coming from far off places. Daily exercises could be seen everywhere and mock demonstration of attacks and counter attacks, defence and strategic structuring of the army patterns went on, mornings and evenings.

Arjuna was now engaged in praying to Mother Durga in these anxious days of countdown of moments. Durga appears one day on his mental pedestal :

Durga : “Brother Arjuna , why do you so pray to me, while my brother, the All-Lord Sri Krishna is by your own side ? Why not pray to Him ?

Arjuna : “Mother, you are the one to grant victory. Please bless me and our army to achieve it by your grace”.

Durga : “Do you doubt it when the Lord of Success is with you ?”

Arjuna : “It is not a question of doubt. I did my duty by you and paid my respects to you at the right moment. There must be no lapses in these matters of divine duty. Success is not in our hands, but in yours”.

Durga : “Glad. Then I shall perform my duty. Go fearlessly”.



Karna too had a dream on the New Moon day preceding the Karthika Amavasya. He had narrated it to Krishna, too. In that dream Yudhishtira rises to the top tower of a thousand pillared Hall, which is actually a palace. The other brothers are with him too, then. All of them are dressed in white clothes, and wear white headgears.... The earth below is littered with bodies of dead soldiers, and dismembered parts of their decaying bodies. Yudhishtira has to walk up on them to rise to the top of that building. He now holds a golden vessel in which there is sweet soup mixed with ghee and honey, and drinks it sip by sip. Bhima is climbing up some hazy hillock.... not clear enough. Arjuna is on a mythical white elephant, and holds his Gandiva bow firmly in a non operational clasp. Nakula and Sahadeva ride in a palanquin borne by humans. Karna also has a glimpse of some Kaurava heroes - most of them in

red clothes marching towards the south. Karna knows its meaning. A white royal umbrella is seen on the heads of Ashvatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma.

Now Karna remembered the significance of this dream on the ghastly Kartika Amavasya night. Sri Krishna, in the other camp too, remembered Karna's narration of this, and the meaning was clear to both. Duryodhana too had bad dreams on that night, like Dusshasana. Bhishma and Drona had spent sleepless nights.

Hastinavati had a desolate look, for those that were left behind, and those that were elsewhere on the war front, to remember it.

Dhritarashtra had no sleep, and remembered Veda Vyasa. No peace ! He sent for Sanjaya. Vyasa taught him timely advice, and interpreted the dreams and the portents. Dhritarashtra did not relish anything that could save him, his sons, and the larger mankind. He wanted success for his sons, at all cost, which destiny was to deny him.



CHAPTER 9

SANJAYA ENDOWED WITH SPECIAL VISUAL POWERS

Dhritarashtra began to have special heartbeats after learning that all his sons had left for the war-front. He slept no more peaceful nights. His heart-beats sang only one song in a monotonous rhythm: "Thy sons shall return no more !" He regretted, for the time being, for his having not listened to Vidura's wise words. His encouragement to his son in all his diabolical plots and over-ambitious schemes to overthrow and slay the cousins, now began to eat into his vitals. Above all, non-prevention of that deceitful gamble began to weigh upon his feeble and fickle mind, in its moment of distress. His own further share in ensuring the failure of Sri Krishna's embassy and mediation for peace was there as the final taunt for ever. How could he pretend innocence to himself? Who would believe him? Everyone from Bhishma to Sanjaya, all knew that he was the epicenter of this war of a volcanic eruption. There was no Shakuni or Karna to comfort him ! They were there on the war-field to consume their own cup of poison, having made it ! He began to realise slowly that he might be destined to survive his son's death, in a long life of eternal self-torment and perpetual regret. The

thought staggered him and broke what little heart he had, to endure. He was now sure, for once, that not one of any of those assembled on either side of the war, would survive, as Vyasa had told him. It looked as if conviction would not arise from merely listening to good advice in time, but only when all was lost, out of remorseless suffering. But even in that ghastly moment of being so near to truth, his mind began the usual earlier cacophony of blaming the Pandavas for his ills. Did not the Veda condemn 'killing' instead of extolling it ?¹ Why then do the Pandavas kill his sons, being well versed in scriptures? Dhritarashtra sent for Sanjaya as usual in such moments of stress, for infructuous listening of words of wisdom :

Dhritarashtra : "Sanjaya, has the war started ? I hear that the Pandavas are finally reconciled to kill Bhishma and Drona, for the sake of territory. Does that not mean that Adharma is mightier than Dharma ? Or else would you say that the fault is in us, in as much as we are ready to sacrifice these elderly respectable men, to retain power ? Where does the fault lie exactly ?"

Sanjaya : "Maharaja, do not blame your son for your own faults. His share is his own, and not under your account. Your share is double in both encouraging evil, and not preventing it, while it was still in your hand. Why blame the Pandavas, Rajan? They have resorted to this war as the last resort, as the bounden duty of the warring class, after

¹ *Na vadhah pujiyate Vede*

tremendous patience exercised all these more than dozen wasted years. What is now left to you is to die with the admission of your own fault, and so reducing your burden."

Dhritarashtra : "How will that reduce my burden? Will it not increase it ?"

Sanjaya : "It will reduce the burden in the sense, that it will give you the determination to carry that burden by you and you alone !"

Dhritarashtra : "How will determination lighten the burden?"

Sanjaya : "In the same way in which it sharpened your ambitions, to accumulate your weights in the other direction ! Determination is a double edged sword; it can kill, carry, construct or destroy."

Dhritarashtra : "I do not understand ! You are becoming more and more mystical these days. You speak in symbolic language, in images, and in metaphors, in which I am not educated or trained. Be plain, for heaven's sake !"

Sanjaya : "Sir ! Language becomes loaded when speaking of these matters of good and evil, naturally. I am no more educated than your esteemed self. I speak only what I can see in my uncorrupted consciousness, unclouded by unreasonable ambitions. If there are symbols or metaphors there, I do not know. Ask someone better, if you like."

Dhritarashtra is more distressed by this bold and straight reply than ever before, and begins to shed tears, and thinks of Veda Vyasa. Vyasa appears :

Vyasa : “Son, there is no use calculating the consequences when you cannot prevent them any longer. God has begun to act upon what conditions have been wrought on this earth against his laid-down moral and spiritual laws. Aggressors of the law will be wiped out, to assert the might of morality. If you are prepared to see with your own eyes what is going to happen, I shall endow you with eye-power for a short while.”

Dhritarashtra : “I do not wish to be a witness to the fratricide, to take place.²

Vyasa was struck by the irony of the suggestion that it was the Pandavas that were going to die, not his own sons, as Dhritarashtra fondly believed even at this moment! (the word *jnati* means cousins, not sons)

Vyasa : “What else do you want ?”

Dhritarashtra : “It is enough if I can learn first hand reports of daily happenings in the battle field. If someone can narrate it in detail it will be good.”³

Vyasa blesses Sanjaya with such powers that even without being on the battle field, Sanjaya is not only able to visualise the actual scenes on all the fronts, but also the happenings within the minds of fighting heroes on either side !

² *Na rochaye jnativadham drashtum Brahmarshisattama |*
(He does not mean the death of his sons, but the death of their cousins!!)

³ *Yuddhametatvaseshena shrinuyam tava tejas ||*

Vyasa : “Let me give you special powers, so that during day time as well as at night, whatever is happening anywhere there, in the minds of individuals, shall be revealed to you as if you see them directly, hear them directly, on the earth, in the skies, behind or before you. You shall not be touched or troubled even if you visit the war sites. May you hear far off outer voices also, as well as see what is otherwise imperceptible for other human beings. No weapon shall touch you, no tiresomeness shall stop you. May you live long after the war to be a lone witness to all this in an extraordinary super human way. I shall myself author forth this story to unfold the truthfulness of the Pandavas, and the wickedness of the Kauravas. Alas ! No one can stop this war hereafter. Victory is only for truth and justice. Proceed, my boy.”

Sanjaya became possessed as it were from that very moment ! He was blessed with all those faculties that later on went to make a Poet in a divine sense - perception, power to understand the overtones and undertones of situations and characters, their ‘asides’, ‘insides’, power of interpretation, power to recall them to mind later on, at any moment of need and re-live those moments in divine animation, (Imagination as the latter day analysts would call it) - and the power to draw immediate conclusions from a moral and spiritual angle. Blessed was he indeed.

Vyasa remained there for some more time to teach Dhritarashtra some firm lessons of life :

Vyasa : “All Kshatriya families will be wiped out this

time, in this fateful war. Omens indicate it plentifully; vultures, crows, kites and eagles converge on mountain tops - in clusters for human flesh ! What does this strange 'union' mean ? Why do carcasses fly to the heights of hill tops in mornings and evenings, at dawn and dusk ? The moon just looks like a ball of fire on the Kartika full moon night - as against full brightness expected of him on that night! Why this diminution ? Why do images and metal statues in worship-rooms sweat and tremble? Why do they vomit blood like human beings ? Why do drums sound without a human touch or beating by someone ? Have you ever heard cuckoos, koils, parrots, swans, and peacocks making death-cries of the most terrible type like forest creatures ? You can hear these now ! Rains contain stone-missiles and elements of flesh, and pour down in untimely seasons ! Take astronomical unusu-als ! See that Arundhati star, which should always precede Vasistha, is now proceeding before him ! What does this abnormality mean ? Shani - Saturn - is causing tensions for Rohini - which again is unusual. Why do thunder-bolts crack in blue skies, empty of clouds ? Let all these be : See horses and elephants weep as they stand in war-fields without provocation. What does this indicate? Should asses and mules reproduce in cows and other dissimilar categories of animals ? Should children copulate with mothers as they do now ? What kind of times are we coming to ? The cycle of seasons has gone mad as it were, and we have untimely flowers and fruits. Mothers are giving birth to abnormal children in unusual

numbers. Sex-transformations have become common and commonplace. Birds that live with man in town and those that live on flesh, in forests have learnt cohabitation and collective living ! Can there be some evil provocation behind all these ? Have you ever heard lame and blind persons dancing ? Why do images in temples fight among themselves as foul fellows on the war-field ? Can lotuses grow on trees, instead of in steady waters ? The eclipse now is due in the Tula zodiac. Meteors appear in clusters. Mars is in Makha star, Jupiter in Shravana and Rahu in Uttara Phalguni. This is not a good combination for the world. Venus is in Proshthapad. The Saptarshis have lost lustre. Jupiter and Saturn who ought to last long in each zodiac are approaching Vishakha star in a sinister quick movement. Two eclipses in a fortnight of less than fourteen days - a lunar and a solar one - are not doing any good to the world of today. Have you ever heard of such a phenomenon before ?⁴ Should an eclipse occur or happen on the thirteenth day of a fort night - with two lunar days swallowed? Good God ! I have neither seen this nor heard of it before. This surely ends an age of evil !”

Dhritarashtra was fear-struck by these crystal clear words of Vyasa, and something stung him - the description of the period as an ‘age of evil’. He was

⁴ *Chandradityaubhau grastau ekahne cha trayodashim |
Aparvani graham yatau praja samkshayamicchavah ||*

*Chaturdasim panchadasim bhutapurvam cha shodhashim |
Imam tu nabijanami hyamavasyam trayodhashim ||*

silent for some time, and said something that gave the impression to Vyasa of his willingness to go through it, rather than stop the war. Dhritarashtra said :

“Teacher Sire, what if kings and warriors die as per the duties of their class or caste ? They will certainly attain heavens for this noble act of theirs.”

This was a determination to go through the war to the finish, no matter even if all his sons died ! This was defiance, devilish ! Vyasa was struck by this strange and stupid stubbornness, and made one more effort to dissuade him :

“Son ! It is Father Time that creates this world, sustains it and swallows it, for still better phases of evolution. But the code of Time does not prescribe fratricide as the only course of new emergencies. There are more civilized, cultural ways of dying and disappearance. I advise you to prevent war even in this last moment. You are capable of doing so, if only you will it that way. I do not like this irresponsible fighting, even now, personally, although I have no stakes in it. Let not your son impose this war and death on innocent others. He is no God . He should also be a responsible instrument of God. Do not be a helpless witness, while still being helpful. You are blind and so cannot see others’ sufferings. You cannot even imagine it in your mind’s blindness, in the absence of actual response. After all, even being an Emperor has not made a difference to you, as you cannot enjoy anything with your own eyes. You cannot see if others respect you or have contempt for you ! But Dharma, though

invisible, is available for silent experiencing even with blind eyes. Trust that, and not the vain glories never experienced by you. Dharma brings good name and fame here, and bliss in the other world. Call your son, pull him up. Cancel the war, recall your soldiers and announce truce by giving the Pandavas their legitimate dues.”

Dhritarashtra did not relish these unwanted words of advice, as they went against his ‘self-interests’ as he thought in his blurred view. He considered it as an intolerable intrusion, and so snubs Vyasa in audacious words :

Dhritarashtra : “Wise sage ! What you know, I know too; no need to explain all this any further. Do I not know we are all instruments of Time ? Need you say this so emphatically again and again ? Let me tell you one thing firmly and finally : When selfishness is involved, all three worlds and their inhabitants get clouded minds and do what they think is right. I am part of one of these worlds. If my mind is clouded, it is my account, not another’s. If my sons do not listen to me after repeated advice, should I cut off my relations with them unilaterally ? Moreover how can I accept that all they have done is totally wrong ?”⁵

⁵ *Svarthe hi sammuhyati tata loko mam chapi*

lokatmakameva viddhi |

Na chapi te madvashago Maharshe na cha dharmam

kartumarha hi me matih ||

Vyasa was dumb-struck by this foul reply of Dhritarashtra hinting that it was not wrong on his son's part to eliminate the Pandavas as his enemies, by any means' even war ! The lust for power was so strong in this stubborn reply, that there was nothing more to answer. He did not want to disappear suddenly. So he speaks :

Vyasa : "You, son of Vichitravirya ! I have done my duty. But it is you who have called me. Before I go, if you have any more questions, ask me ; let me see if I can answer."

Dhritarashtra : "What are the good omens that indicate success in war, sir ?"

Vyasa felt that in this loaded question, the implication was whether there prevailed at least one or two good omens on the side of his son. The blind king wanted success for an evil - doer, in war !

So unmindful of the evil intent of the question, Vyasa answers, casually, disinterestedly, leaving the inferences to the king :

"Fire in the altar must shine peacefully in luster. The smoke should be in the clockwise direction - *dakshinavartha*. There must be pleasing odours in the oblations to Fire. Conches, drums, and other similar percussion instruments must produce deep and assuring sounds of rhythm coordination and not cacophony. The Sun and the Moon should shine with natural splendours, unhindered by celestial hindrances or adjuncts. Crows must make humanly likeable sounds of calling. Other

birds too; no startling or warning or bemoaning sounds, or fear-filled ones. If the garland around the neck of a fighting soldier does not fade for a long time, that is a sure sign of victory in advance. Horses must neigh pleasingly, in encouraging tones or waves of pleasant neighing. I have already told you that it is not the numbers in the army that matters, but self confidence of the fighting crew, whatever their numbers may be. If you have broken-hearted soldiers with diffidence, writ large on their faces, even you will get frightened; won't you ? A war won with diplomatic force is the best; the one that you win by dividing the enemy is next best; but war by use of force only, is the worst. Its fall-outs are also far numerous to be enumerated, in brief. Garuda⁶ does not appreciate such a war in which your own army gets devastated while stupidly facing a far larger army on your enemy's side ! Heroes do not depend, either, on the largeness of armies ! That may not always be possible also."

Dhritarashtra, instead of finding comfort from these words, got more distressed and distracted ! Vyasa disappeared !!



⁶ This must be a reference to a political manual by Garuda as author, which is now lost, perhaps. Numerous such manuals are mentioned in *Kautilya's Artha sastra*, and by Bhishma in *Anusasana* and *Shanti Parvas*.

*Na Vainateyo Garudaḥ prashamsaḥ mahajānam |
Dṛiṣṭva suvarṇoṣṭhīchitāim mahatya api Bharata ||*

Margashira, bright half of the fortnight, morning of the tenth day it was - just one day before the war was to start. On that pleasant morning Bhishma was having morning bath in the river Hiranvati, in Kurukshetra, and performing his first Sandhya worship of the day. Something happened to distract his attention then! A fourteen year young boy was practicing arrow-shooting into the skies, unaware of all those who were bathing in that river. He was on the fine sands of the riverbank. He was testing his skills in all varieties of shooting, for his own satisfaction, but onlookers had gathered in good numbers from either camp, themselves great archers, to see this young lion as it were, indulging in what elders often lacked- sheer skills. Bhishma tried to recollect if he had seen this lad ever before.... no.... he had not seen him or even heard of such a prodigy. Bhishma looked at Drona by his side, also similarly engaged in ablutions, inquiringly. Drona caught the unexpressed question silently in his mind, and his answer was in terms of tears of joy, which he could not control at that moment. Next moment he answered a puzzled Bhishma openly, but suggestively - "Can you not make out by the way he has tied his chest cover? Can any other soldier here do it that way?"

This, instead of answering Bhishma, provoked his curiosity all the more. He took a look at the lad's shield from the front. Nothing could be made out at first. But when the boy turned his back, he could see a special knot, the style of which, few knew on the field. There was some answer possible in this. But it still certainty eluded. Then, as if to clear Bhishma's lingering doubts,

something happened: Sri Krishna himself emerged out of a nearby camp to call the boy. Now it was clear - the resemblance of Sri Krishna's face and that of the boy were extremely close and unavoidable. The boy stopped his jugglery of shooting single arrows, which multiplied in term of hundreds, in seconds, and shot into the skies in squadrons of flying birds, as it were, and turned back - a feat, which resembled only Arjuna's skill. Bhishma glanced again at the back of the boy! He now got it - only two others knew that way of tying the shields - Drona and Arjuna..... So!..... this must be Abhimanyu!! The threads were tied, the ends being not visible, and absorbed into the pattern of the Divine eagle, with lovely wings spread to the width of that small back in a pattern that was unique ! The shield covered the chest while the threads and the spread - eagle covered the back and the sides of the boy immaculately. How the boy could tie it himself without assistance - only a Drona or Arjuna could answer ! Bhishma began to shed tears of joy and silently prayed for the long life of the boy after guessing his identity. The shield was adequate, light, and was impregnable from the front and sides. Only treachery could cut it open from behind, which was forbidden in a fair war. Bhishma admired the boy and cursed himself for the side he had to take in cruel and unavoidable circumstances.

Drona : "You might know that only three of us know this, myself, this boy and his father - that father whom I once I described as the one bearing the name of a tree, and the son of one who cut the wings of the immovables." -

Drona suddenly switched over to a symbolic double language, observing someone, who could be a spy!⁷ Bhishma understood it, but actually a spy of Duryodhana was overhearing this conversation, though he could not make head or tail of this latter part of the identification of the person under discussion.

Sri Krishna, before drawing that adventurous lad into his camp, was pointing to Drona and Bhishma, with his pointed finger to introduce them to him for the first time. Abhimanyu took a folded handful of the river water and offered it to them as a mark of respect and withdrew silently.



Elsewhere Sanjaya had begun his 'running commentary' on the war, its preparations, the ground, its specialties, the heroes, their minds, the scenario, its import sociologically, philosophically, humanly and of course politically - some of which would not interest the blind monarch. Sanjaya was not deterred and went on with what came uppermost to his mind, as directed and blessed by Vyasa. He was running through a

⁷ The verse referred to occurs at *Virata Parvan* 39-10 and runs as :

*Nadi jalam Keshava narihetuh, nagahvayo nama nagari sumuh|
Esho jngana veshdharah kiriti jitvavayam neshyati chadya gavah||*

If you take it as *Nadi + Jalam + Keshava + Nari + Ketuh ..etc*, it means nonsense ! But take it as *Nadija + Lankeshavanariketuh + Nagahvayo nama Nagarisumuh etc* Then it means "Oh ! River-born (Bhishma), Arjuna with the monkey in his flag - the monkey that burnt Ravana's Lanka, and bearing the name of a tree (=Arjuna), and son of Indra who cut off wings of mountains, has come to get cows released . Let us protect ourselves from him."

metaphor now, which compared the warriors to dogs who were fighting for pieces of flesh of dead animals! He was saying :

“Sir, this wide world is nobody’s property, living or dead. But it belongs to all, from another angle, equally as the ground of Sadhana or preparation of the soul - for the other world. Even Gods have to attain their salvation here only. But this mean war of vanity is unbecoming of soldiers whose really appointed duty ought to be the protection of the righteous from the evil-perpetrators. Look, they are fighting like dogs for pieces of meat and beef.⁸ Sir, I ask you point-blank - can there be limits to the selfishness of man or his insatiable desires ? Even if one wins and the other loses, as both cannot win or lose simultaneously, do you think the winner has infinite lifetime to enjoy all his desires on this earth, things of his choice ? Does not death wait staring at the other end ? Life is extremely short in this Kali age. Life spans are unpredictable, in addition to pains and plagues, infirmities and uncertainties. There are still - born babes too ! How pitiable, sir ! Warriors of today are less resplendent than those in previous cycles, less valorous, less truthful, and less right-minded, and anything can lead them to war, as at present. Who can stop them ?”



Another camp takes us to a different scene : It is Yudhishtira in closed conference with Sri Krishna and his own brothers. He is worried as ever before, about

⁸ Anyonyasyavalumpanti sarameya yathamisham |

the consequences of the war that is yet to begin, not as a coward, but as an over-concerned, compassionate saint, which he was not ! Duty was all that mattered, and he did not know that duty in his clouded and confused mind. Who was not confused at that hour ? Drona ? Bhishma ? Karna ? Arjuna is comforting that distressed brother in quantitative terms :

“Brother, it is not the numbers that win. Bhishma and Drona are grimfaced, not because of our coming here ; but because of their own tight corners. See Sri Krishna, his self-confidence, enthusiasm and disinterestedness at the same time. He is the Lord of Glory, Lakshmi always follows him.⁹ Let us trust him and follow him. Success is surely ours. No worry.”



Duryodhana was closeted with the spy who had reported about Drona speaking to Bhishma in a coded, loaded language. Duryodhana was not surprised but annoyed. He could not make anything of ‘sons of trees’, ‘sons of mountains’, and this inconsequential stuff.

Another servant came to announce the arrival of Karna, at that hour. Duryodhana had not expected this, after Karna’s vow not to fight under Bhishma in his life. He was naturally surprised and happy, and also mistook his purpose before Karna could speak :

Duryodhana : “Come Karna ! Welcome ! I am happy, you have changed your mind. It is my good piece of fortune.....sit down.”

⁹ *Gunabhuto jayah Krishne prishthato abhyeti Madhavam |*

Karna : (standing still, crest-fallen) “No friend; no question of my changing the mind. That is ruled out. Instead, I have decided to send my sons and army to join you, if you allow. They are here at your camp-entrance. Only these, instead of me, will be with you, in the fight. I shall also be in touch with you, directly, in person, off and on, to offer you suggestions, and know the day-to-day positions, to direct you, if you want. But ‘lift the bow’ - no, never. I shall never do it, under Bhishma! Let the old hag, that vulture, fight and die, first!”

Duryodhana did not like this disrespectful reference to Bhishma, nor the unwarranted contempt to a General, not due to his age and place, here, on the field. His mention of ‘death’ stung him as an ill omen. Yet he added.

Duryodhana : “Bhishma is likely to die, leaving me in the lurch when death in his context is being mentioned so liberally and so frequently and even by close friends like you ! Success is if only he can fight; with an open mind, only ! But that is uncertain ! Anyhow he has vowed not to kill the Pandavas. What then can we expect of him ?”

Karna made some audible but unintelligible sounds as expressions of sympathy without wishing to say another word on Bhishma. Suddenly :

Duryodhana : “Friend, as and when and if, your turn comes up you are sure to kill Arjuna, are you not?”

Karna : (red in face, but trying to control his surprise, his thick passions of a complex type, and trying

to be his usual calm self) - "Friend, what makes you doubt it all of a sudden, as never before, and at this hour ? Have I given scope for such of your doubts ? There is something weighing on your mind surely !"

Duryodhana : (trying to conceal the hurt feelings of his, as Yuyutsu made this revelation earlier) "I just casually asked, in a dejected mood that has descended on me these days. I cannot depend on Bhishma and Drona; I want to be sure at least of you, especially as you have opted out of the war-field under Bhishma ! That is all to it."

Karna : "I am sorry that Bhishma has provoked me to this."

Duryodhana : "What will you do with the other Pandavas ?"

Karna : (Evasively) "Let my turn come up, and you shall see. Now you are in a mood of doubting everybody. That is unfortunate !"

Both of them understood that each was unpleasant with the other, and knew perhaps things, unknown to each other !



After Abhimanyu caught Bhishma's attention for a glimpse, and Drona moved away to another spot for meditation, due after the morning ablutions, Bhishma sat quietly on the sands for meditation in the Holy Asthakshara way - as the Upanishad had described it as the "secret of secrets, an esoteric jewel, rare even

for Gods to obtain.”¹⁰ After some time when he got up to perform ‘farewell’ (*upasthana*) to the Deity presiding over the *Manthra*, another surprise awaited him:

Another very handsome looking youth, who was also grossly engaged in the morning divine routines, caught Bhishma’s attention, unawares, gluing him to where he was standing ! Bhishma tried to recollect any encounter with this young man, who had rather a feminine face, any time before. But, no, he had never seen him before, he told himself. Bhishma was wondering who this youth could be ! Then he felt a faint resemblance between this boy and someone else!... who... who... could it be ?...yes!!...Here it was !.. It was a face that resembled Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna, except for his rare complexion, he had hardly come across, before ! Then by the process of mental elimination, he began to wonder, if by chance it could be that....Oh! how... could it be ?.....

Bhishma’s mind remembered a whole chain of unpleasant and tragic circumstances of many years ago, and the old Sire was now blankly staring at that youth and seeing beyond him into that past.

That youth was a certified hero by marks of wearing the bow on the left shoulder; but had long and crow-black lovely hair, making him look like a woman, by his other characteristics like swollen chests that almost looked like breasts ! Bhishma almost guessed

¹⁰ *Devanam guhyam, etadvai mahaopanishadam* | at Tait. Up IV, called otherwise the *Mahanarayana* or the *Yajniki* upanishad.

the youth's identity and now felt a sense of shame and even guilt for having stared at this rare figure for so long. But the temptation was so irresistible that he turned back to take a final look; the face was unmistakably feminine, with all features to the last expectation - long eyes, dark bow-like eyebrows, sharp long nose, rosy cheeks, handsome chin and dimples when that youth laughed or smiled. He could fix anybody onto where he was standing or sitting with his strange staring powers, and eyesight ! There was a bewitching, magical spell in that stare.

As if to confirm Bhishma's guess, something happened at that very moment :

Dhrishtadyumna ran from inside a tent and called to that youth in question : "Shikhandi, father wants you urgently; he has been looking up for you everywhere. Come, come."

Bhishma felt petrified at the mention of this name! He had not imagined that his Death would be in so-handsome-a-youth's hands ! What an irony that Death could be so tempting here and now !



CHAPTER 10

OH ! SHIKHANDI !! - BHISHMA REMEMBERS...

The war was to start the next morning....Bhishma had neither sleep nor rest in his bed, comfortable otherwise ! He was running through a crucifying experience of a few decades ago, in his mind, which was packed with pain, struggle, conflict and agony, in strange mixtures. The good and bad moral effects thereof he could neither decide, nor shake off in all those more than four or five decades, rendering him mute, numb, ineffectual and even impotent, spiritually or morally. They talked of physical courage ! Bhishma, ever since those ghastly experiences, could never divorce physical strength from the other two aspects. He had harmed an innocent damsel, ruined her, unwittingly, walking into vows that acted as deathtraps. He had not benefited either; he had committed several blunders, Himalayan-ones, Vindhya-ones, Crouncha-ones and what not - in thoughtless acts, which he thought, would solve his problems. However, they went on becoming more and more tangled and beyond solutions. Each solution brought a new problem, as unusually it happens. It all started innocently.



Bhishma was a stout youth of prowess, just returning from the Gurukulam of Parashurama and Brihaspati, to his father's fold. He was welcomed by the father fondly and became everyone's darling in the palace, very shortly.

Then a series of unexpected things happened : Ganga had already deserted her husband Shantanu, after giving birth to Bhishma, as he had violated the promise made to her that she shall not be questioned for any of her acts of commissions or omissions. (She was found drowning her earlier half a dozen babes, soon after giving birth to them. When Shantanu prevented this next one, Bhishma, she left him for good.) But the boy Bhishma was brought up by her, instructed well by Brihaspati and Parashurama, before being brought to Shantanu. This was the first phase.

Shantanu had remained unmarried again for a long time, until after even Bhishma had returned to his father's side. Then one day on a hunting expedition, he fell in love with a Princess of the Fisher Folk king, who had refused to wed his daughter to him, unless he promised his kingdom only to her progeny. Shantanu hid this for long from his young son, who soon found out the secret of his father's agony. Then Bhishma, (who was only Devavrata till then) negotiated, and got his father married to that Princess, Matsyagandhi, on voluntary renouncement of heirship to the throne ! Hence his name 'Bhishma'. (The One of Terrible vow.) This marked the second phase of the tragedy.

Soon after, Matsyagandhi gave birth to two children - Chitrangada and Vichitravirya - Shantanu passed away.

Bhishma brought up the children, heirs to the throne by grooming them well, to shoulder the responsibilities. The loss of the father and the responsibility of the throne weighed heavily on Bhishma in this third phase.

Chitrangada, as an upcoming and promising youth lost his life in a battle with the Gandharvas, prematurely, making Bhishma's burden weigh heavier than before. Vichitravirya was given to worldly pleasures, and Bhishma was worried about getting him married to girls of well known royal families, when none seemed willing to come forward to cultivate alliances. Now started the most tragic fourth phase.

The Kashi Ruler of those days had arranged a "svayamvara", (a marriage left to the girl's choice, or selection of the bridegroom, from among those called to assemble, to settle the alliance), for his three daughters, named Amba, Ambalika, and Ambika.

Bhishma went there on behalf of the Kurus, and for the sake of Vichitravirya, and abducted away those hapless girls, after fighting with, and defeating all assembled Princes there. This mode of marriage by abduction was known as the 'Rakshasa' type and the scriptures had accepted it as one of some six ways of marriage, in those days. But here there was a violation, in as much as the abductor did it not for himself but someone else ! There were other complexities too. It was kidnapping outright, and what ratified it was brute-might, though this type of marriage was becoming out of fashion, forcing revisionist ideas in responsible minds. (Sri Krishna reviews this in the context of justifying Subhadra's elopement with Arjuna. It was

uncivilized as the freedom of the girl was violated. One might ask, how could Sri Krishna 'abduct' Rukmini ! The case is totally different, in as much as that the suggestion came from Rukmini herself, and the parties were willing to be wed. For that matter, Krishna married none against her will or wish. The girls vied with each other to wed him. Bhishma's was not such a case.)

Then there was a further complication : Ambalika and Ambika accepted their fates in a docile way without protests. Amba, the eldest, had loved the King of Shalva, and he had also reciprocated that love. This was not known to Bhishma. She told him now. Bhishma respected that wish and sent her to him with all royal honours. Poor Shalva did not deserve her love, as he refused to accept her now in Bhishma's custody ! He called her "Bhishma Parigraha" in a vulgar sense, as "one who had been accepted by Bhishma" (whatever the sense one would guess !) He sent her back to Bhishma, himself.

Now started the final act of Destiny : Amba fell on the feet of Bhishma and requested him to accept her as his wife ! Bhishma told her of his vow of celibacy, and asked her to go back to her parents. But the parents also refused to accept her back.

Amba returned to Bhishma and begged of him to accept her or show a way. Bhishma washed himself of her. Amba went to Parashurama through his disciple Akritavrana. Parashurama took pity and called Bhishma to fight with him if he could not do justice to poor Amba. The fight was equal and Parashurama had to withdraw at the instance of gods and sages.

Amba undertook penance at various places - banks of Yamuna, Vatsa Bhoomi, Chyavanashram, Prayag, Devaranya, Bhogavati etc. Ganga Devi blessed her to take birth as a river in one aspect; and she committed herself as food for fire in another and by Rudra's blessings was born as daughter of Drupada ! That was Shikhandi.

Drupada, who was hungering after revenge against Drona, wanted a son, and no daughter ! So he dressed this girl as a boy and groomed her up in manly ways and in warfare. But marriage to Dasharna exposed the girl ! She now went to a Guhyaka (a Gandharva of Kubera's clan) by name Sthunakarna and requested him to alter her sex. That surgeon converted her to a male, by exchanging the sex organs. That was how Amba stood as Shikhandi before Bhishma's external eyes, that day, waiting to finish Bhishma at the right moment.



Bhishma saw there the former Amba only, even in the present Shikhandi, and an uncontrolled pity for (him or) her welled up from his heart very deeply, for the plight in which he landed her, unwittingly. Her prayer: "Marry me, do not forsake me to ruin my legitimate right of married life." - rang in his ears, after so many decades also !

Bhishma asked himself : "Am I really so hard-hearted ? Am I so stubborn or cruel ?"

By some strange coincidence Bhishma remembered Draupadi - Shikhandi's sister! "Was he cruel to her also?" - he asked himself, now. Why would fate bring

helpless women in this inextricable way into his unmarried or unmarriageable life, ruin them and make him responsible? Here were two wronged women in the same family - Shikhandi in her former life as Amba elsewhere; and Draupadi, in that wicked assembly ! Was it not natural for Panchalas to be whetting their swords for revenge ? It was actually a war between Kurus and Panchalas - he realised now, - from one angle, that angle that mattered most to justify himself for being on the Kaurava-side, however feebly. What did not bring solace to him was the entanglement of the Pandavas on the opposite side, unfortunately for him and for them also. Poor Pandavas! Bhishma wished for a moment that he was not alive to face this complicated situation in which he could do nothing but injustice to the others. But he blamed himself for this escapist thought in passing, though! Bhishma felt for a moment that the vow of celibacy he undertook, was after all the hard cruel bottleneck that prevented him from coming to fair decisions in his hapless life this far. But there was no going back on it on any pretext - to any time earlier. His vanity justified him, although on false notes. Now he did not have one unswerving answer for the simple question, coming up again and again in his mind - "Who is responsible for all this ?"

He felt Drupada's anger justified after all: Shikhandi for him, Dhrishtadyumna for Drona - were the missiles in his armoury.

Bhishma felt pity for Duryodhana, in that unguarded moment for not depending on the right and sure people! He blamed himself for having been made a ready target for Shikhandi. Then he realised that this was a different

account - that of Duryodhana. Had only Draupadi been married away into some family other than that of the Pandavas! It was Sri Krishna who arranged it so immaculately to entangle all those whom he considered as dead weights on this earth, to be eliminated in one stroke, as it were!

Then he brushed aside this blame - which did injustice to God, come down as Krishna, and to himself for inescapable decisions for which he was now paying dearly, and of course to the Pandavas who had been grossly wronged at every step - gods after all; Indra, Yama, Vayu and the Aswins.

Bhishma almost decided to quit his body by yoga, for a moment. But then he decided to postpone it, as it was yet Dakshinayana; and he had to wait for nearly two months and more; who knew how long the war would take to end, and who would remain at the end!

One justification that came uppermost into his mind as a final piece of satisfaction was that he had to clear Duryodhana's debt - salt debt - anyhow. He was now, that Prince's paid servant and it was not proper to examine the merits or demerits of that master. That should not matter at all now. He might have examined it all, if God had given him that freedom, at the time of accepting that Prince as his master. But was there that freedom, then also, after all?

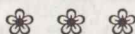
Bhishma counted how many days it would take for him to finish off the Pandava army ?

Or how many days he would give it to the Pandava army to finish off the Kauravas ?

Or whom did he want to succeed and survive ?

Bhishma cursed himself for doubting victory for the Pandava camp! They shall win, after all, by God-ordained laws, unalterable by man.

So ? He would have to linger on the battlefield until he sighted Shikhandi. Would Duryodhana take that care till the end, the end that he envisaged or wished for?



CHAPTER 11

DAY ONE - ARJUNA'S MISPLACED COMPASSION

In Margashira's bright half of the fortnight, Ekadashi has arrived. The opposing armies are awaiting signals for the war to start.

In the Kaurava camp, Duryodhana alights his chariot, goes to Drona's place !...All are wondering as to what urgency takes him there ! Everyone looks at him from both camps.

Duryodhana seems to be in a most disturbed state of mind, as he had no sleep the previous night, and his counts have not come up to his expectations. He doubts everybody's integrity - Bhishma's, Drona's and even Karna's - yes, even Karna's, for all his protestations of unstinted support. His inactive stance during Bhishma's Generalship is the first proof. How could Duryodhana's mind be happy or ready for war, as a final plunge ? Bhishma and Drona talking in a secret code, on the war-field ! What did it indicate ? So, he wants things to be straightened, immediately, and accounts settled with the Acharya. It may be no good strategy, but does a disturbed mind care about niceties or planning?



Here at the palace, Sanjaya is before Dhritarashtra and trying to understand the question of the blind old man:

“Come, Sanjaya, tell me everything unexceptionally. What is happening in the camps of the Kauravas and the Pandavas ? Has not Bhima vowed to kill all my sons? What is our camp’s counter plan ?”¹

Sanjay began with elaborate word-pictures, introducing prominent heroes on either side. But the old monarch is impatient and interrupts the narrator again, and is in no mood to listen after his own questions and queries:

“I feel fate is stronger than human efforts in deciding human destinies and happiness ! For, I knew better than anyone else, the evil effects and entailments of war, and yet here I am entangled in it, in spite of my better judgment ! What do you say ? Why could I not curtail my son’s - Duryodhana’s - evil designs on his cousins, to drive them into an evil war. Why could I not follow the middle path of good for both families, while it was in my own power ?”²

Now in a loaded question the old man prompts Sanjaya for an answer :³

¹ *Ehi Sanjaya sarvam me aachakshya anavaseshatah |
Senaniveshe yad vrittam Kuru Pandavasenaayoh |
Pratijnate Phalgunena vadhe Bhishmasya samyuge |
Kimakurvata me mandah putra Duryodhnadayah ||*

² *Dishtameva param manye paurusham chapi anarthakam |
Yadaham buddhyamano’spi yuddhadoshan kshayodayan |
Tathapi nikritiprajnam putram durdyutadevinam |
Na shaknomi niyantum va kartum va hitamatmanah |*

³ First verse of *Bhagavad Gita*

“My sons and the Pandavas assembled for a mutual fight on the war-field. It has a hoary Dharmic antiquity - It is a field where merit is earned as means for the other world. *Dharmakshetra* it is; also associated with our ancestor Kuru, who did extraordinary penance there, to leave his name permanently in association with his field of activity - *Karma Kshetra*. Should such a field be now chosen for mass massacre ? What Irony of fate? You say all have assembled there for fight. Tell me what did they do ?”

See the insensibility of the question on the surface, unless you guess the cruel intent behind the veils of words in layers of evil thinking.

“*People have assembled to fight; what did they do?*” - Is this an intelligent question ? For, even the stupid can answer : “Well, thoughtlessly they killed each other to the last man. What else was there to do?”

Does not the blind king know as much ? He knows too well, to intend this superficial meaning ! His real question is a rhetorical one :

“Tell me Sanjaya, - Why don’t you ? - that the Pandavas actually ran away to the forests, on seeing our huge army led by Bhishma and Drona ! Do you think there was a real need of war ? Did it really take place ? Tell me that it was a farcical assemblage on the Pandava side !...”

Such was the vulgar wishful thinking of the pitiable monarch.

There is a remarkable verse in the *Karna Parva*, reviewing the regional traits of human ways of speaking and understanding :

"The people of Magadha understand another's heart, by a mere look at his face. The next best are the Kosalas - for they understand if the eyes meet each other's, the questioner's and the answerer's ! The people of Kuru-Panchala-belt are much inferior to these - for unless they speak one half of the sentence, they do not understand. The other half they can make out without pronouncement. But last come these southerners - they understand only if everything is openly said, not caring for suggestions or hidden meanings."⁴

Sanjaya and Dhritarashtra come under the third category, from Kuru clan or dynasty. The old man's heart behind the innocent-looking question was well understood by Sanjaya. And equally in the same style and characteristic manner, he too does not answer directly, but in half suggestions which when put together would yield the full answer for a diligent person. The full answer comes at the end of *Bhagavad Gita* :

"Victory is where the impelling Krishna, the All-Lord, is, and where the obedient Arjuna takes up the bow and arrow for the fight, together. There, sure is permanent success, plenty , peace, and well established order, policy, rule and prosperity."⁵

The blind man's question is taunting and challenging. And the wise narrator is equally taunting, tantalising, evasive, dodging for a direct answer ! That is the big

⁴ *Ingitajnastu Magadhah prekshitajnastu Kosalah |*
Ardhoktah Kuru Panchalah sarvoktah dakshinapathah |

⁵ *Yatra Yogeswarah Krishnah yatra Partho dhanurdharah |*
Tatra Srih Viyayo bhutih Dhruva nitih, matirmama |

joke ! The insinuations and innuendos are far too many and inexplicit. The sum total of suggestions would be like:

“Sir, you want success for your son ? But see whether his words or actions are indicative of any such signs ? He frets, fumes, talks, disrespectfully to Drona, discourages everybody, insults the generals; how can he win in this state of lack of self-confidence ? Let me narrate.”

What had happened was like this : Duryodhana viewed the Pandava army well assembled, in good spirits and led by a person sure to kill Drona - Dhrishtadyumna ! Drona knew that his end would be in the hands of Dhrishtadyumna, and yet had accepted him as disciple as per the etiquette of the days ! Now the same person has come as the General of the enemy camp!

Drona is not wise or thoughtful - that seems to be Duryodhana's anguish and accusation ! Drona was paid by Duryodhana as patron. But the Acharya thoughtlessly taught even possible and potential enemies, unwisely ! Now he was treacherous also in a way - because, paid by one side, he aided the other side ! (Dhrishtadyumna managed to be the unchanged commander of the Pandava army all through the war, but the Kauravas had to change their generals four or five times, each of them individually greater than he !)

Drona : (caught these vicious, suggestive, pointing accusations; but without losing his cool poise said:)

“Why ? Duryodhana ? Are you not well ? Are we

not strong or sufficient to face our enemies ? See how great and distinguished our heroes are !”

Duryodhana : “Yes, yes, I know ! You are a great master. That is your greatness. But weaknesses are plenty. You are partial to my enemy, Arjuna; you praise our enemies too often and one does not know how you will end. Bhishma is invincible, yes. But he has vowed not to kill the Pandavas. What use is he to me now ? Kripa too is equal to both sides. Karna is under the curse of his teacher Parashurama! You are all on my side physically, but spiritually on the other side. I therefore feel we are not self-contained though with a bigger army; I feel our enemy is strong enough to win, though smaller is his army. After all he has your blessings !”

Drona did not reply, being so humiliated ! Duryodhana then ordered his close associates :

“Have care of Bhishma, and protect him.”

This order was pregnant with an irony ! It was Bhishma who was expected to protect the army. But here was a situation where the General required protection because (i) of his age, (ii) of his partiality to the other side, and (iii) he would lay down arms at the sight of Shikhandi ! So Dusshasana and others had to watch the old man to see he got no pretexts to run away ! That was the inner meaning of Duryodhana’s instruction !

Now it was Bhishma’s turn to be annoyed. He wanted to encourage the sagging mind of Duryodhana by a heroic act, then and there, so he blew his conch for a long time. But this was misunderstood as war

signal for readiness to start. So all the others blew conches, drums began to sound in terrible alarm and the field got filled with terrific sound of war bugles, conches, drums and so on. Since all began simultaneously, this confused-noise prevailed for a short while and subsided soon, with not one soldier responding from the other side !

In fact it was not a signal call at all ! It was a thoughtless and instantaneous, voluntary action of Bhishma, just to enthuse his depressed Prince.

The Pandava army was more disciplined even in these small matters. All knew here, that until Sri Krishna blew the signal, nothing could start. Moreover, there were still unsettled movements here and there. Duryodhana was still not back in his seat. Drona and Bhishma were still not ready. How could the war start?

Now Krishna wanted to silence Bhishma and frighten and tear the hearts of the Kauravas ! He wanted to show that an army, which was indisciplined even in blowing conches or beating drums could hardly expect victory. So he now demonstrated how the other side was perfectly disciplined. First he blew his Panchajanya to his heart's content for a long time. The Pandava heroes knew that no one was to intercept it. When Krishna stopped, Arjuna began. None intercepted it either. Then Bhima, Yudhishtira, then the twins, and others, one by one went on, making the programme a rather long process of tearing the hearts of the enemies. The sound reached the skies and was echoed by the earth; the echo was reflected back to the skies; there was a competition as it were, between the two elements in tossing these

terrible sounds up and down; the Kaurava army was helplessly listening to this sound note of death.



Sanjaya went on narrating these indirect mutual provocations, in the psychology of opposing heroes, and their effects. Then something happened, totally unexpected !

All was ready for the start. Arjuna had aimed some arrows in his well-stringed bow, even. Flags on either side were about to be waved to say "Go".

Then all of a sudden Arjuna was oppressed with an inexpressible grief, and burst out into a bout of sorrow, which overtook him, from somewhere, inside!

The symptoms were very deep. He could not confess his conflicts to Sri Krishna openly. Nor could he act as he was expected to do in the context of his profession, his family, his duty to society or the nation. He suddenly lost faith in duty, in himself and in everything in the universe of which he was an indivisible part, an aspect, dictated by forces he neither generated, nor controlled, nor fashioned after the taste of his choice. He did not know what it was that so unnaturally transformed him into the opposite of what he was till about a few minutes ago. Was he the same ? Was he different? He could not answer.

Now symptoms : First he wanted time to know himself and what was happening within himself. "Take my chariot and station it between the warring armies, so that I can have an eyeful of look at who all want to fight with me" - he ordered Sri Krishna, as you would order a mere cart diver.

Sri Krishna turned back, smiled, and obeyed. But he had stationed the chariot between the armies, and right opposite the chariots of Bhishma and Drona, so that he did not run away at least for their sake; or so that he can take a last firm look at them!

Other symptoms : he began to sweat; the skin began burning as it were, because of a passion in his heart, which he could not characterise as sorrow, or indecision, lack of responsibility, or a sense of forlornness, despondency or morbidity. His hands began trembling, the vision blurred and he threw away the bow and arrows.

It was complete. The disease had completely overtaken him, by now.

Now the oral symptoms : he said :

“Krishna, I am not interested in fighting. I can't kill Bhishma, Drona and others. Let them kill me, if they want. If Kauravas do not know that war is wrong, why should I fight after knowing that it is wrong ? What then is the difference between an intelligent or wise man and an ignorant one ? Killing is bad; but killing elders is worst, if they covet kingdom at our hands; is it not our duty to offer it to them, who are after all worshippable? Even if it is going to bring all the three worlds, I shall not fight these elders to kill them...” He went on and on as Sri Krishna listened silently in wonder as to what had happened to his friend and disciple !

Several explanations are offered by the learned and the wise for this psychological change in Arjuna. In no case was it anything like cowardice. He had fought

battles, won them, killed the enemies, and had never before uttered these words, felt like what he did now. It was neither fear nor indifference behind his words.

This war was totally unlike any other war. Even the one on the outskirts of Virata's capital, where he had to counter Drona and Bhishma, it was more like a proxy or fake war. There was no killing involved in it, but only retrieving the cattle taken by force. Besides Drona and Bhishma were not serious. Arjuna merely demonstrated there, how well he was equipped for the war that was merely a possibility then.

Now it was all different. This was a war to kill, to eliminate, to wound, and to render millions of women widows ! Arjuna was sure that victory was to be his, but inevitably, Drona and Bhishma had to be killed. This situation had never before occurred. When he won, as he would, there would be no Drona or Bhishma to share that joy ! That, he could not imagine, or reconcile to!!

At this moment of weakened determination, perhaps another factor mattered and suddenly supported that weakness by seemingly sound logic !

Dhritarashtra, had earlier sent a message through Sanjaya to the effect that war was bad, and the Pandavas had better retire to the forests; almost the very words of that message ran through his submission to Krishna! The very same arguments !!

That meant that those words were dormant in his mind, waiting for an occasion of outburst !

Strangely, he had replied in positive heroic words at that time, perhaps the first impact was not very deep,

and he was hoping against hope that war would be avoided, better counsels would prevail on the evil culprits, and so this awkward situation of having to kill elders, teachers and well-wishers would not arise. Now it proved false !

It was still not late to avoid the war as he thought, in his clouded mind. If he laid down arms, at least he would be free from sin ! Sin, he thought, consisted in actions themselves, and not in their driving forces behind, the thoughts, and the accumulated actions in a chain of choices made or unmade ! He entertained too simple a view of sin, evil, morality, goodness life and death!!

What had Dhritarashtra, said through Sanjaya then?:

“Where Bhishma, Drona and Ashvatthama are killed, would any wise person covet power coming through this sin, and followed by it ? Yudhishtira, forgiveness is better for you !”⁶

Well, say, the Pandavas forgive the Kauravas, and also avoid the war. What shall they do now for living? What means of living shall they follow ? Dhritarashtra had suggested ‘Begging’ !!

“If my wretched sons do not agree for the partition of the kingdom, still, you are born without any enemies, oh Yudhishtira. (You will not hate my son, I know) and therefore it befits you to bear your lives with

⁶ *Papanubandham ko nu tam kamayeta kshamaiva te
jyayasi nota bhogah |
Yatra Bhishmah Shantanavo hatah syat yatra Dronah
sahaputro hatah syat |* (Udyoga 27.24)

begging (not in my kingdom) but in the lands of Andhakas and Vrishnis and other Yadavas, far off. War is not good in any case.”⁷

But why this cruel, unbefitting alternative? Dhritarashtra now philosophises in lofty terms to suit his case or position. (cleverly)

“Life is very short for man; even while it lasts, it is full of sorrow, and eternally exhausts wealth, energy, enthusiasm, and life itself at last. Nothing is permanent here for anyone. Therefore dear Pandavas ! Do not indulge in sins, (which alone will follow you). It ill befits you.”⁸

If begging is not to the liking of the Pandavas (of which they have plenty of training, experience and expertise), there is the other profession of retiring unto the forests for ever (in which mode of life also they are trained and used to). Instead of using these well practiced alternatives, why resort to a new way of life through war ?⁹ Life in the forests is full of hardship, all right, but free from sin; that was Dhritarashtra’s view!

⁷ *Na chet bhagam Kuravo jnyatra yuddhat prayaccheran
tubhyam Ajatashatro |*

*Bhaikshacharyam Andhaka Vrishni rajye sreya manye tu
yuddhena rajyam |* (Ibid verse 2)

⁸ *Alpakalam jivitam yan manushye mahasravam nitya dhukham
chalam cha |*
*Bhuyascha tat yashaso nanurupam tasmāt papam Pandava !
ma krithah tvam |*

⁹ *Nivasadhyam varshapuga vaneshu dukkham vasan Pandava !
Dharma eva |*

But why this repeated advice for the avoidance of war ? Because the Kauravas are 'kith and kin'. That is the main consideration.¹⁰ (Arjuna now remembers this with a depth of consideration).

What if the Pandavas do not heed, and do resort to war ? Dhritarashtra reminds them that it will lead to extirpation of the entire family and fold of warriors at large also. It leads to a devastation of man on an unprecedented scale ! It is a disaster for all mankind!¹¹

Besides there are other weighty considerations : Where is the surety of victory of the Pandavas ? Who will guarantee it in advance ? It is a big gamble.¹²

Whatever this be, there is yet another consideration: the effects of good and bad deeds do not dry up or disappear without entailing consequences in a chain. Even before a man reaches the other world, his sins and merits will have reached there in advance.¹³

Now, thick came all these memories of these powerful bits of message, and their impact was fully felt on the shaky mind of Arjuna.

What was there for Arjuna now to see for himself on that battlefield? Whom had he not seen earlier?

¹⁰ *Sa bhratriputra svajanasya rajnyah*

¹¹ *Sarvakshayo drishyate yatra kritsnah papadayo nirayo abhava samstah*
(verse 25.7)

¹² *Paranjayo yatra samo jayascha ||*

¹³ *Na karmanam vipranaso asti amutra punyanam vapi
athava papakanam |*

*Purvam karthuh gacchati punyapapam paschat tu enam
anuyatyeva kartha ||*

No, there was nothing more to be seen; everything for an action, a final decision to eliminate all those that were responsible for their (The Pandavas') earlier humiliation! Between the thought and action, there was no room for reconsideration, reconciliation, or revision - which was exactly What he wanted now - gap in time!

Not that if there were even a bigger gap he would have arrived at a third alternative, a better decision. That, he did not know !

So he was in utter confusion. An imbecile feeling, a sterile death-wish, a frustration in the form of an unbecoming compassion for the evil doers, evil dead weights on the earth, people whom God meant to be eliminated, overtook him and unnerved him. It rendered him unfit for duty, and revealed life in ghastly colours, and brought about complications in thoughts, feelings, and action. That was why Arjuna saw them as 'relations' and not as warriors on the evil side. A patient on an operational table for a surgeon is just a patient and no other relations are relevant there. In any other professional field, too, what matters is the contextual relation and nothing outside. A man like this is a buyer, a customer in a commercial relation, a patient in a clinic, a traveller in a vehicle, or boat, a devotee in a temple and so on. Forget the context and you complicate the situation by remembering the unwanted, objectionable details. That was the trouble with Arjuna.

What did Krishna do ? He went on showing the various Kaurava heroes to Arjuna, and eyeing them with a severe look so as to rob them away of their life-essences, reducing them to mere moving corpses !

Bhishma remembers it on his death bed.¹⁴ Arjuna too realised it in a way after Sri Krishna returned to his Eternal Abode.¹⁵ Bhishma recollects that scene at the end of his life.

But Arjuna did not realise it while on the battle field on that confused day, and at that hour !

Arjuna built up false arguments in a chain of fallacious links :

“War is bad. It kills all. So many women, behind at home, are going to be rendered widows. If they lose character, there will be a social downfall in intermixture of Varnas and Kulas. That is the worst sin against collective humanity. So withdrawal is better. If that leads to the enemy gaining the upper hand by slaughtering the Pandavas, and their armies, it does not matter; it will be to their account.....”

What he did not realise was the other argument :

“A soldier’s duty is the protection of the collective order of society. It is by doing duty of punishing the transgressors that a warrior keeps that order, that society together; not by running away. Intermixture of society, and transgression of the law of professions inherited by

¹⁴ *Sapadi sakhi vacho nishamya madhye nijaparayorbalayo
ratham niveshya |
Sthitavati parasainikayu rakshna hritavati Parthasakhe
rathirmamastu |* (Sri Bhagavatam 1)

¹⁵ *Yo Bhishma Karna gurunurshalya chamushu adabhra
Rajanyavara ratha mandala manditasu |
Agrecharo mama vibho rathayuthapanam ayurmanamsi cha
drisha saha oja archat |* (Ibid)

tradition are the results of a warrior's neglect of duty and running away from it; not by discharge of the appointed duty. Sin is not in actions themselves, but in their motives behind. If bloodshed is bad and sinful, then surgery is bad and sinful too, because it involves too bloodshed. Punishment is purification, and not a malicious act of harmfulness. If there is no *Danda*, rule or punishing authority, only jungle-life will prevail ! Evil must be eliminated in suitable ways from all walks of life. Compromise with evil is dangerous. Much worse is the argument that good and evil are the same, but only called so, because of different circumstantial understandings."

Arjuna's blurtings, incoherences, incongruities of statements revealed to Krishna two things:

1. That a warrior had to be a sound thinker too, with a clear world-vision as well as a sound ethical moral base.
2. In ultimate actions of a collective nature that are going to decide fates of civilisations, adhocism can be more dangerous and lasting than chaos !

So a brief, but effective teaching of the essential thoughts involved in actions, of human responsibility and God's role in balancing good with evil forces, etc., was to follow.



CHAPTER 12

THE DIVINE TEACHER AND HIS CELESTIAL TEACHINGS

FOR A RIGHT LIVING HERE AND BEYOND

“What has happened to you, Arjuna ? Who is that speaking from within you ? Wherefrom did you inherit this cloud of a confusion ? Is it my old friend Arjuna or someone else speaking to me ? How can you talk of renunciation of duty so unashamedly ? What happens to your culture, your determination, your duty, your discrimination between good and evil in well - defined moments of clarity and illumination ? Come, Come, overcome this weakness of blurred vision that weakens the firmness to act. We are in a field of activity - a terrible but unavoidable war and not in a classroom of some hermit. Get up and act. Be a man and no coward”-

Sri Krishna brushed aside all the words of Arjuna so ornately built into a sound-looking word-structure !

Sri Krishna's firm - worded strictures made Arjuna hesitant a bit, initially, but ignorance has no shame; confusion has no concealment; and anti-life feelings and thoughts can take infinite shapes and forms. Weakness of vision and feebleness of feelings can take shelter behind myriad futile arguments. Knowledge is contextual

but nescience is universal and secular. Wisdom requires cultivation and so time. But ignorance is immediate and quickly pervasive. It can destroy individuals and nations, permanently. Loss of sense of duty assuming forms of etiquette on social and political scales has destroyed very beautiful cultures built up over centuries and millennia. Arjuna's ignorance, or forgetfulness took the form of Pacifism - i.e., "Peace at any cost" and required urgent and effective treatment.

The essence of that treatment has come to be known as *The Gita*. It takes Arjuna through several steps and factors of integrated wisdom as a beacon light which from an incalculable altitude sheds light on every aspect of human personality, its functioning, its divine purpose, and justification against all despairs, all frustrations, all cynicism and such other modes of negative thinking, prevalent then and now. Bhishma or Drona or anybody who is a personality in visible form is a complex blend of body and Soul - teaches Krishna, and the teaching unfolds gradually as follows :

Mere body is a corpse. Mere soul is an abstraction. The two together in a peculiar logical relation of Karma and Dharma constitute a living organism - from ants and microbes to *Brahma*. No two persons are the same, though similarity persists. Previous choices exercised in particular desired ways for those purposes accumulate and form into Karma, threatening to close all future choices. But there are enough opportunities to tame those accumulated balances in the *present*; right action here and now can mitigate the past effects, and errors, and open up bright chances of the future. The past, the present and the future are a continuum of Time running

through commonly for all. The *Karmic* forces can be tamed by action informed with the knowledge of the Divine, and dedicated to it. Karma can then become *Karma Yoga*. Yoga means 'association' 'combination'. If action is associated with God for deliverance from cycles of sorrow and ignorance, it elevates; and it is called yoga, as distinguished from mere mechanical *Karma*, blind, mischievous as flux, and as inexorable. Similarly knowledge of the soul as an element of God, aspect of God, pure light of being, capable of leading by its own light, and shaking of all bodily cravings, crafts, cunning and calculated sorrow, - is associated with the life beyond mundane existence, by grace of God, it can also be termed as *Jnana Yoga*. But this is possible only after one acquires mastery over *Karma Yoga*; it may take several attempts, cycles and births. Those who are straightaway eligible for this latter will have acquired proficiency elsewhere in another life before. These two are bases for a third and final yoga of the finest evolved feelings, in the form of craving for God, called *Bhakti Yoga*. Sublimated feelings of love, for God and God alone in place of hundreds of unworthy objects that perish, and are momentary - that is the most elevated delivering force called *Bhakti*.

All life has to become an integrated yoga, in terms of action, knowledge and feelings in different admixtures, depending on the stage of evolution of the individual human being. *War is also Yoga* ! It is not an isolated action of 'killing' a Bhishma here, a Drona there or someone else, somewhere else. For a warrior, protection of the Good from Evil is a duty through war as the highest punishment, and through strict administration of

law and justice at the lowest levels of duty. Elimination of evil is not regrettable, anymore than clearing a garden of dead wood and withered leaves, and nonfunctional trees and plants that have served their purpose, place, time and function. Bhishma, Drona and all the army in front is no more than that now. Instead of broomstick, it is the bow and arrow, that this political gardener has to use.

Besides, it is only the mortal, mutable body that is going to be removed in such a cleansing. If you do not cleanse it now, it will cease to function, sometime, on its own, and someone else will have to remove it. It is not made for all time. The Soul is imperishable, immutable, and is self-luminous, and it is ironical that it should be associated with this opposite pole of a body at all ! The relation between the two through Karma is personal, individual and is through responsibility. It cannot be transferred to another or exchanged. It has the tendency to eclipse knowledge and obliterate it if allowed its own way through life, uncontrolled by discipline of the mind and other senses of intelligence as well as action. If used properly, in the orderly instrumental way in which it is designed and cast, it can be an excellent vehicle of the journey on this earth and be a take-off point for the other. The body has no other use, in the Divine scheme. The Soul has no other purpose than union with the Divine. That is the logic of their relation. However, vulgar desires in life, vanity, lure of ephemeral pleasures, loss of vision, fallacies about life's permanence and misplaced or pervert notions of relations - all lead to loss of that Eternal Vision.

Take professions, and their place and use in this scheme. Professions are to be viewed as sacrifices in a symbolic way. The Vedic sacrifice is symbolic too, unlike what the Sacrificialists have made it out to be merely ritualistic in meaning. It is not an end in itself. It is a means to promote life, and reach it to its destined end of perfection. Without the spiritual meaning, a sacrifice loses its Vedic significance also. God created this ancient institution at the same time when he created all else, and said : "Beget from this, promote life, so that this institution shall serve you as your Kamadhenu."¹.

But how ? The earth can transform one grain of corn into a sheaf by self-offering on that altar. One teacher can find immortality in a thousand students, by self-offering in the fire of teaching. Parents offer themselves to each other in the altar - fire of marital relation and beget children. So whatever promotes life is a Sacrifice. All respectable professions are sacrifices-teaching, trade, agriculture, cattle rearing, shoe making, pottery, smithy, shipping and even war as protection, as defence, administration, jurisprudence and so on. (Liquor trading, prostitution, murder, theft, gangsterism, gambling and such other short cuts to life that harm life and rob others of hard earned wealth do not come under this category). Now Arjuna must fight, as a duty,

¹ The 'Kamadhenu' is the proverbial Cow of Plenty. Such Cows lived in the hermitages of Vasistha and Jamadagni, and were confiscated by Viswamitra and Karthaveerya Arjuna with disastrous effects on them, their people and their civilization. It is a 'symbolic' entity. The Veda recognises some 23 exemplary such objects in Nature - The Sun, the Earth, The Veda knowledge and so on, as explained by the Etymologist Yaska in *Nirukta*.

from this angle. The four-fold order is God-ordained in any civilized society. It avoids heartburns, unhealthy competition and cut-throatism; and regulates life on the natural basis of aptitudes and professions.

Q. But is not war destructive ? What does it produce?
Is it not sinful to shed blood ?

Ans : War, if defensive and unavoidable (as it is, as long as evil prevails in life, and greed and lust overtake ambitions, usurpers leading to stampede and throttling the onward movement of life and forces that promote it) produces peace, ironically! It protects, orders, and prevents disorder and chaos. *No other profession can do this*, and therefore is as respectable as other good, noble professions; or is better than any other as it calls for the self-sacrifice of the soldier any moment, anywhere. Here Death leads to life! the Soldier will not have died in vain, as others by example come forward for a similar act.

Q. : What about sin ?

Ans : Sin is neglect of duty, or encroachment of another's duty.

Sin is contribution to confusion, disorder and chaos. Neglect of God-ordained duties can directly lead there and so it is sin. Whatever promotes life and order is merit. That is god's direction fixed for life – evolution from *Asat* to *Sat*, death to immortality, and from darkness to light. Running away from God-fixed positions of life is sin. There is life collective, beyond you and me, and beyond the present and the past. Man cannot

know all this or direct himself or others in life's integrated goal of Auspiciousness. He must surrender his ego, his self, his pride and vanity for a higher good that only God knows. Surrender to God opens up a clearer vision beyond all temporalities of life.

Surrender is not easy. It is possible by self-conquering of the body, its machinations, snares and enmeshments. The body is matter made of three *Gunas* - *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. This last, *tamas*, is inertia, anti-knowledge, anti-movement, and a force of gravity pulling man to his grave. It tends to freeze man of all his fine feelings and evolvment into higher ranges of knowledge and Divine aspirations. But careful food habits, cultivation of good company conducive for evolvment and acquirement of appropriate mental and spiritual attitudes and cultivation of knowledge under devout spiritual guides can make man emerge out of this death shell- this body that is otherwise what it is.

Right activity, Right feelings and Right knowledge constitute the equilateral sides of a triangle that our life is. If one or the other dominates over the other two, that fixes the temperament of the aspirant. No such thing as pure isolated activity or knowledge or feeling is possible in life. It is all a mix. 'Right' is what causes evolution and 'wrong' is what prevents it.

Come to gods; they are all aspects and functional faces of One Supreme, all Pervasive God only. How can there be more than one center only in a circle ? Looking all at life rolling all through the year, and through all time we cannot form any other picture! Life

is a cyclic roll with God at the centre; but this centre is reflected in all the points within the circle. His glory is scattered and reflected everywhere. At the same time all is within Him. It is all His 'expression'. This 'All in him', and 'He in all' constitute the two polar sides of the same Reality, the same reciprocity and organic unity of all existence. All action must have this basic knowledge; what remains then for man is only Instrumentality or Agency of God, and not absolute independent Doership. Arjuna must realise this, that he is Krishna's agent, weapon, and instrument.

Sri Krishna as God reveals his cosmic form - Visvarupa- to Arjuna to convince him of this truth. Sanjaya, Vyasa's other gifted disciple is allowed also to partake of this Cosmic Vision.

But the teaching continues, clearing various other doubts of Arjuna.

The supreme Esoteric truth - or Secret - is twofold.

- 1) Bhakti or Highest form of love for God, which is not static, but is dynamic and informs all activities of man, and permeates all his knowledge, if cultivated as the one special faculty of life. Even war, like any other activity, has to be conducted while being in this devout attitude. It is possible by practice. Bhakti as dedication to God is no mere substitute for any other attitude. It is an all-enveloping protective sheath as well as sprouting growth - point for human personality. In a prominent drive, it has the force to destroy all sins that may otherwise arise from activities, otherwise selfish.

- 2) Surrender is the total dedication of all personality to God, self-abnegation, self-effacement, making way for God to take over the Self, to lead it through stress and strain, sin and merit, suffering and joy, and all conflicts and agonies, contradictions and perversions, to its true Destiny, Godhead.

Sri Krishna stresses, among other things, the all-too-important fact of life's transitoriness, which many do not realise seriously for its consequences. Go, we must, from this life. But to what destination ?

The uncareful happy-go-lucky man, the unthinking pleasure-hunter, inconsiderate to other fellow human beings, and animals in our care, has two options - of either Hell, or perpetual transmigration. Hell has three wide doors - *Kama* (desire), *Krodha* (hatred) and *Lobha* (lust), because of the heavy traffic every moment! The Devilish-tempered man, taking pride and pleasure in harming others and exploiting them, the sadist, the bully, the bigot, the despot and all others whose ways of life are parasitical and based on anti-values all go to this Dark world, as a grand mansion of purification. Transmigration is for those who never once think of the escape-door of futile 'becomings' that do not lead to 'Beinghood'. Life must go on and on until all become Perfect Beings. That is the meaning of life - evolution to perfection. If the impediments are too forbidding, those concerned will be sent to the Purifying Centre, called Hell. If they are disturbing, elusive and less severe, these others concerned will be given opportunities here in this life-laboratory, repeatedly to correct themselves, in the company of the evolved ones, for

a further onward march. Rebirth is not, thus, a curse, but a repeated opportunity for right evolution.

The evolved ones are destined to reach Him and share all qualities of perfection, beyond all infirmities and fluxes, to share all His Glory, in a world beyond Time and Space. That is the goal. It is to reach that, God has endowed man with a body, a human personality, and facilities of activity, thought and sublimated feelings.

Activities ordered into categories of preservation and protection, into knowledge and inspiration, research and guidance, maintenance and supplies, and sundry labour of a great many variety - are not arbitrary, but natural, and based on the infinite variety of human nature, determined by *Karma* and its numerous forms of mutation, and has a Divine sanction behind it all. Violation of this law of one's own 'being - becoming' is devilish in nature, as it promotes nothing but chaos in life, through lust and selfishness. This is against the direction that God has fixed for life.

The question of 'equality' or 'inequality' in life is man made and has no sanction in the Divine scheme. We are all 'differently' made, that is all. Each is great and important in his own divine ordained 'post' in life, which in Vedic language is a 'sacrificial post', as long as the vocation is sanctioned by life - like agriculture, warfare, instruction, research into the secrets of life, cattle rearing and service. But short cuts, and false 'professions' like theft, robbery, harlotry, liquor - making and selling - are devilish as they harm life, promote stampede, unhealthy competitions for success and demoralisation of the established order based on true

labour that runs life. The relevant question is of *justice* and not of *equality*. Justice must be available to all in their own means of living, with opportunities for self-perfection without disturbing order. The duty of a warrior, an administrator, a judge, or a monarch is in this holding of balances evenly for all, the weak and the strong, the wise and unenlightened, the wealthy and deprived. So Arjuna must fight against organised evil!



CHAPTER 13

YUDHISHTHIRA'S MASTERLY ACT !

While Shri Krishna was instructing Arjuna for an hour-long duration, soldiers on either side were still getting ready and not many noticed what was happening; still less, a few realised its importance or significance. Of course, a delusion covered the war – field when the Master was revealing His Cosmic Form to the confused disciple. This Cosmic Vision was vouched to only Sanjaya outside the war-field, and not even to Bhishma or Drona, nearby, who claimed to be Devotees, in their perplexities. All that people could see was that Sri Krishna and Arjuna were still not ready for the beginning of war.

When the Divine Conversation ended, Yudhishtira could catch a break to know that the moment of action was near. Arjuna's lifting up of *Gandiva* triggered that hope, and the peace and determination on the face of Arjuna, reassured steadiness into his mind. Sri Krishna beamed a profound smile on the other Pandavas!

There was now a surprise in store for both camps! Yudhishtira was removing his armour on the chest !!

His protective sheaths on his forearms also!!! After removing the shoes with leather straps also, he lay down his bow and arrows, alighted from the chariot swiftly, and was moving alone in the direction of Bhishma's chariot. Bhima feared some unthoughtful compromise in this unexpected move, and also followed him. Arjuna also missed a few heartbeats at this strange behaviour of his eldest brother.

Sri Krishna accosted Yudhishtira by shouting a stiff question at the fast – moving Yudhishtira : “What are you doing, Prince ? What is your idea ?”. The other two brothers also had now followed, to prevail on Yudhishtira, and prevent him from some unforethought foolish offer to the enemy.

It was only Dhrishtadyumna who remained unperturbed. Even Satyaki and Dhrishtaketu had followed the Prince with serious misgivings. All had expected the unexpected now ! - cessation of hostilities, suspension of war, and an announcement by the Prince that he was ready to retreat into the forests as a recluse instead of war and this violence !

Sri Krishna now remembered the earlier conviction of the Prince that war must be abjured at all costs; it was only the warrior who lived on violence unlike all other respectable professionals in society - labourers living by hard work, merchants by trade and commerce, and Brahmins on alms and charities, by begging and preaching. Only the warrior subsisted on the doctrine of Kill, like fish swallowing fish in waters, and dogs

snarling at other dogs. Was this Dharma¹ ? Yudhishtira had ridiculed the entire warring profession by comparing the warriors to dogs in an undignified metaphor - how they snarl, bark, follow each other in circles, gnash their teeth and then fall upon one another to tear each others to pieces ! He wondered in his unconsidered deep anguish, if there was any difference between dogs and soldiers ! It did not matter to him as to who started the war, or the difference between offenders and defenders. Yudhishtira never imagined in his all-too-facile conviction, what would happen if there were no rulers, warriors, administrators to keep order in society, to prevent encroachments, and to arbiter in disputes among men and societies that were always there, all time.

Yudhishtira would only say and pray that there should not be disputes, wars and violence at all-, which would be anybody else's prayer too ! But that was only in idealistic day-dreamings. Reality was otherwise. Wishing it away was not for a ruler; it was no good for a saint or a philosopher also; life was always a grim battle between good and evil, even within man's mind, in his own inner thoughts, feelings and actions. Yudhishtira would not want 'violence' of any kind, unavoidably thrust on man by evil forces.

¹ *Shudrah karoti shushrusham, Vaishya vai panyajivanah |
Vayam vadhena jivamah kapalam Brahmanairvritam |
Kshatriyah kshatriyam hanti matsyo matsyena jivati |
Shva shvanam hanti Dasharha, pashya Dharmo yathagatah |*

Sri Krishna knew that Yudhishtira had no respect for the warrior's duties, even of protection, which was sacred and God-ordained. He had advised him against this oversimplifying of a hero's duty – time and again, with no effect.

Now, on the other side, the Kaurava army was waving in outbursts of laughter of ridicule, misunderstanding Yudhishtira. Shouts of “shame, shame!” rent the sky, and the army thought that the war was over, without even a formal start; it was anxious about Sri Krishna's next move.

The Pandava army was non-plussed for a few moments; but then Bhima chased Yudhishtira, with misgivings of an impending wrong move, and a miscalculated war move - to avert it by any means, so as to persuade him against this mischief, with Arjuna behind him : “Brother ? Where are you going? What do you intend doing ? Why are you unilateral? Take me into confidence ! Please.....please.” - he was shouting. But by now, Yudhishtira had neared the chariot of Bhishma who had not expected this or who did not know its meaning. Yudhishtira touched the old sire's feet and sought his blessings :

“Grandpa! So, you decide to lift up your bow against us, at long last ? Is this your desire that we should either die or resort to forests, again ? Do you consider it as Dharma, after all humiliations, and injustices heaped on us ? If this is your resolve or conviction, permit us to retire to forests, as we would not want anything against your wishes ?” - he was heard saying to the old man.

Bhishma : (With tears uncontrollable, rolling down his cheeks) “Child ! I have never wept like this before! See tears gushing, falling on my long beard and wetting my upper garment !! Do not, for heaven’s sake, say that you want to retire to forests. Who can accuse you of evil designs or selfishness ? The whole world knows your woes, your being wronged and being left with no other alternatives ! But realise my awkward position also, for a moment. I am in a tight corner, in a confused moment of moral crisis - I have to discharge my debts to this stubborn Duryodhana, somehow, and at the same time do justice to you also, to be fair and equal. Right now I cannot retire from the war-field for this reason. Ultimately you will be rewarded with success by God, justice being on your side, undoubtedly. I have been unable to help you in any of your moments of distress or humiliations or life-dangers. That pinches me, and helplessness is eating into my bones and flesh. Let me tell you one thing.if you had not come here now to seek my blessings, and thereby pleasing my disturbed mind, perhaps I would have cursed you in my mind. You have done the right thing. So, ask for a boon from me. Ask me anything except asking me to switch over sides or stop fighting. Have you not heard the saying that man is a miserable slave of Artha²? And that economic considerations are

² *Arthasya purusho dasah Dasastu artho na kasya chit |*
(Artha is to be taken in the narrowest meaning of economic favours and not in the larger sense of statecraft or polity.)

nobody's slave ? I live by the grace of this vile fellow, Duryodhana, and am indebted to him for food and clothes. I am ashamed, my boy ! Tell me, what can I give you except those two boons?"

Yudhishthira : (Being deeply, touched, and unable to think of asking, being taken aback by this frank confession, looks at Bhishma with a searching stare and then) "Grandsire, bless me with your heart for ultimate success."

Bhishma : "That will happen automatically even without my blessing ! Ask for something that I can give you here and now."

Yudhishthira : "Tell me, sir, then, how do we win over you ? how can we disarm you, as you are beyond inflicted mortality ?"

Bhishma : (this time with a grim, firm face, and with a final decision, yet with tears and a choked voice) "Boy ! you cannot win over me, until I myself voluntarily retire from the war field. And the whole world knows those conditions under which I shall not fight - if I am faced with a woman, or woman-become - man, a eunuch and such other situations. Do not put me into this position right now; approach me at the right time and I shall advise you. Go and start the war." Yudhishthira curses himself for even this much of causing pain to the old sire, and returns with rolling tears on cheeks. He now proceeds to Drona's place.



Sri Krishna : “Arjuna ! See the wisdom and masterstroke of your brother ! He could not have done more for his cause.”

Arjuna : “(understanding, somewhat, Krishna’s meaning), “But why should he have done this so openly and right now ! I do fail to understand the relevance of place and timing !”

Sri Krishna : “Whatever the intentions of your brother, the strategy has worked; you see how : an incalculable benefit has accrued on your side by this move. Your brother is against crooked moves and strategies, to get the enemy into straight jackets, even when the enemy practices them. He wants everything to be straight !! Stratagems, bound by Dharma, are not themselves any evil, as both Brihaspati and Shukra approve of them. But your brother is against even these. Sukra, however opines that in a crisis, and a fight against established evil, such stratagems are a must, and are to be considered as Dharma; even if you call it Adharma it does not matter, he says : What has your brother done now ? He has bearded the lion in its own den!! What more could we have wanted or desired? He could have silently sought the blessings of Bhishma, in his own camp, last night ! That would not have demoralised the Kaurava army as a whole or even the chief heroes ! That is exactly what has happened now ! Duryodhana is unhappy ! That is good for us; secondly Bhishma has let the world know that he is unable to put his heart into the war on Duryodhana’s side ! That is a sure assurance to you, of victory in advance ! The Kaurava-camp

will hereafter be suspicious of their General, and this will divide their loyalties. It has already broken their stand morally - to the heroes on that side, still believing in Dharma. Hereafter it is a question of time for you to be victorious. If this visit had been private, last night, Duryodhana might have tortured your grandfather or even changed the general in a hasty move ! Who knows ? He is fickle-minded. Bhishma could also have been accused of treachery! Now all has happened in daylight, so openly. Besides, Bhishma has not said anything you and I, or the world does not know. He has been won over, so artfully ! Bhishma, for his part, would have wanted to bless you all, in his troubled mind, and would have cursed himself and you all, had not your brother given him this chance to unburden his loaded heart at this juncture ! Now this has all upset Duryodhana's calculations and destroyed the army's determinedness and will to conquer. Now the rest of you the Pandavas - also go to Bhishma, and ask for his blessings."

The rest of the Pandavas obey Sri Krishna and meet Bhishma, and touch his feet. Bhishma melts into compassion and blesses them all with long life and victory. Bhishma, views now Sri Krishna as if to ask him : "What is this you have done, by impelling these unfortunate children to meet me at a time when I ought to be concentrating on means of victory for the Kaurava - camp ?" Krishna also eyes him as if to say : " I have told you all that I ought to, on the day you decided to back the camp you have chosen finally ! This is your own doing ! I am only correcting the choices of you all, by counter measures so as to guide the world

towards lasting peace and honour. Why blame me for your mistakes ?”

Bhishma lifts up the bow with trembling hands and observes the Pandavas moving towards Drona's chariot. He silently pities Drona, also in the same plight as his own, and imagines how Duryodhana must be viewing this all, in envy, distrust, rage and helplessness.



Dusshasana, who was behind Bhishma's chariot, as its wheel protector, was watching this in bewilderment and disbelief. On seeing Yudhishtira approaching Bhishma, he had thought that this coward was nearing the old man with a proposal of peace and permission for retreat ! Now he was awestruck, held his breath in fear, and swallowed his anger in sheer helplessness. He said half loudly to himself : “Some treachery is going on !” He could not clearly hear all the words of Yudhishtira or Bhishma, but could make out that the enemy was asking for some concession and that the old man had surrendered, as was evident from the tears of the old man. There were arms-suppliers and vehicles loaded with fresh arms between him and Bhishma, which prevented the overhearing of this crucial dialogue! Dusshasana cursed himself for being so far away at this moment.

He ran to Shakuni and appraised him of his own misgivings : “Uncle ! These cowards touched the feet of this infirm old man of easy compassion to all and sundry, and asked for some favour, which I could not make out; the old man seems to have granted it, as he was weeping in helpless agreement. He will not fight

with any determination, I think ! We made a mistake by crowning him as our General and by keeping Karna out ! How are we to make good this loss ?" - he said.

Shakuni had not expected this bolt from the blue and missed a few heartbeats, not being ready with an answer or a counter stroke. He thought for a while, staring blankly at the skies, and then approached Duryodhana, along with this Dushshasana. None of them seemed to have a way out. Duryodhana said at last : "Now we are helpless. Right now I cannot afford to accost or antagonise the old man. That will backfire on me. Let the war start. At the appropriate time I shall wreak my vengeance on the old man in suitable verbal taunting. I cannot do more, even then. He has anyhow proclaimed publicly that he will not kill the Pandavas! What more is there for him to grant them secretly ? His own name is at stake here, if he wants to backtrack from the Generalship, so generously given to him by us. We do not expect much from this old man anyhow. It is enough if he can eliminate as much of the enemy forces as possible. If he can wipe out their army, even if he spares those five villains, our work will be done! All that we now have to do is to protect this old man from the sight of Shikhandi ! Take care, all of you ! Let us then see what treachery he can do to us."

From a distance, Sri Krishna, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna were observing this secret conference on the other side. They could gauge the contents and direction of their helplessness and silently spoke to each other through gestures of their eyes. Now the Pandavas, had neared Drona's chariot.



Yudhishthira : “Pranams, Acharya. We have come to seek your blessings, after you also decided to fight against us, your own disciples.” The Prince now touched the preceptor’s feet, followed by similar gestures of respect by his brothers.

Drona was over eighty years of age, rather dark skinned. In that steel-like frame of body, few would have expected delicate human responses to difficult situations. But the world knew, most people not knowing him personally or intimately, that he could arrive at hard decisions and stick to them, rising from stark poverty to the heights of royal preceptor of the undivided Kuru family of princes. There was a time when he did not afford to possess a cow, even a single cow, to feed his only son with milk! But by skill, hard work and enticing manners and a very sharp intellect, he had acquired a status next only to that of Bhishma in the hierarchy of Kaurava heroes. Indeed all the war – planning, the entire strategy was in his hands.

Duryodhana had calculated that Drona could not play treachery, anyway, as there was his personal interest in it too; in as much as Drupada, his enemy number one, was on the other side, and at least to kill him, and satisfy his urge for vengeance, Drona would put his mind and heart into the fight. Drona, unlike Bhishma, could not afford real or pretended neutrality. There were common enemies for both Duryodhana and Drona.

One factor however worried: Duryodhana had just now spoken very harsh, unkind, cutting words at the teacher; now Yudhishthira’s meeting with the teacher

would act like showers on a scorched piece of land. The Acharya would be pleased with the Pandava heroes, and that was not good for him.

Drona, for his part, had not anticipated this visit by the five brothers to him. It is all right they paid customary respects to their family chief. But he himself was no such blood relation! Drona melted into kindness, and wept like a child.

Drona said : "Prince Yudhishtira, I have seen you since your boyhood, and I am pleased with your genial manners, as well as the respectful and civilized behaviour of your brothers. I am not related to any of you in this or the other side. But believe me, I had to take this side as a paid servant, to discharge my indebtedness, and not because of any dislike for you. I am not at all against you. Dharma will save you, as you abide by it. Sri Krishna will ensure definite victory for you, in spite of odds against you in numbers and weights like me against you".

Yudhishtira : "Teacher Sir, what are we to do if you too stand against us ? Shall we retire to forests or fight against you ?"

Drona : (feeling pinched and in tears) "Victory will be for you but only after my death. Kill me as early as possible!!"

The five brothers are awestruck by this command of Drona, without realising the meaning. Drona continues:

"Didn't you understand ? Arjuna! you are dearer to me than even my own son! This is no exaggeration!

You know where my breath is rooted or centered!... that is all I can say now; go”.

Drona turns his face in anguish against himself in his ironical plight of having to fight against Dharma, and his own dear pupils, especially Arjuna, who had fulfilled his vow of humiliating Drupada, among all Kuru princes.

The Pandavas move now on to Kripa; a similar dialogue takes place, and Kripa too blesses them for victory: “I am not destined to die like mortals. But victory will be yours, believe me” - he said in great compassion.

Sri Krishna now was watching with keen interest, the next move of Yudhishtira and felt relieved to see him approaching Shalya.



Yudhishtira : “Uncle dear! What is this you have done by joining this foul fellow, Duryodhana? Is he nearer to you by blood than we, your nephews, Nakula and Sahadeva ? You are an elderly statesman, knowing codes of Dharma as well as chivalry. If you too desert us, whom can we depend on ? Or, do you really consider justice is on the other side, so that we are fit only for forest life ? Say in a word whether we deserve life or death!”

Shalya is pierced sharply by these wise insinuating words. For a moment he is speechless, being equated with Bhishma and Drona who betrayed the Pandavas and got clubbed with evil forces! He pauses and then being repentant, says to Yudhishtira, words of some comfort. He narrates, in detail, how he was coming with

a huge army only to join the nephews ; how there were resting places with food and comforts, pleasure and entertainment on the way, arranged by someone, without his asking, and how he mistook that someone for Yudhishtira, and then came to see, it was all Duryodhana's strategy, who asked a boon for the services of comfortable stay on the way; how that boon turned out to be a request to join him in the impending war, instead of joining the nephews. Shalya felt sorry for being tricked and cornered in this ironical way. He was helpless and meant no trouble for the Pandavas.

Yudhishtira : "What is this fun uncle ? You say you do not mean trouble for us, while being ready to fight us, by joining the enemy ! How can you mean no trouble, being a hero of Bhishma's stature ?"

Shalya is flattered by this comparison, and feels elated for a moment; but realises the absurdity of his situation, which he cannot explain in rational words; after a moment he replies. :

Shalya : "No, no; do not see this from the mere angle of personal loyalties. Chivalry is a greater Dharma! Besides, did I not come to see you and comfort you all at Upaplavya after your exile was over? Does it not mean, I am with you in the heart of hearts ? What is my fault ? This crooked fellow trapped me into this absurd situation, for which I feel really sorry. Anyway, I shall grant you a boon; ask for anything except, my switching over the sides."

Yudhishtira : "Bless us wholeheartedly, in spite of your position."

Shalya : “That is easily done, even without your asking for it; ask for something I can really give you, to ease my troubled conscience.”

Yudhishtira : (thinking for a moment, and then)
“Shall I really ask of you ? there is a strong possibility....should I anticipate it and ask of you, I do not know....”

Shalya : “All possibilities are there in wars of this kind. Anticipation is part of strategic thinking. Say out what you want.”

Yudhishtira : (Emboldened by this assurance)
“Uncle!..... Karna has vowed not to join the war till Bhishma retires.”

Shalya : “I know all that...speak your mind...”

Yudhishtira : “How long Bhishma will take to retire, only God knows. No one can say when the war will end, or how many generals they would require. There is Drona also; Kripa too...”

Shalya : (Impatiently) “Skip all this, young man and proceed.”

Yudhishtira : “In case Karna assumes generalship and in case you are required to be his Charioteer....”

Shalya : (Fuming with anger, and intolerant of this proposition) : “No, no, no....that is ruled out ! I hope you are not insulting me with this possibility! How can a true warrior like me ever do this mean service to this upstart who pretends to be a hero? Who said all this to you ?”

Yudhishtira : (trying to assuage his hurt pride, in a comforting tone) : “Uncle ! You yourself said that

all possibilities are there in a war of this kind! I am not suggesting anything on my own.... I have heard that Karna would like to have you for his charioteer, as and when and if, his turn of generalship arrives. It may or may not.

Shalya : (Bewildered, and suspecting a campaign of character-assassination) "How can this happen without my consent ? Who told you I would agree? Am I so cheap and ready for sale or mean service? This is a sheer impossibility ! Forget it and ask for a boon. You have not yet told me what it is. Why talk of Karna and these wild possibilities ?"

Yudhishtira : "Uncle dear ! Duryodhana will pressurise you, or trick you somehow to accept this possibility! He has already proved his capacity by drawing you on his side, away from us. Do not say he will not have you serve Karna, in his own chosen way! You are pliable after all your bravery and can be easily flattered and fooled."

(Shalya thinks of this, and has no ready answer for Yudhishtira. He is still fuming with humiliation at the mere suggestion of his having to drive Karna's chariot)

Shalya : "Then hear me. Even if your possibility comes true, it will not be to the advantage of Duryodhana."

Yudhishtira : "It *shall not* be to his advantage; that is the boon you may grant me, if ever you can do so."

Shalya : "I do not see your point at all ! How will this help you ?"

Yudhishtira : "It will help me this way : Karna is a braggart and foul-mouthed fellow. His arrogance

will blind him to the many key suggestions, guidances and pieces of advice you may have to give him from time to time. It is then that your services will help me."

Shalya : "How ? I still fail to understand ?"

Yudhishtira : "Giving him right and suitable advice is not *adharmic* by any standards. He will refuse them, given his hot temperament and conceitedness. You will not pocket the insults I know. Then try to discourage him from his foolishness, to your utmost; that will take out his pointedness in mischief and render him less ferocious and less vengeful. This is all you have in your present power to help, I think."

Shalya : "This is nothing ! This will automatically happen, even without your asking. I think you are very logical, and reasonable in your expectations, also. Karna will be wrong to ask for this punishment at my hands, as it will be suicidal. The world should not blame me then for Karna's faults !"

Yudhishtira : "Blames and counter blames will not be of use when the war ends, as it must, somehow. I do not seek anything else from you, sir."

Shalya : You must be clear about certain things in my account. First, I am not a mercenary, selling myself to anyone for lustful considerations. Second, I am in a condition to afford neutrality, as a warrior of my stature cannot afford it in a world-war of this magnitude. I do not want to be branded as a coward. Thirdly I am not willfully on the evil side, but tricked into it. God shall forgive me."

Yudhishtira : "Uncle; there is nothing to forgive here. It is God who directs us all. I tried my best to avoid this war; but it has materialised into a ghastly reality, getting us all into unimaginable ironical situations."



Yudhishtira : "Sri Krishna, where had you been all this while ?"

Sri Krishna : "Tell me if your errands are fruitful or no ?"

Yudhishtira : "Where is the question of fruitlessness when you are not merely with us, but upholding our cause ? Tell me where you had been."

Sri Krishna : "Guess if you can."

None of the five brothers is able to guess, with all efforts by them.

Sri Krishna : "Well; I met Karna !"

All are totally surprised ! Yudhishtira cannot believe his own ears !

Yudhishtira : "Did you say Karna ? Has he come upon the battlefield ? What happened to his vow?"

Sri Krishna : "Yes ! He has come.....but not to join Bhishma or actually fight. He is overlooking camp arrangements, and arms supplies and is managing such other accessory affairs; not directly participating in the war under Bhishma. So I got news. I thought I could meet him while you were doing your diplomatic operations."

Yudhishthira : “I do not understand your move at all!”

Sri Krishna : “You will understand now; I told him; ‘You see, Radheya ! Anyhow you have vowed not to fight on that side, till Bhishma holds the bow. Why can’t you fight from our side, at least till that period ? After that, you can go back to that camp if you want?’ ”³

Yudhishthira : “Did he agree ?”

Sri Krishna : “How can he ? I knew he would not! Yet I played this diplomatic move with another purpose.”

Yudhishthira and brothers cannot believe or understand this move !

Sri Krishna : “ I just continued your strategy. I knew that you - none of you - knew about Karna’s presence here; even if you knew, perhaps you would not have approached him perhaps, as you never considered well of him. So I used the opportunity.”

Yudhishthira : “How would this help ?”

Sri Krishna : “See one thing. We are diffusing the enemy forces one by one, by trying to sag their enthusiasm for war. They are all bewildered, and rendered without purpose, unable to hold on to their loyalties. Will this not help ? Someone lifts up a sword against you and before that if you can remove the sharpness of that edge, does it not help?

³ *Asman varaya Radheya yavad Bhishmo na hanyate |
Hate to Bhishme Radheya punareshyasi samyugam |*

Now Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna are all blind and blunted weapons, rusted as it were ! We have not transgressed Dharma in this at all. Dividing their loyalty by playing on their conflicting minds is advantageous, in advance. It occurred to me when I saw you approaching Bhishma, whether you looked at it that way or no, as a matter of mere courtesy in your artless mind.”

Yudhishtira : “If it had occurred to me that this is also a strategy, I would not have approached Bhishma at all ! Would it not be unfair playing on the conscience of those, on whom Duryodhana depends?”

Sri Krishna : “This is a question you have to answer, after the war is over. Secondly actions will have their effects proper, whether your intentions are one way or another. I do not at all think of it as unfair. We have not poisoned anybody's ears, with false or unworthy tales or suggestions! You yourself said that Bhishma and Drona would have cursed you in their hearts, if you had not given them this occasion to vent their feelings of propriety or impropriety of their participation in the war! You have done them a service and gained an advantage too. On my part I continued your diplomacy, as I explained”.

Yudhishtira is not convinced. He is still confused.



CHAPTER 14

THE FIRST DAY OF WAR

Yudhishtira now played a second masterstroke!

Yuyutsu had been humiliated by Duryodhana publicly for his just suggestion to avoid the war and treat the Pandavas well. Yudhishtira had been briefed about it by spies just two days ago. Yuyutsu, was the illegitimate son of Dhritarashtra by a Vaishya lady, and unfit for any royal inheritances. But he was brave, handsome, fair-minded and popular with a considerable division of army. Dhritarashtra was fond of this youth also. Yuyutsu was politically neutral and wise. Now he had been banished from the Kaurava side, for no fault of his. Few people knew the difference between as to why Karna was a favourite of Duryodhana and why not Yuyutsu! Duryodhana should have taken this 'brother-in-a-way' into his conscience. But he could not, because of different perceptions of Right and Wrong. Karna had plunged into the affairs of Duryodhana blindly without such considerations. Duryodhana just wanted 'yes-men', whatever be their status or strength or abilities. Krishna, Yudhishtira and the rest of the world knew about this weakness of Duryodhana. Even among his own brothers, he had kept away Vikarna from his inner circle for the same reason of Vikarna's love of Truth and other values.

But Vikarna persisted in the camp of Duryodhana, with the hope that wisdom would prevail one day. Besides, he did not want to be blamed as a traitor or deserter. That was understandable.

Yuyutsu was not bound by these or other considerations. But he used to visit his father often either by the invitation of the blind King or on his own. Duryodhana had his spies on him as war was nearing, fearing any betrayal or mischief played into the ears of the unfirm blind King. But when Yuyutsu was banished publicly after that humiliation by Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra had not objected. That was silent approval in a way.

Now Yuyutsu took this seriously to heart and was wondering about the right course of his next action. His self-respect and pride were too deeply hurt to be contained. The King, his own father, was also a party to that humiliation! Was he not too, a Prince ? Who cared for legality or illegality in matters of respect ? Was he any aspirant to the throne to be so despised? If Karna - a mere 'Sutaputra', as the world knew him - could enjoy royal status, how was it wrong, if he himself expected mere dignity and self-respect ? Could not the King have restored at least this, by pulling up that villainous other son ?

After deep considerations, Yuyutsu came to the inevitable conclusion that it was proper for him to die on the side of the Right, Truth and Goodness in the unbecoming war. It was a question of choice between Wrong and Right and not betrayal. Duryodhana had anyhow disposed of him.

So he had sent word to Lord Sri Krishna, the previous night, of his readiness to join the Pandava army under Dhrishtadyumna. His was like the case of Vibhishana in the Ramayana - exactly.

Sri Krishna looked at Yudhishtira, as if seeking his view.

On his part, Yuyutsu was not hopeful of being accepted. He had heard of Rukmi's case of being rejected. He respected the Pandavas and the wisdom of Sri Krishna in not accepting all and sundry into their camp, without examination of pros and cons. Any other person would have seized the opportunity to accept a formidable army of that size - one full division. This rejection had enhanced the prestige of the Pandavas and of Sri Krishna, and the envy of the Kauravas in the self-confidence of the Pandava army, though smaller in numbers. Yuyutsu's army was not so huge either. His mind argued that Sri Krishna must have had very weighty reasons for Rukmi's rejection; and that there being no such tangible reason for his own being rejected, his mind hoped that he would be accepted after all.

After long silence, and not unwisely or hastily, Yudhishtira, on the advice of Sri Krishna, sent this message to Yuyutsu :

"Brother, I appreciate your volunteering help, and your bold stance on the Right in your father's assembly. I shall however send for you and accept your help, later on, at the most appropriate time, and not right now. Please do not mistake my words. But be ready with your army in your expected position, right before us, from the beginning."

The spy had been honoured profusely, with this message. That was on the previous night.

After the messenger disappeared, Yudhishtira asked Sri Krishna :

Yudhishtira : “What did you mean by the appropriate time ? Have you any valid reasons to reject him politely and indirectly ?”

Sri Krishna : “A warrior or ruler has an opportune moment for everything, and he must wait. Untimely moves are not merely unfruitful but also harmful, as they might yield unintended opposite results.”

Yudhishtira : “If I may know, why not right now? He is not of questionable loyalty like Rukmi; nor is he vainglorious of any trusted chief of our enemy. What is the right time, as you seem to think ?”

Sri Krishna : “Just before the war starts, get into the gap between the army-positions - the ‘narrow street’ separating the two sides, so to say - and shout loudly : ‘whoever believes in the Rightness of our Cause, in Truth, Justice and God, is free, from the other side, to join us. I welcome even in this last moment’ - and see for yourself the effects! The enemy army will be totally confused and in disarray, if Yuyutsu then comes on our side publicly, in the eyes of all. Will that not be to our advantage rather than this secret acceptance ! Let the world not say, we have played foul. Secondly, we do not know how many potential Yuyutsus are still in the waiting on that side ! What further effect this will have on Bhishma, Drona, and Shalya - we cannot

say ! It will at least further destroy the stability of minds of those, who still believe in Righteousness."

That was exactly what happened now, and in this way : War drums and Kettles beating, bugles and conches blowing and shouts of "glory be to Dharma" rising from the quarters of the Kaurava army, where Yuyutsu and his segment were stationed, Yuyutsu marched out royally, majestically with all his followers to the Pandava camp!

After this realignment, now was the time for war to start. Yudhishtira alighted from his chariot, tied up leather-protectives to his forearms, feet and legs and looked at Dhrishtadyumna, and waved gently his right hand, to say "Here we go !...Start." Dhrishtadyumna signalled similarly to the cavalry, charioteers, men on elephant-backs and the skies were torn, as it were, from the loud outbursts of war drums and kettles, conches, bugles and other paraphernalia ! The Kaurava army responded equally ferociously. Heroes shouted to their men "Follow; charge; kill; do not spare the enemy" and so on.

Like two oceans meeting each other at Capes, and Confluences, waves of soldiers rose and fell foul on each other. Now Bhima held his conch tight to his mouth and blew it to his heart's content. The Kaurava army felt a sudden chill in whoever had bones and blood and muscles ! The elephants and horses trembled, discharged urine, and emptied their bowels on hearing this death knell as it were.

Bhima now rushed in his chariot towards Bhishma, to catch and kill the Kaurava brothers behind the grand old man ! Durmukha, Dusshala, Shala, Dusshasana, Durmarshana, Vivimshati, Chitrasena, Vikarna and others were within arm's length of Bhima, and there was impending tragedy at the very first moment of war ! Bhurishravas, Purumitra and others intervened to force Bhima into an awkward retreat, and saved those others, unfortunate brothers ! Bhima, rushed again after a moment of tactical backward movement, and threw up the chariot of Bhurishravas along with its charioteer and horses. In a wink of the eye, those eight brothers had run away to escape death at Bhima's hands. Bhima searched for them with eagle eyes and noticed that Draupadi's sons were now engaging them preventing their flight, with other segments of the Pandava army encircling them. Abhimanyu, Nakula, Sahadeva and even Dhrishtadyumna were behind the sons of Draupadi, and the Kaurava army was being sandwiched and helplessly being attacked on all sides.

On the other side, Bhishma had heaped up a pile of killed soldiers of the Pandava side ! Arjuna was engaging Bhishma with all ferocity possible, but no, the grandsire was not to be contained; he appeared like Death Incarnate, even in that old age. Arjuna at last rendered Bhishma helpless and without supplies, by cutting that line successfully. Now the Kaurava army behind him got scattered and was running for life in different directions in search of protectors, supporters and supplies. Enough harm had been poured on that side within a short time.

Here was Kritavarma engaged with Satyaki : Abhimanyu was locked up with Brihadbala, who was the Kosala Prince then. Abhimanyu lost his Flag-post, and charioteer. An enraged Abhimanyu shot nine arrows at once on Brihadbala, and equalled the position by killing his charioteer and destroying his Flag-post.

On another front Duryodhana and Bhima were fighting with bows and arrows, instead of maces, their usual weapons. Nakula engaged Dusshasana at the same time. Shalya was there on another front engaged with Yudhishtira in a fierce battle. Dhrishtadyumna was preventing Drona from rushing towards the Pandava army. Alambusha (the son of Rishyashringa by a Rakshasa woman) was opposing Ghatotkacha elsewhere so as to make him retreat. Here was Shikhandi against Ashvatthama; Virata versus Kripa, Drupada versus Saindhava, Uttara versus Virabahu, Chekitana versus Susharma of the Trigarthas, Sahadeva (son of Jarasandha) versus Uluka (son of Shakuni) were seen here and there then. Dead bodies of elephants and horses got piled up, within no time, with no one to clear them, to make space for other bodies, continually falling there. There was no time also. By noon, the war-position of loss and gain was equal on both the warring armies.

There was no regular lunchtime as such. Who was to give lunch to whom on what conditions and when? Besides, the heroes never bothered about it between intervals of death, which would be anytime !

Bhishma showed his youthfulness in action in spite of an aging body that day. Kritavarma, Durmuka, Shalya and Vivimshati rushed to back him as guards. But

Abhimanyu resisted them successfully and engaged the old man giving him no respite. Bhishma enjoyed that fight like an old man playing with a grandchild! That encouraged the young lion-of-a-boy all the more. Others too enjoyed that sight, forgetting themselves, where they were or fighting with whom.

Abhimanyu had *Karnikara* flowers¹ as sign on his flag. They were painted on golden coloured silk and looked very attractive in the sunlight from all angles. Kritavarma was hit by an arrow and went into a swoon! Imagine the force of Abhimanyu's arrow ? Shalya received five, for a similar treatment. Durmukha's flag-post was felled with a single arrow. Bhishma's charioteer was now killed with a casually flying arrow and Bhishma himself was rendered bow-less for a few moments. Bhishma was so enraged and began to dance as it were to the rhythm of Abhimanyu's arrows. Everybody wondered at the boy's quickness and expertise in archery.

Bhishma took up a bow at last and destroyed Abhimanyu's flag-post and charioteer. Now five 'Maharathis' - Kritavarma, Kripa, Shalya and Ashvatthama and Bhishma together attacked Abhimanyu to contain him. The boy was not deterred. He faced them bravely and successfully and scattered them. Bhishma again lost his flag-post, by nine of Abhimanyu's arrows. Bhima jumped with joy at this scene of Bhishma's helplessness and the boy's ability to harass

¹ A kind of red flowers on green bushy plants common in sparsely watered areas - a vulgar version of roses, offered to inferior gods and goddesses.

the old man so frequently ! Bhima now rushed to the boy's much needed protection and engagement. Now Virata, Uttara and Dhrishtadyumna, the five Kekaya princes and Satyaki heard Bhima's roar, and rushed there from different spots to engage Bhishma and support Abhimanyu. This went on for a long time to please the onlookers.

Uttara was seated on an elephant. He was less known by his original name Bhumimjaya, the other name being somehow more popular. He was not now the same as the earlier version of a coward that he had appeared at the time of 'capturing the cows' on the northern side of the city of Virata, known infamously as "Uttara-Gograhana". By now, he had acquired special training under Arjuna to become a class-one hero, with no trace of war-fear whatever. Special missiles were in his stock, thanks to Arjuna, and with them he had destroyed a good part of Bhishma's army, and naturally Bhishma was enraged, as he had ignored this boy, all along, mistaking him for the earlier coward. Uttara had now thrown sharp lances to kill all the four horses of Shalya's chariot, at one throw ! Bhishma could not believe his eyes !! He forgot the rules of war agreed upon and directed Shalya to kill the boy. Shalya took a shaft and threw it on the boy seated on the elephant, forgetting that only another man on an elephant could so engage him. Uttara had not expected this foul play. The shaft pierced into the boy's broad chest, though protected by armour, and fell him down immediately. Uttara was killed unfairly on Bhishma's direction, thus. This enraged his brother Sweta ! On this side, Shalya's anger did not abate ; he jumped from his horseless

chariot, with a sword in hand and cut off the trunk of the elephant, which had borne the unfortunate Uttara. The animal roared in agony and fell to die. Uttara had thus proved himself a warrior, worth Shalya's and Bhishma's attention, and paid the debts of Arjuna who had so sublimated him into a war-class hero, and now lay in a pool of blood - the only son of Sudeshna, the second wife of Virata.

Shveta the other son of the first wife of Virata wanted to take vengeance of Shalya, and rushed forward. A huge contingent of charioteers on Shalya's side offered formidable resistance to him on his way to prevent his advances, but for which Shalya might have lost his life that afternoon. Jayatsena, (of Magadha) Rukmaratha (Shalya's son), Vinda and Anuvinda, Sudakshina of Kambhoja, and Saindhava now rushed to support Shalya. Shveta poured on them all shafts of sharp edge; he cut off their bows repeatedly. Rukmaratha was fatally injured in one such sharp throws of lances and shafts ! His bodyguards took away his unconscious body for treatment. Six more shafts by Shveta threw this bunch of opponents into disarray. On seeing this the Kaurava army ran away in fear. Dhrishtadyumna was now chasing Shalya, helpless without support and rendered weaponless.

Duryodhana became broken hearted and rushed towards Bhishma, to draw his attention to this scene of devastation. Bhishma had already seen it, and was admiring the two sons of Virata, a dead one and now an avenging one in silence ! Duryodhana's rage increased. He abused Bhishma in foul terms and prayed for quick action.

Bhishma began pouring arrows, rather late. Meanwhile Shveta had fast approached Shalya and had enveloped him in a thick cloud of arrows to render him almost breathless. At once, at that moment, a thousand charioteers rushed to protect Shweta. The wise Dhrishtadyumna had directed Shikhandi to engage Bhishma to prevent him from approaching towards Shweta.

The sun was due to set in an hour or so, to end the war of the day. Here Shalya felt as if the sun had already set, because of the thick cloud of arrows around him, and he could not see anything. There was no count of horses and elephants dead due to Shveta's weapons, that evening. If Bhishma had made further advances, he would have to fight Shikhandi or lay down arms as per his vow. That was the double target, Dhrishtadyumna had aimed at that evening - eliminating Shalya through Shveta, and disarming Bhishma through Shikhandi. Duryodhana realised this double danger and repeatedly egged on his soldiers to prevent this tragedy on the very first day itself. But none dared to rush to the spot of death, which, surely it was, then.

The Kaurava army had paid heavy penalties on that evening. In the melee, in the confused retreat, Kaurava chariots fell on each other, and soldiers died wastefully, without a single hit by the enemy arrows. The Pandava drums were beating announcing the defeat of the Kauravas at that moment.

Bhishma now began shooting arrows from a distance to avoid meeting Shikhandi ! This turned the war in the opposite direction and tilted victory in favour of the

Kaurava army, in just a few minutes ! The running soldiers were chastised by Duryodhana and pooled together to rush to Bhishma's help.

Bhishma now stood face to face with Shveta, but for some moments he was unable to bear the sharp edges of his arrows, which came in flocks like pecking birds! The Pandava heroes clapped hands, blew horns, conches and sounded kettle drums; this enraged Duryodhana further and he blamed Bhishma in loud insulting words: "To a hero who could defeat Parashurama, should this mere boy be difficult to eliminate ?" - he shouted. But Bhishma was in a swoon not to hear this piercing comment. The Pandava army further gave repeated applause and ovations to Shveta.

Duryodhana himself plunged into their midst, personally. This encouraged his army to array itself and rally behind their leader. Bhishma too responded to treatments by doctors and woke up to resume war. Shveta cut off his bows some seven times in quick succession, and had cut off his Flag-post. The eighth bow in Bhishma's hands was slipping, and the sounds of war drums on the Pandavas' side cleft the sky, and even Bhishma got confused as to who, he was fighting against. Duryodhana shouted loudly to his men : "Protect Bhishma; rush forward; go immediately." Now the aged Vahlika, Shalya and Kripa obeyed him and rallied behind a tired Bhishma. Shveta spared none and made them all retreat before they could come anywhere near Bhishma.

Bhishma lost his bows repeatedly; and felt too feeble to pick up fresh bows at the end of the day, and cut a very sorry, helpless figure, then.

Dhrishtadyumna now took on from Shveta and poured arrows on a tired Bhishma.

Duryodhana shouted in uncontrollable rage : “Is there no masculine hero on our side to contain this villainous Shveta today ?” But even he could not follow his own instructions. It was Shveta’s day, obviously.

Shveta was now seen drawing a terrible shaft with golden handle and studded with gems. It looked like the weapon of the God of Death. Shveta shouted to Bhishma : “Old man, do not run away. Stand if you are a man, to face this” and threw it on Bhishma.

The Kauravas thought that it would kill or wound Bhishma fatally and render him unfit for the rest of the war. Duryodhana shouted for help.

But Bhishma shot eight arrows at the shaft at once and faced it. The arrows rendered the shaft diffused after some time and all felt relieved.

Now Shveta threw a heavy mace on Bhishma. It hit Bhishma’s chariot and burnt it. Bhishma fell injured but escaped death. Now he had lost his charioteer also. It was difficult for him even to stand until an alternate chariot arrived - so fierce and quick were the attacks that Bhishma felt, that never before was he in such pitiable condition.

A voice from the skies told him now : “Bhishma, this is your true moment of success; try; gather heart and eliminate this little opponent.”

Bhishma got into the new chariot, got a new bow and threw fierce arrows at Shveta; he made him

weaponless, chariotless and charioteerless in a few minutes. Shveta held up a sword and shield now, and rushed towards the tired old man at the end of the day.

Bhishma, for the first time drew the Brahmastra missile, as he was at his wit's end and knew nothing else to end him, as a last resort. It pierced into Shveta's chest-shield and killed him in one stroke. Shveta fell like a bolt from the blue; the Brahmastra destroyed much else also, although not intended by Bhishma, on both sides.

The Kauravas roared with joy. The sun was setting now. Virata's army - chief now rushed at Bhishma. Virata's other remaining son Shankha also. He gathered together the scattered Pandava army with success. The Panchala, Kekaya armies besieged Bhishma, who however faced them to contend them and make them retreat. Now Arjuna rushed forward to the help of Shankha.

Shalya held his mace in the right arm, got down his chariot and attacked Shankha, killed all his four horses at one stroke. But Arjuna saved the boy by taking him on, into his own chariot. The sun set and the war ended thus in victory on the Kaurava side.



The Pandava army had given the best performance, though. Virata's family had lost heavily though they were very near success that day. The old King was upset. Yudhishtira was worried about heavy loss of troops. The Kaurava army too had lost heavily, but no important leader was hit or killed. But on the Pandava

side Virata's two brave sons were dead. Bhishma had been cornered repeatedly, and rendered helpless, proving that valour was only in his past history, as mere boys could confuse him, bewilder him and bedevil him ! It was a kind of warning or taste of a sample of what was in future store.

Duryodhana was worried; he had not imagined that Shveta was so valorous. How many more such surprises in the Pandava army ! - he wondered, and feared.

Bhishma was being treated by army-doctors. There, on the field, thousands of wounded soldiers lay unattended. Now the Kauravas were planning for the next day's strategy.



CHAPTER 15

RESULTS OF THE SECOND DAY

Dhritarashtra was reacting to Sanjaya's narration of war events of the first day. He was saying : "I am happy and comforted that Virata's son Shveta is dead, and can do no more mischief. Any way we have won the first day, whatever the cost may be. Sanjaya, I did not know that war was so big a gamble and results so unpredictable. Gandhari did not want it. On that side, Yudhishtira, Sri Krishna and even Bhima and Arjuna were ready for compromises instead of war. My foul son inflicted it on us all, on the wicked encouragement of Karna and Shakuni, and Dusshasana. I wonder if my sons can emerge safe and victorious at the end".

Sanjaya : "Why blame these others, my lord ? You must own the greatest share of responsibility, as all this happened only by your tacit approval, with the choice of putting an end to enmities always in your hands only. Even now you can stop the rest of losses, if you want. There is no use of building dams on dried up or emptied rivers!"



Yudhishtira was deeply upset and silent in the camp. Sri Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna were there too, Sri Krishna sitting in a Yogic mood with closed eyes, Bhima moving restlessly to and fro, and Arjuna in deep introspection. The twins were at the entrance of the camp looking for orders from Yudhishtira. At last:

Yudhishtira : “Krishna, did you see the ferocity of Bhishma ? How did we wrong him ? Is this the way he blesses us ? See, how many thousands of our men he has eliminated without an iota of mercy? If we cannot suitably remedy this, he will eliminate all our brave men like Shveta in no time! It is better to stop the war and spare them, even at this late hour, I feel. On our side Arjuna is not putting much of his heart into the fight. Only Bhima is my solace today; he very nearly finished Bhishma, but for his boon of death as at the moment of his own choice. Arjuna has not at all done well today, your bosom friend !! You are *Yogeswara*- and can create a hero of your choice, to stop this Bhishma from further harm, if you so wish. Can’t you make up your mind ?”

Sri Krishna : “Do not worry, brother. Do not fear also. Temporary losses are natural. As long as I am there and your brothers, final victory will be yours. Is not Shikhandi in waiting for Bhishma ? He will get his due moment. No problem.”

Turning to Dhrishtadyumna, Sri Krishna continued:

“General Sir; today is over for whatever gains or losses. Tomorrow shall be our day. Arrange the Kraunch-Aruna pattern for the army tomorrow and lead it. These

five brothers will follow your lead. I suggest this Vyuha or army-structuring especially because the Kauravas might not be familiar with the ways of tackling it, with all their leaders put together. Arjuna shall be in the forefront. At the head of the structure of the Vyuha there shall be Drupada; at the spot of eyes of the bird-structure of the Vyuha there shall be stationed the Dhasharnas, Dasherakas, Anupas, Kiratas. At the back fill up the Nishadas, Poundras, and Pauravas and at the fag end Yudhishtira shall stand. In the wing parts of Vyuha, Bhima on one side with the sons of Draupadi and in the other Abhimanyu, Satyaki, the Pishachas, Kundivishas, Dhenukas, Tanganas, Paratanganganas, Vahlikas, Tittiras, Chola Pandyas, and in between Agniveshyas, Hundasbharis, Shabaras, Udbhasas, Vatsas and Nakula as well as Sahadeva with appropriate numbers of horses, elephants and other equipments”.



It was a Dwadashi day. By Sunrise, the army was ready, spread in the pattern Sri Krishna had suggested. Duryodhana knew that this pattern was impregnable.

The Kauravas had an ordinary pattern. At the start, the patterns attacked each other. Bhishma attacked the left wing - to receive Bhima, Abhimanyu and Satyaki. Soon the patterns got disturbed, at this strategy of Bhishma. Bhishma's Mahavyuha though ordinarily well known and none too difficult to break, worked well, thanks to Bhishma's leadership and planning.

Arjuna : “Sri Krishna, take my chariot to Bhishma's position.”

Sri Krishna did so in no time. Hanuman on the Flag-post of Arjuna's chariot was shouting fiercely so as to get the enemy army terror-stricken. The Kaurava army lost courage, and scattered at this. There were festoons and colourful flags flying, decorating on all sides of Arjuna's chariot. His chargers - horses - pierced into the enemy army like knives, in unimaginable speed and deftness. Arjuna eliminated the enemy armies on either side as he advanced into it. Soon the Krauncha-Aruna pattern of The Pandava army re-structured itself as before, and closed on all sides to be impregnable for the enemy army. Now a lot of Kaurava warriors were locked up in it, in suffocation, as it were, fodder for Arjuna arrows ! No one could save them from any side. Outside, Dhrishtadyumna and Bhima prevented outside help for the victims inside.

Saindhava and his army had initially tried to attack Arjuna and prevent him envelope so large a part of their army within the enemy grasp. Now Bhishma came there to break open the closed Vyuha. Drona, Kripa, Duryodhana, and Shalya also came to the help of Bhishma. None could stand against Arjuna for even a few moments, and so retreated. They could not see where Arjuna was stationed, but received his arrows from all sides.

Now sons of Draupadi, Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna also joined there to support Arjuna. Slowly Bhishma felt his energies sagging and anything could have happened to him as in a similar moment on the earlier day. Duryodhana came now on this helpless scene and shouted to the old man : "Grandfather...see there, what

is happening to our army ! All are running. What kind of pattern - Vyuha - is this you have structured ? Is it a match for what the enemy has conjured up ? Have you secretly given word to Arjuna that you would surrender my army for his consumption ? I am foolish in crowning you as our army chief, by over-trusting you ! I had gathered this army in such great numbers, with lots of efforts and pain, and now you are wasting it all wantonly, callously and in collusion with the enemy. Are there no heroes to protect our side ? This Arjuna will destroy here and now even our reserved forces. Grand old man, have you made up your mind to enjoy this cruel scene silently, like a joke ? I made a mistake in not crowning Karna as our chief and so lost him for the period you want to remain indifferently ! That is a double loss ! Alas ! Please kill Arjuna, and do not allow him to return alive."

Bhishma's enthusiasm subsided at these piercing unkind words. He was already tired and wounded on the previous day and not yet fully recovered. He had come on the war-field out of sheer will power and determination to enthuse the army by his presence, somehow, without expecting Arjuna to come upon his army in this whirlwind way ! He, like a true warrior, felt proud of Arjuna, though in the opposite camp, no doubt. It was no easy fight against him for anyone. Here was this fool of a Duryodhana chastising him needlessly without any practical sense of realisation of his own best efforts, and the uphill task of even standing before him. Bhishma cursed himself for his parasitical life and dependence on his patronage. "Fie unto me, that I am still alive to hear these abusive words!"

Duryodhana continued to taunt Bhishma and draw him into a needless dialogue :

Duryodhana : “Old man! Yesterday you played for long with that mere kid of Shveta, wantonly ! We never thought he deserved so much of your attention and time or energy. Karna would have.....

Bhishma : “Don’t tell me about that scoundrel ! Foolish prince ! You would not have stood before that boy even for a second. Underestimating the adversary is costly, and you do not realise this. You may know that I had to use Brahmastra, the best missile, to eliminate that boy. Know that no responsible warrior like me should have used that last resort. Can you now imagine how fierce was that boy ?”

Duryodhana : “What do I care, what weapon was used by you ? You might have used it quite early, if that fellow was as terrible as you say.”

Bhishma : “Your stupidity is incurable ! Brahmastra has to be used sparingly, if there is no other alternative, if one is really helpless. All moments are not helpless ones. One who feels repeatedly helpless is an unfit warrior. I am not one, whatever you say. Do you know - how many of my bows were cut by him; how many times he killed my charioteers; how many times he made me replace my chariots ? I am doing more than what my age permits; do not taunt me again to force my withdrawal. This is my ultimatum to you ! And do not mention that braggart, that uncultured Karna again. I will not tolerate this arrogance again.”

Duryodhana : “Well, please finish Arjuna today.”

Bhishma : “How many times I should tell you that I cannot and shall not kill the Pandavas. The most I can do is to make him retreat and not do much harm to our army.”

Duryodhana was disgusted and walked in a huff. Meanwhile Arjuna had filled the body of Bhishma with arrows and blood was oozing on all sides of the old man's tired body. Bhishma shot back three sharp arrows at Arjuna's seat, which missed their aim and hit Sri Krishna's chest and hurt him most. Blood coming out from the chest of Sri Krishna, made him look like an object worshipped with red flowers.

Arjuna now became extremely angry with Bhishma for this irresponsible act and hit back at Bhishma's charioteer. That made him lose control over the reigns of horses, so that Bhishma's chariot went round itself, by one full circle and for that while, Bhishma became neutral as he did not know where he was going and with whom he was fighting. It was funny to see Bhishma so whirling round about himself idiotically ! Arjuna too went round that chariot attacking him all the while. Bhishma blew his conch in anger, and Arjuna retaliated by doing a similar thing and the surrounding army enjoyed this sight and shouted in profuse appreciation of both heroes. None could decide the comparative superiority of the contending heroes. For long, this equal fight went on and few could identify Arjuna or Bhishma in chariots appropriate for them. Only signs on flagposts betrayed them to the bewildered. Each found no weak point in the other to exploit and

attack, like men in Dharma, available for attack by men in the opposite camp. It was a perfect match in that the warriors fulfilled all requirements of a Dharmic code proper for each missile to be projected or attacked and counter-attacked. Some took sides with Bhishma and felt that in a straight fight Arjuna could never fell him. Others took the view that the aging man was no match for the rising star that Arjuna was, and that this stalemate in conditions of equality was all too temporary.



On another front, the Panchala heroes were fiercely engaged with Drona. Dhrishtadyumna was facing the Acharya. At that moment Drona had just had an edge over his disciple, now adversary, having killed his charioteer with a sharp lance, and felled all his four horses with a mere four arrows. Dhrishtadyumna stood on the bare earth and had shot some ninety arrows and blinded the old man by wrapping him up in a fort of those arrows piercing him without providing space for further activity.

Drona was now searching for a fatal missile to finish off Dhrishtadyumna then and there. It shone like the Bolt of Indra, and the shaft of the God of Death, and was spitting fire. Warriors around the scene felt that all was over with Dhrishtadyumna, then and there. But was not Dhrishtadyumna trained by Drona himself to face such situations? He met that missile with an equally ferocious one from his side and got it neutralised. In the next moment he drew out a shaft - Shakti - and threw it at Drona. It was bejeweled and framed in gold. But Drona cut it in three pieces with a sharp arrow,

and destroyed the bow also that had projected it so successfully. Dhrishtadyumna's face reddened and he threw now a heavy mace at Drona, which also met the same fate. He now got into a fresh chariot, acquired a new bow and a sheath of arrows and engaged the Acharya for a very long time and made him retreat.

Now Bhima joined Dhrishtadyumna to force the Acharya for a backward step. Drona was assisted by a large segment of Kalinga forces to advance. Bhima destroyed them all, giving some required-respite to Dhrishtadyumna. Ekalavya's hunter-army, rough and unsophisticated came to the rescue of Kalingas. It was large and unconventional, and lacked the manners of a well-trained or disciplined army. All that was now destroyed by Bhima. Moreover Chedi, Matsya, Karusha armies came to the help then. But this was only for a short while, as Shakra Deva, King of Kalingas himself came to his army's aid, and scattered Bhima's supporters. Bhima, however stood his ground without looking behind. Shakra Deva destroyed Bhima's chariot, in retaliation for which Bhima threw his heavy mace at him, which destroyed the enemy's chariot, horses and even the enemy was caught under this debris with no help, and died a pitiable death.

Now Shakra Deva's father an old man, faced Bhima. This was Bhanumantha, the once famed hero, now in age, advanced. He rushed at Bhima, with a mere sword in hand, and shield in the other, which was coated in gold and with emblems of half moon, stars and celestial decorations; Bhima rushed towards him. The old Kalinga-warrior had a bow and arrows in hands,

which were cut into pieces by Bhima as he advanced, without such a quick movement being expected by the old man! His other arms and weapons were no match for Bhima's prowess, who was now roaring like a lion. The old man shouted : "This is no man before me!" His army now deserted him and ran away. Bhima rode an elephant and drove it fast at the old man, who now threw a missile. Bhima cut it in two, rushed at Bhanuman on foot and removed his head. Bhanuman's mace had however destroyed that elephant.

Bhima now entered the remnant of Kalinga army and went on a killing spree with no one to stand before him. The Kalinga army now had consisted mainly of a large contingent of elephant forces. Bhima cut the trunks of those elephants, which rushed in all directions in pain and confusion, throwing away warriors on them. Horses now waited for a similar treatment next. The weapons that cavaliers threw had not the slightest effect on Bhima! The war-field was now littered with dead bodies of animals and soldiers everywhere. There was no space even for Bhima for advancement! He jumped on those dead bodies, as springs for his long jumps, and rushed at whatever was now left of the Kalinga army, which was not much. Bhima kicked the soldiers to death, and with clenched fists he disabled many. No arrow could pierce him, no shaft or lance could get into his chest, and no mace could hurt him. He was now above enemy weapons of all kinds, like the fabulous Hanuman of Ramayana!

Those that escaped him in the enemy army surrendered to Bhishma, rallied behind him, to seek

safety and protection from him. Oh! Where was Bhishma all this while ? Only Shrutayusha, the last Kalinga hero now remained.

Ashoka, Bhima's charioteer got for his master a new chariot. Bhima got into it and killed this Shrutayusha with a bare seven arrows. His army ran away again! Bhishma was helpless at this quick movement of Bhima, who spared not even wheel-supporters, arms-suppliers, linesmen and even standers by.

Now the reserve force of Kalingas, numbering about two thousand, consisting mainly of cavalry, attacked Bhima. Bhima rendered them weaponless by the magic of his quick action and weapons they did not expect and by surreptitious movements. Not a horse was spared and no elephant could escape death at his sure hands. Bhima's conch blew non-stop and frightened those hapless animals before they were despatched to the other world. Bhima did all this alone, unbelievably.

Shikhandi now rushed to the help of Bhima with a large army, urged by Dhrishtadyumna. He finished off whatever Bhima had left of the army of Kalingas in no time. That was the moment of success of the day.

Dhrishtadyumna silently approached Bhima from behind and touched and tugged Bhima's upper garment and Bhima turned back in happiness and hugged him; the two were in silent tears in the hugging posture for long. Then :

Dhrishtadyumna : "Bhima, dear. You have won our hearts, particularly my father's heart today. Excepting you and Satyaki none else is so fit for the

admiration and affection by him. His judgment has been proved impeccable today in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of all those, that have seen what you have done alone”.

Dhrishtadyumna then blew his conch to his hearts' satisfaction. The Pandava army rejoiced and responded with appropriate drum and kettle sounds.

Satyaki had now been enveloped by the enemy army in a surprise move, swiftly. Dhrishtadyumna noticed his 'Kovidara' flag¹ from a distance, and rushed Bhima to his help.

Bhima rushed like a fast wind; and on seeing him rush towards them, the Kaurava forces fled to the last foot soldier! Some were shouting : “Here is Death coming, after swallowing Kalingas in one gulp. Are we a match for him ?”

Hearing the roar of Bhima, Bhishma rushed there in his chariot. Bhima and Satyaki together engaged him and “entertained” him for long. Bhishma, at one stage destroyed Bhima's chariot with its horses and charioteers. Bhima threw a heavy shaft at the old man; Bhishma cut it in three, and broadly smiled. Before that smile could vanish Satyaki killed Bhishma's charioteer. His horses drew him in all directions, being confused. Bhishma had to retreat, being humiliated at last, in this helpless condition.

What was remarkable on that day was that the entire Kalinga army war being wiped out by Bhima

¹ Name of a large tree. This was also the Ikshvaku flag - emblem in the Ramayana.

alone ! None had done a similar thing elsewhere in the world-history. None could think of a similar feat hereafter, perhaps. It was victory for the Pandava army, its architect being unique ! Whoever had witnessed it that day, remembered it forever in life. It was so romantic, unbelievable, and fascinating ! The other Kaurava divisions trembled even in dreams, waiting for similar turns at Bhima's hands.

A tired Bhima was now joined by Satyaki, who took the hero onto his own chariot, embraced him and congratulated him. It was evening, and the Sun was setting.



Ashvatthama, Shalya and Kripa were still engaged with Dhrishtadyumna on another front, till dusk. Abhimanyu now joined Dhrishtadyumna to decide the end in favour of the hero. Lakshmana, Duryodhana's son, joined the tired trio, then. Abhimanyu made the war turn in favour of the Pandava army. Duryodhana would not tolerate the defeat of his son ! That boy now retreated being unable even to stand before Abhimanyu ! The rest of Duryodhana's brothers surrounded Abhimanyu. Now Arjuna rushed to the rescue of his son. In a flash of a moment all the Kauravas got scattered, and their army fell in heaps, dead, on all sides. Broken chariots, weapons, split wheels, Flag-posts, dead elephants and horses - littered the field everywhere. Who should weep, for whom ?



Sanjaya : "Oh, king ! There was no one to save your

army there, at that time. Bhishma was silent as a spectator, as he was over-tired ! Two full days' hectic fight was too much for that aged hero. Arjuna spared no one who neared him to offer a fight !”

Dhritarashtra shed tears at this reporting of the Kaurava army's helplessness, and Bhishma's inevitable neutrality.



The Sun was now setting and the fight had stopped. Drona removed his armour and was nearing the spot of Kaurava defeat that day. Bhishma greeted him.

Bhishma : “Acharya, this Abhimanyu is extraordinary.

In prowess, presence of mind, skill of archery, quickness and agility he is a match only for his father. I can't think of another to fight him, on our side. With him in front, anyone can only be sure of a defeat. See, how our army is running in fear. Here is sunset. Only time has spared our army at the end of this unfortunate day for us. Abhimanyu and his father, together, in this combination are above all others, both sides counted, in this war.”

Bhishma blew his conch, signalling the cessation of hostilities for the day. White flags flourished everywhere announcing the end of the day's battle.

The Pandava forces shouted glories of victory and slogans of 'hail' for their heroes and marched towards their camps to the rhythm of drums and kettles.

Bhishma and Drona were weighed down by the heaviness of defeat for their side, in spite of their best

efforts, and moved towards their camps with unwilling steps.

Sri Krishna, in the other camp, greeted the Brothers and congratulated them for their achievements and victory.

Yudhishtira was still, inexplicably unhappy :

Sri Krishna : "What happened to you, Prince ?"

Yudhishtira : "How long more shall we kill the innocents, like this ?"

Sri Krishna : "This was not of your choosing ! War was imposed on you by the wicked ! You want me to go over this entire story again, do you ?"

Yudhishtira : "Who chooses, is not the problem ! It is slaughter that is the result that worries me."

Sri Krishna : "Tolerate for a few more days. Your agony will end, once for all."



CHAPTER 16

TWO MORE DAYS OF PANDAVA-PROGRESS

Sunrise on the third day brings activity again on the war-field. Bhishma arranges the army in the Garuda Pattern. In its 'beak', he himself is there now to lead. In its 'eyes' there are Drona and Kritavarma stationed. In the rest of its head are Ashwatthama, Kripa and others. In the 'neck' region the Trigatha brothers, Vatadhanas, Bhurishravas, and Shalya. In the tail part there are Duryodhana and his brothers. In the wings are the Magadha and remnants of Kalinga forces on one side, and on the other are Karushna, Vikunja, Munda, and Kundivrisas, to complete the structure.

Arjuna, on seeing this, suggests to Dhrishtadyumna that they should go for the half-moon structure. On the left was stationed Bhima along with Virata, Drupada, Nilayudha and their armies. On the right were stationed Abhimanyu, Satyaki, sons of Draupadi, Iravant (Arjuna's son by Chitrangada) Ghatotkacha and others. In the middle were positioned Dhrishtadyumna, Yudhishtira, Shikhandi, the elephant squad, the other Pandavas and so on. It was Bhima who was to lead the attack on Drona that day.

Unfortunately war-rules, mutually agreed upon, were broken right from the beginning, that day. All began to fight with all in a confusion no one could prevent. The Kaurava forces retreated because of Ghatotkacha's unconventional fight. His unsophistication was terrible and the Kaurava weapons did nothing to him. They ran for life, right at the start. Bhima directly went to Duryodhana and very nearly captured him. Duryodhana went into a swoon and his charioteer took him away into safety, far off to another corner. Bhima had thumped on his chest with a fierce fisty cuff, so that Duryodhana lost his consciousness and the Kaurava army scattered remembering the previous day's experience at his hands. Duryodhana woke up after some treatment and grieved over his retreat. Bhishma saw this with helplessness. Bhima had now no worthy enemy to fight with, and waited for Duryodhana to return with unusual patience. Drona and Bhishma tried their best to gather their armies and realign them. Terror was however so deep-stricken into their hearts that no strong inducements made them return for long. Satyaki and Abhimanyu came there now sharing the same chariot, like the Sun and the Moon together causing a New Moon Night, and the Kaurava forces missed a few moments of vision and would not believe who could come in whose company and from where, when, from the Pandava side ! This leaderless army of the Kauravas lay in heaps of dead bodies, in just a few moments ! The two heroes spared no weapons, no missiles, and no weights in smashing the enemy army, that hapless morning.

Duryodhana regained consciousness now, on the run, and goaded the charioteer to take him back to the war-front. But wherever he looked, he could only see his army run helter-skelter ! He lost patience and went to Bhishma to abuse him :

Duryodhana : “Grand sir, I am still alive, unfortunately for you, to see this humiliation of my army at your hands, and with your neutrality helping the enemy. Does this scene befit you as our leader ? Why do they run ? Why can’t you put courage into them and do something ? Why does your bow rest idly in your heroic hands ? Where has your valour gone, deserting you ? What ails Acharya Drona, also ? Is this a joint plot to betray me ? Can I believe that you are afraid of this handful Pandava army ? Where is that villain lost, Ashwatthama ? You are perhaps in secret agreement with the enemy to end the war in their favour today, finally. Why didn’t you say, you would not play fair to me, in the beginning ? I repent for my overtrust of you, and loss of Karna, because of you. Let alone the enemy princes; can’t you fight against at least Satyaki ? at least Dhrishtadyumna ? I fail to understand you, your abnormal behavior today ; what treachery?”

Bhishma : (Smiling sarcastically) “Mr. King Sir ! I have given you my best pieces of advice in the past, to no avail. Now you see what is inevitable - defeat! Even Gods cannot win over the Pandavas - I said; you did not believe. I am an old man. I have not turned suddenly old now, here, to disappoint you,

or deceive you. You know my limits now. I am prepared to die in your service and here you are taunting and punishing an old man in your loyalty. Your tongue is foul and long and uncultured ! It discourages me against your own interests, more than the enemy might or their strategies. You share this long tongue with Karna, and deserve his fate. I curse myself for joining your side. But see, what I am now going to do to disperse this enemy army.”

Duryodhana was not at all pleased. His brothers blew conches to enthuse him, in vain. The Pandavas retaliated by blowing a battery of conches, to produce an opposite, unwelcome effect on the Kaurava army, which went on running, unstopped. It was noon !



Bhishma had been too deeply hurt by the sharp words of Duryodhana. He stood up in his chariot and resorted to a strange play of arrows in a Gandharva Vidya style as Sri Rama had done to eliminate Ravana's reserve forces, in the past. He turned around himself in incessant circles, with himself at their centres and shot off arrows in all directions, recklessly, so that no one could see him or where he was, in the cloud of arrows, so thickly created around him.¹ The enemies fell in large numbers, killing each other, fancying Bhishma everywhere before them. It was a scene no one had seen in the last three days. How Bhishma could create this illusion of omnipresence, no one could say.

¹ *Sharaih ekayani kurvan*

Whether it was an ordinary course, or black magic, or just trickery to fool the enemy or mere skill of arrow shooting, none could say - not even Drona ! It appeared as if Bhishma was dancing; no arrow of his was a waste, and no second went wasted, and no target missed.² Thousands were killed with each stroke of single arrows. Yudhishtira's forces were emptied in all directions, in no time !

Sri Krishna and Arjuna saw this miracle ! Some soldiers were tearing open their chest-shields and armours, to surrender themselves to Bhishma, to save their lives, others were tearing their hair in despair to beg mercy of him; yet others were throwing down their weapons in a mood of surrender. There was no count of those who were running away from the field. In just a few moments, the Pandava forces got scattered in complete chaos. Sri Krishna was disappointed as well as enraged, and said to Arjuna :

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, in a full assembly of princes, at Upaplavya, you had made a vow; remember it and fulfill it at this appropriate moment. Remember? You had said : 'come with me, all those of you that want to join me; I shall eliminate Bhishma, Drona, the Kaurava princes and their followers'.

² *Sa nrityan vai rathopashte darshayan panilaghavam |
Alatachakravat Rajan ! tatra tatra sma drishyate ||
Tamekam samare shuram Pandava Srinjayaissaha |
Anekashatashsram samapashyanta laghavat ||
Maya Kritatmanamiva Bhishmam tatra sma menire |
Purvasyam dishi tam dristva pratichyam dadrishuh narah ||
Udichyam chaivamalokya dakshinasyam punah prabho ||*

Now that is the action required of you.”

Arjuna did not reply; he was red with rage and waved his right hand in the direction of Bhishma's chariot, to signal to Sri Krishna, to take him there. On seeing this, the Pandava army re-united and followed him in no time.

Bhishma roared like a lion, in anger and being stunned with this nullifying effect of his earlier action and achievement. He poured arrows on Sri Krishna and Arjuna, who did not mind them; and his attempt to stop them from approaching him at this, otherwise, moment of victory. Arjuna cut off the bows of Bhishma, one after another continuously. Bhishma only smiled and admired Arjuna; and this jugglery occupied them for sometime, yielding no results for either.

Sri Krishna had no appreciation for this waste of time; he wanted hard and quick action on Bhishma, who was a veritable God of Death till then. “Finish him” - roared Sri Krishna.

Arjuna was still playing soft with Bhishma, unwilling to harm him in a major way, to the dismay of Sri Krishna. Without tolerating this never-ending soft war, Sri Krishna again taunted Arjuna :

Sri Krishna : “Arjuna, please do not take any further, the trouble of continuing the war unwillingly on Bhishma ! I shall finish him and his army in a minute, and fulfill my vow. We must retain whatever is left of our army, for some more time and contain this villain, Bhishma, who is otherwise determined

to end the war in favour of Duryodhana, by wiping out all your army and sparing you five for a forest life, or for beggary ! You fool ! You do not realise his strategy ! Is this the time for compassion for this old man ? Love of the enemy is suicidal and you have forgotten all that I taught you on the first day !”

Even before Sri Krishna could finish his word Bhishma was showing an exhilarating skill of archery by filling the sky with arrows to make Arjuna blind and lose direction !

Arjuna, yet, had no mind to fell Bhishma; perhaps his infatuation had relapsed ! Sri Krishna’s teachings had been all a waste, Sri Krishna thought !!

Sri Krishna looked in anger at Satyaki in the chariot next to him and said this to him in the hearing of Arjuna:

Sri Krishna :“Friend, Satyaki : see now; I shall hold the Disc in my hand and kill Bhishma, with my own hands and with my own efforts. Then I shall eliminate all the rest of Drona, Karna and other pillars of the enemy army and please Yudhishtira and his brothers. What if this Arjuna listens or not to my advice ?”

Having said this, Arjuna’s chariot was left by Sri Krishna, who jumped off his seat and held the divine Disc in his right hand. The brightness of that unmatched weapon, blinded the eyes of all soldiers on both sides!

Bhishma responded by surrendering himself, and throwing off the bow and arrows, and folded both hands in a respectful, and venerating mood.³

Sri Krishna ran towards Bhishma with the swiftness of a lion towards an elephant, with the Disc turning round on his right hand finger emitting fire like, it would end up the word at the end of Time's cycle. Sri Krishna's upper garment fell down. Yet Sri Krishna shone like a blue cloud with the lining of a lighting in it. Sri Krishna's roar deafened all on the field, and the armies fled in different directions !

Bhishma enjoyed that scene like a poet - with the Disc as a lotus, opening itself to the Sun of Sri Krishna's angry eyes, in the blue watered pond that his body shone like, and blossoming on his round arm, long and strong looking like its stem.⁴

³ *Tatah sunabham Vasudevaputrah suryaprabham
vajrasamprabhavam |
Kshurantam udyamya bhujena chakram rathadavaplutya
visrijya vahan ||
Sam kampayan gam charanairmahatma vegena Krishnah
prasasara Bhishmam |
Madandham aajow samudeernadarpam simho jighansanniva
varanendram ||
Sobhidra van Bhishmamanikamadhya kruddho mahendravarajah
pramathi |
Vyalamabi pitanta pattakashe ghano yatha khe yatha
taditavaruddhah || (Bhishma 59 - 88,89,90)*

*Tatah Krishnakopodaya Suryabuddha kshuranta tikshnagra sujata
patram |
Tasyaiva dehoru sarah prarudham raraja Narayana bahunalam |
(Bhishma 59 - 92)*

Bhishma felt that this was the highest moment of his glory and fulfilment of life's purpose - to visualise Lord Narayana, in that pose of adorning anger as an ornament, and holding the Disc in his hand, breaking his vow, to uphold the vow of his devotee and thus indicating that his devotee was superior to Himself !

At the very moment Bhishma held both his arms folded on his head and chanted the divine names of the Lord in a sublime mood of humility and exaltation, forcing a spontaneous expression of ineffable tranquility, satisfaction and bliss on the face of Sri Krishna, his true nature as God hidden in the veil of Avatar before Bhishma so far ! It was an unusual sight of Beauty vouched to a true devotee in an unusual place a war-field, in an unexpected mutual action of cause and effect; Surrender and Self-revelation ! Few could view this from this angle, and fewer still had the patience for Vedanta or Bhakti on the war-field.

"Come, come, World-Lord ! Madhava, wielder of Disc ! Kill me and grant me liberation from cycles of sorrow, this life is otherwise. You are the ultimate Refuge for all, and do I not know this ? But let me challenge you, and see if you - even you - can kill me against my wish, against that boon of my father. Have you not honoured me by fulfilling my vow and thereby forgetting your own vow not to wield any weapon in this battle ? See who has won ? But you are an abode of mercy in so honouring me at the cost of your vow!" - Bhishma was in tears of joy, and Sri Krishna was stunned by Bhishma's words and action.

Bhishma remembered this scene of sweet confrontation in all the sixty-five days more of his life on this earth - every moment, and even on the deathbed of arrows, that had pierced into him as shot by Arjuna on the last day of his Generalship.⁵

At that moment the earth trembled at the feet of Sri Krishna's run and rush in divine anger - the same war-field that did not tremble because of the weight of that enormous army of eighteen divisions of all kinds of fighting forces on either side. It was in the fitness of things, as Sri Krishna as 'Damodara' had 'all the worlds in him', and that weight was too much for the poor earth, a mere part of that weight above it. It was as if Sri Krishna was to fulfill the vow of clearing the earth of its unnecessary dead weight - the main purpose of *Avatar* - at the cost of that other none-too-important vow that he would not wield his Disc ! The Earth was thrilled. But, as chance would have it, Sri Krishna's upper garment fell down, as he ran in wrath towards Bhishma ! Do not say that is of no consequence. The Dharmashastras prohibit a householder from sitting for food-consumption, without that upper garment, (*Gatottariyah*) ! Sri Krishna is the All-Eater as the Katha Upanishad describes and the Brahmasutra confirms

⁵ *Svanigamam apahaya matpratignam ritamadhikartum avapluto rathasthah |*

Dhrita rathacharano abhyayat chalatguh haririva hantum ibham gatottariyah |

Shitavishikha hato vishirna damshah kshataja pariapluta atatayino me |

Prasabham abhisasara madvadhartham sa bhavatu me Bhagavan gatir Mukundah |

(Sri Bh 1-9, 37,38)

it. (*Atta Charcharagrahanat*). That was what spared all assembled war-heroes from being swallowed in one gulp at that moment. It was comforting to Mother Earth that the Lord's upper garment fell on her, as if to bless her.

Sri Krishna, now, had protected the Pandava army from Bhishma, in a severe warning to him; and had also fulfilled his devotee's vow, by breaking his own vow at the same time. His chest, which had been hit and torn, was now bleeding, and his angry look at Bhishma made him more handsome than ever before. Bhishma enjoyed that scene as never before.



The Sun was about to set. Arjuna got back into his chariot after persuading Sri Krishna that he would take care of Bhishma, this time, without fail. He now showered a severe rain of arrows on the opponent; the army re-assembled behind him with a determination that had been lost for some time.

Bhishma was joined by Bhurishravas, Shalya and some brothers of Duryodhana. But nobody could even stand up to Arjuna's force and ferocity that evening. All their weapons failed. Bhishma's body was dripping blood profusely, and arrows had stuck up there everywhere, with no relief or respite for removing them. Dhrishtadyumna and Virata ran here to be witnesses to this rare scene and to enjoy it. Arjuna now used the Aindrastra and disarmed all on the opposite side and felled them in thousands. Blood began to flow in streams, carrying dead bodies, and carcasses of horses

and elephants. Wild animals, demons and supernatural creatures were tearing those bodies to feast on them. Bhishma was a failed hero by the end of the day, and all his earlier valour had come to naught. It was Pandava- victory at last. The war ended for the day.



Fourth day ! War resumed after terrific signals of drums, kettles and conches sounded fiercely.

Sri Krishna said to Arjuna : “Remember your word of last evening to me. You have yet to fulfill that word. Bhishma must be eliminated if you are to win.”

This was a severe taunting. Arjuna had now no option. He faced the old sire and severely injured him bringing distress to him in a hundred ways. Diffusing his enthusiasm, and depressing his mind, which was already torn in loyalty.

Abhimanyu joined his father now on the scene. Bhishma had now an occasion to witness the skill of this boy, but Abhimanyu would not allow him to kid with him in any insulting under-estimate, as Bhishma tended to view and treat the boy. Whoever came to assist Bhishma or protect him could not stand there even for a moment; that was inevitable, before this combination of son and father.

Bhishma went into a swoon, though admiring the boy. The charioteer took his unconscious body to avert the fatal final blow. Elsewhere Dhrishtadyumna was engaged with Shala, (not Shalya), son of Samyamana, in a fierce combat. His son who joined to assist the father, fell to the arrow of Arjuna.

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Shalya now rushed on the scene to contain Arjuna. But the Pandava army, ably assisted, fought so as to force Shalya into a retreat.



Dhritarashtra : “You, fool of a Sanjaya, you are constantly reporting to me only of defeat and retreat of our forces ! Why can’t you bring me good news? Has human effort no meaning in life at all ? Is it all Fate, on the way of life ? Cruel Fate ? How can all my son’s efforts come so shamelessly to nothing? Did he not make a firm, determined effort to win over his enemies at all ?”

Sanjaya : “King, hold your heart firm and further listen. Is not all this disaster the result of your own wrong policies, and wrong direction to your wicked son? What use is there now in blaming them - your sons or the Pandavas ? You are to be blamed ! Besides, I am not selective in reporting. I am just telling you what is happening there, faithfully without distortions. If you are interested, I shall continue the running commentary; or else you can rest for a while, until you make bold to pick up the thread of listening.”

The old man would not rest in his all too disturbed mood, and so narration of events of that fourth unfortunate day, continued, breaking the heart of the Blind King further.



Ten brothers of Duryodhana rushed behind Shalya, making him their shield as it were, now. Duryodhana

himself was there with Dusshasana, Vivimshati, Durmarshana, Dussaha, Chitrasena, Durmukha, Satyavrata and Purumitra, as well as Vikarna.

Bhima felt this as a good opportunity ! He gathered now nine invincible heroes behind him and attacked them. Here too was a tally of ten ! Draupadi's five sons, Dhrishtadyumna, Abhimanyu, Nakula, and Sahadeva with Bhima were too much of a match for those chicken-hearted group. The war with bow and arrows had no effect on the Kauravas. Bhima had expected this, but did not want to take out his fierce mace for these mere kids, as it would insult his chief weapon. Now there was no other way. He turned it in a profound spin and threw it on this ill-assorted bunch, and it killed all except Duryodhana and Dusshasana, in one fell, before they could retreat behind Shalya. The mace, spinning still, took its further toll of a large number of cavaliers and elephant brigade. Bhima now got down his chariot and rushed into the middle of that leaderless elephant brigade and smashed them mercilessly. He did not spare Bhishma also who advanced to protect that army unit. Satyaki now ran forward to assist Bhima.

Fourteen more brothers of Duryodhana, gathered together the retreating army, and advanced in a bunch to bear the blunt of Bhima's fury. Would Bhima ever slip such an opportunity ! He told his charioteer Vishoka: "Dear brother, one of my long-wished ambitions seems to get fulfilled shortly, thank God ! See there those villains; and drive my chariot there, hurry up."

The charioteer was quick and obedient, and took the chariot to the spot where Bhima wished.

The Kaurava brothers - Sushena, Senapati, Jalasandha, Sulochana, Ugra, Bhimaratha, Virabahu, Alolupa, Durmukha, Dushpradharsha, Vivitsu, Vikata, Sama and Bhima (Oh ! there was a Bhima's namesake, here also !) - approached Bhima like beetles in a bunch. Bhima opened his mouth with his tongue visible, ready as it were, to drink their blood, in anxiety, and relish the taste. It was like sheep rushing towards a hungry wolf, and they were not conscious of this irony ! Bhima fulfilled his dream in a variety of novel ways - by removing the head of one with his sword, by slitting the chest open of another with arrows, by dashing a lance into the heart of yet another, by crushing still another with his mace, into a lump of unidentifiable flesh, by twisting the throat of yet another so round and completely as to disconnect it from the rest of the body and so on. Here was another crushed under his own chariot along with horses, leaving no trace as to his self-identification. Whichever weapon these hapless victims got ready to fight him with, Bhima would change his own weapon, and the tactics of killing them in unexpected ways. It was inevitable they had to die, it appeared, as Bhima was Fate incarnate, then and there, waiting for retribution ! This logic, only Death understood, and not those possessed by Death - wish. When these were finished, their army ran away.

Bhishma called upon Bhagadatta to capture Bhima, and let his elephant force loose on him and his followers.

It was a Titanic, Demoniac creature - called Supratika - this strange elephant of Bhagadatta, son of

Narakasura. It was Asuric in nature and knew no nicety or elegance like normal Sattvic elephants. Bhagadatta shot sharp arrows on Bhima from the height of that elephant's back. Bhima was hit by an arrow or two, and slowly felt being tired. His son Ghatotkacha rushed to his father's help and frightened the enemies by assuming numerous forms and making the wildest and unimaginable cries, changing the 'tunes' endlessly. The army behind Bhagadatta got scattered, leaving him isolated to the fury of Bhima. Ghatotkacha created an elephant-force by magic, and brought them from nowhere before the formidable enemy.

Bhagadatta now lost his direction and focus of attack, and felt helpless.

Bhishma rushed there, himself, to his aid. But Ghatotkacha irritated him so much, that the nonplussed Sire announced cessation of hostilities for the day, and felt crestfallen, and ashamed to face Duryodhana !



CHAPTER 17

FOUR DAYS MORE - DEATH OF TWENTYONE MORE KAURAVA PRINCES

The continually pouring news of death of his sons, day-by-day, is what the old blind King cannot endure! It is too much ! Can nobody eliminate Bhima? Or at least prevent him ? What are the Kaurava Generals doing all the while ? How can Duryodhana the eldest son be so callous to these deaths ? Why do children die in bunches ? What cruel fate ? Or irony ? Who will ensure the protection or safety of at least the rest? - The old blind King of ten thousand elephants' might trembles like a lost leaf in the air, with no sign of peace arriving on his own terms, easily.

“Sanjaya, I am both worried and bewildered ! I wonder how Bhima can achieve all these, which no God can !. With all tremendous preparation, how can my son lose out to the enemy day by day ? How can they die this type of miserable, dishonourable deaths? I should have listened to the wise words of Vidura long ago ! I do not know what divine boons have ensured protection to the Pandavas ! What can be the secret of

their success? Why should only this poor blind old man suffer? Is God equal-minded and fair ? Bhima, at this rate, will kill all my children, I am afraid ! Can none save them ? Tell me what happened next and how my son retaliated ?” - the King asked.

Sanjaya : “Oh, King ! The Pandavas have resorted to no magic, or foul practice. They have not brought any scarecrow on the war-field. Their prowess is natural, and their ways straight and Dharmic. These have stood by them, and ensured their victory. Everyday, in the beginning they pray for victory that is just and deserved. Once on the field, they do not retreat in a cowardly way. Justice and victory always go together; and what is there to wonder at, or fear ? Your children are unlike them; they are villains and sinful. They do not hesitate to adopt any crooked means for victory. It is evil that is betraying them. The plottings they carried out against the righteous Pandavas are now yielding rich sinful dividends ! Do you not know how numerous they are ? Are you not a party to all this too ? Now fruits of all those sins are coming thick and at once on you all ! You are aware of how many people advised you against them, then, at every wrong step. Do not blame others, sir. I too advised you along with Vidura ! The question, you are now asking me, is not new either ! Duryodhana asked Bhishma the same, long ago - why are the Pandavas strong in spite of the heaviest world-weights on his own side - Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Kripa and Shalya ? What is the extra rider on their side ? Do you remember Bhishma’s reply ? They are being protected by Sri Krishna, the wielder of

that bow called Sharnga ! So, nobody can vanquish them!¹ Did you also not acknowledge it in different words ?² - 'who', which wise man, can dare to fight with this lotus-eyed Lord Sri Krishna ? Did not lots of men advise you for a compromise ? Did you listen?

Sanjaya speaks eloquently of Sri Krishna's greatness in Vedantic words and phrases. To equate Sri Krishna with petty deities and mortals is the only crime man can commit. Like gold, which is not worried about being cut, burnt, examined with stones by rubbings, but only about being weighed against baser metals and dry seeds, Sri Krishna cannot tolerate this.³ He is the God of gods, and to view him as man is an insult to him. He whom he blesses, can achieve anything. Those that are bereft of it are doomed.⁴



On this fifth day, the Kaurava army is structured in the shape of a crocodile, a whale. The Pandavas arranged a vulture-shape for their army. Right at the

¹ *Nasti lokeshu tad bhutam bhavita na bhavishyati |
Yo jayet Pandavan sarvan palitan Sharngadhanvana ||*

² *Tam Krishnam Pundarikaksham ko nu yuddyeta buddhiman |*

³ *Hemnah khedo na dahena, choshane, kashanena va |
Etadeva mahad dukkham yad gunjasamotonam |*

⁴ *Navajneyo Vasudevo manushyoyam iti Prabhu |
Yashcha manushamatroyam iti bruyat na mandadhih |
Hrishikesham avajnanat tamahuh purushadhamam |
Yoginam tam mahatmanam Pravishtam monushim tanum |
Avamanyet Vasudevam tamahuh tamasam janah |*

(Bhishma 66-18,19)

start Bhima opened his account against Bhishma by attacking him with a torrent of arrows. Duryodhana had not yet recovered from the loss of dozens of his dear brothers on the previous days, and now, yet again this Bhima was here up to more mischief ! He went to Drona.

Duryodhana : “Acharya; I am entirely dependent on you Sir ! You can defeat even gods, I suppose. Bhishma is becoming progressively helpless. You are my sincere well-wisher. Do something to eliminate these Pandavas.”

Drona : “You are a confirmed fool in so underestimating the Pandavas or their strength. I am doing my best, even without your goading, prompting or taunting. Go and mind your business and leave me to my strategies.”

Saying so Drona broke open the Pandava-planning of army-structure, in the presence of Satyaki; to see Bhishma and Bhima locked up in fierce battle. Dead bodies of men and animals were piling up in no time. Duryodhana brought a Kalinga contingent to Bhishma's help. On the other side Arjuna came to help Bhima. The string-sound of Gandiva had dispelled the Kaurava army to all quarters. On the other side now Bhishma was engaged with Virata, Ashwatthama with Arjuna, Duryodhana with Bhima, Lakshmana with Abhimanyu, on different fronts. The battle was equal for both sides for long. The fifth day was drawing to a close, while Satyaki was fighting with Bhurishravas and sons. Satyaki had lost all his ten sons on that day. Bhima came there in anger after destroying a sizeable part of Duryodhana's army on the day. The evening halted hostilities.



On the sixth morning the Pandavas went for the Makara Vyuh, and the Kauravas for the Krauncha Vyuh. The armies clashed as they moved in their set patterns, and killing started.

.....As narration continued Dhritarashtra was distressed by news of heavy losses on the son's side.

Dhritarashtra : "Sanjaya, your narration impresses on me only the cruelty of mighty fate. How strong is our army, you and I know. Have the treacherous gods joined sides with the enemies, in secret, incognito ?.....I should have listened to Vidura, and avoided this war, while it was in my hands. Well.. my fate..."

Sanjaya : "Sir, how many times have I not told you that blaming fate is no use ? You are mainly at fault as the originator of all this avoidable violence! Why did you allow that gambling to take place at all ? With whom can you share fruits of Karma, as it does not so allow ?"

The narration continues. Three more of the Kaurava princes were noticed by Bhima, in the morning itself. These unfortunate brothers, in their delusion thought that Bhima being alone, they could capture him prisoner! Bhima killed all of them with their armies with his heavy and sure-success mace. Then he went on a roam to see if more of the Kaurava princes were available for his count to rise.

Dhrishtadyumna did not see Bhima roaming about, but his empty chariot, being run by his charioteer Visoka and was disturbed :

Dhrishtadyumna : “Where is Bhima, dear to me as my breath, good man Vishoka ?”

Vishoka : “Sir, the master told me to wait here, and proceeded alone, perhaps in search of new prey !”

Dhrishtadyumna’s anxiety increased ! “What use is my life if Bhima is harmed fatally ?” - he said to himself, and plunged into the enemy army in search of Bhima. Bhima could be spotted after some time. Bhima was seen to be devastating the Kaurava army like a fierce wind in a plantain estate !

Duryodhana could not recover from sorrow and anger at the loss of thirteen more of his brothers that unfortunate morning. He now rushed at Bhima with a small band of followers. Drona now dashed to the spot to assist Duryodhana. On seeing this the Pandava army began to scatter in fear. They were now moving in irregular circles dashing against each other without direction or purpose. The Kaurava army was amused and felt sadistic pleasure for some time.

Bhima got back into his chariot and smashed Duryodhana with sharp weapons. Duryodhana also hit back with appropriate counter weapons. It was noon....afternoon...evening also ! But the heroes did not retreat. “Bhima shall be ended this evening”- roared Duryodhana. Bhima replied : “I shall end my mother’s woe by finishing you, you bastard ! I have to avenge the wrongs done to Draupadi, in the incarnation of the God of Death in my form, here and now. Let me see how your instigators, Karna and Shakuni, will now save you! Fellow, you were the one to insult even Sri Krishna, when he came to save you through an

honourable settlement ! Were you not the one to send vulgar words of message in insulting words, even as we were to march here ? See, how many of you brothers, I have finished, with no one to help them in any rescue ? Let me equal the account by finishing all others, including you !” Bhima threw his powerful mace in a terrible spin at him and killed the horses of his chariot in one exact stroke ! Duryodhana’s Flag-post was thrown off its fixture; next was his life as a target! His army was frightened and ran away. Saindhava rushed to save Duryodhana from Bhima’s fury, and took him forcibly into his own chariot, which was not to the liking of Duryodhana, as it tantamounted to defeat in public view. But Duryodhana was bleeding profusely with arrows stuck deeply into his flesh piercing the pith and marrow of the bones. He was helpless and sat like a dead body in the chariot, being taken to a burial ground!

Eight more of his brothers were locked up with Abhimanyu in a fatal battle then as the sun was due to set. Dhrishtaketu too was there. This battle was equal, with no signs of decision yet. It was dusk.



On the seventh morning, Duryodhana was yet unable even to open his eyes in terrible pain of arrows still stuck up in his body. Blood was still oozing and removing the arrows was even more painful. But with extraordinary efforts and determination, he got up without aides and went to Bhishma :

Duryodhana : “Grandsire; my army is being wasted pitilessly with no protectors. See, what Bhima has

done to me ! He has left only a little breath in me to suffer this death in life, before killing me fully. I am ashamed to say that I am frightened even to look at him after this. Unless you put your heart into the fight on my side, I cannot live, let alone achieve victory. Bless me.”

Bhishma : “Young man, there is nothing more that I can do, which I have not already done. Why do you repeatedly suspect my intention of bringing victory for you ? Do you think I am escaping the Pandava fury? Do you accuse me of treachery or the wish to live at your cost ? The Pandavas seem to be possessed of extraordinary furies of Rudra, the war-god, as never before ! This is a new phenomenon unexpected by anyone; this is frankly beyond my calculations. So they are invincible and growing in power. They are gods in potentials by birth. They have weapons that no one on this side can ever think of. I am ready to die for your sake, whether you believe or not. I shall face them directly today, to force them to retreat. But I cannot kill them as I have vowed, and as known to you in advance. What more can I do, as a captive of Dharma?”

The Kauravas structured their army in the circular Mandala shape. The Pandavas arranged themselves in the Diamond structure. The war started to the rhythm of drums.

It was Arjuna's day. He defeated Susharma of Trigarthas, to make him run for life. The army of the running hero was destroyed by Arjuna in no time.

Bhishma came on this scene. Now even Arjuna found it difficult to match the old man's skill in archery at that age.

On other fronts also the battle fiercely progressed. Virata along with his brothers, was facing Drona's fury. Virata's only living son, Shankha, was also with him. Drona cut the bow of Virata, who took another one and avenged by killing Drona's horses and charioteer; and by destroying his chariot altogether. Drona was almost done to death in quick and breath-taking battle. Drona's anger knew no bounds ! He got into a new chariot and killed Virata's son with a single arrow. Virata's line of family succession ended thereby !

Shikhandi was now engaged with Ashwatthama, and was seen to have split the enemy's forehead with fierce arrows, so as to make him swoon in a pool of oozing blood ! After his doctors treated him, Ashwatthama got up to reply to Shikhandi, but was not effective. Arjuna now assisted his friend at this needy moment. Dhrishtadyumna was fighting elsewhere with an overtired Duryodhana, not fully recovered from the previous day's humiliating wounds and defeat ! It was noontime.

Arjuna's son Iravantha had just defeated Vinda and Anuvinda, the Avanti princes, to force them to a retreat. Ghatotkacha was locked up with Bhagadatta, both engaged in "deceptive" (maya) war methods, becoming invisible to each other. Even Gods would not identify them properly - so covert was that guerilla war. Bhagadatha's elephant 'Supratika' was freely roaming

about in the army, with no one to contain it, to check its fury and mindless vandalism. Much of the Pandava army, which attempted it, was already dead in its aimless tramlings.

Nakula and Sahadeva were here confronting their uncle Shalya ! Shalya had not seen this prowess before! He swooned though appreciative of their valour, unable to stand up to them. The evening saw the war ending in Pandava's favour.



Yudhishtira was found accosting Shikhandi on the morning of the eighth day for retreating the previous day. "Brother, how many times had you boasted that you would easily eliminate Bhishma ? What is this you have done, so far ? What an occasion slipped and let go by you ! What happened to your oath ? You have wasted your life, its purpose, its opportunity, altogether in that moment which shall not return to you, again ! Your vanity has destroyed the honour of your family - what will you do today to retrieve it ?"

What had happened was like this, on the previous day: Shikhandi stood before Duryodhana, with a torn chest-shield and tired. Bhishma was viewing this from some distance. If only Shikhandi had deftly appeared before Bhishma, by a swift move, Bhishma would have been compelled to lay down his arms, and the CHAPTER of Bhishma would have ended. But Shikhandi either did not notice Bhishma, or was too tired and humiliated. Besides, he had no weapons now, and here was Duryodhana, between him and the old sire ! No one

came to his help also, as the war was to end for the day. Bhishma lived to win before the eyes of his Death. This was too much for Yudhishtira to bear.

Today also it was a fierce battle. Bhishma was in excellent form. But some tragic events occurred in his own helpless view.

Sunabha, Adityaketu, Bahvashi, Kundadhara, Mahodara, Aparajita, Vishalaksha, Sudurjaya, Panditaka - some nine unfortunate brothers of Duryodhana - were seeking Bhima, to avenge the killings of their brothers on the previous days.

Bhima had just attacked Bhishma to force him to a retreat, after killing his charioteer, and was in search for new prey ! That was the moment when these unfortunate souls caught his attention. Bhima took no time to increase his 'score' and roared in the very presence of Bhishma - the Grand Commander ! With arrows, spears, mace, sword and lances these were eliminated in novel ways. The Kaurava army ran away in fear.

Duryodhana was an eyewitness to this tragic scene where Bhishma was helpless ! He roared with the order: "Kill this vile Bhima here and now !" There was no taker for this order, as the army was running ! Duryodhana, as usual went to the old man and expressed his anger. Bhishma replied coolly : "This is of your own making. Did I not advise you against this war, saying no one will contain Bhima's fury ? Did you listen ? Your suffering is what no one can mitigate, at this too late an hour."



Ulupi's son Iravan was found fighting with the brothers of Shakuni on another front. This young hero had an excellent cavalry, strong and exceptional in training. Shakuni's brothers - Gaja, Gavaksha, Vrishabha, Charmavan, Arjava, Shuka, - six in number, were about to rush in the direction of this Naga hero. Shakuni intervened and shouted at them: "No! Not in that direction! You cannot win them. Go elsewhere, urgently; avoid him at all costs" But it was too late! The cavalry of Iravan had encircled them in a death-trap in a lightning movement, and exit was impossible on any side. The armies of the six brothers had been left far behind to be of use to them. These unfortunate princes did their best, no doubt. But Iravan jumped off his chariot with a bare sword in hand, and cut off their heads in a row. Duryodhana had to witness this helplessly. Alambusha was standing nearby. He was the son of Rishyashringa by a Rakshasa woman, and now on the side of Duryodhana, who now ordered him to kill Iravan.

Alambusha created a hallucination of a cavalry equal to Iravan's in no time. Two thousand such troops were conjured up and let loose on Iravan. Iravan too, knew this lore of black magic from his mother. He became invisible, escaped to the skies above and began attacking Alambusha, with all kinds of weapons to pierce his body into springs of blood on all sides. Alambusha's body was cut into fragments and thrown unidentifiably on the field. But the demon sprang up from those very fragments, assembled by magic powers. He let loose millions of serpents by the cult of black magic, which bound themselves to Iravan's body like iron ropes. Iravan dispelled them with Garudastra. Yet

Alambusha overpowered Iravan, in an unguarded movement, and removed his head with a sword. A great Naga-family through Arjuna, came to an end and in this tragic way.

Arjuna received this bad news, elsewhere and was stunned for a moment. Duryodhana was pleased, of course.

Ghatotkacha was now furious, and went to attack Duryodhana. The demon went enumerating all the evil deeds of this villain and would have very nearly ended him, had not Drona come to his aid then and there. Drona had behind him Bhurishravas, Somadatta, Saindhava, Kripa, Ashwatthama and others. But nobody could contain the demon. On the contrary Ghatotkacha grew in strength. He cut the bow of Drona. He destroyed the flag-post of Somadatta. He hit Vahlika in the chest with a sharp lance, and made him swoon. He made Kripa retreat. Bhurishravas lost his chest-shield. Saindhava lost his flag-post and horses. Ghatotkacha played havoc in the Kaurava army and struck terror in a number of unusual ways. There was no sign of his being tired.

Bhima rushed to the help of his son now. The Kaurava army fled in fear in different directions on the mere seeing of this unique combination! Duryodhana had to face Bhima inevitably now. Bhishma sent Bhagadatta to his help. Ghatotkacha dispelled that army by making it lose direction and concentration, resorting to magical tricks. Bhagadatta let loose his mad, demoniac elephant again on Ghatotkacha's army. But Ghatotkacha threw his trident-like missile on it to destroy it. The

elephant would certainly have died, had not Bhagadatta intercepted it in the middle to diffuse it. The missile that Bhagadatta now threw on Ghatotkacha was caught by the demon, as if it were a dry reed and broke it on his knees into pieces! The gods appreciated this sportly action and blessed him.

Bhagadatta now turned to Bhima to vent his fury. It was a fierce attack in which Bhima's flag-post and horses were destroyed and Visoka, the charioteer was sent into a swoon.

Arjuna joined his brother then. He was inconsolable over the loss of his son Iravan, that morning, and was taking heavy revenge on all those that came into his sight on the enemy's side.



Nine more sons of Dhritarashtra attacked Bhima, to his relish. This was fate indeed! Bhima was hilarious!! Anadhristi, Vairata, Dirghalochana, Dirghabahu, Subahu, Kanakadhwaja and three more sought Bhima to receive death at his hands, bringing the total to some forty-six killed among the Kaurava brothers, till date.

Ambashtha and Abhimanyu were engaged in severe fight elsewhere. Bhishma prevented Arjuna from rushing to the help of his son; Bhagadatta and Kripa ensured this further. Abhimanyu cut the bow of Ambashtha, drawing him to a duel with swords. The rest of the armies were mutually destroying each other, in needless bloodshed. Human heads floated in the river of blood, on all sides, and appeared to ridicule the vanity of living kings and their mutual hatred. Those that were

still alive, were too tired to see dead heads on flowing blood!

Both armies had suffered heavy casualties on that cruel day. Duryodhana had lost seventeen brothers, while Arjuna had lost his dear son Iravan, and had taken it deeply to heart.

War is a gamble, after all. Once a hero is in it, it is difficult to stop, even in defeat, looking for the elusive victory, every next moment. That is the story of war, then, as now, as always.

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra trembled and boiled in anguish at the news of killings of their sons at Bhima's hands. No one could bring them comfort.

Only evening put a stop to further slaughter.



CHAPTER 18

SRI KRISHNA WEILDS THE DISC AGAIN ON THE TENTH DAY !

Arjuna was inconsolable. What a son, this Iravan! His mother was the only daughter of her father Airavatha; the only issue so to say, as there were no other children. Iravan grew with his mother, and not with the father Arjuna, and in Nagavatha. There was a background to it, also. Airavatha's brother had a dislike, bordering on hatred for Arjuna, and so now he had joined the Kaurava camp on the war-field. (The hatred between Nagas and Princes of the Kuru race dated back to the days of Nahusha, and was up-to-date till the rule of Dhritarashtra ! The reason was that Nahusha onwards, if not earlier, the princes of Hastinavati, used young girls of the Naga families for satiation of their sexual urge, illegally, and left the children so born without political rights and social status; the children had grown now into numerous tribes, and were waiting for revenge. One among them, Takshaka, killed Parikshita later for avenging the old wrongs, and consequently Nahushya Nagas, Dhartharashtra Nagas were all burnt alive in an unforgettable genocide that assumed religious proportions

in the so-called Sarpa Yaga.¹ A majority of Naga Princes joined the Pandavas, because of alliances between them and Arjuna, and also because of relations with Yadavas, particularly with Kunti, whose maternal grandfather, Aryaka, was a Naga prince, ruling over Nagavarttha, near where, Bhima had been poisoned and drowned in the Ganga, in his boyhood. Had not Aryaka saved him, it would have been a different story. The general polarisation, with Nagas on the Pandava side was understandable this way, given the hostility for whoever was on the throne of Hastinavati. Nothing much had been done to mitigate this burning hatred of the Nagas for the Kauravas. Duryodhana underestimated this factor in his arithmetic of numbers in the counting of army-strength. Airavatha's brother had perhaps a personal, special reason for his hatred of Arjuna. Takshaka was another such exception, who had escaped the fury of Fire in the notorious Khandava-burning by Arjuna, waiting now in the form of 'Nagastra' - a 'serpent missile' - in the quiver of Karna, without his knowledge.)

Iravan was handsome, possessed of virtues, valorous and wedded to truth, honour and Dharma. Unfortunately he had not seen Arjuna, his father, till now; Arjuna had kept track of his son's growth, progress, virtues, in private, and so was as proud of him as of Abhimanyu.

Iravan as a boy would often ask his mother, in his

¹ Several such tribes that met the ire of the people and so were killed are mentioned in the *Adi parva*; *Rig-Veda* also mentions some of these tribes; scattered references are also available in other texts of the Vedas.

younger days: “mother, dear, where is father ?” She would put him off with evasive, tentative answers, until one day, when the boy became aggressive, she told him: “your father is in Indraloka, as a friend and guide, on an urgent mission.” She thought this would silence the boy. Actually Arjuna was there in that world at that time ! The boy went straight into Indraloka, met his father, introduced himself as the son of Ulupi by him and pleased him. The surprise of Arjuna knew no bounds as his son, who did not know him, could seek him, as far as that higher world. Arjuna had then told the boy: “You must not waste your time here; go and learn all that a warrior’s son ought to ! I shall call you during any emergency war; and sure, you will join me then.”

Now during this war Arjuna had called him, and here was his fate, so cruel ! Arjuna repented for having called him, as the messenger of death, in these ironical circumstances.

Sri Krishna’s consoling words had no effect on him in these personal moments of loss and sorrow. He was now cursing the warrior’s role in society and singing the tune of his confounded brother Yudhishtira, confirmed in irretrievable Pacifism, to startle Sri Krishna:

Arjuna : “I grant that Duryodhana is the enemy of mankind. But I am no less of a fool to lose my son, for no fault of his. Is it not a despicable profession, this one of warriors, to sacrifice children and kindred for the sake of vanity of worldly possession of power and royalty ? One who is dispossessed, and in adversity like me could better

abjure war, take to more civilized ways of life, than offer children for our sake, our selfish causes ! Even beggary would be a nobler alternative, I feel. See how many millions are dead here for the sake of the obstinate Duryodhana and his wicked counsels, Shakuni and Karna ? How many families are ruined? Should responsible people like me, also, behave like the evil Duryodhana ?”

Sri Krishna : (With a broad and contemptuous smile,) “My noble friend, your enemies will not allow me to repeat all my teachings to your impervious mind, as on the first day of this war ! Your disease does not seem to be curable, after all, even if I try the treatment here right now. Come, come; evil is not of your making or liking. It is there for us to fight, staring us in our face. Succumbing to it is cowardly. You call it noble, and as a better alternative. Must you not avenge this death of your heroic son ? Come, let us get ready.”



Here was Duryodhana, in Karna's camp, boiling with uncontrollable rage : “Friend ! I have lost as many as forty-seven of my brothers. Uncle Shakuni's brothers are dead too ! How many more dear ones should I lose? You have forsaken me; and here are old fools, Bhishma and Drona, unable to do anything to prevent it. They don't put their minds into the fight. Please show me a way out of this mess.”

Karna sighed, in silence, and in helplessness. Duryodhana continued :

“These extraordinary heroes on my side do not seem to be interested in eliminating the Pandavas or their forces. Bhishma has so vowed, I understand. But what about Drona or his son Ashwatthama ? What has happened to them ? I fail to understand. The Pandavas have suddenly grown strong out of our weakness, or generosity, and are destroying our armies without a check. Our armoury is getting exhausted. Villain Bhima killed my unfortunate brothers in the very presence of the Acharya ! What devil has possessed him to force him into this deadly inaction? I too was rendered helpless as a mute witness ! How can I continue the war, and on what might or support?”

Karna : “Prince Duryodhana, do not grieve. If you can advise Bhishma to take rest for a while or retire from the war-field, I shall bear that mantle for your victory; not otherwise. Once I take lead, I shall see to it that all accounts are made equal, so that I can lead our armies to greater glory and victory. I shall take no time in finishing the Pandava army, and then the war ends ! Bhishma, as you have found, is kind to the Pandavas ! You made a wrong choice of a General in him. He is too old and senile also. If Bhishma is not voluntarily agreeable for retirement, bring pressure on him through Drona. Once Bhishma is out, know that the Pandavas are dead.”

Duryodhana ordered Dushshasana : “Get the armies ready for the day’s war. I shall meet the Grandsire and return quickly.”



Duryodhana : “Sire, myself and my brothers began this war by banking on you heavily ! You have seen how miserably my brothers are being slaughtered daily, without protectors, while you are showering mercy on our enemies, the Pandavas. That is a sure discount on our side - this bonus of mercy of yours on them !! Now I seek a favour of you. (1) Either you destroy the Pandavas today along with their forces, or (2) allow me to entrust the lead to Karna in your place. Please have mercy on me and at least retire. Let Karna fulfill what is beyond your capacity.”

Bhishma was too deeply hurt for a quick reply. It was the most dishonourable proposal and so unexpected that stunned him. After some moments he recovered and replied; Bhishma's stare was both killing and piercing as never before :

Bhishma : “Your foolishness has exceeded all bounds of my expectation; your stupidity is endless and I curse myself for having stood on your side so far. You are not able to realise that I am using all my strength, strategy and will to please you in a fight no one could participate at my age. Show me anyone equal to me on the war-field, for the results I have produced. Fool ! you want an impossibility to be achieved, and that in a single moment ! I am no magician, nor God ! you have no proper estimate of your enemies at all. They are not static pawns to be mowed down like dried crops on a field ! How many times have I not told you what kind of adversaries we are facing here ? Take Arjuna, for example; he fought Indra alone, in the

Khandava-burning episode and defeated him. Can you do that? Could I do it? In the 'Ghosha Yatra' episode² when the Gandharvas captured you alive, who else could have secured your release other than Arjuna ? You still live to remember these and yet accuse me of unworthy behaviour ! What were Karna, Shakuni and Dusshasana doing then? Where were they ? Why don't you accuse them of betrayal ? Take again the 'cow-capturing' drama enacted on the outskirts of Virata's capital! Arjuna could defeat Nivata Kavachas, who were beyond even Indra's prowess; who could face him now ?³ You fool! you are not able to realise that God himself is at the back of Arjuna, the God who bears the Conch and Disc, to protect all the upper and lower worlds! Who can fight against God for victory ? Is it not Vishnushakti that you see in Arjuna ? Even Narada and other sages came to your court to advise you against this evil course of war, which was avoidable then! Did you listen ? Even now you seem to be confirmed in your ignorance, which is proving costly for you, and not my humble and sincere efforts to fight ! Are you not seeing proof of words of advice? Are you not the fellow who cultivated hatred for the most loveable Pandavas? They say that one on the eve of death visualises golden trees and bushes ! What are you

² The annual "Cow-counting" exercise was misused by Duryodhana, who camped near the Pandava habitation, to excite their jealousies

³ *Ko hi shakto rane jetum Pandavam rabhasam tada |
Yasya gopta jagadgopta shakhachakragadadharah ||*

seeing or counting now ? If you are a man, fight yourself against Arjuna or Sri Krishna and then come to me to accost me in these mean words. I can kill to eliminate the Somakas and Panchalas excepting Shikhandi. Or I shall be killed by them to avoid you and your daily taunts and reach heavens more honourably.⁴ The world knows my vow, well indeed for long, that I shall fight no woman, or one who has been a woman before, one who has a woman's name, or one who looks like a woman and so forth. Shall I tell you more openly? I shall lay down arms if I should spot that Shikhandi, of the Panchala family, right opposite me. You are fortunate that it has not yet so happened."

Duryodhana was tired of all this repeated story, which he had no patience to listen to further and walked away in a huff without answering Bhishma's questions. He could not more openly advise Bhishma to retire ! And here was Bhishma who did not volunteer to vacate his position for Karna, either !

Bhishma cursed himself for a dependent life of slavery to evil, his own thralldom and unavoidable loyalty to Duryodhana. He cursed also his long life, which he could end only by his own will. Old age, servitude to unworthy rulers, rebukes undeserved - pierced him as never before. He decided to intensify the personal combat against Arjuna and got ready.

⁴ *Vratametanam mama sada prithivyam api vishrutam |
Striyam stripurvake chaiva shtrina mnam strirupinim ||
Na muncheyam aham banam iti The Kauravanandana ||*

Duryodhana held an urgent war council and told Dushshasana ! “The old hag may be up to some mischief today, as he has indicated : See to it that he has no excuse to lay down arms. Avoid his being confronted with that bitch Shikhandi, at all costs. Let my piercing words have some effect on him, today at least.”



The ninth day arrived. Bhishma arranged the army in the ‘Sarvatobhadra’ structure, Vyuha. But bad omens and supernatural signs not favourable for a victory appeared soon.

The Pandavas, for their part counter-structured their army suitably. Right at the start Alambusha and Abhimanyu clashed. Sons of Draupadi joined Abhimanyu there. The Kaurava army was torn to shreds and was hacked mercilessly to death. The five sons of the Pandavas looked like five planets attacking the moon in one Zodiac ! Alambusha went into a swoon, woke up, only to face the fury of Abhimanyu, and go mad!

On another front Bhishma and Kripa came to attack Arjuna, together, while Satyaki had engaged Drona and his son. Bhishma could not stand before Arjuna that day. Drona and Susharma Trigarth came to the support of Bhishma then, but were rebuffed by Arjuna.

On yet another front, it was entertaining to see Bhima handling an elephant-garrison of the Kauravas to death in funny and simple ways. There flowed a river of blood towards the netherworld. Even soldiers on the Kaurava side condemned this avoidable slaughter, blamed Duryodhana and praised secretly the Pandavas for their truthfulness, and for their success.

Susharma ran away to avoid death at Arjuna's hands. Abhimanyu dispelled Chitrasena. Drupada, unfortunately could not face Drona, that day. Bhima had tired the old Vahlika king. Satyaki now engaged Bhishma, who had already been done in by Arjuna. Duryodhana saw this from a distance and sent Dusshasana to the old man's help. This battle went on for long, on equal footing.

Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva had now Shakuni among them caught like a fox in a forest fire. Shakuni's cavalry division behind him was emaciated in no time. Seeing that there was no escape from death, Shakuni ran away amidst laughter in the Pandavas' quarter. While Yudhishtira and brothers were looking for a new prey, Shalya came on the scene to engage them.

Bhishma succeeded in making Satyaki retreat with his strong army, which finally ran away shamefully. Sri Krishna was worried as the ninth day was drawing to a close in defeat on the side of the Pandavas. He said to Arjuna :

Sri Krishna : "Friend, you have broken your word to me, it seems. When will you fulfill your vow?"

Arjuna gave an evasive reply to the effect⁵ of the same mischievous tune that he had always hummed before, as usual :

"By killing those who deserve no such killing, am I to achieve worlds beyond Hell to rule ? What will I lose by withdrawing to forests or by withstanding

⁵ *Avadhyanam vadham kritva rajyam va narakottaram |
Dukkhani vanavasena kim nu me sukritam bhavet ||*

hardship to which we are already used ? Would that not be a better alternative ?”

Sri Krishna lost patience, jumped off his seat, rushed at Bhishma with his Disc rotating on the forefinger of his right hand !

Both armies now shouted : “this is going to be the end of Bhishma ! God save the old man !!”

Sri Krishna ran like a lion at Bhishma who looked like a majestic elephant or a bull. Bhishma was totally undisturbed and devout at this moment, like a yogi; he threw away the bow and arrows, and folded his hands now on his head; he stood up and uttered chants, praising Sri Krishna, and cried loudly: “Lord, I am but your servant, in spite of my present ironical situation. Come; strike me and have mercy on me to end this anguish and conflict. Who but you can put an end to it ?”

Arjuna ran behind Sri Krishna, speedily, caught up his legs in a devout clasp and prayed : “Lord, return to your seat; please; please; I shall fulfill my promise to you, this time without fail. Believe me, and do not break your vow. Trust me and return. I swear on my bow Gandiva, on my earned merits. Leave this old man to me now.”

Sri Krishna smiled and returned to his seat. The sunset and the battle ended, without any substantial result.



The Kaurava army at dusk was gloating over their ‘victory’ in forcing the Pandava army into a retreat,

although it was not warranted. But the Pandavas were worried that nine days were over with no tangible results except heavy losses on either sides. The army on their side had shrunk, and here was Bhishma still alive in good form to finish off whatever was left of it ! There was a council at night as usual :

Yudhishthira : “Krishna, Bhishma does not seem to spare us. In fact he is growing in strength daily. We have tried all our best efforts to contain him and failed. At this rate, defeat is certain for us. Better to retire now and at least spare the remaining soldiers. I knew this would happen so and that is why I suggested that it would be nobler for us to resume life of recluses in some hermitage. I have brought shame and trouble on my brothers and wife and got all my supporters into an inescapable death trap. Let me inflict austerities on me to wash off this sin, by going away right now.”

Sri Krishna : “Brother, do not be sad. No one says you are a coward; you are a hero, all right; and heroes should not think or talk in your strain. Do one thing : give me directions to end the Kauravas and bring this war to an end.⁶ If Arjuna cannot eliminate the old sire, let me do it for you.” (Sri Krishna beams a mischievous smile at Arjuna, and proceeds:) “If the death of Bhishma can halt the war and bring you victory, I shall get into his chariot along with him as a warrior this time, and accomplish it in no time. He who is your enemy,

⁶ *Mam va niyunkshva sowhardat yotsye Bhishmena Pandava ||*
(Bhishma 107 - 28)

is my enemy too; do not doubt. My all is at your disposal, my soldiers and dependents are all yours. Your brother is now a directly related blood bond of mine through my sister. I am ready even to cut off flesh from my body and yield it in his service, just as this best among men is ready to give his life in my cause. This is our covenant, and let us mutually support each other in this very difficult time.⁷ Arjuna is my disciple and friend too !”

Yudhishthira : “All this is true Sri Krishna. Do I need to be reminded of all this ? But I do not want your direct participation in war; that would break your vow and bring you a bad name as a hypocrite. I think of one way out just now ! On the first day when I approached him for blessings, Bhishma had promised to reveal to me a plan to eliminate him from the war-field at the appropriate time : That time seems to have arrived now after all. Let me approach him this night, right now, and see what he would advise. I shall ask him to switch over to our side ! But you should also accompany me! However one more worry is there. Even if the old Sire reveals such a plan, and helps us, it will end in our killing him. There is no other go.”

⁷ *Yah shatruh Panduputranam macchatruh na samshayah |
Madartha bhavadiya ye ye madiyah tavaivate |
Tava bhrata mama sakha sambandhi sishya eva cha |
Mamsanyutkritya dasyami Phalgunarthe mahipathe |
Esha chapi naravyaghro matkrite jivitam tyajet |
Esha nah samayah tata tarayema parasparam |*

The brothers agree to this plan, and proceed to Bhishma's camp along with Sri Krishna.

We must understand the chivalry and war - etiquette of those days.⁸ When the day's war ended at sunset the soldiers forgot their sides; met each others respectfully, and sat together chatting through nights. None spoke of the events of the day - the victories or losses. They behaved like brothers with each other. They got medically treated for scars on their bodies and wounds with weapons, removed edges of arrows, got blessed by Brahmins, bathed in herbal waters and enjoyed music on instruments, played games for recreation, enjoyed praises by bards and spent the nights comfortably like moments of joy in heavens. That was a divine routine even on battlefields. The armies slept in peace at intervals, along with horses and elephants, thousands and thousands of them, without fears of foul or treacherous attacks from the enemies. Forgetting the bitter memories of the day's battle was no small achievement in those days of Dharma ! Mutual trust was an extraordinary achievement even in hostile camps.

⁸ *Tatah svashibiram gatwa Pandavah Kuravasthatha |
Nyavasanta maharaja pujayantah paraspam |
Raksham kritva tatah shurah nyasya gulman yathavidhi |
Apaniya cha shalyani snatva cha vividhah jalaih |
Kritasvastyanah sarve samstuyantascha vandhibhi |
Gitavaditra shabdena vyakridanta yashasvinaha |
Muhurthadiva tatsarvam abhavat svargasannibham |
Na hi yuddhakatham kaanchit tatra kurvan maharathah |
Te prasupta bale tatra parishranta jane nripa |
Hastyasva bahule rathran preksaniya babhuvatuh |*

We have to realise some plain truths even for today: all who participate in wars need not be wicked, selfish, or cruel. What can hatred or partisanship achieve for soldiers that await death any moment ? Before the reality of death, vanities of life vanish like dew on green grass at sunrise. A dying soldier has no use for hatred as it is no means for any other better world. Even war could be made honourable and a source of satisfaction for the dying soldier in this impartiality of discharge of duty in a disinterested manner. The rules of those days made these values possible. Can we imagine 'enemy' soldiers relaxing on sands of riverbanks, cracking jokes to please others, enjoying comforts of company, with no fears or suspicion ? The exceptions were Karna, Duryodhana, Shakuni and the like. Their numbers were small, not to influence the army morale on the negative side of values.



It is Bhishma's camp now. Dim lights light the corners silently. Servants wait nearby helping in medicating Bhishma's wounded body in numerous ways. They do not disturb his sleep, but apply ointments on his multiple wounds, trying to give the body maximum rest. But Bhishma does not get sleep, and he tosses on the bed by changing sides frequently.

There are firebrands burning at the entrance of his camp, and the camp keepers are vigilant. Footsteps heard from a distance make them alert, and one of them advances with a burning firebrand too see as to who it is that is approaching. He is surprised, and comes back to report to other doorkeepers. Now all of them

greet the guests - Sri Krishna and the five Pandavas. The guests stand at the entrance, while the doorkeeper reports to Bhishma, to seek his instructions. Bhishma is not surprised; he gets up half in the bed and speaks: "Come, Sri Krishna, come in Yudhishtira, come Pandavas." He waves a hand in the direction of seats for them. The brothers along with Sri Krishna prefer to sit on the ground by the side of resting Bhishma, and Bhishma inquiringly looks at Sri Krishna, in curiosity. The conversation starts :

Sri Krishna : "Grandsire ! If you can administer an oath of pledge to the Pandavas to retire to the forests, you will be doing a fine service to humanity by putting an end to this evil war, although you may be wronging a rightful party fighting for a just cause. There is no other go. The brothers have come seeking your blessings in this regard. It seems you had already blessed them to a final success on the first day, on a similar occasion. But then conditions have changed perhaps, and you seem to have developed second thoughts, now that Adharma has overpowered Dharma ! Well, well, it is your liberty to change your views as you have to account for your own doings and choices, in the final count. Any way be pleased to bless the Pandavas. I knew even on the first day that these unfortunate brothers have no chance, when you opted to fight against them ! They should have decided then, what they have done today. Better, ten days are wasted, than never ! Let the rest of army be saved."

Bhishma is in tears being pierced by these taunting words with their innuendoes and their blasting

suggestiveness of moral and ethical overtones! The insinuations are too much for him to bear, coming as they did from no less a person than Sri Krishna. It was a divine commentary on a moral decrepit unbefitting or disgraceful conduct in life and a treacherous performance on the battlefield. At last, Bhishma replies, still in tears:

Bhishma : “Oh, Vasudeva, you too speak this way ?”

Sri Krishna : “Sire, I am not aware if anyone else passed a similar comment on you, unless your own inner voice is also of the same view”.

Bhishma : “Do you not know that inner voice? Are you not the soul of all ?”

Sri Krishna : “That discussion has no use for our occasion now”.

Bhishma : “I am asking you of the Inner Voice through which someone spoke to me about ten days ago, advising me that the movement of body is dictated by Karma, and that of the soul is directed by God, if it surrenders to God! I am but following that formula. This taunting and that voice go ill together!... Let it be... Yudhishthira! tell me, what do you want of me now ?”

Yudhishthira : “Sire, you told them that victory shall be on the side of Truth and Justice. You said these are on my side. You also promised to reveal a secret by which you could be overcome and driven to long rest, that you seem to need because of the choice of war by me, so cruelly inflicted on you! You are a living abode of all knowledge of all weapons,

all missiles and secrets to success in war. After all where are we, your grandchildren in contrast ?”

Bhishma : “I still stand by my word. Truth alone shall win and not untruth”.

Yudhishtira : “Your fight yesterday has belied that hope in my humble view and in my great estimate of your prowess!... The forests are always there for us. Please give us permission.....”

Bhishma : (sighs in long silence.. thinks deeply and proceeds) “Boy, Yudhishtira, Truth shall win finally... but not until I am on my feet on the battlefield! None can kill me, you know that too. The only way out is that I must voluntarily lay down arms and retire from war! Now let me reveal the formula of your success. You know that I shall lay down arms, the moment I see a woman, woman turned man, man dressed as a woman, an eunuch, a man with a woman’s name, a patient, and so on. You know what I mean. This vow is not made for your sake for immediate political calculations. Let no one accuse me of partisanship. I made this vow long ago as a chivalrous gesture. Now if it can help you, use it..... I mean, Shikhandi. Keep this figure before Arjuna; you will vanquish me at my will. He has inauspicious signs also in his flag, which I cannot tolerate.” ⁹ (Bhishma hangs his head, remembering how he had wronged the Pandavas, all these ten days)

⁹ Skull, seems to have been that sign. It is not very clear.

Sri Krishna gestures through eyes that the Pandavas must leave the camp of Bhishma as they had achieved their purpose. They all bow down and leave.



Bhishma reviews the regrettable, wasteful and fateful events of his life, one-by-one, tossing on bed in pain, in body as well as in mind. Coming in close succession, in bunches and clusters, they mock at his celibacy, his wisdom, his devotion to God and his decisions derisively with remarkable fatal effect. How could he have peace now ? Even in death he was going to die wastefully, without benefit on either side.

Bhishma remembered Draupadi, and her scene of helplessness in that assembly! He trembled for his ill-advised inaction in words and deeds. "Damsel! forgive this old man for the loss of his senses on that occasion!"- he silently prayed. He wondered how he, who was an expert on Dharmic texts and their applications in critical contexts, was struck with so much ignorance that he could not utter a single word, then ! He blamed on his Karma repeatedly. But Karma said to him : "I am but an accumulated version of all that you chose to think, say or do! I am not independent of you!! You are to blame yourself ".

That did not satisfy him. He then wished that he had died earlier to avoid these embarrassments! The inner voice replied : "That is a cowardly thought. Besides, nailing the past will not unravel a better future or alternative".

Now Bhishma remembered his father Shantanu and

the circumstances in which he vowed celibacy for the sake of his father's happy married life, for getting this boon of "Icchamaranitva" - "Death at the moment of choice".

It now appeared like a curse more than a boon! Bhisma calculated that it was not yet the brighter half of the year - the uttarayana - for him to reach the higher world. He said to himself at last "Let me wait".



CHAPTER 19

END OF BHISHMA'S GENERALSHIP

A spy rushed to report to Duryodhana that the five brothers and Sri Krishna met Bhishma secretly at night. Duryodhana seemed uninterested at first, but then became alert to say :

Duryodhana : “Did you hear the conversation ?”

Spy : “No sir ! Sri Krishna kept watch at the entrance!”

Duryodhana : “Blast that bloody coward !.. Anyway what is there that we do not know or guess ? It is all one to me. You can go.”

He sent the spy away by rewarding him with a necklace and rushed to meet Shakuni.

Shakuni : “What brings you here at this strange hour, nephew ? Any disturbing news ?”

Duryodhana narrated what he had heard. Shakuni chuckled ! He then frowned, thought for a moment and then said :

Shakuni : “If Bhishma retires, it may be a good riddance in a way. Anyhow he will not kill the Pandavas, as he has vowed. It is gracious that he has held so long, somehow. It is our opportunity

to see Karna on the war-field, whether he becomes the General or someone else does. The treachery of these Pandavas and that cowherd cannot do any damage that we have not anticipated or estimated. Let him go !”



The Brothers had returned to their camp. Sri Krishna closed his eyes, in his seat like a yogi. Yudhishtira and Arjuna sat at his feet in moods of complex thoughts. A long silence followed, and then the chat followed too :

Arjuna : Krishna, who can understand my feelings in place ?”

Sri Krishna : “Friend ! Feelings, whether complex or simple have no significance outside their context. Feelings are holy and play great roles as propelling forces for actions, if sound in moral and aesthetic potentials, and if backed by wisdom, experience and discrimination. That is their place as God-ordained in the life of a good man with self-control, and disciplined in the habits of thought and actions. Erratic feelings of an undisciplined soul like Duryodhana can destroy whole civilizations and achievements of cultured societies, as you can see now. God wants our life to be endowed with auspicious tendencies, and directed towards a grand, integrated Good for all living things. He directs it himself, but through infinite and varied choices of all manners of souls, possessed of good, evil and indifferent intentions and backgrounds. He asserts

ultimately, but allows us to heed him, out of their/our own freedom ! That is what Vedantins call Leela. Moreover what are these feelings that you name now ? A hardened, crystallised, clear feeling becomes thought. A molten, amorphous, fluid thought crying for a concrete shape is what you call feeling. A genius can convert a feeling into a wise thought by overpowering it, harnessing it, and channelising it into its own proper shape or mould. An unwise one is carried away by it, losing self-control, direction and lost in its mischievous fluctuating force. I told you to seek refuge in wisdom, on the first day.¹ What more can I tell you ?”

Arjuna (startled): “Am I slipping my way from righteousness, as you suggest, by this reminder ?”

Sri Krishna : “I am not suggesting any new thing now. It is left to you for introspection . Reminders are well intentioned, whether one takes them or not. I just did my duty.”

Arjuna : (not being able to comprehend the meaning)
“Well, when past memories come upon us thickly, what are we to do ?

Sri Krishna : “Nothing shall be out of context, purpose, or meaning. The context alone decides it. If the past is meaningful to the present, take it, digest it,

¹ *Buddhaow sharanam anviccha*

Buddhiyukto jahatiha ubhe sukrita duskrite

Yada te mohakalilam buddhih vyatitarishyati.....

Buddhiyogam upashritya

(Ch 2. Gita)

amalgamate it, absorb it, and assimilate it in the rhythm of the present. Or else if you allow it in its own outmoded form, shape, force, purpose, it will torpedo the present context and take you away into its whirlwind like force, on your unguarded feet ! The past *as past* is dead, except as its significance to the present and the future. It is like dead people who are immortal in ideation, in new embodiments in you and me. They do not have physical bodies of individual identity."

This is too much for Arjuna to bear now in his agonised mind-condition. He weeps profusely and reaches a stage when it does not seem to stop on its own. Sri Krishna eyes him with a fixed stare, and turns to Yudhishtira who is also in the same condition of mind.

Arjuna : "We were born in the forests; lost our father at too impressionable an age. When we required all that paternal affection, there we were at the entrance of Hastinapura, not knowing whether we belonged there, or anywhere, whether we were acceptable or not. Grandsire was magnanimous to us; welcomed us, gave us warm places in his heart, and filled the gap of affection that fate had denied us by taking away our father. When we played in the dust and came home dustily, he would embrace us, clasp us to his bosom, unmindful that it would spoil or soil his white clothes. How he used to fondle us all ! I did not know my father when I came there; and for a long time I thought he must be my father. As I grew in the sunshine of his unparalleled affection, and called him 'father !' one day, he corrected me by saying 'child ! I am your

grandfather; no father Sir; but I am in the position of your father, as for as affection and care matter'; and then he wept, remembering our father. I still remember that touching scene. Now this has raised in me a fountainhead of gentlest feelings of reverence and affection for the unfortunate old man ! Tell me, how I can fell him, kill him ?"

Sri Krishna : "There is nothing in this that you have not already confessed or I do not know. Nor am I indifferent to filial affections. I am only saying that the context has altered. I am asking you to rise to a higher altitude to see things from a wider angle, and have a totally different sight. I cannot say the same things again and again, except trying this, one last time. If you cannot understand this time also, I have to leave you to your own fate. See this : we cannot measure, understand and grasp the value, use or status of a person as if he were an all - time fixture ! Man and his measurer are both non-static. He will have done many things from different frames of mind at different times. Putting them all in one category is difficult and also wrong, qualitatively. How do you assess ? Only if the abstract man behind all this variety, the entity 'unchanging' if at all, is available for calculation, you can understand. But that is not available. Even if available, that is only your 'creation', this abstracting from the concrete growing man, something convenient for your calculation. A unified personality from which all these frames of mind and their angles emerge cannot be known in advance. It is not ready-made or known in advance.

Do you think you can paint a life-like colorful picture with one single colour? All colours must be in their places, in their true intensity or shades, the arbiter being life and life alone. If it is done in only one colour, and is therefore unrealistic, do you say it is good just to please the painter and avoiding wounding of his heart ? Can the subjective principle be allowed to colour the judgments here for fairness of evaluation? Let me be more plain: Let us say a man praises God in a divine mood, at one time. At another time he wrongs his wife, the God-ordained social order, and goes to a prostitute for satisfying his uncontrollable sex-urge! Now how do you assess this man, and from which angle ? Which is the truer man and why ? He may yet love his children very much, born of his own wedded wife ! This is as it should be in normal circumstances. But further, say, he loves a friend who sells beef, and at the same time loves cows, and tends them also at home ! How much more complicated his case is now ! There are here so many bases from which to look at the man, none of them being ignorable, avoidable, or discountable. Do you close eyes to one, to pick out another for a favourable or unfavourable judgment ? Do you invite him to receive ablutions, when you perform your father's annual death ceremony ? Is he fit ? Do you count only on your friendship with him as main in consideration ? Do you not need the totality of this man's known personality at least, if not the unknown side of it, for dealing with him properly? Or do you say propriety is beyond

consideration here ? Only 'thoughts' about him, only 'feelings' about him cannot help your judgment here; do they? There is the greater consideration of whether all these activities of the man are pro-life or anti-life, the larger moral standard ! That alone can determine act by act, thought by thought, feeling by feeling, the man, torn arithmetically as it were, into minute details, minute factors, to help you to arrive at a larger judgment. You cannot remain at this factorised level also, without re-unifying these into a totality, whatever that may come to, when you so integrate them all. Now in this complex problem of total estimate, you are seeing one Bhishma, to the exclusion of other Bhishmas ! The Bhishma that was a mute witness to the sight of disrobing your wife is also there! The Bhishma that divides the nation is there too! The Bhishma that put Dhritarashtra on the throne without crowning the un-crownable blind man is also there ! The political Bhishma, the moral or immoral Bhishma, the personal Bhishma, the celibate one, true to his father in his pledge is there. Which of them are you now talking of or viewing ?

Arjuna : "Good God ! You have complicated the matter beyond my grasp or imagination now ! What examples ! What analysis ? Even if I could appreciate your flow of thoughts in an out-of-context position, what am I to do now ? How can I put it into practical application in a situation of do or die here, once for all ?"

Sri Krishna : "You have complicated the matter by

introducing the concept of 'out-of-the context situation' ! Is there something like that in our ever-changing contexts of life ? I simply brought some basic facts to your consideration ! They are neither my creations, nor fanciful imaginations ! Your context is your own. That is determined only by the greater national context, the larger human context, and the more enormous cosmic context of God, directing all life ! If you still insist on being blind to all these, and being partial to a blinded view, you can go your own way, leaving me in peace, privately, though a little too late. Are you a child ? Are you irresponsible ? Are you crazy?"

Arjuna : "I did not say that larger philosophical questions are useless, or out of place. I merely suggested that we must not ignore feelings; the finer feelings that make us men, not mere breathing machines !"

Sri Krishna : "Oh, I see ! Take relations themselves. Even here a man has more than one relation with another, to deal with. Nothing is simple and easy for consideration, here also ! The relations go on becoming complex as time advances, and simple assessments are impossible. I merely asked you to check up whether relations retard, get reformed or deformed, and see how you can comprehend them to tackle them as they deserve. Feelings come up within the radius of this complexity. Outside this frame, feelings lose their meaning or place, and dealing with them isolatedly is dangerous, as it leads to erroneous judgments. They will trick you

into moral or spiritual pitfalls. I warned. Life beyond is inextricably bound up with life here. I am even more concerned with feelings and values than you are, from all these considerations. How else can you view Bhishma, now - minus these myriad considerations ?”

Arjuna : “I don’t understand it completely, Sri Krishna! Please do not get angry. I am frankly confused. I am related to Bhishma personally, and what other aspect is there, that I have missed, misconstrued, misunderstood, misinterpreted, other relations not comprehended within it, you will tell me. How will it alter my equations with him, also. If my delicate feelings about him do not find a place in my final judgment of him, then what happens to personal feelings ? Are there impersonal ones, too ? Does not a warrior’s profession look despicable if it ignores these relations or feelings ?”

Sri Krishna : “That is the limitation of the human intellect ! It can make anything despicable, look contemptible, in a moment of misjudgment. It is subject to Rajasic and Tamasic influences.² The higher view of looking at all actions as modes of service to God, without taint of selfishness, attachment, and clouded, downward considerations, is difficult to achieve. This is what I am asking you to resort to. Your feelings, relations, and values must stem from and be comprehended within this

² *These are qualities of matter, pervading upto Intellect or Buddhi - the higher mind. Sattva is Peaceful, quiet and balanced. Rajas is madly, hectically active in force. Tamas is inertia.*

larger Sathvic framework of an elevated view. How can a warrior be precluded from this Sathvic framework ? Does he not serve the world at large by protection ? Is he there merely to kill, to grab, to self-glorify, gloat and enjoy at others' costs ? You are misjudging and doing injustice to the class ! How you handle Bhishma should come within the perimeter of your duty as a warrior to protect all else. See if Bhishma is doing his own duty within a similar orbit or exceeding it by throwing his lot with Duryodhana ? How can you single him out of this all-too-important consideration, now ? Can you close your eyes ? Can you fool yourself by wishing away what you shy from, and willing to accept what is not there ? Can you have a wishful, reformed, unrealistic Bhishma as a mental picture ? Are you fighting the real or the imaginary ? Your grandfather is a devotee of mine, a Bhagavatha, true. But does this agree with his fighting against me and my dependents, the other Bhagavathas like you ? How do you assess him now ?”

Arjuna cannot bear the truth of this estimate, this picture drawn by Sri Krishna, so convincingly, and is about to go into a swoon ! He tries to recover to this truth slowly, and does not know, yet, what to say to him.

Sri Krishna : “There is this other side to this also : Don't you think your grandfather is also in a terrible dilemma ? In torn loyalties ? In an irresoluble crisis of moral character and spiritual consideration ? Do you think he hates you ? If he loves you, why

is he on that side ? Is he not confused like you too ?”

Arjuna : “Is he not entitled to my pity as an old man?”

Sri Krishna : “Is pity all ? Is he merely an old man? Do you not see him as an immoral warrior on the side of Duryodhana ?”

Arjuna : “What if I choose to forgive him for his wrong judgment ?”

Sri Krishna : “It is the old song again ! You are singing the same tune shamelessly ! Who are you to forgive? You represent the wronged people on this earth in a Divine polarity ! The world you represent does not forgive him ! It will not forgive you if you save him now ! Do you want to change sides into the wronging party, against your wife, your brothers and all those others whose protection is your God-ordained duty ?”

Arjuna : “What harm is there in forgiving a confused man in a crisis of not his own making ?”

Sri Krishna : “Two confused men cannot forgive each other ! There is the rest of the world around them, as they hold high offices in public life, being watched by the world for the consequences of this fight ! First you resolve your own crisis ! I shall take care of him, hereafter. Take ‘crisis’ as you said. Should it happen to a man steadfast in Dharma? If the crisis is true as it is , then he has betrayed Dharma, which he is supposed to uphold. You share your confusion with Yudhishtira often ! Dharma here is a set up, on order, on a deeper principle

of inviolability, not made by you as a mere custom or covenant. How can anyone break it ? Not understand it ? Bhishma's attachment to Dhritarashtra and his sons has landed him into this moral clouding of mind ! Your attachment to the erring old man is no less of a crime, a trap, a snare !"

Arjuna loses all his courage and self-confidence in personal judgment by this penetrating analysis. He cannot trust himself now, while not being able to reject Sri Krishna's judgment, either, bewildered.

Arjuna : "One more question, Sri Krishna. Do you think that what has brought the grandsire into this plight is his excessive, blinding love or infatuation for his grandchildren ? Are values wrong ? Or feeling ?"

Sri Krishna : "This is not 'one' question ! The same question you are asking, and I am answering in vain, all this while ! How many times should I answer and in how many ways ? Love is pure within Sattvic bounds. Infatuation is blind love of a Rajasic or Tamasic nature. It comes under ignorance. Let me prove it. Let me agree that Bhishma was helpless when your wife was sought to be disrobed, and let us grant that nobody took his words of advice as to avoid that dishonourable act; why then did he sit through the entire scene in that shameless assembly ? What prevented him from getting out ? Did his conscience die ? Where was his wisdom or discretion ? Even after seeing Vidura leaving the assembly hall, why did he prefer to sit through ? What do you call this ? Why did

he not protest ? What does the code say ? Go back and see still earlier ! When you were exiled in the forests, did he come even once to enquire of you, your well-being ? During your incognito-stay at the Matsya capital, why did he indirectly reveal characteristics of the region where you were staying ? Is this not betrayal for a person pretending to be neutral ? Did he not count the duration of the total exile period correctly to tell Duryodhana so, later on ? Why then did he agree to accompany him for the episode of capturing of the cows ? Do you now deny his total partisanship on the Kaurava side ? Does this befit him ? He knows all lores, all codes, all philosophy, and lives like a devotee, though as a statesman - but don't you think even blind people can see cracks in this image, lines out of proportion, colours out of place, and a grotesqueness unbecoming a devotee of God ? My last question to you, my friend : should such a senile person play any more role in the vicious politics of today ? Is your personal relation more important than the outcome of the battle between Godly and antigodly forces ? What is your own role here ?”

Arjuna : “Things are becoming more clear now. Our roles in life are more complex than we understand! I shall do my duty today; if you permit, let me ask you a question about yourself.”

Sri Krishna : “It is daybreak time; so be quick.”

Arjuna : “When you were at Hastinavati as our ambassador, why did you not advise Bhishma, straight and tell him all this, yourself ? Just as you

advised me now, could you not have advised him then ?

Sri Krishna : “You seem to suppose I am a failed, muddle-headed politician ! What an accusation, after you have heard all that transpired there in detail, several times from me ! Listen again if you want. I went to Hastinavati. They had planned my camp at the palace. I rejected it. Since Bhishma and Drona pretended neutrality, they expected me to camp with them. I rejected this also and preferred to stay at Vidura’s. Do you not expect Bhishma to know my reasons for rejection of his playing host to me ? Did I not thereby club him with Duryodhana? What more could I convey to one who is sensitive to know? Duryodhana objected to my breaking of protocol rules of staying with royalty. I told him that the real protocol was to refuse to dine with an enemy or one who hates. Should not Bhishma understand ? No, he never understood ! What else remained for me to say ? Bhishma’s famous word of a past situation is there for us to be reminded of. Should he not expect us to follow that at least?”

Arjuna : “What word ? When ?”

Sri Krishna : “Remember Amba ? She brought pressure from Bhagavan Parashurama to prevail over Bhishma’s obstinacy. Bhishma said to his teacher: ‘You are a Brahmin, and my teacher too ! War with you is improper for me.’ But Parashurama further pressurised Bhishma. Then Bhishma shot back ! ‘Sire ! you are not behaving like a true Brahmin; you forget Dharma and force me also into Adharma;

now shastras tell us that there is no sin even if I kill you. If one reciprocates to the enemy in his own code of conduct it is neither sinful nor Adharma. That is auspicious ?”³ You know from this that Bhishma was ready to kill Parashurama, notwithstanding his boon of being above mortality. Why ? For interfering between him and Amba. Now he is himself interfering between you and Duryodhana ! What are you supposed to do according to Bhishma's own known opinion ? Are you going to fight to eliminate him ? Or waste your time by drawing me into endless controversies or needless gossip ? The Shastra says that one, who seeks to burn you alive, rob you of your property-possessions, land and belongings, one who seeks to dishonour your wife, one who seeks a battle with you on frivolous grounds, is the worst possible sinner called *Atatayin*. Now Duryodhana has done all these. Shastra further tells you to kill him at sight, with no discrimination left. If Bhishma is on the side of this sinner, do you obey Shastra or question it ? I have nothing more to say. Do as you please!”



The tenth crucial day arrived. The Pandava army was in good moods and spirits. Shikhandi led the attack on Bhishma, as per plan. Both Bhima and Arjuna acted as his wheel protectors. Behind them followed sons of

³ *Yo yatha vartate yasmin tasminnevam pravarthayan |
Naadharmam samavapnoti na chaasreyasch vindati |*

(Udyoga 178-53)

Draupadi and Abhimanyu as bodyguards of Shikhandi. This was followed by providing Satyaki and Chekitana. Dhrishtadyumna along with a huge division of army followed in the rear to avoid taking of chances of Bhishma's escape or other mean tricks by the enemy. Then followed Yudhishtira and Nakula as well as Sahadeva. Virata, Drupada, Kekaya - all followed in the tail of the army - for the big catch or kill - Bhishma.

Arjuna had told Shikhandi : "Brother, you are going to be the hero for today's victory. Bhishma must end with your arrows. That is how fate has willed and you are born for this moment. I am here to help you in this achievement. Do not look back until you achieve this target." So the armies clashed.



The Pandava army rammed into the Kaurava forces, like with the robust rush of Ganga as it joins the sea! It was a sight for gods to see !! The Kaurava soldiers fell dead in just a few moments of the start of war. Shikhandi rapidly approached Bhishma, as the shadow would dash at the moon or the sun, on the day of eclipse at the appointed hour. Duryodhana had heard of this strategy the night before, and so he went to Bhishma and taunted : "See, old man, that Arjuna is burning my army like fire devastating a dry forest in summer. Do something to stop this."

Bhishma too lost his temper : "Fool ! I do not want your promptings or encouragements or chastisements. I am fulfilling my vow as promised to you, to the last word. I am eliminating no less than ten thousand soldiers everyday. Today also I am at it. Further more,

I am going to settle your accounts finally to throw off this body in your despicable service !⁴ What else can I say?" - Bhishma retorted.

Unable to control his rage Duryodhana rushed elsewhere.

Now Shikhandi was nearing Bhishma with no one to stop him, in worthwhile attempts. The Pandava army followed behind him with a swiftness that was beyond the Kaurava expectations ! Kritavarma took on Dhrishtadyumna, Bhurishravas attacked Bhima, on Duryodhana's orders. Similarly Vikarna, Kripa, Durmukha, were taken care of by Nakula, Sahadeva, Ghatotkacha, and Satyaki on the other side. Drona prevented Yudhishtira from advancement. Dusshasana now attacked Shikhandi, risking his life, to save Bhishma! Now was the crucial moment. Sri Krishna met the eyes of Arjuna, who noticed arrows sticking into the body of Sri Krishna ! Arjuna was so fierce at Dusshasana now and threw calculated arrows at him from his bow; so the villain sought shelter behind Bhishma's chariot, clearing the space between Bhishma and Shikhandi.

Drona caught at last, Arjuna's meaning ! He counted the ill omens for Bhishma, and pointed them out to his son. On the other side ten great soldiers who had attacked Bhima were retreating - Bhagadatta, Kripa, Shalya, Kritavarma, Vinda and Anuvinda, Saindhava, Chitrasena, Vikarna - all unable to stand up to Bhima! From another side Arjuna was rushing at Bhishma in

⁴ *Adya te purushavyaghra pratimokshye rinam tava |
Bhartriipindakritam rajan, nihitak pritanamukhe |*

a terrible speed. Here was Bhishma with a new record for the day - he had destroyed within a short time as many as five thousand chariots, along with heroes, charioteers, horses and so on, since morning, that day. As many as fourteen thousand footmen had died at his hands ! One thousand elephants and ten thousand horses had been eliminated by him. Thousands of crowned kings had been targeted to death by his arrows. Virata's brother Shatanika, had been killed, this being Bhishma's last achievement for the day, and for his tenure. The Pandava army desperately needed Arjuna to protect it, and cried for help, taking his name and shouting to the skies.

Here was Shikhandi very near Bhishma. Bhishma sighted him with eyes of fire and lightning. Shikhandi began to appear in several shapes to Bhishma's mind - now as Amba, whom he wronged once, then as Mahakali, Death incarnate, and as Mother Death with a sword in hand and so on. It was Bhishma's tragic past that was now projecting Shikhandi in these unforgettable images or symbols, closing his future, in these unavoidable present circumstances - the past, the present, and the future conspiring to eliminate him from the seat of his 'duty'. Bhishma remembered the wrongs done to the Pandavas, his role or instrumentality in them, and the taunting words of Duryodhana on the other hand. That made his hands tremble, losing control over the bow and arrows. That was when Shikhandi and Arjuna showered arrows on him !

Ten arrows of Shikhandi pierced into the body of Bhishma. Bhishma's bow had already been cut; his

charioteer had been killed; and the Flag-post was now in the mire of blood, wallowing.

Bhishma knew that his end had come. "If only this Sri Krishna, this Vishvaksena⁵ was not against me on the other side, I would have destroyed all the Pandava army by now. My own vow, not to kill the Pandavas, also has helped them. I have now nothing more to achieve either personally, or for Duryodhana whom I promised health. Here is Shikhandi waiting for revenge, as my instrument of death. I can't kill him. But I cannot die unless I choose so. What am I to do?" - he thought.

The sages, gods, and the Vasus appeared in the skies and told him : "renounce arms; it is time for you to retire now."

A perfumed wind was now in the air, some gentle breeze; this was in spite of the pungent smell of rotten flesh and blood on the battlefield, littered with dead bodies everywhere. Bhishma who had just lifted another bow, now threw it down; he removed the quiver of arrows from his back and threw it down too. His chest-shield was now in tatters. His crown had been shot away by the arrows of Shikhandi. Bhishma stood on the ground in, perhaps, the most pitiable plight of his life.

Shikhandi, and Arjuna behind him, together were shooting their best arrows on his body. Every time an arrow stuck up in his flesh, and blood oozed out,

⁵ Another name for Krishna , meaning : 'One who leads the world, like a general of a victorious army'. The name occurs in Vishnusahasranama.

Bhishma went on shouting the names of the Lord in wringing pain - "Sri Krishna", "Vasudeva", "Hari", "Jagannatha", "Janardana", "Mukund", "Madhava" and so on, like a devotee in distress, dressed and decorated in a red garland of God's names. It was an extraordinary sight for anybody to witness.

Bhishma remarked to himself : "These arrows, which strike me like blunt ends of a pestle are not of Arjuna; they must be of Shikhandi only. These others are of Arjuna, as they are sharp and pierce into my bones, their pith and marrow. They strike me like the bolt of Indra and suck away my breath and life. I am now feeling pain like the birth pangs of a mother-scorpion, when the hatchling issues out by killing her, as it emerges out of her womb."

Bhishma rolled down, struck with all arrows on all sides, holding him up from the earth, as he rolled down.



CHAPTER 20

ADVICE FROM THE BED OF ARROWS

Bhishma resembled a sleeping mountain from which founts sprang on all sides - with red waters, however. It looked very terrible from a superficial angle - an old warrior to come to this tragic end, to be avenged by someone whom he had wronged unwillingly. From another angle he looked very dignified even in that condition - body not touching the earth, but held up by stuck-up arrows, a bed befitting a warrior of that stature. He owed nothing to anyone now, not even a bed ! He fell of his own accord, so that he owed death also to nobody ! He looked peaceful, unmindful of the pain of the piercing arrows, and with no weight on his mind. He had escaped the servitude of Duryodhana at last ! One good service he had rendered to the Pandavas, for all the other odd things he had done, he had involved himself in, against the Pandavas, without his intentions ! No more self-tortures on the growing mind, at long last. The much-awaited moment had arrived at last, in this complex way. There was a seal of fulfilment on his face, in that moment, with his eyes closed, brows relaxed, and mind fixed on God. Perhaps he felt he had not been wronged, with all accounts closed with all whomsoever he was connected with, with nothing to regret ! Who else could die such an enviable death ?

Bhishma remembered the earlier scenes of his life - his sacrifice for the sake of his father; his efforts to stabilise the throne of Hastinavati ; crisis after crisis - Dhritarashtra's blindness, rendering him ineligible for power, resulting in never-ending acts of jealousy against his nephews; Pandu's abdication; Kunti's return to the capital with her children; problems of succession; the division of the Nation; the disastrous gamble he could not prevent; - and that word he had uttered in total confusion, which turned against Draupadi in distress when she was sought to be 'disrobed'¹ and the scenes at the Kaurava court when Sri Krishna came on that noble occasion of royal embassy of the Pandavas, and now the inevitability as he thought - of having to remain with the Kauravas, and the consequent injustice to the Pandavas he did, and to his heart's God, Sri Krishna, by fighting against Him, and this miserable end ! Bhishma even felt that, this having to lie in this posture of painful arrows sticking up to his bones, was in a way his *Prayaschitta*, a kind of expiation for that wrong done unto Draupadi ! Why could not he have walked out then ? The power, now to endure this unbearable pain, sprang because of the guilt-feeling, due to that past situation.

Some sages were flying in the air just then as Swans, to see Bhishma's end nearing. It was mother

¹ *Asvami ashaktah panitum parasvam striyaascha bhartuh vashatam samikshya ||* (Bhishma 111-90)

"If your husband had no lordship over you, he would not have been able to pawn you in the game; you would then be out of his possession; having known that a lady is always half the Atman of her husband, how can I say he is wrong in betting you away?"

Ganga who had sent them. These 'swans' roved round him in a circle above, as if to pay respects to him, and spoke to each other, in a language which Bhishma understood by his yogic powers, thus :

"Bhishma, you are a great soul, it is yet *Dakshinayana* (the Southern path to lower worlds only). How can you breathe your last, knowing that this inauspicious season is not congenial for one who wants to reach the higher worlds?"

Bhishma replied in a low voice : "I know; I shall wait for the next fifty eight days, in this condition only, as I am endowed with the boon to die at a moment of my own choice."

The Pandava army was blowing trumpets and conches, and beating drums incessantly as a mark of their victory, throughout that evening, as it melted into the night. Soldiers were praising Bhishma for valour and truth, steadfastness and impartiality, while some among them were blaming him for taking part in this war, at all, and coming to this sorrowful plight, while Bhishma kept on muttering the *Ashtakshara*.² (It is an eight syllabled Holy Incantation, an epitome of Vedic-Vedantic thought, and a means to delivery from cycles of sorrow and death. It is called *mahopanishat* in *Taitt.. Narayaneeyam*.)

The Kaurava army was pervaded with a profound sense of sorrow and shame, at this heavy loss, although most soldiers knew that Bhishma was to end up miserably as he was fighting against God, Dharma, and

² *Mahopanishadam chaiva yogamasthaya viryavan |
Japam shantanavo dhiman Kalakankshi sthitho | bhavat ||*

Justice, being compelled by cruel circumstances, and circumscribed by his own vow of not harming the Pandavas. But nobody could expect the end so near, and so ghastly. Many praised his great self-sacrifices, and the heroic efforts to save the throne of Hastinavati. Even sages and manes came to express their sense of respects for him there. Bhishma, unmindful of all this, was chanting that Manthra of his choice, throughout.



Here was Sanjaya in tears as he was narrating how the tenth day of war so ended in disaster and misery: "King, the brightest star of your galaxy has set now. Bhishma laid down his arms and was pierced by Arjuna's arrows on all sides. He is holding breath in pain for the Northern Half-year to dawn, for his final departure from mortal body. Today the Pandavas are celebrating their victory in all befitting grandeur."

Dhritarashtra went into a swoon. He would not believe that Bhishma met with his end in this tragic way and so soon. He remembered the virtues of Bhishma. He asked repeatedly Sanjaya : "How did this happen ? Did not Drona come to his help ? How could Shikhandi - a no-match for Bhishma - fell him, with inferior arrows, inferior skill, and possessing no divine weapons ? Does this not mean that Adharma is stronger than Dharma ? Did the Pandavas really prefer kingdom at this cost ? Or else we are to blame for desiring the retention of political power at Bhishma's cost ! Or why should I blame my sons ? They have to fight as per Kshatriya etiquette, after all, and they offered Bhishma as a pawn in this gamble ! It was all because of the decision of the Pandavas to fight us back for their

ambition of regaining their share of kingdom that this has happened. They are the persons to blame. Tell me what happened.”

Sanjaya smiles to himself noting the several self-contradictions in this. He wonders at Dhritarashtra's brazenness of heart to put the blame on others and maintain purity of motive and action, even in this grave moment, in this all-too-late an hour, and when his sons were in mortal danger of self-elimination, because of their own faults and wrongs done unto the Pandavas. There was no iota of self-search in him ! Sanjaya replies:

“Maharaja ! Do not blame the Pandavas; do not put the blame on your eldest son, either. You have to own up your own responsibilities at least now. One's own faults cannot be attributed to another; and blames of fruits thereof.³ Do not be angry, my lord; do you know who is worth ridicule or condemnation ? One who does what is ridiculous and harmful to others ! Were you not the one to bless your sons, and encourage them to invite the Pandavas for that devastating game of dice? Even then, see how the wronged Pandavas endured all the insults and injuries heaped on them with patience that the world has not seen elsewhere, and demanded back their kingdom's share, after fulfilling your humiliating conditions ! Did you do them justice? Did you tell your sons ? Did you arbitrate properly? Did you listen to Sri Krishna's advice, even at the last moment ? Tell me now who is at the root of your present sorrow ? Do not say another word on the Pandavas;

³ *Ya atmano duscharitam ashubham pranuyannarah |*

Enasa tena nanyam sa upashankitum arhasi |

I am telling you all I see and reflect on, due to the grace of my preceptor Vyasa ! You asked me why did not Drona prevent the fall of Bhishma ! listen : he was elsewhere fighting in another segment. Errand - men went to inform him of this situation; but it was too late ! The Pandavas were at the death-bed of Bhishma who had regained his consciousness.”



The arrows struck into Bhishma's body had upheld his body and prevented it from touching the earth. But the head had no support and was miserably hanging in the air, causing terrible pain in the neck and upwards! Bhishma had no breath or even strength of voice to complain about this discomfort; he made a groan in a feeble voice to draw attention to it, and turned his sight at the sons of Pandu, the Pandavas, as if to tell them: “Welcome ! I am happy that you have come; I am pleased with your graceful behaviour.” They neared the old man who said in feeble whispers : “Can you provide me with support for this hanging head ?”

Overhearing this, Duryodhana ordered immediately for soft pillows from his camps. Meanwhile they volunteered to uphold that head, until the pillows arrived. The pillows came. But Bhishma rejected them with a derision appearing at the edge of his twitching lips, as if to say that they did not befit him. The Kauravas did not understand it. Bhishma gestured to the arrows on which his body lay, as if to say, “while the body is on such a bed, do I need a grotesque pillow of a different kind ?”

Arjuna immediately understood it, and struck two or three arrows into the earth beneath Bhishma's head, which stood there upholding Bhishma's hanging head.

Bhishma was in tears of joy, for his quick understanding and prompt action, as if he was supremely happy with this arrangement. He called him nearer and whispered: "If you too had behaved like other dullards, I would have perhaps cursed you. After all you are the sharpest amongst these assembled here. May God endow you with long life and happiness. A warrior like me cannot aspire after a better way of death, than this, on the battlefield. Others can envy me now."

Arjuna unstrung his bow, touched the grandsire's feet, and wept like a child for being instrumental in ending that noble life in so miserable a condition. Duryodhana also wept, for a different reason, altogether. The Kauravas and the Pandavas did not see eye to eye even in tears. That was the cruelty of Destiny.

Bhishma signed to them to come near : They sat in opposite groups at his feet. Bhishma gathered all his strength and told them : "leaders of both camps; you may now return to rest that you need and attend to your next duties. I shall be lying here in this posture until the sun changes his direction and moves to the Northern quarters. Wait for the day of Ratha Saptami. Then you may come to see how I shall depart on the Yogic path. One last request. I am feeling terribly thirsty. Will someone provide me with cool waters ? Water shall be available always here, around this bed of arrows, also protecting me from ants and insects. I shall fast here doing Suryopasana.⁴ Stop hostilities at least hereafter, and return to the camps, peacefully. God shall bless you."

⁴ This means meditation on the Holy Gayatri. Ratha Saptami is the day when the horses of the Sun turn northwards. The next day is an Ashtami, on which Bhishma died at 12 noon in the star of Rohini.

Arjuna dug up a small protective moat-like structure, with arrows. He dug up a well at the rear of Bhishma's head as Ganga sprang up from there in a powerful spring, filled up that moat, remaining an eternal fount to quench the old man's thirst, whenever he so desired. All wondered at this feat of Arjuna ! But there were millions of dead bodies of horses, elephants and soldiers whom no one could cremate or even protect till such a time of disposal ! Here was Bhishma, a dead man practically, still alive by only will power. A small contingent of The Kaurava army kept watch around him day and night to prevent wild animals from eating him away, as he was in no position to ward them off by himself. Bhishma could not bathe or perform daily prayers or discharge divine duties. Which doctor was there who could treat him back to health ? Moreover, for a dying man what treatment could help ?

Duryodhana had called for royal surgeons to remove the stuck up arrows from Bhishma's body. Bhishma smiled at them as they were opening their kits ! All pain had to be settled by suffering as there was no further life or birth for this Yogi ! What use were medicines for a man who had never touched them throughout his life even once ? He told Duryodhana: "honour them and send them away. There is nothing to regret, as I am dying a heroic death. It is impossible for me to die as a coward, without these 'ornaments' of arrows. I have to be burnt with these arrows after I breathe my last."

Duryodhana was struck with wonder at this studied stand of a dying man in that terrible state of pain too! The other unexpressed reason for this resolution - to

expiate for the wrongs done to Draupadi - was not known to any assembled there.

The Kaurava princes and leaders departed after lingering there still for a few more minutes; they had to choose their next General also urgently, which was not easy. They had to work out their strategy for the next day also. There was not much time left in the night for consultations, negotiations, removal of confusions and a smooth transit to the next phase of war. Soldiers with burning firebrands kept guards, as others were moving round with swords in their hands to ward off intruders. They made arrangements also for change of guards in the following days, till Bhishma lived in that condition there. Bhishma was however fully conscious, though unable to turn sides in that 'bed' of arrows, with blood oozing out, and flesh issuing out of the holes where arrows had pricked. He could not have food, could not sleep; but kept meditating on the glories of Sri Krishna with an unswerving mind, by sheer will power. And what will power !!



Shri Krishna was elsewhere, all this while, with his attention on something else—he was treating the horses of his chariot with medicines, ointments and other aids, by plucking out arrow edges and other sharp pieces of metal stuck up in their bodies in all this restless period. They responded more quickly to his affectionate touch rather than perhaps to ointments. The horses needed rest also in addition to affection and medical care. It was not indifference to Bhishma that held him up here. After all Bhishma was going to be there for a few more days; Bhishma remembered too Sri Krishna continually, and

this meant that he was there in his heart invisibly, anyhow. No useful additional purpose could be served by being in that crowd around him, with people from either camp. The Kauravas had to be sorrowful at his fall, though this was a foregone expectation. The Pandavas, though happy, in a way, could not celebrate it, and needed to be there around the old man in mixed feelings. What was there for Sri Krishna to do in this odd situation ?

The Pandavas returned to their camp to see Sri Krishna in the service of horses ! Actually he was kneeling before a horse to apply ointments, oils and medicines on its knees! The camp doctor was ready nearby with medicines in open phials of gold and silver. There were also servants nearby waiting for sundry commands. The Pandavas were deeply touched !

Yudhishtira : “Krishna, a saga is over in Bhishma’s fall; and in the war an important phase is over; I feel this is your grace. We could not have achieved this victory today without you on our side.”

Sri Krishna : “Say that your Dharma has stood by you, more than my help or guidance. If Bhishma had not realised the wrongs done unto you, do you think he would have told you the secret of your victory over him ? Dharma was alive in all his subconsciousness, and piercing him, throughout ! That has come to your help. Otherwise would you have dreamt of a straight war of success with him? Would your army be a match for him to learn archery and warfare from gods themselves ? Yudhishtira, let me tell you one thing : Bhishma could not face your straight-look at him, as your

eyes had the power to burn him to death, because of the wrongs endured at the hands of your enemies. It was that power of yours that felled him at last.”

Yudhishtira : “Not my eyes, but your eyes, you should have said. Are you not ‘Pundarikaksha’ - One with powers of eyes to protect or kill- ?” When you are on our side, how could we be unsuccessful? Even in war you are the guide and well-wisher.”

Sri Krishna : “Enough of praises. Think of the immediate next plans. Let us see who will lead the Kaurava army, in the morning.”



There was still time for sunrise on the morning of the eleventh day. All the Kaurava princes and warriors had assembled near Bhishma's bed of arrows to enquire about his condition. The Pandavas too joined there shortly. Bhishma, though in pain, was uttering Lord Sri Krishna's Holy Names in a garland of such Name-flowers. He felt thirsty and made feeble signs and sound-efforts to that effect. Duryodhana sent for fragrant waters and some relishable dishes from the camp, without understanding Bhishma's intent. Servants brought perfumed waters in golden jugs along with sweets and other palatable pleasures. Bhishma waved them off with a contemptuous smile, as unworthy of a warrior of his stature and character and the grim situation in which fate had placed him at that moment. Other kings tried other options and met with equally derisive rejection. Bhishma made efforts to speak to this effect : “You all know that by now I am almost one foot in the upper world. It is only the moment of my own choice that

is between me and that other world. I have relinquished human comforts and pleasures, long ago, by my celebrated vow of celibacy. Should such a spiritual personality require your perfumed waters and delicious foodstuff on the war-field ? Why can't you understand this ? I have almost cast off my human condition!...Where is Arjuna ?”

Everyone understood that Arjuna alone knew what was at the back of mind of the dying, aged hero! Arjuna came forward with enthusiasm. Bhishma still spoke in a puzzle : “My boy ! can you not arrange for befitting waters to quench my thirst ? See ! Your arrows are still paining me singeing into my bones. My face is getting dry and withered. You are intelligent as well as capable of redressing my thirst.....”

Arjuna knew in a flash what Bhishma meant. He strung his bow and shot an arrow into the ground just behind Bhishma's head; lo ! a fount of Ganga-waters sprang immediately, and its sweet waters fell into the mouth of Bhishma, refreshingly, and partly on his chest, as if his mother came up to comfort him. Arjuna had used a missile in the name of Parjanya, the god of waters; it rendered the ears of all deaf in its ferocity and had released underground waters in a moment, the very intent of Bhishma. The waters were cool, nectarine in taste and had divine aroma in it. Bhishma felt refreshed, and was pleased at this feat of Arjuna. Those that had gathered there, felt wonder-struck at Arjuna's mind-reading of Bhishma, and his lightning action also. This was indeed a superhuman feat, and the princes - except the Kauravas - flourished their upper garments in the air to indicate their great sense of appreciation

of Arjuna's adventure. Conches blew and drums were beaten.

Bhishma called Arjuna near, blessed him heartily and said :

"It is no wonder my boy, that you possess such superhuman powers. I know who you really are. Narada had told me all. You are Nara, friend and disciple of Narayana who is now Sri Krishna Vasudeva. That is why no parallel for you as an archer, bow-wielder, ever exists now on earth...see, how I, in elaborate detail - I advised Dhritarashtra's sons against war with you. Fools ! they did not understand. Vidura advised too; no less a person than Bhagavan Sri Krishna came for a compromise. All efforts for peace were rendered in vain by these foolhardy and headstrong sons of Dhritarashtra. What could I do ? Duryodhana ! Come near. Do not feel hurt by my words. I am still your well-wisher. I have no animosity for you or preference for your hapless cousins as you still seem to think. You do not trust anyone. That is a fatal drawback in a ruler. Learn the wisdom of co-operation and collective living at least now. Let this war end with my death. You trust nobody's experience or wisdom ! Rulers must not act, overtrusted in their own isolated minds, and insulated judgments. They must confide, consult and act in coordination with wise counsels. This must be evident even to you by now ! There is Bhima's vow and his mace is hanging on your head for its moment of fulfilment. Let not be there any more deaths in your family on this battlefield. Save yourself. Those of your brothers who are no more are unfortunate as they paid for your faults; you have given them death ! You cannot

give life ! Is not this one feat of Arjuna enough to prove to you that he is mightier than all your minions like Karna ? See where justice and might go together ! You have seen till this moment where victory is going to be ! Would I have fallen in this pitiable way otherwise ? A hundred Karnas put together will not be equal to one Arjuna. This is no empty praise, but a proven fact, right before your own eyes ! Nobody else possesses all the missiles in Arjuna's armoury. Believe me. Agneya, Varuna, Sowmya, Vayavya, Vaivasvatha, Koubera - are all at his fingertips. Possessing them is not enough; resourcefulness, presence of mind, chastity of mind coupled with a wish for the well-being of all mankind, and all living creatures - these are extraordinary qualities in him and him only. Let not this contrast infuriate your jealous mind. Only Sri Krishna excels him in all this, and no other. But he has vowed not to wield weapons in this war. That is your good luck, I must say; for, otherwise by now you would not be here, listening to this long advice by me. Do not trust Karna, I repeat. Go for compromise and conciliation to end this avoidable war at least now. Let my death bring peace for both clans of the Kaurava family. Give your cousins their share of kingdom or else you will lose all and regret in death."

Expectedly these wise words further infuriated Duryodhana, and he felt humiliated as never before, as his face frowned and he fretted in helplessness.

Bhima found his opportunity here for oral vengeance: "You brute !" - he shouted in an enraged voice - "Even if you choose to act upon Bhishma's words of advice, at this belated hour, let me tell you finally, I shall not

stop short of fulfilling my vow of smashing your thighs, or drinking the blood of your ill-fated brother, Dusshasana. If I fail in this, let me not attain higher worlds of virtue; let none call me Bhima, son of Kunti, then. Let me not be known then as the son of the Pandu!"⁵

The earth trembled ! The gathered heroes were terror-stricken, and silently dispersed, lest Bhima's anger should fall on them next !

Arjuna tried to comfort Bhima then :

"Brother ! Wait with patience for your moment. There is nothing new in the elder sire's advice. It is all old and well known. Only the occasion was new and strange, being his deathbed. This advice which has fallen on deaf ears all these years cannot bear fruit all of a sudden, given the character of the man who has called for it. It seems a foregone conclusion. So why waste breath ? We are all here, as playthings of God, who is the distributor of justice."



⁵ There is a famous verse in Kumara Vyasa's Kannada Bharata to this effect. Similar sentiments are missing in the original, in this context, though scattered elsewhere, profusely. Liberty with the original in this context is nonviolative of the beauty of expression and intent of Veda Vyasa.

CHAPTER 21

DRONA AS GENERAL

Duryodhana was taken away by Shakuni, in a bid to save him from Bhima, then and there, as the war was likely to end, if Bhima had a few more free moments.

Bhishma wept silently, in closed eyes, as this latest effort for peace also had failed.



The same tenth day of war on which Bhishma fell so disgracefully to the arrows of Shikhandi, a wonder of wonders took place !

It was the night of that day; Bhishma was half-conscious in pain and tiresomeness. The torchbearer came very near Bhishma and said in a loud enough voice : "Sire, King Karna of Anga is in waiting ; he wants to meet you, Sir."

Bhishma heard it clearly enough, but in his state of mind attributed it to the wishful- thinking nature of the mind ; a dream perhaps, an impossibility in reality after all that had happened ; Karna of all people !! Why should he seek an old dying man for whom he had no regard while alive! Bhishma was angry with himself for even imagining this much. He had no use for him even in dreams.

But no! The lightsman again repeated : "Sir, the Anga Ruler, Karna seeks your blessings".

Bhishma was now stung! "Blessings!" It was no fancy or day-dreaming now, he realised.

But with usual geniality and enough cheerfulness even then, Bhishma made efforts to wave his hand, as if to say : "Admit him. !!" Mildly, he said something to this effect orally, also.

It was indeed Karna! Bhishma felt tears welling from his dry, hollow, sunken eyes : "Come, come my son, Karna! Can I believe my eyes? I hope I am not in a state of hallucination? But even if it is a dream, let me know what brings you here. I hope you have brought from your bosom friend - Duryodhana - an inclination to stop the war. My death, then, will not be in vain. Tell me all in detail!" Bhishma expressed himself positively, in broken, halting words, even in that condition.

Karna did not know how to negate such a buoyant hope in so feeble a man on the deathbed. After a pause, Karna opened the conversation in a divergent way, intelligently, thus.

Karna : "Sire, I am Radheya, come to ask for your forgiveness ; I took that day a foolish oath which must have pained you too deeply for you to forget. I am sorry..."

Bhishma : "My son, you are not the son of Radha and Adiratha! Forget the past ; it is good you have come now..."

Karna was astonished by this negative revelation! It was surprising that Bhishma too knew the truth of his birth-circumstances. The whole world thought of Karna as a Sutaputra¹, while in reality he was like any other Pandava, divine-born, only with this difference that he was a pre-marital product. (We do not know who told him all these facts - perhaps his foster-father Adiratha must have divulged it to him as war-preparations were going on).

Bhishma paused for a moment at the silence of Karna. But Karna was weeping like a child, a scene not witnessed by Bhishma earlier! After some time:

Karna : "I know, grandsire, that I am the son of Kunti! Even before Sri Krishna told me at Hastinapura, I knew about it. What I have come for, here, is not to tell you this. Please say you have forgiven me. I vowed not to fight while you lived. I should not have been rash or foolish then. I knew not that you would fall so soon, and so easily".

Bhishma had not expected Karna to repent so easily and so soon. Was this the same Karna who was earlier egging on Duryodhana for war against the Pandavas? Was this the man who was one of 'The wicked four' as the world called them ? What purpose did this asking for forgiveness serve now, if not stopping the war? Did Karna come all this way merely for asking for forgiveness?

¹ The son of a Brahmin woman by a Kshatriya male, was so labelled in those bygone days. The *Sutas* were entitled to the sacred thread and all the spiritual lore. But they could not carry the profession of either a Brahmin or of a Kshatriya. They were close to royalty.

On the other hand Karna was elated at Bhishma's liberality of address as 'My Son', equating him to Arjuna, something that the old man had never done before. He was overcome with emotion, and so touched Bhishma's feet and was again choked with tears. Karna was not so easily emotionally disturbed even when Sri Krishna or Kunti confided with him earlier at Hastinavati. Perhaps war, death of Duryodhana's brothers, and this pitiable situation that this old man was in now, must have moved him into this momentary outburst. Politics, ambitions, strategy are nothing before the reality of war, violence and loss of kith and kin! Human passions natural to life for all circumstances are another matter. Karna now appeared in this latter light of true human nature.

Karna remembered all his earlier moments of humiliation; his loneliness; a sense of forsakenness that grew with him; that forlornness turning into a feeling of seeking vengeance against unseen, unknown enemies; those customs, those social normalities or formalities that had rendered him and his unfortunate mother into irremediable tragic circumstances. Now he saw them in a new light, in a new unfoldment of mysteries. He could never imagine that reconciliation with Bhishma was so easy and so natural! The same Bhishma who appeared earlier as the representative of caste rigidities, as his visible enemy embodying social cruelties, as even Fate, striking him down and suppressing him in all his, otherwise, moments of glory, was now so pliant, so affectionate, so liberal and so paternal and so equal-minded as to surprise Karna! It did not occur to Karna that he himself had undergone a complete change, and

Bhishma might have had other intentions to suppress or oppose Karna, in his evil moments which he thought of as moments of glory in a fuddled and frustrated mind! Karna went on arguing in his mid in his own favour for long. Karna felt again and again how his own mother had cheated him of all chances of betterment in life by hiding the circumstances of his birth, particularly of caste. He could not imagine for a moment what other alternatives she had at the moment; poor woman ! Or cruel and selfish lady, who worried more about her own future than the future of her first child ! Ever since he came to know how he was Kunti's son, Karna had unrealistically waited for a public announcement by her to that effect. Nor that he would have given up Duryodhana's side, in that case! This was an irrevocable alliance, in his view, whatever the consequences to whosoever was concerned. Yet he wanted caste status to add to his prestige. But it came too late, and that too in circumstances in which he could neither relish nor use it for his own betterment. Karna felt frustrated at a force more dynamic than Kunti, the society behind her, or the traditions it followed, behind all these. They were natural in any society, as long as society could only be so called, with well-defined communal manners and matters, he knew. Yet he wanted rebel-individuals with undefined characteristics to have their own ways in a mass flow that could somehow be called society. Karna had implicated Bhishma in this social tangle in a personal way, with no clear-cut ideas of what he could have expected of him, and how it might have helped him. His love for Arjuna was one thing that he was very envious of! His pronouncements, however

ineffectual in the circumstances, against the Kauravas, and in favour of the Pandavas, while being in the Kaurava camp too deep to be extricated from, was a constant irritant for Karna. Perhaps Karna suspected that Bhishma knew about how Kunti left him afloat on the Ganga, on that nameless, fateful day! He was not clear whether this was a justified guess or not ! But somehow Bhishma was a party to the suppression of the truth, he had thought, rightly or wrongly.

As war started, and days rolled, Karna began slowly to realise that Bhishma was in a strait! Not very unsimilarly like himself ! That melted the ice. Bhishma began to appear more and more innocent ; more as a victim, than as the master of the situation.

One thing still remained unclear - Why Bhishma had been hostile to Karna, all the while. Duryodhana's friendship apart, could not the old man consider his valour, his merits independently to weigh him against Arjuna fairly? Those wordy duels had invariably centred round this unwelcome contrast.

While Karna was lost deep in this reverie, while his head touched Bhishma's feet, Bhishma allowed this silence to continue, recollecting the wrongs he had done to him all through. Bhishma even wanted to embrace him and comfort him, a thing that he had never done while in better circumstances, and when Karna desperately wanted it. The arrows pinned him down to the earth, disallowing such a gesture. Karna understood this by the gestures of the old man, and was thrilled, even when that embrace could not materialise. It was enough that Bhishma thought of him as worthy of it

at last. Karna cursed his bad luck even in this. The arrows that prevented this embrace appeared as symbols and images of Arjuna, again coming between him and the old sire! But this time Karna's inner conscience corrected him - Arjuna did not know that he was the younger brother of Karna ! How could he be blamed? Yet Karna wanted a justification for his hate of the Pandavas, and for his fate being what it was! Reason went on destroying one by one all his false constructions, he had fabricated with relish all these earlier years. At last Bhishma broke the silence.

Bhishma : "Come, child Karna, sit as near me as possible.... you were always arguing with me, challenging all my rulings, all my advice, all my decisions, which had no partisan intentions. If you had not come now here, to straighten our relations, that would have done no good to you, while leaving me also uneasy on my deathbed. Listen..... I knew long ago from Narada that you were Kunti's son. Vyasa confirmed it later... Look... I never hated you or had no reason to dislike you except to discourage you from egging on Duryodhana for his murderous plans against the Pandavas, his cousins. But for your encouragements and participations in his evil plans, Duryodhana would not be so bold as he is even now. I had to cool his tempers. So I had no options but to underestimate you publicly, particularly in his esteem. It is another matter that my intentions, to avert this war, could not be realised, as you know well, by now. Shall I ask you one thing?..."

Karna : “Sire... many things are now becoming clear to me too late... But I too have no options. You need no permission to ask me anything. Please go ahead.”

Bhishma : “Why do you hate the Pandavas? What wrong have they done to you? Have you any personal reason that I do not know of? What really do you want by joining sides against them?

Karna : (Non-plussed for a moment)... “Let me tell you in all truth that I do not have any personal reasons at all! In a way I do not know how it germinated in me... Perhaps long ago, long long ago, during the display of expertise of skills in arms-show, when I was prevented from combating with Arjuna, by Drona and Kripa, I might have developed a grouse against Arjuna, unknowingly! The privilege of the forest-boys in the royal palace might have fanned my jealousy, if I can now recall it retrospectively, such... I was also from nowhere! See the parallel? Why did not society treat me equally?”

Bhishma : “If you knew that you were Kunti’s son, then, you might have said so and equalled the chances! I speak hypothetically, like you! Can I not?

Karna : “Why fight with the past Sir? Complexes need not have well defined reasons ! When developed they invent reasons! It is enough I think that Duryodhana is wronged. Was it his fault to be born of a blind King? What if the blind sire had no chance of being crowned? Is fate also hereditary?”

Bhishma : “You are indeed unfortunate to be caught in the whirlpool of justifying Evil at any cost! Why argue with you? You and I are not deciders or disposers of the fate of the world. We are but instruments... well,... I thought you had really changed and been repentant.. I am deceived...”

Karna : “I do not know grandfather, what you mean by change! I should not have insulted you publicly. I did it then. I am repentant for that now... I have changed this way, if you will so accept it.”

Bhishma : “(disappointed and showing it in facial expression), Who am I to accept or reject changes or no changes in someone else? We have to account for them individually, at the proper times. In collective life one good change in a key person may bring a great fortune for the whole society. That is how change in others may affect us all. You would have done great service to mankind, if you had so completely changed in your own self - assessment.”

Karna was hardening now in his conscience, unconsciously! Where was this dialogue leading him, after all? Asking pardon of the old dying man was a matter of chivalry, and he had done it whole-heartedly! But here was this old man dragging him to and fro in histories of likes and dislikes, old hatreds, old problems that could not be now solved or wished away! He had not come here for hearing a discourse on Good and Evil, their origin and the results of their non-stop fights.... But he could not be rude to him either; after asking for forgiveness, Karna did not want to repeat the same

mistake again..... Karna wanted to go away. But that would be abrupt if he left now, without a soft end to this mild confrontation. He waited for a suitable moment.

Bhishma : “Are you happy, child, and the way things are happening? Do you want the war to go on? You can stop it! Can’t you?”

Again the same dishonourable proposal, as Sri Krishna or Kunti had made earlier! Karna was unwilling to discuss it now.

Karna : “Sire, you are getting tired. Let me go. What use is there in talking like this? Things are out of my hands, or bounds”.

Bhishma : “No, No. Let me tell you what you yourself know... you are happy with none... not even yourself! This dilemma in you, this conflict that you cannot avoid is congenital. Do not feel hurt : You are born in circumstances violative of codes of Dharma, and so time has framed you this way.² You hate people with virtues : you are genial to evil fellows. This perversion is costly. But with the power of reason, and good company, one’s own nature can also be changed. We are in a world of choice to some extent and all is not determined in advance. Think reasonably and come to your own judgment. Your mother sinned by begetting you without legitimacy; deserted you; you, fellow, pitiable as you are, fell into evil company.. without rescuers. I tried to dispel some of your clouded

² *Jatosi Dharmalopena, tataste buddhiridrishti |
Nichasrayat matsarena dveshini guninamapi ||*

thinking publicly, as there was no private occasion to meet you ! You never met me alone.”

Karna realised that here was one opening from his otherwise tight corner! But pride would not let him admit it. Bhishma proceeded :

Bhishma : “I am fully aware of your otherwise virtues.

You are really a great hero of our times. You are a worthy pupil of Parashurama, my teacher, and Drona’s too. You worship the holy Brahmins and grant them boons. Do you wonder that I am praising you as never before? No! I am just paying tributes where they really belong. But there are times for every thing - praise as well as blame. I have nothing to gain from you from such praise on the deathbed. Elders are not supposed to praise them - children - before them. It will ruin them, they say...”

Bhishma breaks down into tears. Karna is deeply moved and wipes those tears that the old man was not even able to wipe. Karna’s soft touch on Bhishma’s cheeks soothes the old man’s anguish more than any oil or ointment could do. Karna weeps too like a child. Bhishma holds the hand of Karna and continues.

Bhishma : “When a man departs to the other world, he must settle all accounts, here, and go clean-hearted and light. To me, you are all the same - yourself, Arjuna, Duryodhana - in terms of affection, and relation. I may have treated you appropriately on varying circumstances, your choices on good and evil sides. Treatments vary, though with same affection. All that I tried was to prevent this

genocide, which you have collectively imposed on yourselves! Do I not know that in aiming and missile shooting you are the equal of Sri Krishna or Arjuna? But see, my agony is that all this has not been of any avail in saving yourself or all your brothers or cousins! Don't you agree?"

Karna did not agree with this final assessment. The old man was talking a mixed language of praise and blame at the same time. But he could not argue against the forcefulness or simplicity of Bhishma's logic. He was saying obvious things, which Karna was habituated to looking at from its opposite angle. Never before did Karna face such a dilemma of neither accepting nor rejecting his own assessment.

Bhishma : "Will you promise me something?"

Karna : "Grandsire, I would willingly have provided you what you now want, perhaps. I know what you are about to ask for. But "

Bhishma : "Offering reservations is no use now."

Karna : "Reservations are forced by circumstances..... not by me."

Bhishma : You are a hero enough to reverse the circumstances. Do not speak like a coward!"

Karna : "Practicality is above heroism or cowardice, Sire!"

Bhishma : "Practicality expects of you to stop the war and save the innocents. Your idealism is costly for humanity. Empty ego does not constitute anybody's idealism. Do not use tall words for mean things."

Karna : “Sire... I agree... I agree a hundred times. But time has run out. That is the practicality of the moment. If I had known that I was also a Pandava long ago, and if the world had so known, not requiring me to convince a Duryodhana, it would have been a different matter. Now my reputation is at stake. I can neither switch over sides nor play natural. Both would mean treachery to my trusted friend. I have told Sri Krishna and Kunti the same already.”

Bhishma : “So Sri Krishna and Kunti also told you the same thing! See how this is the universal wisdom. Is it not wise to save Duryodhana? Is your loyalty going to save him?”

Karna : “Sire, the way the war has progressed indicates where victory belongs. Yudhishtira is going to be crowned. But thereafter I do not want to wander in the streets of Hastinapura being branded as a traitor. Death is more honourable both for me and for Duryodhana, after all that has happened. There is no use in further arguments against this position.”

Bhishma feels the force of Fate in this trend of conversation and sighs repeatedly. Meanwhile Karna is preparing to say something very damaging to Bhishma's heart as is evident in his gestures.

Bhishma : “You seem anxious to say something serious, yet hesitant about it... Speak out, if there are more secrets we shall see.”

Karna : “No more secrets sir! Shall I ask you why you are not able to implement what you are now asking me to do?”

Bhishma : “You mean that it was in my hands to stop the war?”

Karna : “Yes! You could have joined the Pandavas, if you were sure that justice was on their side! Or, at least, you might have played neutral like Vidura!! Both were in your own hands?”

Bhishma : “On that day when Sri Krishna met you or Kunti advised you, if you had told me so, I would have called Drona and Kripa in your own presence, to decide what the proper future course could be. Our collective boycott of war would have decided that future then. Mere individual action like that of Vidura has not paid, as you can see. Moreover.....”

Karna : “I am anxious to listen, Sir.....”

Bhishma : “I had problems that you did not have to face. In your case it was the Pandavas versus the Kauravas, with your loyalty hanging between your trusted friend and his sworn enemies..”

Karna : “May I know who was your enemy in this case?”

Bhishma : “Panchalas !”

Karna is stunned in surprise! “Panchalas!” - he repeats to himself several times in total non-reconciliation. Bhishma explains :

Bhishma : “See here : The Pandavas are a mere shield. Behind them what you see is largely the Panchala Army. It is a Panchala hero who heads that army as its General. He is supposed to kill later on Drona! Drona knows it too! It is a Panchala hero

- girl turned boy - who fells me into this condition. Panchalas have been our traditional sworn enemies. It is my vowed duty to protect the throne of Hastinavati against all destabilisers or usurpers."

Karna : "Interesting argument Sir! Ingenious indeed. But where is the proof?"

Bhishma : "Proof, did you say? Well, take it : Where is the Pandava army, if there ever is one? None of the brothers has an individual army of his own! It is all Panchala force backing them and a handful of Virata's soldiers. The Panchalas also derive from the lunar race and have always had a claim on the royal seat of Hastinapura. That is the centre of discontent and jealousy! It has been fuelled by Drupada's humiliation by Drona, through Arjuna! That is also why Drupada chose Arjuna as son-in-law through that drama of Svayamvara. There has always been a plan to destroy us by them."

Karna : "This is frankly unfair!..... There was no drama at Kampilya. Arjuna was not chosen by Drupada at random. It happened that way; why can't you see this, Sir?"

Bhishma : "The drama element consisted in keeping that Matsya - Yantra³ as the test for the hero to pass, in getting the hand of Draupadi in marriage."

³ The hero to wed Draupadi had to see the moving 'fish' above in a cage, through a reflection in a large oil container below, and shoot its eye straight in one shot of an arrow , in a perfect aim at a moving object, calculating its speed as well as that of the moving arrow to be shot. Only Arjuna could do it - that was the calculation .

Karna : “But the test was open for all ! Where was the contrivance?”

Bhishma : “Only Arjuna could pass it - as was calculated, and as indeed proven later on. Did you not see for yourself?”

Karna : I could have passed the test even before!”

Bhishma : “Yes, but that is why you were prevented from it; from your very attempting it....., so that the obvious choice was Arjuna! Does everything fit in now?”

Karna : (thoughtfully) “Let it be so..... Suppose Drona, yourself, and Kripa had a strategy to dissuade Duryodhana from war, do you think it would have succeeded?”

Bhishma : “Dhritarashtra *had* to go with us, then. And with no warrior willing to fight, Duryodhana would at least buy time and leave us in a better position as bargainers of peace. The future would have been certainly different from what it is now.”

Karna : “This is too vague an assertion. I was there with him always!”

Bhishma : “One sparrow does not make a roost! Karna, you were never the decision-maker in Duryodhana’s Camp. Shakuni was there to do it for him. The Prince never trusted me as much as he did that villain. Even you were next only to him. If myself, Drona, Kripa and Ashwatthama were neutral , all of you put together would not have insisted on war. I am sure of it. My fall has made possibilities of

this war stop more urgently. It is in your hands to make it a reality now."

Karna : "Sire, I am even more indebted to the Prince than you. What you could not stop then, I cannot now. This Karna is what he is because of Duryodhana."

Bhishma : "Say that of Parashurama, and not of Duryodhana! How would Duryodhana have seen your value, if Parashurama had not so equipped you? Put the blame on Duryodhana, if you will, for the tragedy his decision has imposed on you, as on me. Do you deny this?"

Karna : "You have not answered my question as to why you did not play neutrality then, much earlier?"

Bhishma : "I told you already... we needed you to complete the team of neutrals ! Unilateral decisions, individually would not have helped... Let me tell you, you are in a tragic situation like me."

Karna : "Heroic stands and tragic situations are not the same, Sir!"

Bhishma : "It is not heroic to support what you are convinced about as wrong. Tragedy is what happens when you can neither accept nor reject your blunders, which you have no power to reverse. It leads you to a goal preordained by your own choices."

Karna : "I know that victory is sure on the side of the Pandavas. I told Sri Krishna about a dream I experienced to this effect when he was at Hastinavati in that failed royal embassy. If God

wants to cleanse the earth, nobody can stop it. Let it be howsoever. I came here for another purpose and not this discussion on the consequences of war and the advantages or disadvantages of side-switching."

Bhishma : "I am eager to listen... proceed".

Karna : "I have wounded your pride and feelings on several earlier occasions, in moments of uncontrolled anger and arrogance. The last was when I vowed not to join the war under you, till you fell. I am sorry for all that and I came to ask of you your generous forgiveness, mainly."

Bhishma : "I have already forgiven you, as I told you. Neither was I interested in insulting you, as I desired the war not to start at all."

Karna : "I have another request . Please permit me to join the war".

Bhishma : "A fallen General's permission is needless. Proceed."

Karna : "Permission is sought where forgiveness also is solicited! I want to fight with a cleared conscience. Only you can clear it."

Bhishma : "Then have this advice also. Fight fearlessly in the manner of famed warriors of yore, with character and purpose. Let not egoism sway you from the path of the right. Leave the rest to God."

Karna got up, bowed to Bhishma, by touching his feet, and began moving back with heavy feet. The torchbearer resumed his duty beside Bhishma.



The same night there was another council in session at Duryodhana's camp. Drona was not yet there, present. Karna was sent for, but he was to find his way later on, as he was with Bhishma at the same hour, though none knew about it. For ten days all along, Bhishma had presided over similar meetings, shining as the brightest star in that galaxy. Now the camp was like a dark night without the moon or the stars. It was also like a herd of cattle surrounded by dogs in the absence of due protectors, the cowherds, who bore that brunt. The Kaurava camp was like the space without winds or fields without crops, dried up in broken pieces in famine, or like a demoniac army with its leader dead, like a dried riverbed in an awful, unnatural, lack-lustre mood.

The brothers of Duryodhana were unanimous in their view to crown Karna as the next General. They said so also. Duryodhana listened silently and patiently, saying nothing. Shakuni was lost in his own private silent calculations that none could dive into. While silence enveloped all inside the camp, outside, supporters of Karna were shouting slogans in his favour. There were also conversations among the soldiers that one could hear, if one listened intensely in that din :

Someone : "What if Bhishma fell to die? Does it signify the fall of the entire army? Is there not Karna to bring us victory?"

Someone else : "If Karna agrees to lead, at the mere sight of his riding the chariot, the enemies will run away!"

A different one : "Karna can defeat even gods! Let alone these wily, schemy, Pandavas. We deserve him now".

Still another : “Karna can equal our losses and set right old injustices”.

While these prattles were going on, Karna returned from Bhishma to join Duryodhana. Just at that time Duryodhana's brothers also joined the slogan-shouters. Karna, whose mind was lighter and more fresh after meeting Bhishma, felt elated at these outbursts of new enthusiasm, demanding his Generalship immediately.

Duryodhana : “Friend, where had you been at this dead of night?”

Karna : “I met Bhishma to apologise for my rash behaviour, and to ask for his blessings, and permission to join you hereafter.”

Duryodhana : (Anxiously) “What? Was old sire reconciled to you? Was he happy to meet you? Did he bless you?”

Karna : “Wholeheartedly”.

Karna did not sum up all that conversation, not to hurt Duryodhana's sentiments. Neither did the friend ask for all those details in his long preoccupation otherwise. After some pause :

Duryodhana : “Friend, I am in a perilous dilemma! Whom shall we crown as our next general?”

Of course, Duryodhana had not expected that Karna would volunteer to offer himself, whatever his supporters' demands might be. It was a straight, unloaded question. Karna felt it delicate to discuss the delicacies publicly to avoid misunderstandings and confusions. He took Duryodhana aside, outside the camp to a lonely spot and said :

Karna : “Among those eligible with us now, Drona is both senior and highly qualified. He is also the preceptor of both family-branches. If you supersede him and crown me, he will be angry and that will be also justified. He may then retire, and it will create other complications. Kripa might follow suit. Shalya and Bhurishravas also might follow neutrality or might not put their hearts into the fight. If you crown Shalya, also similar consequences may not be unavoidable. I also do not agree to the proposal. Ashwatthama is too young to be considered now. Kritavarma is from the Yadava side, and his is a borrowed army, with no stakes in the war. Besides, he is unpredictable. Let us push, therefore, Drona only as of now”.

That clinched the matter. All those that mattered, gathered together and went to Drona's camp to make the request.

The Acharya was not at rest. Yes, was he also not a yogi? He had just reclined on his bed, closed his eyes, trusting in God and lost in meditation. Earlier, he was sorry to miss Bhishma's company on the war-field, felt rather lonely and bored with the new situation as it had unfolded. Ashwatthama was near the bed serving his father, softening the muscles below the knees, at the feet. He had applied medicated ointments to his wounded chest and arms and other parts of the body. Drona in a way expected Duryodhana to call on him any moment for consultations. Bodyguards, servants, errand boys had scattered, into corners. The torchbearers and doorkeepers had kept ground at the entrance of the camp - tent.

Duryodhana was announced and ushered in. He kept none in suspense and straightaway opened the topic, by the bedside of the Acharya.

Duryodhana : “Acharya, you are our sole refuge now. Please lead the army to success and end this war. We have no better guide or protector than you at this hour of crisis. We never thought Bhishma would meet with this sad end.” He broke down.

Drona observed that Karna was there too, silently supporting the request as it were. That meant that he was not a competitor at the moment. Drona was happy about Duryodhana’s choice and wisdom of quick action. Yet, Drona wanted to test, if he himself was under no test! So he began to make sure :

Drona : “Are there no others fit enough, dear to you and trustworthy? Search for such a person and honour him first. I am always there with you, of course”.

Duryodhana felt this mild taunt, as he understood Karna as the target, and yet controlling his passion, spoke logically to please the Acharya.

Duryodhana : “Sir, you are senior in Varna, Kula, qualification, age, intelligence and experience. None else is a match for you in valour, courage, strategy, and forethought. You are a yogin, loyal to your patrons, and blessed in every way. Who else can protect the throne of Hastinavati better than your good self?⁴

⁴ *Varnassreshtyat kulotpattya shrutena vayasa dhiya |
Viryaat dhakshyat adhrishyatvat arthajnanat nayat jayat ||
Tapasa cha kritajnyatvat vriddhah sarvagunairapi |
Yatho bhavatsamo gopta rajnam anyo na vidyate ||*

Drona : (Pleased with Duryodhana for having realised the truth of his praises) “I know all Vedas with their auxiliary learning and lores. I am one of the few to know deeply the implications of statecraft as taught by Manu. I know all missile-lore also, as unmatched today. There is a missile called *Triambakastra*, which nobody else has heard of. There are numerous other weapons, which I have taught to no one other than Arjuna. You have indeed praised me, and realised my value today. Let this praise protect you, and bring you victory. But I have a condition to be fulfilled by you. It is a trifle.....”

Duryodhana felt this as a bad omen! Bhishma too had offered similar conditions and ruined himself, his army and all chances of success. Here was a repetition of that fateful event! Duryodhana felt crestfallen for a moment and looked at Karna, who had bent down his head and closed his eyes, as perhaps, he had expected some such thing from the Acharya. Yet Duryodhana pretended not to have been upset, and asked pointedly.

Duryodhana : “Tell me sir, what it is, if I can fulfill”.

Drona : “You do not have to fulfill anything on your part ; it is something I want to say clearly and you should not have any objection to it; that is all”.

Duryodhana : “How do I understand sir, if you talk in riddles? If it is your condition on yourself, as unconcerned with me, why tell me, to frighten me even at this hour of crisis?

Drona : “Do not jump into unnecessary conclusions.. It is concerned with you too, though a personal matter...”

Duryodhana : “Speak it out sir, and relieve me from anxiety.”

Drona : “I shall not kill Dhrishtadyumna at any cost!”

Duryodhana : “Is this a small condition sir? Is it not most related with me? How can you commit me and yourself to this..... to this, dishonourable proposition? In strategic matters elimination of Generals is of paramount importance!... um.....! May I know the reason?”

Drona : “He is my disciple. That is one reason. Secondly an oracle has announced that my death is at his hands ; that was on the day of his birth. He is born of no woman, and is invincible. Even if I tried, he cannot be killed by me. So let this be known to you in advance”.

Duryodhana : “Sir, do not be angry most of our enemies are also your disciples! If you vow not to kill them, what is this war about? I am most dependent on you and here you are offering funny conditions!”

Drona : “Then choose someone else for Generalship.”

Duryodhana : “Choice is over. All is now left to you. But bring me victory.”



CHAPTER 22

WAR ON THE ELEVENTH DAY

Duryodhana did not feel convinced of Drona's vow not to kill Dhrishtadyumna. Sparing an enemy ! And on the war-field !! What madness is this ! Suicidal steps for two Generals - Bhishma then, and Drona now. Before departing, Duryodhana had made bold to pose this question of wisdom to Drona himself, and got this funny answer :

"Fighting with fate does not befit heroes. Accepting it with dignity is better. Did not Kamsa try to fight fate as Sri Krishna ? Did he not thereby become the laughing stock of the world ? Could he avoid it, after all his hectic attempts ? I do not want to be equated with Kamsa !" - he had said.

Duryodhana had not liked this reference to fate ! He could not hide his dismay also. So he shot back:

"Then, why did you accept him as your disciple and to teach him wholeheartedly ?"

Drona : "The world will remember me for this generosity and chivalry, if not the way I fall in this war."

Duryodhana : "Sir, does this defeatist view befit you?"

Is this not ridiculous in a warrior of your stature?
You have guaranteed my defeat also, in advance!
Is this how you will protect me, Sir ?”

Drona : “I never volunteered to protect you ! Rather, you have sought it from me. I guarantee neither success nor defeat to anyone in advance. They come of their own accord, depending on where righteousness or unrighteousness lies. Oracles are not our creations. They neither please nor discomfort us. They speak truth by divine commands. He who fights against them is a fool.”

Duryodhana understood from this that Drona too, like Bhishma had no heartfelt compulsion in the fight on his side. He was helpless without Drona, who however felt merely duty-bound in this needless war, asking for his blood. That was all.



Drona assumed charge as the morning sun was rising and cool breezes were gently blowing. Duryodhana rendered him all traditional honours, as conches blew and war-drums were welcoming the event.

The Pandava camp had expected this - Drona's Generalship next. It replied in terms of drums, kettles and sirens, as if to reply : “We understand the challenge. We are equally ready.”

Sri Krishna told Arjuna : “Friend, today you are meeting your preceptor on the opposite side ! You do not require a second discourse from me, I hope !! You understand ?”

Arjuna simply smiled, touched his divine bow and offered his respects to it by touching it with his forehead. Sri Krishna understood what it meant.

In the Kaurava camp an interesting thing happened; as soon as Drona was crowned, he asked in a routine way :

“Prince Duryodhana ! I am pleased today. Ask a boon of me of your choice.”

Duryodhana was ready with such a request. He shot off :

“Sire, in today’s war, just bind Yudhishtira as a captive and hand him over to me. The war shall end.”

Drona was fooled and taken aback. It took a few minutes for him to regain his senses and then said :

“How wonderful of you ! What a boon ! The person whom you want alive as a captive is lucky to be so remembered by you. I am sure your intention is not to kill him after torturing him. After all, what do you gain by so killing him ? He too is *ajatashatru* - one for whom a hater is not yet born. Your meaning is that when I catch him and bring him to you, you want to hand him over his half-share of the kingdom, honour him and send him back with due honours - thus bringing this disgraceful war to an end. It is a special privilege of mine that war ends during my Generalship. But thank God, this wisdom dawned on you at least now.”

Duryodhana felt terribly irritated by this fanciful interpretation of his crooked intentions. For a moment he even felt that Drona was insulting him indirectly

through exaggerated over-interpretations ! Then he felt that Drona was too plain and muddle-headed to understand his real intentions. He could not tell him so in plain, simple words ; he did not want to antagonise his new General even before he went into action, at the same time. How could the Acharya not understand him, after knowing him full well all these years, since childhood ? Was all his effort to end the Pandavas to lead it to this ignoble denouement ? Duryodhana was stung by Yudhishtira's honorific title 'ajatasatru' ! How can a man be so called, after making so many hundreds of enemies ? Yudhishtira might not have hated anyone. That was his dull-headedness in a world of cruel practicalities. But, sure, there were those that hated him ! Could he not understand so much ?

Now with a derisive smile he started this reply to the Acharya :

Duryodhana : "Sire, are you day-dreaming ? Or are you teasing me ? Laughing at me ? Do you think I sacrificed my brothers for the kind of ignoble truth you are talking of ? I think either you are crazy due to sleeplessness or overtiresomeness; or you are taunting me deliberately for some other purpose best known to you ! Be sane-headed and understand better."

Drona : (utterly confused and humiliated) "Duryodhana! What is this approbation, undeserved ? What nonsense are you talking of ? Who is daydreaming ? You or me ? What is your meaning then for this your puzzling boon ?"

Duryodhana : “Can’t you understand sir ? The meaning is simply this : You bring him alive before me alone. I invite him for a gamble again on similar terms as before. He will not refuse, given his character and weakness. Then my uncle will defeat him. Then he will retire to the forests for twelve years again. The rest of the war not being needed, you will be General for the rest of your life ! How do you like that idea now ? Let him be called *ajatashatru*, and let the same gullible world also call me a lover of peace and non-violence !”

Drona felt the blood chilling in him with a diabolic sense of fear enveloping him ! He had not expected this cruel joke from Duryodhana, at this hour, when he had lost half the number of his brothers and a captain like Bhishma ! Would this fellow ever learn anything from life at all ?

Drona felt cheated in committing to Duryodhana with that boon which he should not have granted so cheaply ! There was no need for it; but he felt sorry now and did not know what to do. Then he thought of a way out, and so, cleverly he replied thus :

“Let me try; but this again depends on another condition”

Duryodhana was now mad with anger : “Acharya, you are offering too many conditions and too frequently at every step. You are discouraging me thus at every moment” he said.

Drona : “Duryodhana, you are very impatient. See, I am no God. You seem to think that it is child’s

play to capture Yudhishtira. Even God cannot be whimsical and arbitrary. There are always others and their choices in our world of non-stop movements. Do you think Sri Krishna will be a mute witness ? Do you take Arjuna for granted ? What Bhishma could not achieve in ten days - your victory - do you think I can get you in a moment? If you want to call Yudhishtira for a gamble, send Shakuni and see if he can come back alive with any message! I talk of war! You talk of gamble! Why do you want a General for this ?”

Duryodhana : “That means you are not interested in this war on my side! That is my bad luck, Sir. All my trusted lieutenants are letting me down, one by one. Is this the time for you to impose such erratic conditions ? How am I to win ?”

Drona was so enraged that he removed the General’s crown from his head, placed it down and said :

“You have one really trusted lieutenant for all of us, the traitors; crown him now, and ask him to capture Yudhishtira alive. I only said what I reasonably thought I could or could not achieve. It is not in my nature to promise impossibilities and brag about foolhardy adventures, to land you in troubles and humiliations. There is a record-setter in this matter on your side. Talk to Karna !”

Duryodhana now realised he had gone too far to enrage the Acharya to this pitch. He fell on the feet of the Acharya, offered unconditional apologies, and prayed for forgiveness.

Karna was very unhappy with this unpleasant reference to him by Drona. But he kept silent without wishing to aggravate the matter further by adding new problems. Karna's silence pleases the Acharya.

Drona : "Let me repeat. I only said I shall try. I cannot vouch for success, as odds are too many against us. Let us plan it in this way : Let our divisional commanders draw Arjuna out of the main battlefront to a far off quarter, diverting The Pandava heroes elsewhere, today. Let them hold him there, and I shall somehow manage Yudhishtira. But let it be known to you all - I have no weapons or missiles that Arjuna does not know. In fact he has more; things given by Gods, earned by his efforts. Moreover he is young, while I am old. He has firm hands, whereas mine tremble due to old age and non-practice. His aims are perfect, whereas mine are determined by blurred eyesight. This is his own teacher's condition! I am not sure, therefore, who else amongst you can face him bravely. Do not blame me then, if such an one is unable to capture Yudhishtira. Mine will only be an attempt in this sense."

Surprisingly Karna also pleaded for his friend being forgiven!

Drona : "Unless you all draw away Arjuna, I am helpless: secondly in this your attempt you may lose a bright warrior on our side. That will not be my fault as this is not my strategy or suggestion. I shall simply be carrying out the Prince's suggestion; that is all".

Duryodhana felt, in this evasive reply, the confirmation that the Acharya would fulfill his wish after all his admonition! That reflected his mind's condition that he would believe anything that could even temporarily guarantee his wish, even hallucination! Then he began to shower praises on the Acharya, reversing the trend of blame of just a few minutes ago, reflecting a gambler's state of mind, elation and frustration, and alternately possessing his mind.



A spy rushed into the Pandava camp in secret and speed and informed Yudhishtira of all this development.

Yudhishtira felt shocked at this evil-minded strategy and Drona's succumbing to it, though not afraid of it. He told Arjuna.

Yudhishtira : "Brother! Did you hear of Drona's vow to capture me today ?

Arjuna : "I shall not leave you alone today. Have no fear. My problem is how to avoid killing the Acharya. But unless he too is eliminated like Bhishma, our situation can only grow aggravated. I shall rather die than allow you to be captured. Duryodhana shall not succeed in his evil plan. Let heavens fall, the earth go into pieces. Even if Indra or Vishnu comes to the aid of Drona, defeat is certain for all of them. I swear."

The armies arranged themselves in good, chosen, structures. Fattened and gladdened with the success in eliminating Bhishma on the previous evening, the Pandava army was in good mood, in good form and

enthused. Drona had anticipated it, and had also prepared his army for a severe attack by the enemy. For a long time the fight did not yield any visible results.

Drona rode a golden chariot and succeeded in piercing into the Pandava army at last. That was all. The Kaurava army followed him in, and rivers of blood began to flow thereafter on both sides. It was like deluge - waters, except for the red colouration, in which all things got wafted into death or long sleep with none to save. Broken wheels of chariot looked like whirlpools, flesh like mire, flag-posts like uprooted trees, swords like fish, maces like crocodiles and so on. Even the daring got fear-struck at this sight.

The Pandava army got scattered and ran in different directions, at the very sight of a ferocious Drona, at that moment. Shakuni was encouraged at this, and began to use tricks of black magic, but was met firmly by Sahadeva. But Shakuni was unstoppable then. He destroyed the chariot, charioteer and horses of Sahadeva, in an unusual moment of daring. But Sahadeva rendered him helpless and a loner in about sixty arrows. Shakuni caught hold of a mace from somewhere, and hit Sahadeva's new chariot and again reduced him to a spectacle of pitifulness. Now Sahadeva also took a mace and attacked him. This continued for long.

On another front, Drona was combating Drupada, his sworn enemy. Elsewhere Bhima had engaged Vivimshati who showed unusual valour in rendering his enemy armourless and weaponless on foot. Bhima took up his mace and smashed him and his army into a shapeless mass of flesh.

Shalya was facing a fierce Nakula, in another quarter. He was now lying down on the earth with no supporting army, or his own weapons for self-defense. Nakula blew his conch then which frightened the Kaurava army.

Dhrishtaketu of the Pandava camp was now engaging Kripa. Satyaki and Kritavarma were fiercely fighting each other. At the same time Dhrishtadyumna and Trigarthaking Susharma were fighting each other. Karna was here in combat with Virata. Often this pattern changed. Drupada was taken over by Bhagadatta. Bhurishravas came to his help. Chekitana and Anuvinda, Lakshmana and Kshatradeva, Abhimanyu and the Pandava Princes, and then Hardikya were locked in combats. Abhimanyu vanquished all those that met him. Saindhava Jayadratha opposed Abhimanyu only to be rebuffed and forced into retreat.

It was now noon and neither army had made progress towards victory, except that Yudhishtira remained well protected and Drona could come nowhere even near him, let alone capture him.

In the afternoon Bhima had pounded Shalya as never before. He had been so subjected to humiliation and defeat. The two then held their maces and started a new phase of war, in single combat. Shalya began to bleed profusely though he had destroyed the Pandava forces that opposed him. Bhima had no such trouble personally, as his strength went on increasing and Shalya was sinking. Kritavarma who came to his help could not improve the situation for any better. Shalya fell into a swoon. The most Kritavarma could do was

to take him away in his own chariot to save him from the fury of Bhima unto death. Otherwise Shalya would have died then and there.

Duryodhana saw all this from a distance and was worried. No one was ready now to face Bhima, who was roaring with challenge. As he advanced he went on butchering the enemy forces as he advanced into it at a speed no one could stop or retard.

Nakula's son Shatanika and Karna's son Vrishasena were now engaged. Vrishasena seemed to be in better command at a time when the sons of Draupadi joined Shatanika to avert the danger. Then followed a rush of Pandava forces from all sides to trap Vrishasena.

It was nearing evening time. Drona was desperate to catch Yudhishthira, with yet no success. Then he spotted his chariot with a white umbrella above it and directed his charioteer to take him there.

But it was not so easy as Drona had thought. Since that morning Drona was instructing his charioteer every now and then to do so; but the moment his chariot moved in that direction, Arjuna's arrows would fall like torrential rain on him from somewhere, though Arjuna was not in sight and the attempt halted if not given up. Drona often lost sight in the clouds of arrows and felt dizzy. Even horses would refuse to rush forward, and stand on hind feet! It was great entertainment for the Pandava army to witness this sight.

Drona, for his part, was happy on one side, with this rare feat of Arjuna, and sad because of defeat, discomfort and frequent taunts of Duryodhana. Then he told the charioteer :

“Look, do not be afraid. He is my disciple after all, though he possesses weapons that no one else has here. He is not near. While even Bhima and others have no courage to near me, here is this rare disciple achieving this impossibility from a distance, being invisible to me. Do not retreat, take me forward”.

The charioteer tried again and somehow managed to progress unnoticed by the others. But waves of armies of Karusha, Matsya, Chedi, Satwata and Panchala enveloped him arresting that progress. Drona's arrows dispelled all these forces and made the path clear for the chariot to approach Yudhishtira! The Pandava heroes saw it from a distance and howled in horror, and cried for help from forces around that scene :

Arjuna who was not far away, heard this and rushed to the spot. His horses, though white, were now red, dripping in the blood of dead soldiers running into a river, unavoidably, and it was a terrible sight! Sri Krishna was angry and commanded Arjuna: “Do not spare him as your teacher. Otherwise you lose your brother! Kill him.”

Drona swooned in the chariot at the rush of arrows of Arjuna into a cloud and suffocating him from all sides. It was actually sunset, and time for cessation of hostilities for the day. Drona had not noticed it in that darkness of arrows. Arjuna observed the setting sun and stopped shooting arrows. Drona too saw it and blew his conch to indicate that war for the day was over. Frustration enveloped the Kaurava camp, densely.



CHAPTER 23

THE 'SUICIDE SQUAD' OF SAMSHAPTAKAS

On that first night of Drona's assumption of Generalship, the Acharya was so ashamed that he even hesitated to receive Duryodhana for a routine meeting to review the events of the day. He had failed in his promise of catching hold of Yudhishtira as a prize. Duryodhana did not refrain from insulting the Acharya or humiliating him publicly. He was not expected to be generous at all.

"What is this Acharya ? Is it my bad luck or your special favour for your chosen pupil, Arjuna ? Somehow the brothers took good care of Dharmaputra. You also protected him, being though in my cursed camp. Who is there to take care of me here ?" so saying Duryodhana looked at Karna.

Drona had anticipated this taunt and he now used a realistic argument in self- defence :

"Prince, you all failed to draw Arjuna on to another front, as I had not merely suggested but offered it as a precondition. That having not been fulfilled, why do you blame me ?"

Duryodhana : "You are the General, Sir! You ought

to have so planned, in your own free way. I never imposed restrictions on you in your plannings, your strategies, in your deployment of armies or structuring it in ways suited for your goals! I simply gave you one such goal leaving all the rest to yourself. Could you not have created such a strategy as to draw away Arjuna elsewhere ? At least do so tomorrow!"

Drona pocketed this stricture in silence and looked at the faces of divisional commanders as if to inquire what plans they could offer, and which among them would accept this responsibility.

Karna : "Don't ask us sir, 'what plan ?'; you give us one".

Drona : (after a moment's thought) "There is a master strategy. Only self-confident heroes can execute it to success or for self-annihilation."

Karna : "Self-annihilation ? What kind of a strategy is this, Sir ? Talk of what can bring us success only !".

Drona : "Karna, war is a gamble after all! Who could anticipate Bhishma's fall after so heroic a fight by him ?"

Karna : "That is a matter of the past. Please think of the present".

Drona : "Then you draw away Arjuna into a far off field of the war. This is my command".

Karna : "Tell me how I can do this... give me details of the plan. Tell me which is that front and how

the trap can be set up and maintained till the end of the day”.

Drona : “That is what I was about to explain and you were impatient to hear. That is called a ‘*Sam Shaptaka Vrata*’”

Karna : “Never heard of it!”

Drona : “Have now the patience to hear of it and its details. A person who undertakes this oath has to perform a small ritual, a fire offering, observe penance and fasting, and declare ‘I am going to kill so and so in today’s battle, or else commit suicide by self-immolation by fire’ All and sundry cannot do such a declaration as otherwise this oath will be a mockery. One who is equal to the enemy or superior to him can so declare as a commitment on his part. Then the enemy will direct himself to protect himself, and the attention of the day will be on this for both sides. That is when I shall catch Yudhishtira, as he will be away from Arjuna and possibly from Bhima also.”

Karna did not feel like doing this job! His vanity made him feel this too small for him and even ridiculous, when he was so sure of killing Arjuna in a direct battle without ritual, this oath, and all under someone else’s command. Let the proper opportune moment come; he could do it under no one’s command. The purpose also was trivial he thought- to divert Arjuna, so that Yudhishtira could be captured alive. Yudhishtira was the target, not Arjuna! Even if he killed Arjuna the credit would therefore go to Drona,

for achieving his purpose. Karna did not like the idea at all! On the other hand, if Arjuna could not be killed, he had to commit suicide - an ignoble act! What was this wily Brahmin committing him for ? An ignoble death, for a trivial failure! One clause of Drona stuck up in his mind however: 'one who is equal to the enemy or superior to him.' Yes, he was undoubtedly one such. But this was not the right occasion, under Drona, and for a different purpose, without stealing the limelight as the main item.

Drona understood Karna's reluctance. Neither did Duryodhana mention him for this task, as he had reserved him for a special occasion later on. All that was needed was a scapegoat - both Karna and Duryodhana thought - as they knew that they would not survive being targeted by Arjuna.

Now the Trigarta King Susharma came forward, along with his brothers. They had unforgettable experiences of defeat and humiliation at Arjuna's hands. The 'cow capturing' - 'go-grahana' - experience on the outskirts of Virata's capital was the latest in that series. Vengeance was urgent for which suicide was the most honourable alternative now.

Susharma : "General sir, we have not wronged the Pandavas in anyway. Yet Arjuna has heaped on us humiliations. Give us this opportunity of avenging the wrongs."

Drona was happy. Duryodhana consummated it with his personal approval, and the scapegoat was fixed.



Two more hours before day break on that fateful twelfth day : Susharma and his four brothers - they too were five! - were performing fire-rites, their own death ceremonies. Satyaratha, Satyavarma, Satyavrata, Satyeshu, Satyakarma, these were their personal names, but actually known as Susharma, Surathi, Sudharma, Sudhanva and Subahu. They were handsome in profiles, and brave too. But they were unfortunate victims of the day, to the Acharya's plans.

It was a pity seeing them performing their own last rites with their own hands, for no fault of theirs. They hardly realised that it was the last sunrise they were witnessing. Their squad - suicide squad, - consisting of Mavellas, Lalithas, Madrakas and other tributaries had also committed similar rites.

Now came the moment for 'Shapatha' - the oath - or swearing for their intended darings of the day : They wore dresses made of Darbha grass, loin clothes as it were; bore similar shields on their chests, protected their heads, forearms, foreparts of legs similarly; the rest of their bodies were smeared with ghee; they wore belts, spun of grass, in the manner of *Brahmacharis*, wore tilaks on foreheads, offered fire oblations, made gifts to holy Brahmins in terms of gold, cows and ornaments - to thousands of Brahmins, in hundreds of such settlements around, and got their hearty blessings. Then they went round the holy fire thrice and swore in one voice thus :

"Today, we shall return at sunset, only after slaying Arjuna who is known as Dhananjaya. Otherwise, if we fail, we shall commit suicide. In that case of our not

reaching our aims, let all the sins of sinners accrue upon us - sins of Brahmin-slaying, sins of broken vows of recluses, sins of seducing the womenfolk of a teacher, a preceptor, sins of letting down and betraying refugees, sins of stealth, sins of treason to a King, sins of taking drinks like liquor, the sin of touching cows with feet, sins of letting down one-time helpers, of killing beggars, of hating Vedas and holy Brahmins, of violating marital codes and so on."

The Kaurava heroes blew conches and the army wished them success in shouts of glory to the rhythm of drums and kettles. Then the squad moved southeastward to reach Arjuna. It was daybreak.



Yudhishtira : "Arjuna, did you hear the challenge of Trigarthas ? Did you catch Drona's intentions ? The idea seems to be to catch me alive after separating you from me! I am not afraid of being captured; but once captured, if Duryodhana invites me again for a gamble, I cannot say no. This is what I am afraid of really! Who knows the mind of destiny ?"

Sri Krishna : "You have a vow known to all the world that if invited you will not refuse to gamble. Such vows have no meaning in isolation from real life. That was how you were tricked into your ruin some thirteen years ago! What if in altered situations you break that meaningless vow ? Declare so here and now, and see the repercussions in Duryodhana's camp! Do you not know that actually gambling is listed among things that constitute the avoidable

addictions of a King ? Actually the Rajasuya rite prescribes that at the end of the sacrifice, an expert King should invite those suspected of loyalties to the throne, and defeat him or them to take away their belongings! But the reverse was what happened when Shakuni invited you, and you went, violating Vedic codes! You are already out of context once. Do you wish to be so again ? Why would Duryodhana wish to have you captured if you declare now that you have given up your meaningless, mischievous vow ? See, I violated my vow and wielded the Disc! Did I lose honour ? Vows must not be used as weak spots of a hero, by crooked adversaries ! or else, command me to finish all this army of enemies! I shall do so and spare you the trouble and anxiety”.

Yudhishtira : “You are God-Incarnate and you can do what you want at will, in manners of your own choice!”

Sri Krishna : “Goodness! You talk like an idiot, ignorant of the nuances of Vedanta! Do you think God is a despot, a whimsical absolute, a cruel monarch or a bigot ? Who can be more responsible than God ? I vowed to tie up the hair of your wife Draupadi into a knot, a thing *you* should have vowed ! Did you ever vow one such, instead of this stupid, suicidal one, regarding gambling ? Do you remember what your wife said that day when I vowed so ? ‘I have lost my husbands’¹ - she said!

¹ *Naiva me patayah santi...*

Do you realise what agony it means to say so for a *sumangali*,² like a widow ? Did you do anything to relieve her sorrow ? What is your net achievement in life, if you cannot wipe out the tears of your own wife ? Draupadi said to me : 'Sri Krishna, even you are not alive to my endless sorrows!' I was touched deeply unlike you! The law says that a deceiver must be eliminated by resorting to his own evil tricks, against him.

mayavi mayaya vadhyah esha dharmah santanah||

At least now behave sensibly”.

Yudhishtira was speechless; he did not agree with Sri Krishna, of course! The other brothers were staring at him to see his reactions. But there were none. Arjuna relieved the tedium of long silence that ensued:

Arjuna : “Brother, Yudhishtira, do not worry. Today Satyajit, the brother of Draupadi will be with you throughout, as bodyguard. There is no reason for worry. Bhima is there too. Have no fear. The Acharya will not be allowed to appear anywhere near you”.

Yudhishtira stared at Arjuna blankly! He had nothing to say.

Arjuna : “If Satyajit dies by any chance, you will move to another quarter with our other brothers to fight someone of your choice. That way also there is no room for fear.”

² A *sumangali* is one who lives her life as blessed with full housewife's glory, with her husband alive. A widow, the opposite, is a dreaded nightmarism, the opposite of auspiciousness.

Arjuna had to go. Yudhishtira embraced him and sent him off.



The "Suicide squad of five" had structured their army in a moon-shape (half circle), in a far-off quarter, northwest of where the main battle raged that week. There was no rule as to where individual armies should stay or fight. In that vast expanse of Kurukshetra any place was as good or as bad as any other for death or killing. Enemy searched for enemy, unless they met by choice or chance, and as directed by the General. The Samshapthakas expected Arjuna to seek them, come running to them.

Arjuna approached them with a huge army, blew his conch to enthuse his retinue. Sri Krishna led them all in conch-blowing. Arjuna was surprised at the enemy's level of enthusiasm! He said to Sri Krishna:

"See, these fellows want to die! They have sworn so! A man possessed of death-wish is not expected to be so joyful! What is their meaning? Or, are they eager to enter the paradise meant for heroes of valorous circumstances of death?"

Arjuna again blew his conch. The enemy army stood petrified like figures in a painting! Elephants and horses vomited blood and trembled.

The Trigarta brothers showered arrows, non-stop, on Arjuna, who did not mind them at all. One of the brothers, Sudhanva, came very near Arjuna's chariot. Arjuna cut off his bow with a single arrow, his Flag-post with another, and killed his horses and charioteer

with a few more. At last with a single sharp arrow he removed the villain's unfortunate head. This disaster happened even as the war had just started, to demoralise the other brothers, who retreated and scattered with their armies. It took a long time for those hapless brothers to reassemble their armies, or whatever remained of them. Arjuna could not be sighted, meanwhile! They began to shout : "Where is Arjuna?" as if he had run away from them! This was funny.

Sri Krishna could not suppress his laughter and asked Arjuna wittily :

"Where are you my friend? I hope you have not vanished into the air, so that they have lost their prize! Even I cannot see you, if I am to believe their desperate cries! What do they mean, by so inviting you ? Are they struck blind ? Or have you performed some magic?"

Arjuna understood even from this joking reference that it was time for action for him, in Sri Krishna's view: to be visible to the enemy unforgettably in every quarter, not allowing them to run away.

He now used the *Vayavya* missile, while remembering Drona as teacher, his own mother Kunti and the other brothers at that moment. The missile raised a tornado and brought all dried leaves, twigs and dry branches together from around, forests and hills and all neighbourhood, and took away most soldiers in its fierce force into a powerful whirl and threw them somewhere else. The Trigarthas could not see anything before them and stopped shooting arrows. Arjuna showered his arrows on whatever remained of that army

and killed them all. The sun was now in the middle of the skies.



On the main front, Drona had structured the army in the Garuda style - the eagle or vulture form. He himself stood at its beak, stationed Duryodhana in its forehead, Kripa and Kritavarma in its eyes. Bhutasharma, Kshemasharma, Karakas, Kalingas, Simhalas, Abhiras, Dasherakas and others in its neck, wings, tail and legs.

Dhrishtadyumna saw this and counter-arranged his army in suitable alterations. Yudhishtira said to him : “Brother, today you have to see to it that I do not become prisoner to Drona”.

Dhrishtadyumna was stunned by this repeated reminder: “Do not fear, sir; I am here awake to my responsibility”, he replied and moved out.

The armies began to clash like possessed men! No one was in his senses it appeared. Rules of decency were broken and all were mad after success at all costs for their sides.³

Drona came forward to meet the Pandava army and was stopped by Dhrishtadyumna. Drona felt this was a bad omen, to meet his death so personified. He turned away quickly.

The age of Kali possessed everyone, it seemed, as it was only ‘killing’ that mattered and not who was killing whom! Soldiers were fighting among themselves! A thing that did not happen during Bhishma’s Generalship!

³ *Tata unmattavat Rajan ! nirmaryadam avartata |*

In this melee, Drona was steadily marching towards Yudhishtira deceiving all the Pandava heroes.

Yudhishtira fought with Drona, courageously and in full control of himself. Drona was covered with arrows. Satyajit, Draupadi's younger brother, joined him. Drona was now severely wounded and the charioteer lost control over the horses, which began to roam in circles, not knowing where to move for safety. So fierce was the shower of arrows by Yudhishtira that day. Again Drona tried to encircle Yudhishtira, and again he was repulsed; this happened many times until Satyajit fell to a cruel arrow of Drona. His brothers Shatanika, Dridhasena, Kshema, Vasudhana and others also were killed by Drona. Now Shikhandi and Satyaki came there and the two made Drona retreat.

Duryodhana was happy to hear that Drona had killed the Panchala princes. He told Karna:

"See how bravely our Acharya is fighting today! If his mood continues I am sure that Yudhishtira will voluntarily renounce his false claim to kingdom and run away to the forests as a recluse".

Karna put on a derisive smile and said:

"Your calculations seem to me wrong. The Pandavas will never run away as you are dreaming. They are brave, they possess weapons, they possess might and are self confident, and have divine blessings. Have you not seen how they have been saved from poison, from attempts to burn them alive, from humiliations of all types, from exile to forests and consequent hazards? What have all our plans come to, after all? Bhishma's fall is very ominous! We have put on Drona, more

responsibility than he may be capable of bearing. I doubt whether he will succeed in capturing Yudhishtira. I have my reservations about it”.

Duryodhana did not like this forecast. He directly went to support Drona.



Sanjaya was narrating this part of the happening of the day, as the blind King was fear-struck.

He murmured : “Karna seems correct in his calculations. The Pandavas, who are a terror to any army will never run away. My son has overestimated himself against heavy odds. Arjuna has been collecting rare missiles all through the years in the forests. They have escaped unscathed the travails of forest life as well as life incognito in the land of Virata. What other tests are there for Yudhishtira to be afraid of ? God has blessed them too. Happiness and misery are divine allotments by birth. Otherwise, do you think a fellow who gambled his all could collect such a huge army? My son counted and recounted his army-strength endlessly, including this army of the Pandavas also on his side. But what happened ? The Kashis, Keykayas, Chedis and Pandyas joined the Pandavas only in the last count! If Bhishma could go, how many more days can Drona stand before the Pandavas ? I cannot give up my fascination for the well-being of my sons, even after losing nearly half of them by now! What strange fate is this of mine ? Bhima... oh! Bhima!... will he spare at least the rest ?”

The blind old man was now profusely weeping. There was nothing new in all this that Sanjaya had not

heard numerous times. Also there was nothing more to reply also. He was tired of saying the same things again and again.

Sanjaya now tried to turn the attention of the King onto something else on the battle scene, to relieve himself from this boredom:

“My lord; let me tell you what else is happening there, next; forget the past and face the present; or else if you still want a tolerable future, stop this war, by calling Yudhishtira and handing him over what your sons robbed him off in that shameful gamble. There are still some of your sons to be saved; do not lose them too by being stubborn still”.

Dhritarashtra snubbed Sanjaya:

“You are always offering me unwanted, unpleasant advice! Why can't you give me good news ?”

Sanjaya : “Sir, it is simply not available on the field. Without goodness in one's own heart, how can one seek it in outer life ? The two are interlinked, it seems”.

Dhritarashtra : “What is in or out, I do not understand...”

Sanjaya : “Sir even if you have no eyesight to view life outwardly, you should have been blessed with insight to know moral rights and wrongs of things that were going on around you”.

Dhritarashtra : “You always say this!”

Sanjaya : “If questions are the same, how can answers be different ?



CHAPTER 24

BHAGADATTA ELIMINATED

Bhagadatta was the son of Narakasura, ruling over a vast Chinese territory, in some far-eastern city as capital called Pragjyotishapura. (which meant “a town on which the first ever rays of the rising sun fell, everyday.” He had an ‘Yellow army’ as the Mahabharata describes. This was part of the greater Hindustan of those bygone days.) When Sri Krishna killed Naraka for his evil deeds and crowned Bhagadatta in his place, he had extracted a promise from him not to transgress Dharmic ways of life. The discontented and evil-minded Bhagadatta had no alternative then, and so accepted this condition, which in reality, he thought, was humiliating for his wayward ways, mistaken for freedom by him.

When the war started, he found a way of revenge on Sri Krishna by joining the Kaurava forces. Sri Krishna had noted this unfriendly act with a shrewd eye of Dharma ; earlier, the sons of vanquished enemies like Jarasandha and Shishupala, had joined the Pandava side without pressure or persuasion and Bhagadatta too was expected to follow suit. This did not happen, given his propensity for evil with enormous power. He had a huge division of elephant army, which was conspicuous by size and strength. He himself rode on a notorious elephant called Supratika. which derived its pedigree

from Iravata, Indra's famed heavenly elephant and was proud and intolerant of everything before it, once on the way of movement. It was erratic, unpredictable, always in a state of intoxication, and highly disturbed, bordering on a condition of lunacy.

Bhagadatta himself was a glutton and had a body with disproportionate limbs, in an awkward assemblage, with eyelids overhanging so much, that they prevented a full sight of things before him. He used a silk band to keep the drooping eyelids, in their correct position, so that he could see things properly. People feared this sight even more than his usual other ugly demeanor; on the elephant, he looked most hideous and ominous, and the forces avoided his sight on either side.

Today he rode into the Pandava Camp like Death incarnate; and went on destroying whomsoever he came across without a check or any considerable opposition. No missiles worked on him, no strategy had any effect on this ruffian!

Bhima now came forward to take care of him. But the elephant lifted up Bhima's chariot, threw it to the skies, and trampled upon it and its charioteer, and killed all the horses and was now advancing towards Bhima, who had escaped unhurt in all this havoc. Lances, maces, arrows - no weapons could stop or hurt this mad elephant.

Bhima now resorted to a trick, which only Sri Krishna had known and used against a similar mad elephant at Kamsa's court earlier, called Kuvalayapida. It was a 'vidya' - an art or trick, a clever Yogic practice - called Anjalika Vedha or Anjalika Bandha. It was used

like this : The elephant's opponent practiced *Pranayama* so as to hold his breath empty for an infinite period of time so that his body became absolutely light while he clung to the lower belly of the elephant, tight, and held it with arms and feet, until the animal turned around itself, to catch the invisible enemy, and lost its direction and force, and got tired on its own at last. Then the opponent came down suddenly, reversed the *Pranayama* process, to acquire abnormal powers of muscle and strength, and now he could destroy the animal by holding its trunk to drag it to and forth, to toss it up and throw it away and thrash it on the ground to kill it. While from under the belly, the opponent could tease the animal by delivering blows, tearing its skin to bleed, or scratch it to tickle it and do a number of other tricks to tire it, to bleed it and render it helpless.

Bhima did all this and at last stood before an absolutely enraged and frustrated elephant, blind with madness in its failure to locate the enemy. It dashed towards him once it noticed him at last. Bhima jerked sideways in a nimble movement and the mad elephant fell on the ground without hitting the target. It broke its tusks, and got bruised badly. Bhima again practiced the same stroke of *Anjalikavedha*, got stuck to its underbelly. The elephant went on getting weaker and tired, to the point of lying down to die on its own ; Bhima came out. This time a low lying elephant, suddenly got up, with some strength welling up from somewhere, and took Bhima in its firm trunk and threw him down in a splash, a tremendous thud! The Kaurava army roared with the shout ; "Bhima is dead! Bhima

is no more” They beat drums and blew horns. This woke up a swooning Bhima, and in a lightning flash of speed he jumped sideways away to escape being trampled.

Yudhishtira by now, had sent a contingent of Panchala elephant forces to Bhima’s aid. Bhagadatta was not afraid. He rode another terrible elephant and went on destroying all that, leaving his personal elephant to take care of Bhima. The army of Drupada now joined.

The King of Dasharna came to tackle Bhagadatta. He was on an elephant too. Both elephants were locked up like two mountains jamming each other in the world’s Great Deluge. But in the end Dasharna’s elephant was overpowered and killed leaving the King on the ground, helpless. Bhagadatta threw ten thorny maces on him to finish him.

The elephant intoxicated with this success turned to Yuyudhana, another Pandava hero. It threw away his chariot in a mighty lift and toss. Yuyudhana escaped gracefully.

Now Satyaki brought a contingent of forces belonging to Sindhudesh, and directed the herd on this elephant.

Supratika now joined the fight, leaving Bhima. Bhagadatta endowed it with magic powers, so that it could multiply its images in hundreds and thousands everywhere! The Pandava army, including the elephant division, ran away in fear at this show of black magic.

Abhimanyu, Chekitana, Dhrishtaketu, Yuyutsu and Prativindhya joined together to attack the elephant from different angles.

Bhagadatha rode now that mad elephant and pierced its head with the *ankusha*¹ and said. "Go, destroy the enemy".



The reddish dust so raised by the trampling feet of the elephants was visible at such a great distance even, where Arjuna was fighting the *Samshapthakas*. Sri Krishna pointed it out and said : "See, this must be that bastard Bhagadatta's elephant, creating havoc in our army-front there. I can even hear his roars".

Arjuna : "So do I understand Sri Krishna. If we do not move there, the war might finally end in our defeat there today only. But here are these villains holding me on to here. Any way we shall move there quickly, do our duty, and return quickly."

Sri Krishna obeyed. But the Trigarthas brothers chased him with slogans : "Arjuna, you are running away without defeating us. You are a coward. This is against war codes. Be manly and first finish this war" and so on. They still had fourteen thousand elephants, ten thousand chariots, and millions of foot soldiers. Arjuna had barely four thousand soldiers following him.

Arjuna felt pricked in mind, turned back and used the *Brahmastra*². It killed most of the huge army of Trigarthas and sent them into a swoon. Flesh-eating devils and demons danced with joy and praised Arjuna

¹ A small dagger-like instrument which alone can control an elephant, in the hands of its rider.

² The deadliest of weapons or missiles which only a responsible warrior could use in the most unavoidable, extraordinary situation.

for this grand and unprecedented feast. Even Sri Krishna folded hands and payed respects to Arjuna, and said "Well , done, my lord!" in mock humility which befitted the occasion.

Sri Krishna : "My friend, this presence of mind, this deftness, this command over missiles is something which even Indra would be envious of! Even gods would be proud of you. You have pleased me today supremely. Even Kubera and Yama have to learn from you.

This filled new energy into an overtired Arjuna. The two had moved on to where Bhagadatta was fighting before the Trigarthas could wake up from their state of swoon. Now they also moved to the same quarter to draw Arjuna back.

When Arjuna joined the frightened Pandava forces, the scene got completely changed. They had a new lease of life, energy and enthusiasm, and got up re-charged as it were.

Arjuna turned back and shot off seven rare arrows at Susharma and his brothers, who bled and fell unconscious! The sound *Gandiva* (Arjuna's famed Bow) made, terrible sounds no one could hear elsewhere, frightened the enemies even more than the arrows springing from it, and even elephants felt confused and began to scatter, rubbing each other's, and trampling armies on their own side.

Supratika now spotted Sri Krishna and Arjuna and ran towards them in rage. Sri Krishna turned the chariot in a quick half-moon turn to prevent any disaster. The

elephant missed the target and fell to the ground, tired. It was still alive. It got up, turned around and again spotted Sri Krishna and Arjuna. All were afraid of the outcome ; The Pandava forces prayed for Arjuna's safety while the Kaurava army eagerly expected Arjuna and Sri Krishna to be trampled.

From on that mad elephant now, Bhagadatta was shooting an array of arrows on the pair before him. One or two of them pierced even Sri Krishna's body. But meanwhile Arjuna had destroyed the shield - coat on the elephant's body.

Bhagadatta took up a Trident with a golden handle and threw it on Sri Krishna. Arjuna intercepted and broke it into a hundred bits. He destroyed the flag with its post, belonging to Bhagadatta, and flying on the elephant at a considerable height, for all to see. Similarly his royal umbrella too was gone to dust. Bhagadatta was surprised ! He threw a thorny shaft on Arjuna, which hit Arjuna's long crown, could not remove it however, and so went round it once, as if to bless him and honour him. Arjuna felt distressed as this was something no one had done, so far. It was an insult to a person so known by that crown as *Kireeti* in all the three worlds. He was naturally angry. He shot off a special arrow and destroyed Bhagadatta's bow. Now he used seventy-two arrows to pierce Bhagadatta's body and bled him in all directions. Bhagadatta felt the first pains of his life!

He had now no weapons in him except a rare one inherited from his father : The *Vaishnavasatra* or *Narayanastra*, was its name.

It had a history of sorts : Narakasura was believed to be the son of Mother Earth, during the Incarnation of the Lord as *Varaha*, out of whose drop of sweat which fell down then, this Naraka was supposed to have been born. Out of his supreme compassion the Lord had granted him this rare weapon, which could be mollified only by lifting both hands in surrender, by the opponent. No other weapon or missile could destroy it; it was superior to even Brahmastra, so that Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna or even Arjuna did not possess it. Now Naraka had given it to his son Bhagadatta, and naturally this demon was infatuated and felt invincible with it. He forgot that "Surrender" could nullify it.

Bhagadatta took up the hooked instrument that he possessed to control the elephant and used it as the Narayanastra, by associating the proper *mantric* formula with it, and out went the missile, hissing, and throwing sparks of fire, lightning and thunderbolts in a moment, towards the Pandava army. Arjuna had heard of it, so that he put the Gandiva and arrows down and folded his hands in reverence. Other soldiers too followed him. Only Bhima would not surrender and wanted to fight it, not knowing its nature and mistaking it for a special weapon of Bhagadatta. Arjuna shouted : "Put your mace and kneel with folded hands." Bhima was mindless and was still fighting when Sri Krishna himself, went to him, took away the mace from him and offered his bare chest to it. The weapon became a garland of lotuses and adorned his neck, while all others watched this miracle. It was a garland of unfading flowers called *Vaijayanti*, with red lotuses looking like balls of fire

in a garland so made ; or so many setting suns strung into an impossible garland. Arjuna was in tears :

Arjuna : “Lord! Can you so expose yourself to such dangers? You have vowed to guide me, only as a charioteer, have you not? Why this hazardous act of receiving yourself a missile in your own name? If I were lazy and indifferent to the enemy that would have been a different matter. I still wield my bow and arrows! Why do you break your oaths repeatedly?”

Sri Krishna : “I must tell you an esoteric truth now. Yogins know of four chief forms of mine always engaged in protecting the worlds in different ways: One of them³ sits in a posture of penance. The second is a witness to the good and evil deeds of all living things. The third one reclines in a mood of rest, granting boons to the deserved who can approach that sphere. The fourth one takes on different occasions, different Incarnations. Now Mother Earth once came to my reclining form and asked for a boon in favour of her son Naraka - that he should not die of gods or demons. I said yes. She insisted on his being given a weapon for self-protection in this regard. I said, ‘which one?’ She asked for this Narayanastra! I then gave it to him. It protected him from all else, and so he became mad with power and thought he was immortal. It is another matter I had to kill him

³ The sitting form of Vishnu is Badrinath. The ‘witness’ is Antaryami; the Indweller. The recliner is Aniruddha. The last is all Avatars, active on Earth.

myself for his transgressions. Naraka's son inherited it from him though in my view it did not belong to him. Boons are generally given individually, not hereditarily. I now created this situation to take it back from him. There is no vow broken. Even if you think I have broken one, it is for the good of the world. That is the greater vow. Moreover, no one else could meet it or receive it to nullify it. I had a duty in withdrawing it. I have just done that. It is neither a mad hazard, nor a foolhardy intervention of a misadventure. You have seen how it adorned my bosom as a garland of flowers. If I had not done so, it would have killed you, your brothers and all your army, as it could not fail, without reaching a target. Now you can kill this enemy."

Arjuna was stunned ! He shot severe arrows on that elephant. But it advanced towards him unmindful of wounds. Arjuna tried again and again. At last the animal was grounded and could not move for all the instigations of Bhagadatta. Like the wife of a poor man, who does not listen to the commands of her husband⁴ it rolled down on the earth and breathed at last.

Bhagadatta was thrown on the ground now! He got up slowly more ugly in shape and form than ever before. Sri Krishna commanded :

"See, Arjuna, his hair and brows have all turned white. The eyelids are too overgrown and want to prevent his eyesight, naturally. But with a silken band

⁴ *Daridrasya iva yoshita*

he has tied them up around his head, and so he is able to work all this havoc. First cut off his ribbon and make him blind. He will then fail to handle even a mild weapon."

There was an oracle in the skies that seconded this view : "Arjuna, what Sri Krishna says is true. There is no other way".

The unfortunate Bhagadatta lost both eyes as soon as Arjuna destroyed the band that protected them. Arjuna threw an arrow with a half moon face to remove his head. The demon fell with a tremendous roar that frightened all around. His army ran away in fear.

Arjuna asked Sri Krishna to return to the 'suicide-squad' waiting for him. When the chariot was turning, two of Shakuni's brothers, Vrishaka, and Achala, accosted Arjuna, inviting them for war with them.



This was an unequal war! They were no match for Arjuna. He destroyed the enemy's horses, chariots, and some five hundred of their followers in no time. Vrishaka was killed with a single arrow. Before that, the two brothers rode in the same chariot, before one of them was destroyed. They were good marksmen in a bad camp. They looked like the heat of two summer months jointly, Vaishaka and Jyestha, to burn the armies of Arjuna. But Arjuna was like the torrential season to cool all that heat. Both the brothers fell to his arrows. The Kaurava army was in tears.

Shakuni was now terribly angry. He used deceptive magic-weapons of a hundred varieties to frighten

Sri Krishna and Arjuna. (They were very common in his land of Gandhara, and Shambarasura had perfected this war by magic, long long ago.) Shakuni's followers used weapons that only Gandhara soldiers knew - like *shataghnis*⁵, long iron rods with piercing edges and others. They made armies of wolves, tigers, vultures, monkeys, serpents, mules, bison, lions, and numerous demoniac forms suddenly appear in clusters, rushing at the enemies to make them withdraw, resorting to tricks of hallucination and so on.

But these deceptive appearances were repelled and scattered by Arjuna by resorting to appropriate divine weapons. Shakuni now caused an abnormal cover of darkness envelop the war-field, with no clouds, and at noon ! Various frightening sounds were created to break the hearts of brave warriors fighting the enemies. Abusive words and slogans emanated from various quarters also.

There was a counter move for all this. Arjuna used the *Jyotishastra* - a missile that illumined the war-field and created a hundred thousand lights in all quarters and dispelled the illusive darkness. The frightening sounds subsided as suddenly as they had sprouted from air!

Shakuni caused torrential rains to fall. Arjuna stopped it with the help of *Adityastra*. Shakuni realised that all his tricks had failed and so ran for life and

⁵ a kind of gun which could kill a hundred people at a time, as its name indicates, by using piercing stone-edges packed in hollow iron pipes and exploded from behind, using chemicals - a thing that *Krishnayajursamhita* mentions.

disappeared. The rest of the Kaurava army was pounded by Arjuna in no time. Those who ran appealed to Drona for protection. Others sought refuge in Duryodhana who was now mad with rage and disappointment, but could do nothing.

Here was Ashwatthama engaged with Nila (different from the other Nila of Mahishmati); Nila died a miserable death at his hands.

Elsewhere Bhima was butchering the Kaurava army mercilessly in the very presence of Drona. Karna and Aswatthama now joined the General. Bhima was joined by Nakula and Sahadeva.

Arjuna who had returned to the Samshaptaka front, kept them at bay, in a certain point of the war and had now returned to join Bhima. The war now turned in favour of the Pandavas ! Karna had lost his three brothers now and was in deep sorrow. Drona had retreated not being able to stay before Bhima. The Kaurava camp was now in complete disarray.

Drona had again failed in his promise of capturing Yudhishtira for a second day in a row ! It was time to stop the war for the day as it was sunset.



Duryodhana : “Acharya, you have failed today also! Why do you make promises that you do not want to keep? Say plainly that you want to spare my enemies. You have been fighting with our own forces in the last two days!. Perhaps you are in two minds ! Tell me which is your real mind ? The one which loves my enemies or the one that troubles our own side ?”

Drona : 'You are talking of what I cannot understand. I am not yet senile. I may not have my old strength. But I am in self-command of my senses, unlike youngsters like you, who surrender senses to uncontrollable passions. Results must be earned with hard work in unity on the battle-front, and not had for mere wishes as puddings at home. Mind your tongue while talking to me. I am doing my very best for you. There is nothing more I can do.'

Drona was furious, with the taunts of the foul-tongued Duryodhana.

Duryodhana : "I was simply praising your love of the Pandavas!"

Drona : "An unrefined tongue knows no difference between praise and blame. But a refined mind gets hurt with misplaced feelings."

Duryodhana : "Sir, do you think I came here for a chat or gossip? Have I nothing better to do?"

Drona : "It does not appear so from your present behaviour!"

Duryodhana : "Tell me frankly if you have, at all, made up your mind to capture Yudhishtira and hand him over to me?"

Drona : "That is what exactly I am trying to do....."

Duryodhana : "No... No... No ! I have seen with my own eyes today that Yudhishtira was within your hands' reach ! Yet you did nothing. I have fulfilled your other condition of removing Arjuna to a far-off front already. Yet? No results ! A cultured

man does not break promises or betray a dependent one.⁶ Now what do I understand from this ?”

Drona was too deeply hurt for words ! He fumbled, fainted... and then :

Drona : “Mere proximity means nothing in war. There are also what are called circumstances. See, Bhagadatta was dying in my sight. Should I rush to help him or not ? Who can decide missed urgencies of past situations? You were not there!”

Duryodhana : “Did you save him either?”

Drona : “It was beyond me! His closed eyes. It was a difficulty I could not help ! Arjuna and Sri Krishna lost no time in Killing him.”

Duryodhana : “I am not asking why Bhagadatta was made to close his eyes, Sir ! I am asking you what was it that closed your eyes?”

Drona : “I was helpless! I could not do anything to Arjuna, as he possessed weapons that even I did not have! You should have been there !”

Duryodhana : “Had you but caught Yudhishtira then and there, two purposes would have been served - his capture is number one ; with this diversion, Sri Krishna and Arjuna too would have turned at you, and Bhagadatta might have been saved ! Is this helplessness, Sir ?”

Drona : “It is all well for you to talk after the event is over ! See, there Arjuna was fighting the

⁶ *Ashabhangam na kurvanti bhaktasya aryah kathanchana |*

Samshapthakas, as well as helping Bhima and protecting Yudhishtira - in two different quarters, simultaneously..."

Duryodhana : "Are you not again praising the enemy, Sir? This is what you are repeatedly confessing, unconsciously. That is my ill luck. What purpose does it serve? Why did you not adopt suitable strategies from that moment at least, to keep him in one quarter?"

Drona : "Reporting is not praising. I would have been proud of you too, had you done a similar feat of appearing in several places at the same time!"

Duryodhana : "Forget it! what are your plans for tomorrow, Sir?"

Drona : "I shall try once more and then give up : Tomorrow let Karna be vigilant. Let the Samshapthakas not allow Arjuna here. Let me structure the army in the shape of a wheel - Chakra - a disc. None but Arjuna can break it. But he will not be here and then....."



CHAPTER 25

THE CHAKRAVYUHA

That was the darkest day of the war! This thirteenth day. Drona, Karna, Kripa, Bhurishravas and Ashwatthama brought shame on themselves as no one else before them, that day. The ten days of Bhishma's Generalship saw the observations of chivalrous rules, mutually agreed upon and as was commonly known to all warriors of the day. Two more days under Drona, did not see any major violations either. But this thirteenth day was totally different! They were mighty warriors that disregarded 'Dharma' in a major, blatant way, glaringly for all to see and condemn them permanently for posterity. The ways of war changed since then till the end, so that it could be called a watershed. History would record it in letters of blood.

Drona had arranged the army in a circular structure¹. It resembled the wheel of a chariot with one well-protected entrance. If someone entered it, it was a death trap, as he would not know which 'lanes' to take and which to avoid, as some of them were blind lanes! Return was impossible unless one knew the exit. And

¹ See picture: This was given to me by a young friend at Bijapur when I was discoursing there on Mahabharata. He was a BE II year student then. It was in the late seventies; I remember his name as Praveen K. Kulkarni.


he could not do so unless he touched the centre and the target in it. Meanwhile soldiers on foot, on horses and elephants, so arranged, lane by lane, would fight with the unfortunate entrant with all manner of weapons, ceaselessly. The hero ought to know all this, be quick, scatter first the pattern, and come out of whatever structure remained. That was a rare possibility, meant only for Sri Krishna and Arjuna, who were out of the scene that day. If on the other hand, no one came forward to accept this challenge, it meant conceding victory for the enemy, and a shame on the defensive army. This was the tight-corner Drona had created.

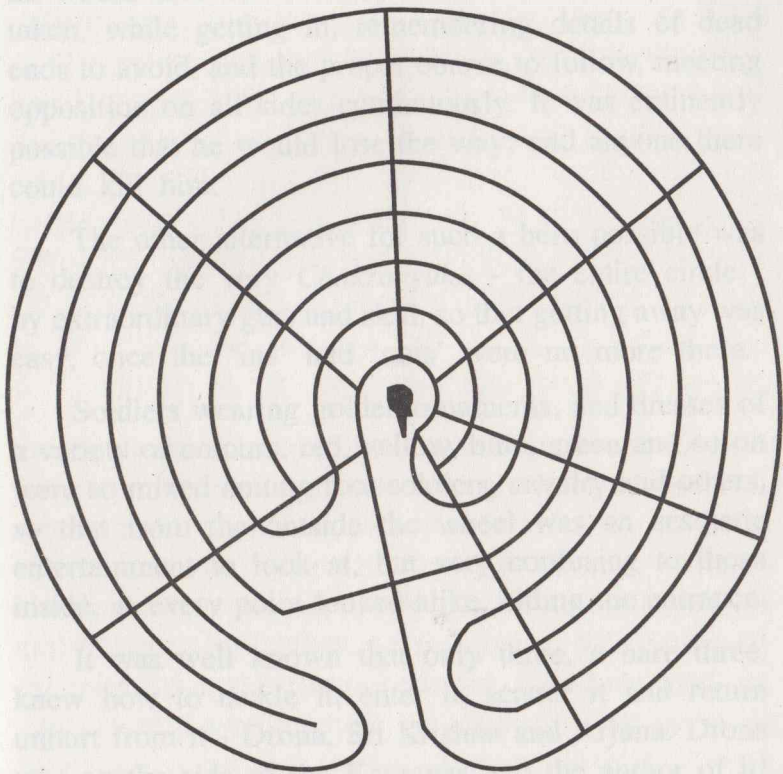
It was a wheel in constant movement, also. The entrant could not remember the landscape, entrance or exit, once in! Only an expert General could weave a human web of this dexterity; he had the option to interchange the positions of heroes so stationed in key points of turnings and swirls, so that he retained all advantages over the enemy by remote control as it were.

At the centre of the wheel Drona had stationed Duryodhana, unwittingly thus symbolising that the war centred around him! The first circle around him consisted of warriors of the stature of Kripa, Karna, and Dusshasana. There was a white umbrella, high on the head of Duryodhana to signify to the rest of the army where the 'centre' was; they ought to know it, in their movements, to keep the integrity of the pattern. He was surrounded by servants with fans in hands, to prevent suffocation, as well as honour him ornamentally as at the palace. For, that was the Royal throne, then at the Royal Court, as it were. This was a way of assuaging

his ruffled tempers of the previous night also, if one could see it from this angle also. Duryodhana never minded it, and that was another matter. In the next circle, at the entrance, Drona himself stood, so that no hero of whatever stature could reach the 'prey' - Duryodhana, - by overpassing him. It was a key post. In the next turn, at the entrance was stationed Saindhava Jayadratha, with a purpose. That was the real door of this Death Trap ! Saindhava was very important there. Near the centre of this grand structure there was a Swastika mark² with four clearly divided quarters, and in them were situated Shakuni, Shalya, Bhurishravas and Ashwatthama, bodyguards as it were for the 'prey', if ever an attacking hero reached thus far, to take care of. Between them, in the four spokes of the Swastika, were stationed soldiers on horse facing directions proper for them, like walls impregnable. Behind Saindhava, slightly to his right, was stationed a hero with thirty Kaurava princes. Without eliminating Saindhava it was impossible to proceed. If Saindhava died, Drona would take care of it in the next unavoidable round, and trap the hero to death! Duryodhana alone had the privilege to be at the still point of the turning wheel !

At the periphery of the circle, moved elephants, horses and riders well equipped with deadly weapons, so that one did not know where the supposed entrance was at all. Here too there were two layers or rings, one facing outside, and the other inwards, leaving a small circular lane in between. More properly it was only a convenient, necessary space for movements and

² like this figure 



A Model of Chakravyuha

negotiations for the proper circles without touching or disturbing their respective orders.

Even if someone had entered it to touch the centre, he would have to return by the same route as he had taken, while getting in, remembering details of dead ends to avoid, and the proper course to follow, meeting opposition on all sides continuously. It was eminently possible that he would lose the way; and anyone there could kill him.

The other alternative for such a hero possible was to destroy the very *Chakravyuha* - the entire circle - by extraordinary guts and skill, so that getting away was easy, once the 'ins' and 'outs' were no more there.

Soldiers wearing golden ornaments, and dresses of a variety of colours, red, yellow, blue, green and so on were so mixed among foot soldiers, cavalry and others, so that from the outside the wheel was an aesthetic entertainment to look at, but very confusing to those inside, as every point looked alike, hiding the entrance.

It was well known that only three, a bare three, knew how to tackle it, enter it, scatter it and return unhurt from it - Drona, Sri Krishna and Arjuna. Drona was on the side of the Kauravas and the author of it! No question of fighting against it ; the other two were elsewhere and would not be allowed to come here to tackle it - that was the calculation of Drona. So defeat was forgone for the Pandava side - the Kauravas expected. In this confusion and confoundedness Drona wanted to capture Yudhishtira, somehow.

Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna by Subhadra upset this all! A lad of fourteen years, and a favorite of Sri

Krishna, the boy possessed all the fine qualities of the father as well as those of Sri Krishna.³

He had the character of Sri Krishna and all his auspicious qualities like fearlessness, steadfastness in Dharma, compassion for those in distress, sensibility, presence of mind and cheerfulness even in distress to avoid depression with firm faith in the winning graces of Truth and so on. He had the handsomeness of Arjuna and his valour, the love of adventure of Bhima, and his efforts to excel all ; he had the unruffledness of Yudhishthira, the humility of Sahadeva and resembled Nakula, in addition to possessing the combined great qualities of all these ! He was the favourite child of all the Pandavas, and especially of Sri Krishna.

Let us remember that Sri Krishna had an uncle too, Kamsa, from whom he received neither care nor affection, due from an uncle, as the world generally believed ! Sri Krishna wanted to give his very best to this nephew and set an example of what an uncle should be. (Two other 'uncles' known in past and recent history of those days, set notorious examples - Maricha for Ravana, and Shakuni for Duryodhana. The former became a laughing stock, though in loyalty, at the cost of honour, truth and self-dignity; and the other, latter, a notorious example of all evil, crookedness, selfishness,

³ *Ye cha Krishne gunah sphitah Pandavesu cha ye gunah |
 Abhimanyou kilaikasthah drishyante gunasanchayah ||
 Yudhishthirasya viryena Krishnasya charitena cha |
 KarmabhirBhimasenasya sadrisho Bhimakarmanah ||
 Dhananjayasya rupena vikramena shrutena cha |
 Vinayat sahadevasya sadrisho Nakulusya cha ||*

crankiness put together.) Veda Vyasa reports that Sri Krishna rendered all services to Abhimanyu from his childhood, services that even nurses could do at home - washing, feeding, fondling, lulling to sleep etc! Abhimanyu was an exemplary boy now, given to modesty, very few words, love of elders, dedication to the inherited duties of the family, lots of knowledge of family history, and lores. Now this boy knew how to break the Chakravyuha! Hold your breath ! He not merely knew, but was highly capable of it too. Only, he did not know how to escape unhurt, unscathed. How he came to be taught is another romantic story !



Subhadra, wife of Arjuna, was pregnant then and in her eighth month of conceivment. She was at Dwaraka with her parents and in exceptional care. Nothing was denied to her, with affection on all sides, all comforts, spiritual and material ; even in pastimes she was lucky to have Sri Krishna with her, telling her amusing and heroic stories of bygone ages. Sri Krishna, found time to keep her company, rather the company of the embryo in her. No wants could be left unfulfilled - that was the ideal of those days.

One night as usual, Sri Krishna began some narration:

Subhadra : “Brother, stories of pious men, however great and admirable, you have told me enough of. Tell me something different.”

Sri Krishna : “Different ? Are you tired of piety and holiness?”

Subhadra : “Not tired in a way. Today I am bored and want a thriller”.

Sri Krishna : “A thriller, did you say? What kind of a thriller? Why ?”

Subhadra : “My son in the embryo has had enough of piety, holiness, and other virtues due to a Brahmin. Is he not going to be a Kshatriya after all ? Heroism, valour, adventure, and love of excellence - these are the qualities he must cultivate in addition and especially. So something of this kind, a story involving these qualities, you will narrate now.”

Sri Krishna : “Good God! You want a war story involving violence, which is good neither for you nor for your child, at this stage. For if such a taste lingers and overtakes other qualities, your son may become a villain, a giant, or even a demon ! It is an abnormal wish! Give it up and ask for something soft, quiet..”

Subhadra : “Enough, enough, brother dear. Tell me about war heroics. The piety you have already taught through other narrations earlier, will look after his character along with the qualities of a war hero.”

Sri Krishna : “Well... but war is not for narration. Is it a story? What is there to tell you? You want, do you, to know how missiles are shot? How training is given? Any story of conquest ? How the Pandavas escaped being burnt, for example? This is good thriller too !”

Subhadra : “Keep your missiles to yourself. What is in their formulae or experiments to thrill? Conquests are tiring too. You have told me of the adventures of the Pandavas already, several times. Your own childhood exploits, your adventures with Jarasandha, Shishupala and others also, I have heard numerous times from you, you know ! Please tell me something new.”

Sri Krishna : “Then I must confess that my stock is over. Go to sleep ; good night”.

Subhadra : “There is an area of war you have not covered.”

Sri Krishna : “Not covered? What do you mean?”

Subhadra : “The structuring of the army in various patterns, for example..... The so called *Vyuh*s, if you please.”

Sri Krishna : “Oh, that!... But it will bore you.. those details..”

Subhadra : “Not the routine ones... But what they call *Chakravyuha*”.

Sri Krishna became very apprehensive for a moment! Why would Destiny want her to know about this most difficult or mysterious *Vyuh*a?... Then after some time he concluded to himself, “What harm is there, after all? How much would this sister understand of it, in a sleepy mood? Even if she understands some details, what harm is there, as she is not a soldier? Let us see if the embryo can understand what even daring elders cannot understand.”

So he began describing how the soldiers were arranged, how the army was distributed in it, and how it revolved round itself ; where its centre, entrance, weak spots and strong spots were situated, how from where the daring hero would enter it, how he would break it, rush into the death trap to reach the target, what hazards he would meet as he got in, what techniques of combat he would have to use, and how to disperse the army, how to disrupt its well-arranged cadres, who are all likely to oppose him, etc., which took a long time. The girl, Sri Krishna thought was getting bored instead of thrilled, with all these monotonous details. He himself was getting sleepy and observed that Subhadra had already gone into sleep. At pauses of the story in the narration, Sri Krishna, like all story-tellers would wait for a response, and the girl went on making a sound of understanding - approval by saying 'hum' rhythmically. If she did not understand she would stop him and ask for more details, explanations, or reconfirmations.

At a certain point this rhythm broke, and sounds of approval totally stopped from the mother, and a feebler voice from somewhere else went on saying "hum" ! Sri Krishna was alarmed, as he had made sure that nobody else was there in the room at that time ; not even servants or errand-maids ! He went round again and satisfied himself that there was none, so the sound must be a hallucination, in a dream state for him too. But the sound continued, as Sri Krishna purposely added a few more words of narration to see if he was sure ! Now Sri Krishna asked rather aggressively "Who

is that, overhearing?" The voice replied : "It is me, uncle, the one in the embryo of your sister." Sri Krishna felt annoyed and said : "Shut up, you little naughty fellow! The narration is not meant for you at all". But Sri Krishna blessed the child with health, wealth, fame, and immortal name. Since the narration covered only a forward movement, the child also knew as much only, and the return journey was not taught, either at that time or later on. That was tragic !

Next, even when Arjuna trained the boy in archery and other matters, by the time he could teach him *Chakravyuha*, war itself had started.



News had reached Arjuna that morning, that Drona had challenged the Pandava army with the *Chakravyuha*! Arjuna cursed his fate and something made him remember Abhimanyu :

Arjuna : Krishna, I do not know what is going to happen. The two of us who could accept that challenge are here with these cursed Samshapthakas. No one there can accept Drona's challenge. Either we shall accept defeat there or loose Abhimanyu!"

Sri Krishna : "Do not talk nonsense! How can Abhimanyu be lost?"

Arjuna : "He is the only one who knows something of it. Either he will volunteer to break it open, or else others will cajole him into it..... The boy does not know how to escape that trap. I did not teach him that part."

Sri Krishna : “See here : The view that challenges must be accepted, that *Vyuh*s must be broken, and that method must be followed or maintained etc., are all in conventional warfare only. But these days conventions are making way for conveniences ! Anything will do for success !! We can also follow the manners of the enemy. Someone can so powerfully wreck the army to powder. Do not worry. Concentrate on the present job.”

Sri Krishna said these words casually, meaning nothing serious for Arjuna. He had to encourage him somehow, and he did so. But Arjuna insisted on the correct strategy :

Arjuna : “What do you mean by unconventional warfare? Who can start it? If we lose order here, who will prevent unbridled violence?”

Sri Krishna : (Now seriously) “When the villains wanted to burn you all alive, what decency or conventionality did they follow? Was it not proxy war to eliminate you? When they tried to violate the honour of your wife, did they think of decency or consequences? See how Bhagadatta, that ruffian, fought us? Is that convention-bound? Conventions died with Bhishma, let me say, more or less. Now let those fellows stand in the Chakravyuha-structure and shout abuses at us, what is our loss? We shall ignore this challenge. Or else we shall send Ghatotkacha, to manage it in his own rough barbarous ways.”

Arjuna : “How can you talk like this, Sri Krishna? Do you think Yudhishtira will agree for the

transgression of codes? If you want us to be labelled as dishonourable, it is another matter. We could have destroyed the Kauravas in that assembly only, that was witness to the attempts of disrobing my wife, if your advice is to be followed. Having followed order, self-control, codes of manners all these years and undergoing unspeakable hardships so far, how can we violate them now? What will the world say if Drona's challenge goes unaccepted?"

Sri Krishna : "What did the world say when your wife was humiliated? How much of that world is on your side in this war? The world will always respect and obey those that are brave and victorious. As times change, manners will also have to change. If you permit, even now, I can destroy all this demoniac army in a minute. Did I not say it earlier, when you hesitated to kill Bhishma ? Manners or customs are meaningful when they are binding on both parties! The enemy cannot say : 'I violate all the rules ; but you shall keep all of them for the honour of both !' Your patience and talk of conventions almost borders on cowardice, as the world really thinks. Moreover, if you had eliminated this suicide-squad yesterday, you would have been free today to take Drona's challenges, there. Even now do your duty early and let us go there immediately."



Why did Drona station Saindhava at the Death - Trap door of the Chakravyuha that day, of all people in the world? There was a reason, and a story behind it.

While the Pandavas were still in exile, as the period stipulated was drawing to a close, one day Draupadi was alone in the hermitage. Her husbands were away gathering food, firewood and flowers for worship. Nearby lived a Maharshi by name Trinabindu. Dhaumya, the royal preceptor kept guard of the ashram of the Pandavas.

Saindhava Jayadratha son of Vriddha Kshatra, was passing by this ashram on his way to some svayamvara, seeking a bride. Draupadi stood on the threshold of the hermitage, looking for the return of her husbands who had been long away. She had just taken her bath and was at ease, expecting no trouble from anyone in that secluded place.

Saindhava's evil eyes fell on her, and in a moment the villain grasped that she was alone, without protectors. Saindhava was accompanied by a host of petty Kings, one among whom was another evil-minded fellow by name Kotikasya, who would do anything to please him. Saindhava had not met Draupadi in person, directly, apart from having vague glimpses once or twice. He wanted now to make sure, to play a 'Ravana' here on his part. He asked Kotikasya : 'Who is this damsel? Is she a wood-nymph, or an *apsara*? If I can have her, I shall give up this journey to that svayamvara of unpredictable results. Go and inquire.'

Kotikasya the 'faithful' followed these evil instructions and approached Draupadi and began introducing himself :

"Look, lady ; I am the son of Suratha, of the lineage of Shibi Chakravarthy of bygone ages. My name is

Kotikasya. Here by my side is Kshemamkara, King of Trigarthas. This other on this side is the Kulinda prince. By his side stands the Ikshvaku prince. Here are the twelve Souveera princes - Angaraka, Kunjara, Guptaka, Shatrunjaya, Sanjaya, Supravridha, Bhayankara, Bhramara, Ravi, Shura, Pratapa, and Kuhana. See there, stands Saindhava King, Jayadratha, followed by six thousand Charioteers. There is no end to the number of foot soldiers at his back. He wants to know about you. What shall I tell him ?”

Draupadi understood the intentions, evil suggestions behind these shameless words of needless introduction. She covered her breasts more tightly with the upper garment and replied:

“I know him too well to need your introduction. It is not proper for him to stand there and send you on such errands. I am alone now, true. But I am the honoured wife of the Pandavas, and daughter of the Panchala King Yajnasena. Let it be known to him and to you. If you want to be honoured as guests, you have to wait for some time until my husbands return.”

Draupadi went in, to see what eatables there were to prepare some offering to the ‘guests’ of honour.

Kotikasya reported all this do Saindhava, and her ‘negative response’, in addition to insinuations of consequences by references to her husbands’ and father’s valour, lineage and so on.

Saindhava could not wait, as his passions rose ; he rushed into the ashram like a beast. Draupadi self-

controlled, greeted him and began to inquire about his progress, wealth and health, in royal matters.

Saindhava behaved shamelessly and said : “lady, look. Fleshly pleasures are the best to have when one is still young. Your husbands have lost all worldly glory, and what kind of pleasures can they offer you now? See, I have come all the way, seeking you, and to give you what you desperately need. Give up these good-for-nothing husbands who could not even protect your honour, as you yourself have seen. Accept me as husband and attain heavenly pleasures of a type you cannot even imagine...”

Draupadi sprang back and retorted : “Have you no sense of shame left in you to restrain you from these unwanted moves?” She looked around for someone to protect her and realised her helplessness.

Saindhava lifted her up, threw her into his chariot as gently as passions allowed, with his men holding her without opportunities to slip away, and keep guard over the prey and allowed the chariot to run in full speed.

Draupadi shouted loud for help to nearby hermits, in particular to Dhaumya. Saindhava barbarically shut her mouth with a hand and pressed her waist down on to the chariot. Draupadi kicked her legs, and tried for escape and pushed him away with all her strength. Saindhava fell to the ground, bruised and enraged! He got up, looked at Draupadi with hatefilled eyes, and sprang upon her again. Draupadi escaped and began running. But the villain caught hold of her, dragged her into the chariot, and again the chariot began to run fast.

Dhaumya came out of his shed and saw all this. He could only curse the evil fellow, and run behind a helpless Draupadi, with feeble feet...

When the Pandavas returned, a short while after, maidservants told them of Saindhava's evil deed. Bhima and Arjuna immediately chased him. Yudhishtira commanded : "Do not kill him ; bring him captive, alive".

Bhima and Arjuna pounded the army of Saindhava, rendered him weaponless, overpowered a coward that took to heels, bound him and brought him captive, and threw him at the feet of Yudhishtira and Draupadi. Bhima had given him already sufficient punishments before bringing him there, as he knew Yudhishtira would not allow such punishments even to an evil fellow. Saindhava had been kicked, hit on the head, had his thighbones broken, and flesh was about to be torn. Arjuna was pityfilled and pleaded : "Dusshala⁴ is our only sister; for her sake leave him with life." That was how the fellow had been humbled and handed over to Yudhishtira. Now some action had to be taken. It was left to Bhima to choose some humiliating deed, which the fellow would not forget, short of taking life.

Bheema shaved off his hair with enough ugly space between five streams, so that they could not be tied into any tuft, unless the fellow preferred to be shaven off completely at a regular barber's hands, and told him: "Look, wherever you go hereafter, you must introduce yourself as my servant, owing your life to me ; the

⁴ Dhritarashtra's only daughter.

moment I hear reports to the contrary, I shall kill you even if you hide in all the three worlds." Then he let him off, to walk all the distance to his place !

But letting him off was a costly error ! The humiliated Saindhava went to Haridwar and undertook severe penance to please and propitiate Lord Shiva. When the Lord appeared before him to ask him of what he wanted, Saindhava said : "I want to achieve victory over all the Pandavas and their collected army. Bless me."

Shiva said : "you are asking for an impossible boon in excess of the powers of your penance. I have myself blessed Arjuna with an unfailing missile in my name! How can you win him over? You do not seem still to be rid of your arrogance after all the humiliation you have undergone! Yet, since you have pleased me, I give you a restricted boon. On one day, in the coming Mahabharatha war, any day of your choice, you will achieve victory over their army".

Saindhava : "This is unfair. I want to defeat the Pandavas, not their mere army. Please grant."

Shiva : "You still bargain! You fool of an ass! You should have felt satisfied, and blessed your stars, that I have appeared before you ! This itself is an achievement. But you have no devotion, as vengeance has filled your heart. Again out of pity I have allowed you victory for you on one day of your choice. You think too much of yourself! See Bhagavan Sri Krishna is at the back of the Pandavas!

The whole world knows that He is God Narayana! That is why even Bhishma could not get victory over them! Are you superior to Bhishma or Drona? The better way would be to go and beg mercy of the Pandavas for what you have done. Do not involve me between you and Sri Krishna, in a war of selfish desires. Go.”

Saindhava returned, absolutely disappointed. His story became known to all in a short time ; he became a laughing stock.

Drona, however, remembered this boon of Shiva to him, and now had employed him in an advantageous point of the *Chakravyuha*, so that his boon could be encashed to the profit of the Kaurava army.

Arjuna and Sri Krishna came to know of this deployment of Saindhava at the entrance of the *Vyuha* and naturally got worried.



CHAPTER 26

ABHIMANYU IN THE CHAKRAVYUHA !

“Uncle ! Do not remain worried. Order me officially to enter it, and in minutes you will see how it gets scattered. I shall wash away the enemy army like floods in Ganga” - said Abhimanyu to Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira : “Boy, you are merely a lad, barely tested in serious warfare. And this is an enigma of a structure! Even seasoned soldiers like me or Bhima, technically do not know how to break it open and are hesitant to rush in. How can I trust you with this enormous and odd challenge? Your wife is pregnant, again, and this forbids me especially from a hazard like this before you.”

Abhimanyu : “Sir, does this challenge wait for my son to be born?”

Yudhishtira : “I know that challenges are God-ordained. But I have to choose the right persons for such as these.”

Abhimanyu : “Where are the right persons then? If you can name them you can overlook my claim. Otherwise do I have no responsibility?”

Yudhishtira : “In valour, my boy, you are not inferior to Sri Krishna or your father Arjuna, I know. But mere valour is not enough here. Skill is needed. And that requires expert knowledge of the structure of this Vyuh. Experience is what is needed.”

Abhimanyu : “Is that not what I am asking you to provide me with? We have to make a beginning somewhere, for everything. How can we ask experience to precede that beginning? Does experience come in a lump by birth?”

Yudhishtira : “That’s all true. But you are too young for this now.”

Abhimanyu : “What was the age of uncle Sri Krishna when he killed Putana? What was his experience when he destroyed Kamsa, and all his followers? What experience did Rama have while killing Tataka? Why could not an experienced Vishvamitra eliminate Maricha?”

Yudhishtira : “My boy, you are asking questions that only yogins can answer. We are talking of humans, chances, risks and calculations within human reach - not of Gods and Divine dispensations.”

Abhimanyu : “If Divinity does not operate within all these human limits you talk of, what is its use, or place in life? In human endeavours? You talk like a fatalist and frighten all others too!”

Yudhishtira : “The situation is indeed frightening. I have not heard of anyone going into the centre of Chakravyuha returning safe! They say that swimming in the swirl of an ocean, dancing in the throat of the

god of Death, or dancing on the head or hood of a serpent is much easier in comparison”.

Abhimanyu : “Uncle, tell me one thing firmly. Do you believe in God’s grace and in its efficacy?”

Yudhishtira : “That is a common factor for all... but human efforts...”

Abhimanyu : “If Grace were not an extraordinary factor, everybody could talk of it as if it were common, phenomenon ! Grace is not so common. And we possess it abundantly. Or else we would not have survived all the plots of our enemies... Why talk more? Do you want or not to win today’s war?”

Yudhishtira : “You are talking too wisely for your age, and I cannot refute your words. But see, if your father were here, he too would confess that he has no experience - actual experience - of this Vyuha... How can you talk so confidently?”

Abhimanyu : “Because I have been taught?”

Yudhishtira : “Taught? by whom ? When ? how ?”

Abhimanyu : “Uncle Sri Krishna was my teacher. I learnt it while in the womb of my mother ! You may not believe...”

Abhimanyu then narrated all that old story. Yudhishtira was dumb struck! He did not know what to say now. After some time :

Yudhishtira : “Let me believe you and your memory also. But may I know how far you have been taught? How well have you grasped all?”

Abhimanyu : “Actually I know one way, the forward

way, the onward march right up to the centre... But uncle stopped there, I do not know why. My mother was fast asleep, as I listened to the narration. Perhaps he waited for a better occasion for the latter part to be taught."

Yudhishthira : "Look, this is a very serious matter. Tell me whether your father at least instructed you in this latter part?"

Abhimanyu : "Such an occasion did not arise at all, as this bloody war started all of a sudden !"

Yudhishthira : "That means, even theoretically you do not know how to return unhurt."

Abhimanyu : "True. But once I enter, the *Vyuha* will scatter and the question of return 'route' does not arise. Everywhere is an exit then, is it not?"

Yudhishthira : "It is not so simple my boy!"

Abhimanyu : "The complication is in your over-anxiety, Sir. You can see for yourself, how. What is meant by an attack? They offer a structure. We attack with our army. How can structures be static? In course of time, elephants, horses, footmen, charioteers all will have to receive the attack and reply to it. That is when 'openings' and 'exits', 'army-streets' will get pounded. Understand? What do you mean by return route? Perhaps those that still remain unskilled, will surround me, wherever I stand! I am there equipped with my army behind. The same risk that all of you have been facing everyday will be there. Will you all forsake me and run away?"

Yudhishthira : "No, no. That is not the picture I get. It

is not an everyday situation. That is certain. The structure cannot be so easily smashed as you imagine. That is the cause of worry. Entry will be firmly, terribly guarded."

Abhimanyu : "You are frightening me, sir! If you or anyone else can take care of it, you can attend to it by all means, yourselves ; or else leave it to me. Let me have an occasion of record making. You are all great record-establishers. Should I not have just one occasion for it? Trust my skill and valour. Do not look to my age and inexperience. Sir. Have you still time for vacillations or choices?"

Yudhishtira looked at Bhimasena, and both agreed by mutual facial expressions that they would allow the boy a chance. Dhrishtadyumna felt enthused, as he had been worried earlier, though an unknown form of fear surrounded this decision that was unavoidable now. He told the boy :

"Young man, all that you are expected to do is to break open the structure, and hold on there, so that Bhima, myself and others will be behind you to support you, and enter it along with you. The rest is left to God."



Abhimanyu was decorated with a Tilak on the face, and honoured duly as the hero of the day, irrespective of his juniority. His chariot, fully equipped with weapons arrived, and the charioteer helped him climb on to his seat. Abhimanyu applied his chest-shield on himself in the proper way taught to him by his father.

Yudhishtira : "Boy, you are equal to your father in prowess. We are behind you. Proceed without fear."

Abhimanyu : “I shall not look back to see who are all behind me to follow. I am born to a family which does not know the backward foot, but only the forward journey.”

This gave an unintended ironical meaning to the others there !

Yudhishtira : “Say you will return victorious. That is all.”

Abhimanyu : “I shall do what brings glory to the Pandavas and Yadavas. You will be eyewitness to all my promises. Let the world say by evening that I have done proud of all of you uniquely and record my valorous deeds in red letters. If even one enemy confronting me from before lives to see the morrow’s light, do not commend me then as Arjuna’s son. I shall fight in all eight directions, though stationed in a single chariot, at one point, a feat only my father can exhibit, as the world knows. Bless me”.

Yudhishtira : “May you grow strong. May gods - Rudras, Maruts, Sadhyas and others - protect you. Now make a move.”

Abhimanyu offers respects to his uncles, and remembers Sri Krishna and his father. He waves his hand to his wife Uttara in his mindand then puts on a grim, determined face and looks forward and orders the chariot to run.

Vultures began to hover over his chariot in the anticlockwise direction! The horses neighed unnaturally and began shedding tears! The charioteer was not pleased with these inauspicious omens and spoke :

Charioteer : “Sir, God bless you with long life. Let me say that these are not good omens today. You seem to have been overtrusted with responsibilities too huge to bear at this stage. I am here to follow your instructions absolutely, no doubt. But it is also part of my duty to advise you from time to time appropriately for the situations as they arise. You are undoubtedly valorous and daring, but new to this task before you. Study the structure well in your mind before you tell me where to attack and when. Tactics and strategy are more important here than mere bravery.”

Abhimanyu : “Mr. Charioteer, what you say is true and in order. I have no reason to be angry with you at all, as you speak well and warn me. But this ‘weight’, this ‘overtrusted responsibility’ as you say is not being felt as pressure by me at all. Do you know that God Subrahmanya was a mere child when he killed the Demon Taraka? Sri Rama was just of my age when he killed Tataka, that demoness, and Subahu that notorious terrorist. Cannot one mere spark of fire destroy a whole forest ? Who was there as helper for my uncle Sri Krishna when he slew the wicked Kamsa? What was his age then? It is not mere age or valour that qualifies one for victory. It is God’s grace that is needed. With that at your back, if you fight honestly and straight, victory is yours. You will say that my fight is against Drona, an expert in war, difficult to win. But I trust, he is not wicked or one who can resort to foul means. He is the teacher of my father and I respect him. No Karna, no Duryodhana, nor Dusshasana can stand before me in a straight war. Why worry?”

Charioteer : “Blessed sir, there are already signs that war has crossed all limits of fairness. Nothing is predictable now or hereafter. It is better you take no chances of fairness or foulness and be prepared for all eventualities. Drona is personally great but on the side of the enemy now; he is no friend of yours. Do not trust him however great otherwise he may be. He is besides a puppet in the hands of Duryodhana. Puppets have no individual thinking or conscience.”

Abhimanyu : “You say the right, wise, practical thing. But greater than all these is the grace of my uncle Sri Krishna. As long as this factor weighs on my side, nobody can win over me.”



A demoniac laughter on the part of the Kaurava princes, Duryodhana, Dusshasana and Karna broke out as welcome to Abhimanyu, even as his chariot was sighted at a distance. They meant that this young boy was the scapegoat that the Pandavas had offered for the day to break open the Chakravyuha.

Drona was now silent and deep in concern and thought. He observed the diabolic behaviour of his own soldiers and did not approve of their glee in advance of the actual fight. Drona pitied the boy and knew he would not escape, safe or unhurt. But he understood the compulsions on the Pandava side, as he had diverted Arjuna to the front occupied by *Samshapthakas*; and was there none else to face the Vyuha? Yes ; none. The inevitable had to happen, and Drona was morally and mentally not prepared for that end. He himself had no

choice. Drona cursed the war, developed boundless contempt for the Kaurava princes, and sighed deeply at the fate driving them all with a determination no one could daunt. Drona for a moment did not understand the Pandava - strategy in sending this boy now. For a moment Drona remembered all the sequences that had brought the feuding clans to this war-point, starting with Draupadi's humiliation, and regretted his neutrality and noncommitment to justice then, as also now. How could he now save the boy without hurting Duryodhana's cause? Would Arjuna forgive him afterwards? Drona prayed to God to save them all 'somehow'.

Abhimanyu was very near the Vyuha now. Behind him Bhima was rushing with a huge contingent of cavaliers and charioteers. Drona now understood their strategy somewhat clearly. "Push the boy to the front to break open the Vyuha, and rush in the rest of the army to smash it in unconventional ways" - that is the plan! Behind Bhima, there were the twins and General Dhrishtadyumna himself with a large army.

Duryodhana observed this from a distance and was really confused about the Pandava - intentions. What if they broke open the Vyuha, at any cost ? But why are they all pushing this idiot boy with so much confidence? What is the meaning of this collective confidence? Was Drona wrong in his calculations? He approached the Acharya for this clarification :

Duryodhana : "Acharya, why is this following so enthusiastic ? Is the foolish boy so anxious to die? What does Bhima mean by being behind him? or else, are your expectations wrong today?"

Drona : (Angrily) “My calculations have never gone wrong! Your anxiety has never paid you positive results. Do you want me to explain what you ought to have understood without my telling you? See, the strategy seems to be to push this boy to the front so that with what little he knows of this Vyuha, he could break an opening, and then the rest of the army could rush to destroy it without plan, or any knowledge of it technically. What else can be the meaning? I am sure their plans may well succeed, if this boy can open the Vyuha”.

Duryodhana : “How can you say it, Sir? Are you going to allow it? Do you want to help the enemy? Will you be mute witness to this idiot-boy’s foolhardiness?”

Drona : “Who should allow or permit this young lion to achieve what he wants on his rampage? Neither your thinking nor your language seems to be governed by any grammar. See his self-confidence in the way he is measuring his steps towards us! There is no question of his seeking any help or support from anyone else”.

Duryodhana did not like this logic or this strain of talk. He questioned angrily:

“Are you not possessed of self-confidence to protect this Vyuha and capturing this idiot?”

Drona : “You are aware of what I am trying to do, my best, and are witness to all my steps directly. But by questioning my intentions and loyalty and taunting me for trivials every now and then, it is you who are destroying my self-confidence. Well, ask your uncle

to protect this Vyuha now, now that you think I am incompetent to do it!"

Duryodhana was too deeply hurt, by this retort, to reply. He did not want to aggravate the matter further by antagonising his General even at the sunrise of the day and so returned to his place in the Vyuha, speechless.



Drona now altered the plan of the Vyuha, slightly, now that Duryodhana felt upset. He went to Saindhava near the centre, at the *Swastika*, who was guarding the Death Trap and told him to exchange his place with Shalya who was at the Grand Entrance of the Vyuha. "You will have a day of destiny today in that new assignment of place. You will win over the Pandavas and stop them from following Abhimanyu. You just do that and leave the rest to me. *Lord Rudra shall bless you today in that position.* Let me see how this boy is going to escape unhurt", he said.

Saindhava was surprised! He did not for a moment understand this last moment's change of position. Whether it was 'promotion' or 'depromotion' he blinked and failed to understand. But the reminder of Rudra's boon rescued his self-respect and he understood the strategy somewhat. Saindhava had expected the Vyuha to stand unchallenged till the sunset, so that Drona could move about freely to capture Yudhishtira alive and helpless. But when Bhima and the others rushed behind Abhimanyu, Drona must have made this last minute change he thought. He liked to be given this long-awaited chance.

Saindhava moved swiftly to Shalya and conveyed the Acharya's command, Shalya obeyed immediately and

the places were exchanged in quick action. The Kaurava army felt enthused by this, although no body knew why sudden changes were effected, or its strategic significance.

Abhimanyu was hardly twenty feet away and now he began shooting arrows in a quick succession. Saindhava too did his best to oppose the boy. The Kaurava cavaliers clouded the Pandava army behind Abhimanyu with thick mists created by arrows everywhere so that Bhima and others lost sight of the boy. Bhima had to retrace some steps back from this fierce opposition. Even Nakula and Sahadeva felt blind by this darkness enveloping due to arrow - clouds.

Abhimanyu shot the Vayavya Missile, after remembering his father and uncle for a moment, praying for success. The enemy's arrows got cleared, and the door of the Vyuha was now in full view very clearly. Saindhava felt disappointed, and wanted to do something to prevent the enemy's further advance. But before that, Abhimanyu had pierced Saindhava's body with profuse arrows on all sides, rendering him weaponless and unconscious, Abhimanyu shouted 'Jai Sri Krishna' and rushed into that door alone with a force now no one could stop. That was a moment's success for him, but also a fatal moment as he did not then realise.

What happened next sealed the fate of the young boy. Bhima who was behind the boy just a few yards away, did not know that Abhimanyu had entered the Vyuha at all, as a cloud of dust surrounded where Bhima was trying to get entry at the same point! Before he could wink his eyes, Bhima realised that Abhimanyu had vanished into the swirl point of the Kaurava army and the door of the Vyuha had closed, shutting him out once

for all. Bhima remembered his word of promise to Yudhishthira, that he would never leave the boy alone, and cursed himself. He got tears in his eyes, thinking of the next possibilities and their merciless cruelties. Saindhava got up at that very moment back from his swoon and roared to tear the skies, appearing veritably like Lord Shiva, before him. Bhima's mace thrown at the enemy, bounced back into his own hands, as never before, ineffective on the enemy. Bhima felt humiliated. Bhima remembered the past mistakes he had committed at Yudhishthira's mindless merciful instances. Saindhava ought to have been killed then and there at the abduction attempt on Draupadi. Earlier still he should have killed all the Kaurava rogues, to have prevented all this sorry and regrettable chain of disasters. He cursed Yudhishthira's senseless, and endless acts of mercy for the underserved ; but what use was there in condemning the irrevocable past? He now remembered Sri Krishna, took up a bow and shot various missiles on the wicked Saindhava. None of them had any effect on the enemy! Bhima cursed himself again for this failure.

Nakula and Sahadeva joined him now to strengthen Bhima. The three together began burning the Kaurava army like three fires from all sides. But strangely, none of them was able to make Saindhava move even by one inch. The fellow stood there, holding his ground, like a peak of a mountain unmindful of the earth below or the sky above ! Bhima, with his missiles failed, did not know the secret of Saindhava's immortality at that moment, or of his own unprecedented failure of weapons.

Now suddenly it flashed on Bhima's mind, the 'why' of Saindhava's success against him! Rudra's boon!! This

confirmed further his misgivings about Abhimanyu's possibility of a safe return. But on the other hand there was time till the evening. Then again his mind remembered the dangers the boy was facing every moment. What was the use of breaking open of the Vyuha by evening, if Abhimanyu was no more by then, there?

It was noontime now, and still there was no success for the Pandava army. Half a day had been a valuable part of time, which was now a waste.



Abhimanyu did not look back to see that there was no army behind him, with his uncles ; the isolation was complete. But the boy, that day, was all the army put together plus his uncles and father in their prowess in him. The Kaurava forces were dying fast, yielding space for further progress, every minute. It was like a fruit, rotting from within, but looking well in shape from the outside. The dying soldiers fell silently with the ring of the Vyuha preventing them from running away to escape. None of Abhimanyu's weapons or missiles failed to reach their targets. It was no easy job, progressing, with enemies attacking him from all sides, together, unethically and like brutes attacking a prey. Shakuni, Shalya and Bhurishravas stood in three angles of the Swastika near the centre and protecting Duryodhana there. Abhimanyu had approached that point by that noon, killing all who opposed his advancement on all sides, like lightning destroying forests in its ravaging fires, in hot summer. The three who stood guard at the Swastika, understood the strategy of the boy and were trying to push him into the rings of circular 'streets' of the Vyuha, back, though

not much of those 'streets' were there in order! The soldiers were avoiding him, and could not run away. But the boy avoided being so pushed back and was steadily moving towards the centre only.

The Kaurava heroes now began to feel that it was impossible to protect that centre any longer. All would be lost in a brief while to come! Everywhere there were dead bodies of soldiers, horses and elephants! What could be the source of this superhuman strength of the boy? Was he possessed by any demoniac powers? Did Sri Krishna himself infuse in him such superhuman, supernormal, supernatural powers? Why did the boy appear often like Rudra, Vishnu or Skandha ? It is impossible that a mere boy who had not seen much of a war ever before, could demonstrate this daring and such astounding results!

Duryodhana now left his position at the centre and approached Drona in haste and invisibly as it were. He was possessed of a strange fear as never before. Something *had* to be done to eliminate this boy. Here was Drona, silently admiring him as it were. Abhimanyu noticed this and intercepted him. It was now Drona's turn of fear, at this rash action of Duryodhana. If he made himself readily available for Abhimanyu, would the boy miss this opportunity to finish him then and there and end the war? Drona shouted in the highest pitch of his voice :

"You Karna, you Kripa, you Shalya, you Ashwatthama, Bhurishravas and all others! What are you doing? Protect this foolish prince, at once, push him back to the centre and guard him. Or else the war will end today, at this very moment."

That was an electrifying moment ! All of them surrounded Duryodhana from different directions, by leaving their appointed posts, endangering the strength or structure of the Vyuha, to this extent from within!

Abhimanyu was angry and disappointed that he could not kill Duryodhana who was so near his reach and so obligingly came forward, as it were, to meet his death at the boy's hands.

He now acquired double his strength as it were, with a new determination to end the war once for all that evening in Pandavas' favour. Shalya went into a swoon without standing his position before him. Thirty of Duryodhana's brothers quit the Vyuha and ran away to escape death at the hands of the boy. Abhimanyu roared a devilish laughter at this and chased them. The Vyuha was now practically scattered as very little time was there for sunset. What remained was some kind of the circular base at whose centre stood Abhimanyu facing heavy odds against a mixture of the remnant of the army under the leadership of the heroes, who had surrounded him.

Abhimanyu could not be stopped by anyone. He killed a hero by name Ashmaka, just now, after destroying his chariot, the charioteer and the horses.

Karna, Shalya, Somadatta, Vivimshati and others joined together to make an attempt to stop him. Abhimanyu raged with redoubled courage and tore Karna's shield on the chest and struck arrows wherever the body lay exposed! Karna fell down and swooned.

Ashwatthama came forward now. But he had to beat a hasty retreat without being able to stand his ground even for a minute.

High in the skies the gods, Gandharvas, Pitris, Yakshas, rained flowers on the boy from above.

Shalya's brother now rushed forward from somewhere to meet death at the hands of Abhimanyu, with a single arrow. Shalya himself was a helpless eyewitness! The army or whatever of it remained now ran into different directions. Abhimanyu made himself a centre for arrow-action, by turning around himself and shooting arrows on all sides, so that none was anywhere near him, now.

Drona was overcome with emotion at such a spectacle and began praising the boy openly by forgetting the sides! He said to Kripa :

"Acharya, did you ever witness a scene like this in all these days of war? How proud should the father of this boy be? The Pandavas must have earned lots of merits in their present lives, and in their previous ones, to have a boy like this as their progeny. Blessed be that mother, who gave birth to him. I do not doubt a bit, that victory will be on the side of the Pandavas, very shortly, and the war is going to end at long last. Glory be to you, boy!"

Duryodhana's rage knew no bounds on hearing this, as he was very near the Acharya. He called Vahlika, Karna, and Dusshasana and showed them, how Drona was now actionless in addition to praising the enemy so unashamedly in such ecstatic terms : "See this treachery, my friends! Tell me whether we can trust him any longer. Is he a match, this boy, for the Acharya? How much time does he need to be eliminated if our General wills it so?"

But those that listened to this accusation of Drona did not seem to agree with Duryodhana, as they had tasted defeat and humiliation at the hands of that same “urchin”, unlike the accuser! So they kept silent and grim. They pitied him for his ignorance and jealousy. They smiled derisively to indicate their disapproval.

Dusshasana came now to take on Abhimanyu. Karna followed him. But both ran away in minutes! Karna’s brother was killed with a single arrow. His army was destroyed. Karna’s son Vrishasena ran away in fear. The Vasatiya contingent of The Kaurava army had been also defeated by Abhimanyu. Duryodhana tried to approach Abhimanyu, but was repelled ; the Prince had to run away to save his life.

Duryodhana’s son Lakshmana fell to a sharp arrow of the boy! Duryodhana could not prevent it. Shalya tried again, but ran away! Brindaraka princes and Brihadbala of Kosala, were killed by Abhimanyu ! Excepting the Centre and Swastika, the rest of Chakravyuha was now in complete disarray.

There was not much time before Abhimanyu would kill Duryodhana ! Drona who saw this was now terror-stricken as never before !



CHAPTER 27

ABHIMANYU SLAIN

The tragic thirteenth day of war was dragging to a dismal end by the evening. The war appeared now to change its ethical codes and moral manners in the hands of people who wanted victory at all costs, reducing war to a worse game than even gambling! No grace or chivalry now seemed to remain there. The time of sunset drew this hard line between fair and foul as between daytime and darkness, symbolically. The worst part of this shame was that even Drona was veering round to this ugly, unnatural view, as he had to win that crucial day's war for Duryodhana somehow, to save his disgraced face. A mere lad compelled the Kaurava army and its chief for this unenviable 'choice' of dishonour for honour.

Drona did not know what to do with this boy, whom none could even approach, let alone defeat. The sun went behind a dark cloud, as if unwilling to witness the brutal act that was to follow in a short while.

Karna was dripping in blood, oozing out from all sides of his body due to Abhimanyu's arrows, like a wild boar in a forest. The king of Bhojas, Ashvaketu, with an elephant's figure on his flagstaff was just now killed by Abhimanyu, in his own presence. Karna could

not prevent it. He could not even lift up his bow. Karna had lost his ministers and counsellors also just then in the same helpless plight. Dusshasana had again run away to escape death. Dusshasana's son, however, now was Abhimanyu's prey. Shalya, who came to rescue this villain, had to fight for his own safety by running away. Shakuni tried again to stop the boy in vain; but went into a quiet swoon. His charioteer took him to safe quarters to save him.

When Shakuni woke up to consciousness in that safe quarter, Duryodhana was beside him, waiting for him to regain his consciousness. Shakuni understood from the impression on the face of his crest - fallen nephew that he was desperately in need of a crooked plot to eliminate Abhimanyu.

Shakuni : "Why are you so worried at sunset?"

Duryodhana : "It will be an unusual sunset now, reserving total defeat for us today, unless a miracle happens, or is planned."

Shakuni : "How can miracles be planned? They can only happen."

Duryodhana : "Uncle, did you not win for me an empire without war, violence and bloodshed? Was that not a planned miracle? Please do something now also. I cannot understand what secret lies behind this boy's daring, or success, uncurtailed. What Devil has possessed him, you say? Why are all great heroes even afraid of nearing him? Why have the enemies let him loose now, only after Bhishma's fall? Is there a secret pact between

Drona and our enemies? Please find a way of finishing him somehow; otherwise there will be no more war for tomorrow.”

Shakuni : “I do not know of secret pacts. All that I know is that our General is soft and indulgent to this boy. Anybody can see it. This is war-field; no place for admirations or blessings. Is this idiot merely exhibiting his skills for the admiration of elders, here? If the General does not even shoot one arrow at him, what can others do? See if there is one drop of blood from the General’s body dripping? One scar anywhere on his body? See if my analysis is not right?”

Duryodhana’s mind was now covered with an unknown form of fear. He was now certain that Drona was a traitor.

Duryodhana : “What is to be done now, uncle? Tell me.”

Shakuni : “Till now we are all defeated by this boy, in lone battles. The next step shall be to tackle him collectively.”¹

Duryodhana did not grasp the meaning fully or immediately. He looked at Karna for clarification and approval. Karna understood what Shakuni meant. He explained it in whispers to his friend. Duryodhana smiled in relief and partial fulfilment; but still he doubted whether Drona would agree to this proposal, for which, however, there was now no other alternative.

¹ *Sarva enam vimathnimah puraikaikam hinasti sah ||*
(Drona 48-17)

Karna took the lead to get the seal of consent of the Acharya, and went himself to Drona, as a carrier of the message of Kali and Dwapara Epoch makers².

Karna : "Acharya, before this boy can finish us all and achieve total victory for his side, tell us if there is any extraordinary plan to stop it. He has to be killed somehow."³

Drona could sense that Karna had actually brought some such plan or quick solution which was not moral, and sought his approval! Duryodhana simply sought the Acharya's Consent, and no more, he knew now.

Drona was equally shrewd and wished to put the 'blame' or 'credit' on Karna himself, instead of involving himself directly in someone else's crooked plot. But Drona's mind was also equally polluted by evil company, and continuous frustrations of all his plans that day, to win the war before sunset. So now he speaks evasively but still suggestively enough to Karna :

Drona : "Friend, you will please observe any lapses, any shortcomings, any loopholes or weaknesses in this boy's strategies that we may exploit to our benefit and advantage. As far as I am concerned, I cannot see any such. He is perfect in all respects, in aiming, in quickness, in the choice of weapons, missiles, and in the sure, self-assured way he shoots

² It is believed that Shakuni incarnated the evil spirit of Dwapara, and Duryodhana that of Kali. Every period of history has its epoch makers. But 'Yuga Purushas' are extraordinary. They may be good or bad. Bad in this case.

³ *Pura sarvan pramathnati bruhyasya vadhamashu nah ||*
(Drona : 48-18)

or throws them at us. His memory is perfect, his steps firm, his presence of mind unfailing, his movements nimble and quick, and his hands firm. What can we do? If you have any view, tell me. One thing I want to say is that in no straight war can we meet him. But unstraight, immoral wars are bad; by agreement we should avoid short cuts. You seem to tell me that we should now adopt unfair means. Do not think I am silent and inactive. Short of immoral ways, I am searching for one, just one, wrong step, one opening - for me to overpower him. But I am unable to notice it.⁴ Even me, he has not spared! See! He is everywhere before us, sucking the blood of our soldiers like a fiend. Though on the other side, I have to admire his perfection and mastery over archery. I do not see any difference between him and his father in the skill."

Drona wipes his tears of joy, which enrages Karna:

Karna : "Sir I am not here to listen to your discourse on the enemy's skills. Tell us if you can put your heart in the fight before sun-set."

Drona too was enraged at the insinuation.

Drona : "You fools are not able to understand or see my point. Well, if you have an alternate plan, let me know."

Before Drona could finish this, a sharp arrow pierced into Karna's arm, as Abhimanyu was driving at the spot.

⁴ *Asti vasyantaram kinchit kumarasyatha pashyata |*
Anvasyantaram hyadya charathah sarvasho dishah || (Ibid 19)

Karna : “Sir, do not be angry. All that you say is true. But it is our duty to win somehow. I am also standing here, just because of my determination to stand, and not because I am comfortable or enjoying standing here. Please tell us a way out.”

Drona now realised that Karna wanted him to guess the plan in his mind and give it articulation and approval. He yielded in that evil moment of Destiny and went down to the lowest depths of infamy for all time in the history of warfare.

Drona : “Karna, have you observed the way the boy has applied his chest-shield, on him? No one can pierce it or cut it asunder. The knot behind is tied in such a way that the two ends of the leather-thread are invisible, involved into it. From the front you cannot attempt cutting it open., as he will not allow you to stand before him even for a second. From behind also, as you cannot say when and how quickly he will turn back to tear you into pieces. The only way is for someone else to engage him, morally or immorally from behind or sideways, render him weaponless, and chariotless. This can never be done in a straight war, engaging him from before. Also it is wrong that several people should engage one person at the same time in a fair war. I have told you of possibilities as well as impossibilities.⁵ I am also standing here, in great discomfort, in the true spirit of a warrior who should not run away. If you like it, and if it is

⁵ *Sthataavya mititlishtami vedyamano Abhimanyuna |
Tejaswinah kumarasya sharah parama darunah ||* (Verse 25)

possible for you, - (if your conscience permits you) come from behind at least, cut off his bow, kill his horses and charioteer, blow up his sheath of arrows, and then oppose him from all sides.”⁶

This was all that Karna needed. He ran to Duryodhana, and summed up the command of the General, without revealing the dilemma of morality versus immorality. All were happy. But Drona was not successful in escaping moral responsibility altogether, since he himself participated in the crooked plot, in the next moment.



The Sun was about to set. Abhimanyu too was getting tired, though his enthusiasm did not decline a bit. He was only getting disappointed that he could not finish the war decisively once for all. He was so near the centre, so near the target, and yet so far away in reaching it. He redoubled his efforts and vigour in a determined bid to clutch at victory, which had somehow eluded him so long. He was totally unmindful of wounds on his own body, everywhere. His charioteer was too tired to notice wounds on himself and the boy's body. He had exhibited all his skills on that one day, as never before. He would bless the boy frequently and say : “Blessed sir, long live yourself; but see there... see beyond there... let us go there” and lead him to vantage points where enemies never expected him in

⁶ Drona puts on a derisive, disapproving smile :-*shanaih prahasanniva* - to dissociate from this evil permission, at the same time. He gives commands that put the blame on Karna, so that history may not blame him/. He says : “If you can” “yadi.”

swift turns and whirlwind-movements, and fell to his arrows in heaps. This was victory shared deservedly by an unusual warrior and his charioteer, which even Drona and earlier Bhishma had not achieved, till then.

Abhimanyu did not notice that he was alone, with no army or warrior or supply of arms behind him. His stock of weapons was nearing exhaustion now. The boy began slowly realising his isolated situation, but without fear, dismay or anxiety. Still, what thousands of ordinary arrows could not achieve, was being achieved by his missiles, whose formulae he distinctly remembered suiting the appropriateness of their moments of functioning. He would certainly have been the architect of the Pandava victory that day, had not Bhima and others been prevented by that cursed Saindhava! Abhimanyu's presence of mind was a blessing that had not forsaken him that day. One thing that did not flash upon the boy's mind was that the treacherous Kauravas could follow evil tricks and foul short cuts to success in so mean a way that was to follow. He was so idealistically fighting without violating war codes, from the beginning that day, expecting reciprocation from the adversaries. That was Sri Krishna's training, and also his own father's example. But now he had to meet those in wrong moulds, wrong aims, and wrong path, throwing away all decencies, honour, chivalry to winds. The boy never even once realised this practical brutal reality that had not merely surrounded him, but was about to grip him. That was tragic.

Karna came from somewhere behind him, like a shameless thief and cut off his bow. Abhimanyu wondered

for a moment as to why such a strong bow that had withstood such pressure since morning could snap all of a sudden, and why; he turned round to see what was there; that one moment was the turning point! Bhoja, advanced from before and killed all his horses in one powerful stroke of his mace. He was followed by Kripacharya, who rushed on and killed the charioteer, as well as the supplier of weapons, in another single stroke ! 'Kripa' - whose name meaning 'Mercy' - was a parody of Brahminhood, wedded to Righteousness and God, and such behaviour! Who could have expected it? The others on the opposite side rushed on him to surround him from all sides with weapons, like errands of the God of Death! They struck him - a chariotless lad, without a charioteer, horses, helpers, throwing all decency of codes - like brutes, like robbers, beyond all manners prescribed for even war.

Some of them were 'Maharathis', 'Atirathins', surrounding him! Abhimanyu did not lose courage, but took it as a rare challenging moment, which had the potential to make him a unique hero, if only he could still emerge victorious, and slay those powerful advancers. He seized the opportunity with redoubled vigour, even in that tragic trap of the moment, holding a sword in the right hand, a shield in the left; he jumped off the chariot and rushed on those foxes like a lion. He flew everywhere on heaps of dead soldiers, as a divine eagle in the skies, unmindful of opposers. The ring around him scattered at this unexpected show.

Drona, now lost all sense and patience, as he had to show some point of victory to his wicked boss,

Duryodhana, on that otherwise eventless day on his side, somehow. From a distance the old Brahmin warrior shot a sharp arrow to cut off that hand of Abhimanyu holding the sword. Shame! His *Vedic* learning, and the knowledge of the eight-syllabled *Manthra*⁷, did nothing for him at the senseless moment.

It was now Karna's turn to shoot another arrow to cut off the boy's left hand holding the shield, and he became Drona's 'disciple' for once, by this imitation, an ambition that had not been achieved or an honour not bestowed on him by Drona, even by silent concurrence or blessing! Karna - the extraordinary hero - had no shame, chivalry or remorse.

Abhimanyu did not mind the pain in both blunt arms, weaponless and shieldless. He still wanted to fight to the finish. There was a wheel of a chariot, in sight that had slipped off its place from a broken chariot, near by. The boy picked it up in the blunted right arm-shaft and wielded it powerfully, looking like his uncle Sri Krishna, for a terrible moment.⁸ He rushed at Drona, now. Arrows had stuck up on his body from all sides, as soldiers on the opposite side were hectically shooting them in fear, in senseless shows of valour. Abhimanyu's clothes were all red with blood by now, but he was not to lose enthusiasm even by a bit. When he threw on the enemies that dreaded wheel, they all saw to it that it was destroyed into pieces and did no harm to them.

⁷ *Om Namo Narayanaya*, the Ashtakshara mantra

⁸ *Vasudevasya anukritim Prakurvan* (verse 40).

Now Abhimanyu somehow clutched a mace in the broken arm, with difficulty, and flung it on the enemies. It fell on Ashwatthama's horses and killed them in one stroke; Ashwatthama jumped off his chariot in time and ran away to save his life. The brave boy, even in that adverse, helpless situation of his, somehow used all and sundry weapons lying waste around him available nearby, and eliminated some seventy-seven cousins of Shakuni, the Gandhara heroes, to the surprise of all, even in the enemy camp. He destroyed the chariot of Dusshasana's son. The last moment came in the hands of this ruffian, who clutched a mace and hit Abhimanyu's head with it to crush it into a pulp! The boy, now a helpless heap of shapeless flesh, was an object of pity for gods.

The *Chakravyuha* had been so completely destroyed, scattered and defeated, by a single hero, a mere lad, that day, as the sun was setting now. The boy's was an eventful death of worthy achievement, after all. Dead bodies were floating in a river of blood, in a just concluded war of the day, as mementoes of the valour of the boy that was no more.

Drona bent his head in shame. By his side Karna, Duryodhana, Shakuni, Dusshasana, Shalya and Ashwatthama were hugging each other to celebrate the evil victory they had just achieved, without a sense of shame or guilt.

Birds in the skies, *Siddhas* and *Charanas*⁹ were talking this among themselves :

⁹ Divine beings in Hindu Pantheon

“This is unfair, this is Adharma, for six famed heroes, otherwise, Drona, Karna and others, to join together to kill a weaponless boy in this shameful way, from behind him, violating all war-codes and throwing chivalry to winds.”¹⁰

But who cared for this estimate of Dharma or Adharma on earth that evening? It was after all a voice in the air, in the void!

It was like a terrific forest fire that raged all the while, reduced all the forest into ashes, and at last got extinct on its own, and with no achievement for itself. After all, the victory was for the Kaurava camp, and Abhimanyu's self-sacrifice could not tilt the balance in the opposite direction.

Even *Indra* felt pinched at the pitiable sight of the slain Abhimanyu in so tragic circumstances : “Child, did death befit you at so a young an age?” - he cried, and even all other gods joined him in this elegy. It was a strange sight, gods weeping.

Shiva's wife *Gowri* shed tears in profound mourning:¹¹

“How will Subhadra bear this sorrow, of separation

¹⁰ *Dronakarna mukhaih shadbhih Dhartharashtraiah maharathaih | Eko[ayam nihatah shete naisha Dharmo mato hi nah ||* (49-22)

¹¹ Arjuna is believed to have an aspect of Rudra in him, in addition to that of Nara, so that Subhadra, sister of Krishna is Narayani, Durga or Gowri, in a way. The sad cry of Gowri is an echo of Subhadra's sorrow as is brought out in Kumara Vyasa's Bharatha, Drona Parva (6.64.) Or Gowri in the *Veda* is Mother Earth. It is natural for this mother to weep for a brave son.

from her only son, at this young age, when even I find it difficult to control myself!! Who will console her?"

Here were Divine Damsels - the *Apsaras*, - who wept in loud sounds containing poetic images, it was as if herds of elephants joining together to kill a young lion; or for serpents joining together to kill the Divine Eagle - *Garuda* - an impossibility come true, to be believed unavoidably. They took Abhimanyu's dead body to heavens.

Wild winds joining together from all directions to break a tall peak of a mountain! That was how Abhimanyu was done to death. Or, in a different image, Abhimanyu was like an elephant in a pond of lotuses, which had plucked them all and tossed them in different directions and destroyed them with his feet.

The Kaurava Camp was celebrating their victory in loud blowing of trumpets and beating sounds of drums and kettles. But even among them there were wise people who did not approve of the way Drona and others had conducted themselves. They shed silent tears in their isolated sorrows.



Sri Krishna and Arjuna heard these outbursts, signs of victory in the Kaurava camp, even from that great distance which prevailed between where they were and the Kaurava Camp!

What did it mean? Arjuna had just destroyed all the Samshapthakas, the 'suicide squad', and was in a mood of fulfilment and victory, and this sound of drums in the enemy camp appeared ominous, at the moment. He expressed his misgivings to Sri Krishna :

Arjuna : “Keshava, victory is ours today. The celebration ought to be on our side, from our camp! But what does this mean from the opposite camp? or else

Sri Krishna : “Why bother, my heroic friend? The full war has not come to any end; so what does a day’s victory matter on whichever side?”

Arjuna : “I do not catch your meaning!”

Sri Krishna : “Let me be more clear. It is improbable that Drona may have caught Yudhishtira captive. Rest assured about it, from me. I swear on it, if necessary. But let us attend to immediate tasks. You are too tired now for such agonising moments and anxieties. We shall know all, once in our camp, back. On the way let us have some good bath in the holy rivers, perform ‘*Sandhya*’,¹² relieve our tiredness and then proceed leisurely.”

Arjuna : “Sir, I am not over-anxious. But I feel some premonition, some ominous sensation in my bowels as never before! Keshava it must mean bad news for me, as I cannot explain it otherwise. Here is celebration in the enemy camp, to confirm it as it were! What can all this mean, together?”

Sri Krishna : “I tell you, you are restless, foodless, tired for three continuous days. Sleepless and without care you are feeling all this sensation in

¹² a purificatory ritual, meditation on Gayatri being its chief characteristic, that a ‘twice born’ is obliged to perform thrice a day in the period of conjunction between light and darkness, praying for victory on the side of light.

the routine function of nature's cycle. Why should there be overtones for happenings behind them? You are also worried about the safety of your brother Yudhishtira in the context of Drona's strategy to capture him as he had promised. These imaginations must be infertile fruits of such sterile anxieties. Should there be meanings for all deformities of minds and their fanciful projections? Come, come, let us proceed."

Arjuna : "Krishna.... look here. You are God Omniscient, they say. Tell me the plain truth... Is my only son safe today on the battlefield? There is none else in our camp who could have entered that *Chakravyuha* or scattered it! My son does not know how to come out of it safe.... I think some disaster must have occurred there. Otherwise why should I feel this pain in my stomach?"

Sri Krishna : "Hero! To answer you finally I can only say this : Anything can happen in war! Do you need a God to tell you about such risks, or assurances of advance victory? See this : your wife was humiliated not only in public but in your own helpless presence!! Could you avoid even this much some thirteen years ago? Anything is possible anytime. This is an all-time truth. I am not saying that your misgivings are with or without foundations. Your duty is not to entertain baseless fears, but fight present problems through, to your victory. Have presence of mind. Even if something has happened, you must endure it and see how best you can remedy the wrongs. Entertaining passions that have

no real basis, makes cowards of heroes. Is it not possible that the *Chakravyuha* remained unattacked, unscattered till sunset and so the enemies celebrate it as victory in a negative way?"

Arjuna finds a ray of hope and his troubled mind tries to catch this straw in drowning tears, but still feels that Sri Krishna might be hiding a hideous truth from him in all this roundabout assurance. Both climb on to their places in the chariot and move on. They bathe in the river *Hiranwati* on their way. But an interesting thing happens then also. While Arjuna was dipping in the holy waters, Sri Krishna lifted up his head a couple of times and spoke loud enough to make it look like a voice from the skies, and shouted : "Hear you, son of Indra in today's war, your son Abhimanyu, after destroying the Kaurava army and a hundred Upa-Kauravas, and causing harm to it on a scale as never before, now rests in the arms of heavenly nymphs." By the time Arjuna, would lift up his head to make sure of the source of the voice, Sri Krishna would be in the waters in a dip! Arjuna in his confused mind thought for the moment that this was his mind's fancy, a creation of consternation.... But when the 'voice' repeated itself again and again, he felt sure that some well-wisher was giving him advance notice of his son's death in a mild way. He turns to Sri Krishna again:

Arjuna : "Friend, why does this voice from above speak like this? Is this also my mind's fanciful creation?"

Sri Krishna : "I have already told you what you need to know, or what I can make of it. Let us find out the truth in our camp."

The chariot moves fast. Arjuna's mind moves faster in fancies and confabulations. For a hero who had heard the Bhagavad Gita from the Lord Himself, here was no equanimity of mind or the strength to bear the truth and anxieties went on gnawing into his mind. Sri Krishna had by now prepared his mind to receive the unpleasant truth. It was an extraordinary strategy.

Arjuna went on observing bad omens, and was fumbling in his misgivings. Sri Krishna went on repeating the same ambiguous words of comfort : "Your brother would be safe, whatever else might have happened. No senior leader would be in harm. Minor sacrifices are unavoidable in such big gambles. Let us not lose heart now".

By daybreak, they were at the entrance of their camp.



CHAPTER 28

ARJUNA VOWS TO KILL SAINDHAVA

Dhritarashtra : “Sanjaya, what is this, that you now say? Did my sons kill Abhimanyu, the valorous son of Arjuna, in this mean, brutal and barbarous manner? Who could have persuaded them into this unmanly, unheroic act, which would surely defame them? Were they not known for bravery, chivalry, and heroism all this while? Why would they now so demean themselves for a mere trifle? Or else I must pronounce that the profession of the warrior is itself so debased and inhuman! How else can those in the places of fathers kill those in positions of sons?”

Sanjaya : “Sire, Arjuna, no doubt is a lion among warriors. With Lord Sri Krishna on his side, even gods cannot fight him in straight battles; the world is already witness to it. None can face the five brothers in wars of rules and principles unviolated. Your sons know it too well, to be told. Now how can they win without resorting to evil ways, questionable methods and demeaning tactics? Why do you praise them to derive false comfort? What use is this untimely and false praise of those whom

you have been hating all along and trying to eliminate ? See their virtues in a right perspective. If they had no respect for elders of the clan, would they have tolerated Bhishma for a full ten days? Would not Drona have fallen to their arrows earlier? They care for their name and fame unlike your sons. Let me tell you, Sir, Abhimanyu deserves your better understanding and heartfelt praise. He combines in himself all the best qualities of the Pandavas, and the best of Sri Krishna, in his own character. Who can praise him adequately? Yudhishtira's sense of Justice and Honour, Sri Krishna's character, Bhima's spirit of Adventure, Arjuna's handsomeness, archery, Sahadeva's humility, Nakula's valour and many more have together concretised themselves in Abhimanyu's form. It was this, your sons have destroyed to condemn themselves to Hell and eternal shame, and to make him immortal forever. What else can I say to your self-fooling words seeking false comfort? Let me narrate in detail, how it all happened. Judge for yourself."



A sepulchral silence had enveloped the Pandava camp that long night, and at daybreak, when Arjuna and Sri Krishna entered it. Yet none of the celebrated Pandava heroes had physically had even so much as a scar on him that previous day. They were kept out of the Vyuha, needing no physical fight. They had seiged it from outside to break it open in vain. But Saindhava stood like a rock, repulsing all their attacks,

safeguarding the entrance. There was thus defeat causing mental injuries, humiliation beyond measurement and unique. They had totally failed to save Abhimanyu, and to follow him as they had promised him. And they had lost him in such unspeakably miserable circumstances. What could they offer as explanation to Arjuna or Sri Krishna? What a loss, even if Arjuna could forgive them ! They were just a wall or two away from the outer Vyuha, and yet so far away from Abhimanyu at the critical hour of his dire need ! Who could now console them? It was not a mere boy's death, but it meant the death of a whole army that day. That was the significance of it. It was as if the Kaurava camp was making mock faces at them in retaliatory humiliation, for the loss of Bhishma, earlier. Arjuna's victory of the day over the suicide squad of Samshapthakas had all been washed out here, on this front of the cruel war. Even if Yudhishtira had not been captured alive, it was a negative score unable to equal the loss of an Abhimanyu! The war strategies of Sri Krishna, his statesmanship and direction had now met with severe set back here, for once. How could the Brothers face him now? What was there for them to tell him? What meaning did the war have hereafter, even if it ended in their victory? Drona had revealed his secret of renouncement of arms, no doubt. But so what? Who would rejoice at that final victory, if it ever came without a live Abhimanyu? Bhima could not keep up his promise of breaking open the Vyuha-entrance - a miserable failure of a mighty hero.

Yudhishtira was weeping, hiding his face in shame. Bhima was walking to and fro as if he were

a lion in a cage - about to burst in uncontrollable shame. Nakula and Sahadeva were staring emptily at the skies.

Bhagavan Veda Vyasa appeared on the mental horizon of Yudhishtira and gave him these comforting words.

“Boy! The war has taken a foul course. It is not an equal or fair war. Those who agreed on mutual conditions have been themselves breaking them unscrupulously. Now this is the retaliation of an irritated Time, for human disrespect for it and their excesses on it. Time is neither friend nor foe of man. But if evil men pressurise it for a desired foul course, it hits back mightily. That will result in misery for the good and the bad alike. That is not because of the blindness of Time but because of universal principles and their general effects. Abhimanyu is no more a victim of cruel circumstances, but not created by Time. Those evil forces responsible for it will be punished in the long run, and Good will win over Evil. You, who have been obliged to make this sacrifice, shall not be demoralised by this loss.”

Veda Vyasa narrated the heroic sacrifices of Marutha, Suhotra, Shibi, Sri Rama, Bhagiratha, Dilipa, Mandhatri, Yayati, Ambarisha, Shashabindu, Gaya, Ranthi Deva, Bharatha, Prithu, Parashurama and other historical personages, and how they upheld Dharma in distressing circumstances.

It was then that Sri Krishna and Arjuna alighted from their chariot at the camp door.

Arjuna : “Friend, why is all so silent and ominous here?

Why is none here to greet me as usual? Why this deadly indifference?"

Sri Krishna did not answer this question, but turned away on the pretext of relieving the horses and giving them respite and the much-needed rest.

Arjuna observed the weight of sorrow on the faces of his brothers, and their inability to face him.

Arjuna roared in anger : "Where is Abhimanyu? What have you all done to him?"

Yudhishtira and others broke into sobs, and answered it in a way. Arjuna guessed the inevitable truth that none had the courage to break vocally, orally.

Arjuna : "I had feared as much, when I heard that Drona had formed the Chakravyuha... The fears have come true. Brothers, you all knew that Abhimanyu was inexperienced though enthusiastic, and a mere lad, with not much of even a moustache on his young, tender face! How could you push him into the cruel jaws of death? Did you not know that he had no knowledge to extricate himself from this Vyuha into a safe exit?"

None dared to answer this thundering rhetoric.

Arjuna : "How will I console Subhadra? What shall I tell Draupadi? How can I endure this sorrow and fight further?" (Sobs)

Sri Krishna was now back from the stables, and proceeded to pacify him.

Sri Krishna : "Friend! Have I not told you all, that you need to comfort yourself, at the very

commencement of this war? Death is sure for a person, born in life. The question is of time. Do not blame the profession of the Kshatriya. He is always for the greatest of self-sacrifices in the task of the nation's protection and upholding of Dharma. What better moment of death can a hero expect or avail than such moments of dedicated act? You all should envy his death. What all of you could not achieve together, this boy has achieved in a single day, alone. See this plus side of the event. Do you know how many he has killed or humiliated to defeat, today? It is Drona who is to be blamed and put to permanent shame! Had it not been for his self-demeaning and inhuman, non-chivalrous orders to his henchmen, to attack Abhimanyu from behind, the boy would have destroyed all their army, ended the war and brought you permanent victory. You have to turn your attention now on Karna, Saindhava, Drona and others, and not stand here weeping till the end of the day. Think of the war and the strategy you have to follow immediately."

Arjuna was partially relieved by this timely awakening. Bhima now took courage to console a cooling Arjuna.

Bhima : "Brother, none of us was willing to push him forward. He himself volunteered, and asked why we were hesitating. He silenced all of us and answered all our objections and anxieties by valorous words, we can never forget. If we had not accepted his offer to scatter the Chakravyuha till sunset, perhaps you would have blamed us, alternately, anyhow! We were in a fix and took the inevitable

risk. Drona and Karna would have laughed at us and celebrated our defeat.”

Arjuna : “Sir, Please tell me the details of this tragedy.”

Bhima : “See, we were interested in someone who could just break into this Vyuha and create an opening. This was all the job entrusted to Abhimanyu, on his repeated appeals. We were ready with our armies to rush behind him to finish it to the end.”

Arjuna : “This is merely a trifle! How did you fail in achieving even so much? Why did you let him down?”

Bhima : “There was that bloody, blasted Saindhava at the entrance, with his boon from God Rudra, that he would achieve victory over us for a single day! He had chosen this day, and we knew of it only after Abhimanyu was in!! Soon after, the door got closed and for all our attempts, the Vyuha became impregnable till sunset. All my weapons were rendered useless because of this villain, Saindhava.”

Arjuna : “So, Saindhava! ... Saindhava!!.... that villain whom we spared of his life unwisely on the wrong, persuasive advice of Yudhishtira during our exile in the forests, like Maricha, whom Sri Rama had spared to bring for himself a future danger at his hands! Brother Yudhishtira, if you had not prevented me then, this villain, and his present mischief would have had no scope. They say that one must not leave even remnants of

enemies behind them.¹ Now... let all the folks of all the worlds, listen to this vow of mine : If I cannot finish off this villain, Saindhava, I shall have no claim morally to be the son of Kunti and Pandu. Even if he renounces the company of the Kauravas, to save his life, or even if he surrenders to Sri Krishna to save his life, or even if all the gods stand on his side to save him, no one can prevent his death at my hands before tomorrow's sunset! If I fail, may I go to Hell; may I be as sinful as one who kills his own mother, preceptor, or a trusted friend; those that commit sins like seducing the wife of one's own teacher, or of laughing at pious scholars and devotees, those that betray trusted relations, those that encroach on others' properties unlawfully, those that kill Brahmins, cows - let me share all these sins, if I cannot kill Saindhava by tomorrow evening. More ... I shall commit self-immolation, myself - an act that scriptures condemn as an heinous crime - if I fail in my vow."

Sri Krishna now blew his conch, Panchajanya, as if to uphold this terrible vow, and make it reach all the worlds - particularly to reach it to the evil ears of the Kauravas and camp followers.

Arjuna asked Bhima for more sensitive details of Abhimanyu's death. Bhima went on narrating.

Bhima : "Brother, all this happened in our own presence, with the walls of the human army of the Vyuha separating us. It was Drona himself who ordered this shameful act in so many words....

¹ *Shatru seshnam na sheshayet*

(Shukra Niti.)

I shall call him a traitor to the community of Brahmins, instead of Guru, or our Acharya. He has lost claims to that honour. The other traitors who followed that barbaric order were all rogues like Karna, Dussahasana, Ashwatthama, Kripa, Shakuni, Kritavarma. These came from behind the boy and butchered him, like a slaughter-animal before a demoness. Drona himself cut the boy's hands, and the final blow on the head was delivered by Dussahasana."

Arjuna : "Brother, Can I believe that Drona went so low as all this?"

Bhima : "Yes; this crooked Brahmin himself played foul, being still the commander of their army, a fellow who ought to have played neutrality, if he were a genuine Brahmin. Another bloody Brahmin, Kripa, killed the horses and the charioteer of our boy... Evil befall them, all."

Arjuna's vision became frozen, with a blank stare, while his mind registered cases against all these culprits, and waited for suitable occasions to avenge this brutal act. But his immediate task was action on Saindhava... After some silence, slowly he pronounced the sentence. "Saindhava has forfeited the right to live on this earth. First he must die. Then other villains shall follow him in their turn."



The reverberations of Panchajanya at the dead of night sent waves of chill into the blood of the Kaurava Chieftains. They also heard the roaring of conches, and

beating of war drums at this ungodly, unusual hour, failing to understand the background. Was it not the hour of shame and sorrow for the Pandavas? Wherefore all this sudden enthusiasm? They could not fathom this secret, for all their ingenuities. Shakuni and Karna who were engaged in exercising gossip and boastful self flatteries, remained petrified in mute and meaningless stares. They were sarcastically engaged in enacting the last moments of Abhimanyu's agony! That theatrical exercise now came to an abrupt halt. Saindhava had been flattered all along as the main architect of the day's victory! Now his arrogance and vanity got dissolved in the roaring sound of the Panchajanya! He felt a burning sensation in his bowels as never before, and a silent fear gripped him stuffing the words in his throat - words in which he was praising himself all along.

A messenger ran there in haste and stood at the camp door. Dusshasana rushed to him to pick up the breaking news. He also stood petrified for a few seconds, before turning to his comrades in the master plan to eliminate Abhimanyu that evening. Karna, inquiringly stared at him, as if to ask "What is the matter?"

Dusshasana : "It seems Arjuna has vowed to kill Saindhava before tomorrow evening, in a fit of mad rage at the loss of his beloved son; or else we shall be witness to his self-immolation by the same deadline of time fixed for the fulfilment of the vow. Sri Krishna has just blown his Panchajanya to acknowledge the vow of Arjuna as his own, and both seem to be determined on it. So the entire camp of the enemy is making all sorts of noises."

Duryodhana : (Grimly) “It is obvious that Arjuna has lost his senses.. What has Saindhava to do with it? He took no part in killing Abhimanyu, at all! He should have vowed to kill Drona; but he has no heart in it. Was it not the Acharya that ordered that necessary killing? If Arjuna had vowed to kill Karna, Bhurishravas, or my brother, that would have had some sense, whether that is possible or no ! ... But this Saindhava? No ...”

Saindhava : “I do not like this logic, brother Duryodhana! I want to renounce the war and return to my country safe. I have had enough of this. We must part ways here and hereafter. How have I wronged Arjuna?”

Shakuni : “You are again seeking a logical explanation, friend! Listen :”

Saindhava : “I have no patience for any more listening... I do not want to die like a pig in Arjuna's hands.”

Duryodhana : “You have lost your brain as well as courage... why are you so terribly afraid of Arjuna? Are we not all here to protect you?”

Saindhava : (angrily) “Who protected you when the Gandharvas made a captive of you, to take you to their country? Remember Ghoshayatra?² Was it not Arjuna, under orders of Yudhishtira? I had a

² Ghosha means a pen of cows, in a forest sanctuary erected for protection of cows under a king's jurisdiction, and under supervision by Royal servants. Annually the king would camp there to count the cows, with additions of calves, and loss of older ones due to age, illness or accidents. Duryodhana had used one such occasion to humiliate the Pandavas.

lifetime's escape similarly, when I tried to abduct Draupadi, again due to Arjuna and Yudhishtira's grace. We have at least this one common point. I just wanted vengeance, and Lord Rudra granted me the boon that I would win over the Pandavas for one day of my choice. And I have had it yesterday. Let me go while the going is good. Adieu."

Duryodhana : "This is cowardice!"

Saindhava : "You are all the real cowards who attacked Abhimanyu from behind, under that crooked Brahmin's instructions. I just prevented Bhima at the door of the Vyuha. That was my victory for all your collective humiliations. That is enough. I dread Arjuna; or else you challenge him for single combat."

Duryodhana : "You accuse us of cowardice, and boast of your victory as if losses and gains are personal and not collective! Fellow, let us go to Drona, and decide our future course. If he permits, and if you are not persuaded you can go to Hell. But as per your own account and assessment, Arjuna will chase you there also, and kill you as well as Yama, if he comes to your rescue. Better die here than in Hell to the humour of tormented souls! You will at least have honour here."

Saindhava : "To Hell with you all!... here am I in distress, because of your follies, and there you are mocking at me cruelly."

Karna : "Stop this quarrel ! Let us go to Drona and decide."



Drona's tent was full of The Kaurava heroes at the dead hour of the night. Not that Drona was at rest.... he had a guilty heart, besides being too tired even for sleep or rest. He too had heard of the rejoicing noises in the Pandava camp, without knowing its reason. When Abhimanyu breathed his last, his staring eyes were fixed on Drona, as if to mock him, and Drona could not escape that sight for the rest of his life. Drona was cursing himself for joining this war on the Kaurava side. He had not joined it out of love for Duryodhana, but out of confusion about duties, and perhaps for an opportunity to settle scores against Drupada and his sons, his sworn enemies. That opportunity had not presented itself till now; but opportunities of shame, and of hearing Duryodhana's frequent taunting words were plenty, almost daily. Drona now wanted a false justification for himself for ordering the boy's slaughter in those shameful words and shameless circumstances. That he could not have justice and victory in that order and combination, irritated him and tired him more than on the battlefield. That he was under the 'debt' of Duryodhana, as he had often comforted himself, now frankly appeared hollow and mockish. His heart told him that he had wronged Arjuna, for once - that dearest pupil who had fulfilled his command of bringing Drupada captive at his feet. Drona dreaded permanent infamy and he had none else to blame at that moment! Here he was, playing an unfair war against a child, against all rules he had respected all along. How could he persuade himself to do that? Was it the effect of foul food yielded by the villain Duryodhana? Did it foredoom a cataclysm, ending an age? Was he goaded by an inner

and unconscious fear? The fear of Duryodhana? Or was he a victim of an inner compulsion, to have yielded to this, as an alternative to his inability to capture Yudhishtira alive, as he had promised to his wicked 'master', Duryodhana?

Drona now tried earnestly to shake off false justifications to see the truth behind his confessedly evil deed. He appreciated the heroism of Abhimanyu till his fall, and in contrast felt himself very small. If Abhimanyu had not been eliminated, fairly or foully, not only the Chakravyuha would have been destroyed, but also there would have been a decisive victory for the Pandavas. Yes. That was the fear that prompted this act. All soldiers under him told him so, and egged him on for that foul command. That was all the justification his mind would yield. Yet, as an aged Brahmin who ought to have been equal to warring sides, he should have explored a better alternative. But meanwhile this boy was very near Duryodhana and would certainly have killed him, if more time was lost. The war would surely have ended in the victory of the Pandavas, but another infamy would have enveloped him then - betrayal of a trusted Prince, and inability to save him, while he himself was the Commander-in-Chief with a duty to protect him at all costs... This dilemma went on and on

Drona now looked at another side of the consequence; he had heard that Arjuna had vowed to kill Saindhava! Drona felt that this was unfair and that Arjuna should have had a better target - Drona himself. Saindhava was peripherally important, and not mainly.

The real agent of Abhimanyu's slaughter was he himself with that notorious command to surround the boy from behind and kill him, hit him from all sides. But why did Arjuna spare him? Kindness? Ignorance? Or warning? Deference for a 'teacher' however villainous? Arjuna must have been deliberate in the avoidance of this right target! This suffering of his mercy was worse than death at his hands, had it come now, as a reward for evil! Drona felt he saw Arjuna's face in the sky, mocking at him, as it were; there he was sweating in cold blood. He stared blankly at the sky. The next moment Abhimanyu's demeanour in his last moment replaced that vision, and Drona lost consciousness.



When he woke up, the Kaurava heroes were by his bedside and tending him. Drona did not feel surprised or relieved. He had expected them, though, for a different reason - congratulations, that is what they must have come to offer to him.

Duryodhana and others offered customary salutes and got seats opposite his resting place. Drona was gazing elsewhere in thick thoughts of guilt agonising his mind. Duryodhana and his comrades felt that the Acharya was perhaps in an enraged mood for having succumbed to their pressure in eliminating Abhimanyu. They had already lost their mood of jubilation when news reached them about Arjuna's vow to kill Saindhava. Now they felt further depressed by the mood of the Acharya. How to conduct further war under this aged, lack-enthusiastic, enraged General, was a problem. Just as Arjuna had avoided targeting Drona for the next day's

war, they all knew Drona's partiality for his dear pupil Arjuna also. Ashwatthama was better, as a camp follower; he was a true loyalist for all his dislike of Karna, and frequent wordy duels between them. Now... they faced the fury of the Acharya! Duryodhana broke the silence, slowly :

Duryodhana : "Acharya, did you hear of Arjuna's vow?"

Drona : (turning to him, abruptly, and in a blunt tone) "Hum... yes..."

Duryodhana : "Sir, you are the General of our army, and I have the right to a more detailed response as Prince. What do you mean by 'Hum'? Do you cooperate with Arjuna?"

Drona : "If you have heard Arjuna properly, you also know how to protect Saindhava! What is there to know more from me? You are also responsible!"

Duryodhana : (in confusion not comprehending Drona's intention), "Sir, do not indulge in word-play. Do you expect Arjuna, also to protect Saindhava, after vowing to kill him?"

Drona : (angrily) "Let Saindhava surrender to Arjuna, and ask for his compassion. That is one way. or else let him take refuge of Sri Krishna. This is another way. Or else let him trounce you all and run away from the war. This is a third way. If there is a fourth one you will tell me, please."

Duryodhana : "You are either displeased or have lost your wits. Do not indulge in ridicule at this critical hour, Sir! I came to ask you what steps you will

take do protect Saindhava; here you are scoffing at me!"

Drona : "You tell me the fourth way, and I shall follow. The safest way out is surrender.. if safety is all that you need."

Duryodhana : (angrily) "Is that an honourable way out?"

Drona : "What was the honour you gained in your proposal that I must order the slaughter of Abhimanyu 'anyhow'? Mine was only an oral order! Yours was the real intent! You made me a scapegoat. Do scapegoats have independent judgment? When it does not suit you, you shift the blame on to me. If it suits you now, you can protect Saindhava from the fury of Arjuna, by assuming Generalship from me right now. I am old, blur in judgment, and erroneous in steps - you all know. Relieve me."

Duryodhana : (taken aback, but changing his tone somewhat) : "You seem to be angry and are mixing up issues. Abhimanyu is now part of history and there is no use discussing his death. The present issue is how to save Saindhava. You are the General and planner of strategies. I have never interfered in your plans or army deployment. I have never questioned your orders. I may have goaded you on to eliminate Abhimanyu. But why should you be angry with me for my natural anxieties? Are not the stakes mine, after all? Are you regretting your orders after being instrumental in eliminating that boy ? I do not know what to do; trust you, follow

you or how to understand you! People die in wars - big or small. Why should you regret an Abhimanyu? Did our enemies regret having to fell down Bhishma? For that matter, was it not foul for them to have shielded Arjuna behind Shikhandi? Did you regret then, or advise your dear pupil, Arjuna? See... I am not interested in long arguments with you at this crucial juncture when we may finally win, after all. So, let me know how you would protect Saindhava tomorrow."

This made Drona totally lose what little self-control he had! Duryodhana's criticism of his role in Abhimanyu's death, and now his commanding tone about Saindhava's safety on which he insisted, and other innuendoes about his love for Arjuna, his silence in the moment of Bhishma's fall and so on - were too piercing for the Acharya to bear any longer. But he expressed it all in cool and calculated words so as to contain the arrogance of Duryodhana.

Drona : "You say repeatedly that I am the General. And a General is one who has to listen patiently to the insulting words of a rash, foul-tongued, foresightless, stupid fellow like you! You say that I ordered Abhimanyu's slaughter. Do you not know that you succeeded in putting your own words in my mouth as the final command? Who is the Commander? Do not self-fool yourself. I am ashamed to have been bound to you and your wicked villainous intentions and manipulations. I curse myself for having yielded to you in that vicious moment, which has damned me permanently in history. You

have escaped blame in the eyes of the world while I am blackened. Lord Yama knows the truth. Our accounts are different and complex. You will say that I had no alternative to save your damned army yesterday. But I had no inner compulsion to be on your side at all! Even now I shall quit you after all my sins. Let your trusted friend, Karna, continue, and bring victory for you, if he can."

Drona became emotional with wet eyes for all his appearance of bravado ; and his threat to quit put on an appearance of imminent reality which unnerved Duryodhana. But Drona had yet more things to unburden from his heart :

Drona : "Look, neither Bhishma nor I had either the need or the intention to be on your side on this needless war that you have imposed on innocent mankind for your selfish purposes. But we had to clear your salt-debt, somehow. Still, note : that Bhishma laid down arms of his own accord. Shikhandi or Arjuna do not matter at all, as I do in Abhimanyu's case. Do not confuse between the situations. I am telling you this because a course similar to Bhishma's is still open to me, and now is the honourable moment for me to choose it. I have cleared my debts, enough, to you and your family. What do I care if you win or lose? Am I your slave? Do you dare order me so? Why should I protect Saindhava? Where is my selfishness or personal need in it? You are teaching me morals - that all is fair in war! Should I learn lessons from you, a fellow who has flouted all morals, all

through your life? You mention Bhishma and his way of being eliminated, again and again! Know this that Bhishma himself willed it that way. Why do you blame the Pandavas? I am cursing myself for going as far as I did in yesterday's battle - and here you are asking for more - to protect Saindhava. Did this fellow have your 'moral' sanction when he abducted Draupadi in her helpless situation? Was it not Arjuna who protected him then? Let God protect him now. I shall follow Bhishma's example and renounce war, shortly. Your orders cannot bind me anymore. Nor do I need your moral exhortations. Saindhava's is a moral question, complicated, that only God can decide. I shall do what best I can, on my own; not under your duress. I may succeed or fail. You are no one to judge me hereafter. As I said earlier, if the wish to live is so strong or alive in him, let him surrender to Arjuna or Sri Krishna. Let him retire from war as he wants. Why do you compel him? Having no respect for true morals, you are talking of self-respect! I am shocked. If ever you try to pressurise me again, I shall renounce war then and there. Take care."

Drona felt light of heart after this unburdening. But Duryodhana developed anxiety as never before, as he felt insulted. To some extent he realized his folly of talking like a bully to an elderly person, his own teacher Drona. His was surely an excess, he understood. He had no answers to Drona's questions, nor explanations for his understanding of Saindhava or Karna. The Acharya had been too deeply pricked, no doubt. Drona's patience was at an end, in his warnings and ultimatum. Now

tactfully he must win back the General's good wishes, and coax him somehow for success in the rest of war. So he now sang a different tune :

Duryodhana : "Acharya, I am sorry if I have wounded your feelings or hurt your sense of self-respect. That was not my intention. All that I was anxious about, was, Saindhava's safety tomorrow. Do you say I should be indifferent in this matter? Whom else should I talk to in this regard, if not you? You are liberal enough to take our side and assume Generalship at a moment of crisis. It is upto you how you protect Saindhava. If you want to share plans with me, well and good. Or else go about it in your own way."

Drona : "Look: Yesterday Arjuna destroyed the Trigarthas - the suicide-squad brothers, ill-fated! Why did you not ask me to protect them, as you are pleading for Saindhava, today? Is there rhyme or rhythm in your requests or commands, whatever you call them? Are they not as dear to you as this Saindhava? In a gamble, pawns are pawns. Why like some, and be indifferent to others? Partiality? Winning is all that matters finally, for a gambler. Some pawns will have to go. Let Saindhava also be one, in spite of our best efforts to save him, if it is inevitable! To me my duty to myself is most important as I conceive. Service to you is part of it, if it can find its place there. To me you are all alike - Saindhava, Karna or yourself - mere pawns in a gamble. God will decide who should win or

lose. I am like a bull drawing a cart. I do not worry about the quality of the load. Quantity in proportion to my age or strength is all that matters. Who knows, I am very aged, and so I may also breakdown, if you go on adding unnecessary weights. Your friend Karna, will perhaps, also say the same, if and when his turn arrives."

Drona looked at Karna, in tears. Duryodhana did not like the symbols the Acharya used or their ominous import. "Pawns", "Cart and bull", "quality and quantity", "all pawns being equal", "breakdown". It meant no assurance of victory for tomorrow or Saindhava being saved; it also meant the diffidence of the General and his inner conflict, his moral agony, his sense of tiredness; his hint to follow Bhishma's example, and above all, the suggestion that Karna also would fall like yesterday's Bhishma and Drona now about to 'fall'! They all talked of 'falling'! What else is the 'duty' of a General other than bringing victory to his side?

Now Karna was in tears; perhaps realising the plight of the Acharya; or at the suggestion of his 'turn' to follow; or because of Duryodhana's situation of friendlessness and his being abandoned by all trusted lieutenants. Drona was further prompted to tears at this sight. Duryodhana was at a loss to understand such a touching scene in its complexity of meanings. At last Drona cooled down and said this :

Drona : "Tomorrow I shall form the *Shakata-Vyuha* and try to hide Saindhava at its Centre...."

Duryodhana : "Thank you Sir...."

Drona : "I have not finished yet... this is for the sake of my own moral responsibility and not any love for you or a sense of help to you. But Sri Krishna will help Arjuna to fulfill his vow, for all my efforts. That is the meaning of the roar of his Panchajanya. Arjuna ought to have vowed to kill me, instead ! I do not like this chance of life granted to me by him."



CHAPTER 29

COUNTER-PREPARATIONS IN THE PANDAVAS' CAMP

Sri Krishna : “Friend, can a hero of your stature make such a risky vow, without consulting me or your brothers? Do you think Saindhava is easy for killing? Will you fall into fire if you fail? What is the source of your self-confidence? Could you be overcome by passions so much?”

Arjuna : “Keshava, my source of strength or self confidence is you, yourself... Do you think I have overstepped any norms?”

Sri Krishna : “You should have discussed pros and cons with me at least, before so swearing. We should not be attempting weights that we may not be able to carry.”

Arjuna : “Keshava, when I burnt the Khandavas and fought with Devendra to defeat him, what other source of strength did I have than you? During the Cow-capturing’ episode (‘the Northern side’) in Virata’s capital, when I defeated the entire Kaurava army alone, who else was my source of strength? Do you want me to make this list long in my citation?”

Sri Krishna : “I am not talking about past incidents. You can now interpret them as you please. Mine is a general question : Do we have the right to presume that God is at the back of all our whimsical, fanciful vows? Can we first decide, wish, and then invoke God? Is the order right? You are a warrior, and of fame. Suppose you vow something that is beyond your reach and become a laughing stock.... but I am your friend, and cannot be a mute witness... am I first, or are you? I am your charioteer yes; but I move first, and then you. Often I advise you of alternatives too. You have never disobeyed. But now you have not even consulted me. What can happen, with an adversary like Drona? Suppose you fail?”

Arjuna : “Do you feel that I may fail? Will you allow that to happen?”

Sri Krishna : “I merely drew your attention to possibilities... not certainties. I make no predictions. But a warrior must first think of the worst and prepare for it; if good things happen you do not need preparations to receive them. That should be your mental make up. There is no scope for wishful thinking or emotions, in serious decision making.”

Arjuna : “I must confess that I was overcome with emotions at that moment of swearing.”

Sri Krishna : “Know what has happened there: our enemies heard of your vow. They trembled when I blew my Panchajanya. They can guess and gauge the depth of your anger. They had even expected that you would rush to Saindhava’s camp right now, in the night, and butcher him in their presence.

Saindhava is mortally afraid as never before. He wants to run away to safety, abandoning the war. Duryodhana has pacified him somehow. He also met Drona. There was a wordy duel between them. The Acharya is too tired of frequent taunts by Duryodhana, and has threatened to give up his post and renounce war like Bhishma. It is a totally divided camp, all right. But Drona will fight with redoubled vigour tomorrow, because of the challenges of Duryodhana, and to escape the charges against him."

Arjuna : "If this is all, it is all for my good. If Saindhava retires from war, I have to rethink of my strategy. I must kill him somehow. If the Acharya himself retires, my task will be easier."

Sri Krishna : "That will not happen; listen to the possible reasons : All those rogues know of my full support to you and of my unfathomable strategies as in the earlier cases of Jarasandha, Kamsa, Shishupala, Mura, Naraka and Kalayavana, as well as hosts of others. Tomorrow Drona will draw up the "half lotus" Vyuha also known as Shakata Vyuha. We have heard of this just now. Saindhava is going to be hidden in its midst, at the centre, and Bhurishravas, Karna, his son, Ashwatthama, Kripa, and Shalya will surround him for safety - the very fellows that killed your son. You will find them all, thus, in one place, in one bunch. This is one side of the picture. On the other side of it, you will have to combat all these Devils' sons together to penetrate to where Saindhava lies. That would take time. Their tactics seems to be to delay

your approach to Saindhava till sunset, by which time they will be tired as much as you, and then to see you fall in fire, broken-vowed. See, how Bhima could not even so much as enter the door of Chakravyuha! The same strategy they will apply tomorrow. Can you fight all these six villains together alone?"

Arjuna : Krishna, this is no boast, but fact. All these put together will not equal even half of my powers or sharpness or strength. Let me see which gods or demons will save that villain! I swear on my bow, Gandiva. Let me first attack Drona; after all, he ought to be my first target. While you are my charioteer, adviser, guide and light, what do I lack in reality? But one thing... only you must do... consoling my wife Subhadra... (tears in eyes)... We cannot get back our Abhimanyu... consoling his wife, Uttara, is a greater task... only you can do it, Keshava."

Sri Krishna : "This is a later thing. I drew your attention to our tasks as it is my duty to do so. I shall be happy if you have the self-confidence required. That is all. Now listen. You have to take a holy bath right now, and observe an urgent ritual. Do bathe and come, after washing your mouth. I shall teach you how to conduct that rite."

Arjuna obeys, bathes and returns. Sri Krishna has kept ready for him a bed of the holy 'darbha' grass. Servants decorate it by strewing gems on it. Arjuna wonders and asks : "Why all this?" Sri Krishna tells him : "See, you have to earn the grace of God Mahadeva

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Rudra for your success and safety. He has already vouched to you a missile by name 'Pashupathastra' which is unique. Before you use it, you must meditate on him, ask for permission and obtain his grace. Was that god not instrumental, after all, for Saindhava's victory over you yesterday? Now you must reverse that trend by a strong appeal to this neutral god. Our ritual is known as "Triambaka Bali." We have to make some worship, some meditation and offer some sacrifices. I shall guide you."

Arjuna : "One question remains.. shall I ask you?"

Sri Krishna : "Go on, ask."

Arjuna : "Keshava, you are the supreme lord of the Universe. I have seen that resplendent form at the beginning of this war. Brahma, Rudra, all are your aspects and functionaries. Then *you* must be worshipped, of necessity! Why Rudra?"

Sri Krishna : "Rudra is the god, leading all to victory, as he is the General of gods. I agree that he is my functionary. But he must be respected and honoured in his own seat of honour and action. Substitutes are out of place, when he is actually there, already pleased with you, earlier. Even if you worship him, that will reach me ultimately. Nothing escapes me. Are you answered? Now proceed. Sit here and recite "Siva Panchakshari"¹. When you proceed, you will see miracles happening. God bless you. The rest of the rituals, I shall conduct after that."



¹ The five syllabled mantra : "Om Namah Shivaya"

Out of Arjuna's camp, Sri Krishna summons Daruka, his own charioteer and asks him to get his own chariot ready for the next day's war, by yoking on those celebrated horses, Shaibya, Sugriva, Meghapushpa, Valahaka :

Sri Krishna : "Daruka, are my horses in good condition?"

Daruka : "Yes, sir. But I wonder why you need them or your chariot or me, while you are yourself driving Arjuna's chariot. If you have any other urgent event like a travel elsewhere, it is good I know, so that I make advance arrangements."

Sri Krishna : "It is good you ask so. True, I drive Arjuna's chariot. It is also true that the war is not over and so I cannot travel elsewhere. This is an emergency I am thinking of. Just in case, Arjuna does not reach his target by the evening, I shall take charge of the war, as a direct warrior, in my own chariot, and eliminate Saindhava, to fulfill Arjuna's oath. Fill my vehicle with all my favourite weapons, my mace, discus, bow, arrows, sword and others. Be yourself ready nearby."

Daruka is perplexed!

Daruka : "That will violate your vow of not wielding weapons directly, and be equal to the warring sides, sir! Are you telling me this seriously, Lord? I shall obey, of course..... but, I must share your secrets also as your honourable charioteer..."

Sri Krishna : "Look : There is my greater vow of establishing the rule of the Right over that of Might

or unjust fellows. Dharma has to be firmly established. The other tactical vow that I shall be neutral does not mean that good and evil are the same to me! Fools, the Kauravas cannot understand my true purpose. Arjuna has undertaken a vow difficult to fulfill. If he cannot achieve it, I have to do it for him."

Daruka : "But, sir, I do not understand this equation."

Sri Krishna : "The equation is this : He is Nara, and I am Narayana. We are inseparable and one in purpose. I do not love parents, wives, relations or friends as much as I love Arjuna. I do not wish to see a world without Arjuna, even for a moment; let it not so happen². I cannot live without him here even for a second. His enemies are my enemies too. He who follows him follows also me.³ You will witness the secret of this equation tomorrow. I have to end my Avatar abruptly and leave for my abode."

Daruka : "Sir, who can foredoom Arjuna's defeat under your charioteership? Anyway I shall be ready with your chariot tomorrow and await your signal."



Arjuna worshipped Mahadeva Rudra, devoutly, and had good rest and relaxation in that yogic mood. Before

² *Anarjunamimam lokam muhurthamapi Daruka |
Udikshitum na shakto |ham bhavita na cha that thatha ||*
(Drona 79-27)

³ *Yastam dveshti sa mam dveshti yastam chanu sa mamanu |*
(Ibid 33)

daybreak he had a dream : In it Sri Krishna first appeared in his own chariot with Garuda on the Flag-post, and told him : “Boy, you will have to use Pashupatastra today. Lord Mahadeva will come before you and assure victory in advance. Ask for his permission. It is a long time back you got it from him. You require his grace now. Get it and show your respects to that war-God.”

Arjuna continued in trance. Now he saw a pond of crystal-clear water before his mind's eye. God Rudra appeared and said : “Friend, Arjuna. Remember your fight with me in Indrakeela mountains? I appeared as a hunter. You offered a fight and got me defeated. I was pleased to give you a missile in my name, then. Now that lies concealed under the waters of this lake.”

Again Sri Krishna appeared in his transcendental form as Narayana, and Arjuna as Nara, together with him lifted up that terrible missile. Two mighty serpents rise up from within that lake, with unparalleled luminousness, and bow down to Mahadeva and recite the *Shata Rudriya* part of Yajurveda. Then the serpents give up their snake-form and assume forms of a Bow and an Arrow. Nara and Narayana lift them up. Mahadeva Rudra, beckons to Arjuna, and utters in his right ear the Manthra - the appropriate syllabic formula - for the effective use of that deadly missile. The trance is over. It is daybreak now and Arjuna gets up with redoubled joy and vigour.



The war of the fourteenth day is on now. Yudhishthira has finished his morning ablutions, made

gifts to holy Brahmins, and come on the battlefield in full vigour and self-confidence. Arjuna is similarly ready. Sri Krishna joins them in the attire of the charioteer.

Yudhishthira : Krishna, we depend entirely on your grace for victory in today's war. The stakes are heavy on both sides. We have not recovered from yesterday's shock and sorrow. Please lift us up from our plight."

Sri Krishna just smiled and lifted up his right hand in an assurance of grace.

Arjuna bowed down to Yudhishthira, who blessed him in these words : "May you achieve your goal and fulfill your vow. Return with victory."

The rest of the Pandavas also joined there and embraced each other and offered respects to Sri Krishna.

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, how did your silent worship go last night ?"

Arjuna : "You yourself appeared in my vision and did all the needful for me. Why ask me, so theatrically?"

Sri Krishna : "I wanted your brothers also to know about it and share your joy and confidence."

Arjuna : "Brothers, Shiva vouched a vision unto me, and granted permission to use the Pashupatha missile. He also blessed me."

Yudhishthira : "You told me of this attainment long long ago, from Lord Shiva! What is this new enactment?"

Arjuna : “True. But in my then-condition, it was difficult to retain it and offer worship daily, as we were often in exile as vagabonds. So I had returned it to Mahadeva himself and had begged of him to get it back to me at my hour of need. Sri Krishna reminded me of that need, last night and himself cooperated with me also in re-acquiring it.”

Yudhishtira : “Brother, know therefore that you are greater than Drona in a great measure!”

Arjuna : (Not being able to catch the meaning)
“Me! Greater than the Acharya? Impossible! After all he is our teacher, and I am but a pupil. How can I excel him?”

Yudhishtira : “Because you have something which he has not taught you, and which he does not have! The Pashupathasthra. Secondly you are blessed by Mahadeva for today’s victory. That means Drona is deficient in one respect at least today.”

Sri Krishna : “Let me clarify, Yudhishtira. Drona may have other missiles in Shiva’s name, like *Bhairavastra*, *Maheswarasthra* or *Shaivasthra*. They are ordinary and any soldier can acquire them through tradition, indirectly; that is, not directly from Lord Rudra himself. This *Pashupatha* is unlike them in power and context. You have got it from its very source itself. Keep it in your focus today and fight.”

Arjuna bowed down in humility, and smiled; he looked at Sri Krishna with joyful tears in his eyes

Sri Krishna : “What happened, my friend? Why tears?”

Arjuna : "All these fourteen days, my friend, I enjoyed another unique speciality, let alone Pashupathastra."

Sri Krishna : "Well?... I should have known it better than you, if such a speciality were in you!.."

Arjuna : "You have overlooked it in your magnanimous humility... that speciality is the privilege of having you as my charioteer. Would you have condescended so, for anyone else? Besides, I have Hanuman at the height of my flag-post that is over and above you! A living Hanuman, not a mere monkey emblem!"

Sri Krishna : "If you knew this, why did you slip into ignorance on the very first day of war? Is it a late realisation?"

Arjuna : "Inborn ignorance is one thing. Untimely descending of this absence of focus, at God's will, is another thing. May I ask my God, why He made me slip into that despondency? Did you not say that even memory or the lapse of it is at your command?"

Sri Krishna : "What a lovely rejoinder! So you put the blame on me!"

Arjuna : "It is a lavish tribute and no blame! You must have had a noble purpose in it too. You would not indulge in meaningless exploits, would you?"

Sri Krishna : "You say exploit! It is the way of the world to attribute to me what they do not understand, as my *lila* - Divine Sport - This is mystical by all bad standards. You know how I struggled to

convince you of your duty, to the right course of action before you."

Arjuna : "I said, did I not, that I shall obey you?"

Sri Krishna : "That was after I got tired, and was about to fling you on your fate otherwise. Even after that you failed in your promised duty, twice. Remember?"

Arjuna : "I have never violated your directions, to the best of my knowledge."

Sri Krishna : "Then why did you force me into wielding my Discus twice against that old man Bhishma, object of your misplaced compassion? Was this in keeping with your promise?"

Arjuna : "Let us forget about it."

Sri Krishna : "I reminded you of it so that Saindhava shall not be spared by you by a similar weakness. Drona it is, whom you have to face; finish him too, like Bhishma, without compunctions. Do you need another exhortation?"

Arjuna : "I have vowed to kill Saindhava, and not Drona, after all?"

Sri Krishna : "I was afraid you would say so! You do not require vows to kill every enemy, I say! Ending the war soon is our top priority. If senior heads roll, quickly, then only we can win soon. Do not be foolish. I shall tell you of what other heads you have to fell before dusk, this day."

Arjuna : "I do not catch your deeper intent."

Sri Krishna : "It is like asking, why dig the innocent

earth, when you are searching for a hidden trove of wealth? Does this make sense? If the trove is easily available on the earth, there would be no need to dig. Drona is the ground; he has hidden Saindhava! understand? If Drona does not yield easily, do you go, hug him or kiss him?"

Daruka appears and tells Sri Krishna, that his chariot is ready.

Arjuna is further bewildered! He looks at both of them alternately and asks Sri Krishna, about its meaning?

Arjuna : "Are you planning your journey elsewhere, leaving me to my fate with Saindhava?"

Sri Krishna : "My journey is to your success-point only!"

Arjuna : "I fail to understand!"

Sri Krishna : "I didn't expect you to understand, after you made me hold my disc twice in my hand! I do not take risks this time. No time, this, for arguments with you. With or without your instrumentality, I have got to eliminate Saindhava, by this evening, and if Drona is a hurdle, I shall wipe out the whole Kaurava army along with him to end this protracted war. Do you now understand?"

Arjuna : "You are the real hero, friend; do I not know this? I am a mere instrument of yours like all others! But on the phenomenal plane that would create confusions about you. Anyhow, today's war is going to be a turning point. Trust me."

Sri Krishna : “The turning point arrived yesterday alone, with treachery practiced on your son by that bloody Brahmin! The world, and its confusions about me - I am not worried. It is a constant factor in all the run of life, in enlightened as well as ignorant minds. If you fail, I shall take it on to your success from that point of failure, or your failing!”

Arjuna acquires a new sharpness of mind, and a new determination at this timely reminding of the fate of Abhimanyu on the earlier evening.

Sri Krishna : “The best instrument of a warrior is his mind. No one can achieve success with a divided mind. I said all this to clarify your mental faculty, and focus it on your present duty. You are now better. Drona, on the contrary, has a hopelessly divided mind. You must thank Duryodhana for spoiling of what little determination Drona had earlier! Things are in our favour. Let us now proceed on firm steps towards our victory.”



Saindhava Jayadratha, was normally not a coward. This only son-in-law of Dhritarashtra, today, however, shuddered of his fate, in the light of Arjuna's vow, supported by Sri Krishna. He prayed to all the gods, without faith in any one of them firmly. Dhritarashtra was even more worried now after learning about it from Sanjaya.

Dhritarashtra : “What is this, Sanjaya? Am I destined to see my daughter becoming a widow? In addition

to all other woes? Can no one save Jayadratha now? My sons and Drona should not have killed Abhimanyu so piteously to have enraged Arjuna for this brutal oath? My son has brought all our camp to this foul end. Whoever wanted that infamous gamble a dozen years ago? Vidura tried his best to prevent it. Bhishma and Drona too had tried their best to prevent it. But see.. all this has brought us up to the end of our race and dynasty. Whom can I advise now?"

Sanjaya : "Sir, unintelligent words do not show you in good light to anyone. Self-deception does no good at this time. Why blame fate sir? It was in your own hands to have prevented that gambling. Did you not annul the results of the first innings to show that you were all powerful? Why did you allow a repeat performance to divest the Pandavas of their rightful share of empire, to exile them? You could have undone this also! But Sir, actually you wanted all that, more than your son or others whom you now blame. You should have listened to Lord Sri Krishna, arrested your foolish eldest son and handed him over to Yudhishtira. Even Vidura advised you to excommunicate him. Your own indifference has brought you to this sorry plight. Do not blame fate as blind. Things happen logically, giving warnings in advance. What you need now is to harden your heart to see more disasters to follow."



The fourteenth day of war saw Drona arrange his army in the half-lotus structure. A hundred thousand horsemen, ten thousand charioteers, fourteen thousand heroes on elephants and twenty-one thousand foot soldiers had occupied the space in the structure measuring some seventy two mile square space, as we may put it today.⁴ The Padma Vyuha looked like a flower with a pointed edge of a needle. So it was also known as 'Soochi Mukha.'⁵. Kritavarma was at its head guarding the 'flower tip' against being opened by the enemies. It was at its heart Saindhava had been hidden. Behind Kritavarma, there were kings of Kambhoja, Jalasandha, Duryodhana, Karna and thousands of expert warriors. Drona was confident that even gods could not break it open. Drona himself was at the forefront, at a distance from Kritavarma behind him. No one could circumvent him to attack the structure directly. He was dressed in white clothes and stood there with knit brows, and looking like a second Rudra with a terrific bow in hand. His horses were of a brown hue; his chariot looked like an altar with blazing fire.

It was surprising that an old man beyond eighty years of age could be so strong and enthusiastic without a moment's sleep on the previous night!

⁴ The text mentions 3 'gavyuti' breadth and 17 'gavyuti' length of space. One gavyuti = 2 kroshas, i.e. six miles. This amounts to the above space.

⁵ *Paschardhe tanya padmastu garbhaVyuha sudurbhidah |
Soochi Padmanya garbastho goodhah Vyuha kitah punah ||*
(Drona 89-24)

Meanwhile bad omens were seen by this pitiable hero aplenty. Crows went round his chariot, in the skies, in anticlockwise circles; foxes moaned; the sun was somewhat dull in the skies, surrounded by unexpected clouds and so on.



CHAPTER 30

SAINDHAVA FALLS!

Arjuna observed those bad omens surrounding the enemy camp, and felt enthused of his own victory in advance. The earth also trembled mildly. Arjuna was followed by Nakula, Sahadeva and Dhrishtadyumna with a large army.

Durmarshana, Duryodhana's younger brother, first received Arjuna in a challenge. Arjuna blew his conch, which was supported by the roar of Sri Krishna's Panchajanya! No one could stand before Arjuna or stop him now. Enemy-heads rolled in profusion, in a circular order on all sides, making the war-front look like a huge pond of lotuses, with the eyes of killed soldiers open in dread. The 'Thud' sound of falling heads resembled that of a palm-plantation where fruits fell to a furious wind. Falling heads fell on shoulders of fighting heroes, and danced to skies, before embracing the earth. It was a sight no one had seen before, perhaps. The Kaurava heroes fought bravely unmindful of the rolling heads of neighbouring heroes, on them. The dread of Arjuna was such that, each Kaurava hero saw the other in their camp as a veritable Arjuna himself.

Durmarshana died in a few moments and his

enormous elephant army had been totally eliminated. Dusshasana was so heartbroken at this sight, that he ran away unmindful of the enemy's roar of laughter. Arjuna roared like a dense cloud of rain.

Drona now came to oppose and to prevent Arjuna's march.

Arjuna : "Sir! You are my preceptor. Bless me with words of success today. You are as respectable as my father and eldest brother. I am like your son Ashwatthama. Please do not prevent me now, here. Today I shall kill Saindhava, anyhow. That is my vow."

Drona : (with tears of admiration) "Child, that is not easy and you cannot achieve it unless you defeat me first." He poured arrows.

Arjuna was waiting for this gesture of initiation by Drona himself, as he did not want to attack Drona on his own, notwithstanding his words of promise to Sri Krishna. Now he went into action so swiftly and furiously that Drona could not see the way before him for quite sometime. Then Drona also shot arrows with equal speed and sharpness. He cut the string of Gandiva, wounded Arjuna's horses, hit Hanuman on the flag-post, and even Sri Krishna in the arm. Arjuna replied with arrows that multiplied in geometrical proportions and made Drona swoon.

The door of the Vyuha now slightly opened. Sri Krishna told Arjuna : "Look, there is enough space for us and our chariot to get in. Let us enter, leaving

Drona behind, in his swoon. It would be waste of time to engage him here now. Come, Come.”

The chariot rolled on into the Vyuha. Drona woke up to see; it was too late! Drona turned back and shouted : “Partha! It is unfair to enter without defeating me. It is against your dignity, or the code of war.”

Arjuna : “What codes have been kept up, only God knows! Sir, you are not my personal enemy either. In a straight war a disciple cannot win over his preceptor. I have surrounded you clockwise to pay my respects. That is enough of a code, if you want one.”

Arjuna threw Drona again into a swoon. Arjuna’s followers Yudhamanyu and others also rushed forward along with Arjuna. Kritavarma, Kamboja and others accosted him now. Drona shot arrows at Arjuna from behind, from where he still stood. Nobody could stop Arjuna then. Shrutayudha, Sudakshina and other kings and their huge armies fell to the sharp arrows of Arjuna. Shrutayudha was known to be Varuna’s son. He had asked for a boon from his own father - that he should be immune to any weapons of enemies. Varuna was reluctant to grant such a devilish boon, and instead had vouched a divine mace with this strict warning : “This shall not be used against one who is not engaged in actual fighting. If you do so it will sure issue back , hit you and kill you.” Shrutayudha in his over-anxiety to fight with Arjuna, forgot this limit and used the mace against Sri Krishna; so it came back to hit him and kill him. The Kaurava army scattered in fear.

Now Srutayu, Achyutayu - 'mlencha'¹ heroes - known to fight with stone instruments, and so-called *Pashanayodhins* - joined together to attack Arjuna.

On another side Duryodhana took Drona to task:

Duryodhana : "So, Acharya, you have allowed your dearest pupil to break open our Vyuha, and enter it! I knew of this your partiality. What should Jayadratha, or his bodyguards do now? We had expected that Arjuna would never be able to enter the Vyuha! Your kindness is very costly for us. What does this mean? Any fool can now see on whose side you are fighting. After all our talk yesterday, you have not changed a bit. I was only fooled by your sweet assurances. What offers are there that I have not made you earlier? Tell me at least now, what other desires are there that I must yet fulfill. I am now like a fly that likes the honey smeared on a sharp razor's edge, bringing my own death by your nectarine words of comfort. I could never understand your true nature before, as I do now. If you had not assured me of positive protection to Saindhava today, I should have sent him home on his request to a position of safety. Now I have made a false promise, it seems. What will happen to him?"

Drona : "You, foulest among fools! How many times should I tell you the same things? I only said

¹ A 'mlencha' is an outsider to the Aryan culture, a barbarian outside Aryavārtha, unbound by Varna, Ashrama, Purushārtha, Sadhana and Divine Scriptures. The ancestors of present Arabs, Greeks, Huns etc.

I shall do my best! Did I say I shall perform the impossible? Did I not warn you of Arjuna's valour and Sri Krishna's skills? See the horses of Arjuna: even a small opening is enough for them for rapid entry. Besides, it is Sri Krishna who drives them. Arjuna's arrows are so fast that they can reach the most distant targets. They made me swoon, and surrounded me in a thick mist. Before I would wake up, here he is in the heart of the Vyuha. I am an old man. What can I do? You repeatedly chide me of so called 'failed promises.' The only promise I made was to capture Yudhishtira alive, if some of my conditions could be fulfilled. Those conditions were never fulfilled. See I am guarding the entrance of the Vyuha, even now. If I had to run after Arjuna, the entrance would be wide open to all the enemies. What do you expect of me? I had merely promised to do my best today, and I am doing it. I have had not a moment's rest or sleep last night. Do one thing: You are Prince and the supreme commander even above me. You are brave and able-bodied. You are grown in Pandava-hate and so sharpened in your determination to kill them, without doubtful loyalties like me, or grace and compassion to enemies, unlike a common teacher like me. Why can't you relieve me of my duties, run after Arjuna, and kill him to end this war in your own favour?"

Duryodhana : (thoughtlessly) "Can I bend him after you have failed to do so, sir? What is beyond you is a certain impossibility for me! That is why I am chastising you."

Drona : “How unreasonable of you, Duryodhana? After understanding all this, without my telling you, you are still blaming me.. Come, I shall tie up your shield more firmly.”

Drona utters a ‘manthra’ (a magic formula) and does the needful.

Meanwhile Dhrishtadyumna attacks Drona with a considerable army around him. Satyaki rushes to his aid. Drona admires Satyaki’s skilled archery, when he destroyed Drona’s bows continuously for a hundred times! He said : “Bhishma had this; Parashurama had it; Sahasrarjuna had it; Now Arjuna has it; Satyaki, you have made your name as his worthy disciple. Well done my boy.” Satyaki just smiled for all this praise by a liberal Drona, and went on meeting Drona’s missiles with appropriate counter-missiles. Now it was noontime approaching.

Here was Sri Krishna taking Arjuna’s chariot fast forward. Vinda and Anuvinda, Sri Krishna’s sworn enemies, whose sister Mitravinda had married Sri Krishna, against their intentions, now wanted to oppose Arjuna, and so came forward. Arjuna did not take much time to eliminate them, and clear the way further.

Sri Krishna observed that the horses now appeared thirsty. But where to bring water from? Where was the leisure, besides? How could the war be stopped even for that short space of time, when all eyes were on Arjuna?

Sri Krishna told Arjuna of the problem : “Partha, see the horses have to be fed with water urgently. See

what appropriate action you can take. In the shock of having lost Vinda and Anuvinda, the Kaurava army is struck with fear and are confused as to what next to do, or who next must attack you. This is your moment. Do what is needful for the horses.”

Arjuna : “This is no problem. Sri Krishna, alight and relieve the horses, tend them, treat them with medicines. Meanwhile I shall engage the enemies alone, and protect the horses and give you the required leisure.”

Arjuna got down, slowly, stood like a mountain peak and poured arrows at the enemy army, so that they became blind to what was happening before them. But the Kaurava army used all their weapons and threw them at Arjuna, in fear, confusion and aimlessly.



Dhritarashtra : “Sanjaya, is this true? What are you saying? How could Arjuna not be hit even by one arrow or one weapon by our army, while Sri Krishna gave the horses some wanted rest?”

Sanjaya : “Sir, listen to the miracle that happened. It was like bunches of verses surrounding prose passages in a *Champu* composition or like Yajurveda in which dozens of verses surround prose texts.²

² *Rathastha dharanishtena vakyam acchandasm Yatha |*

A *champu* is a distinct Sanskrit composition using metrical and prose parts alternately but appropriately. The last phrase above can be broken in two ways : “Vakyamat Chandasam” or “Vakyam acchandasam” to give the two meanings given above.

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One Arjuna, alone on the ground, raised a cloud of arrows around your army, stationed on horses, elephants and chariots, so that they became blind, enveloped as it were by thick mists, so that Sri Krishna could water the horses, tended them, anointed them with medicines, for as long a time as was needed!"

Dhritarashtra : "Where was water in that arid land?"

Sanjaya : "Arjuna created a spring by shooting *Varunasthra* into the earth, and so, water emanated gushing, from within, in no time. It gradually became a pool of accumulated water in the valley around. Arjuna created a shelter around it with walls, cover, roof - all made of arrows only - resting on pillars also made by arrows! The pool was cool, now sheltering fish, tortoise and other reptiles in no time. It all appeared so natural that even swans and other birds came to settle there from nowhere! Sri Krishna himself wondered at this marvel and praised Arjuna profusely. He took the chariot into this temporary shed of arrows and treated the horses to rest, tended them with medicines and water, while Arjuna engaged your army alone. Here were those horses roaming about in rest!"

Dhritarashtra : "What was our army doing?"

Sanjaya : "Watching in awe! What else was there for them to do? They would not believe their eyes! Arjuna was butchering them mercilessly... but still our army watched and watched as never before."



The horses were now refreshed and it was afternoon. Saindhava's hideout was still far distant. Sri Krishna got Arjuna's chariot ready. The Kaurava army felt fear struck at the freshness of horses and their readiness for plunge, as if it were the first day of war. Sri Krishna helped Arjuna climb on to his seat, as usual, and blew his Panchajanya.

Duryodhana looked like a living corpse after witnessing this impossible feat! His army had lost the enthusiasm of life !! Sri Krishna took Arjuna's chariot in a leap to where Duryodhana stood. Duryodhana regained senses and fought with Arjuna for long. But Arjuna's arrows did nothing much to that villain. Sri Krishna observed :

“What is this I see, my friend? Have your arrows lost their edge? or have you lost interest? What is this half-hearted effort when your enemy is face to face?”

Arjuna : “I am doing my best, Sri Krishna. There is only one possibility for this villain to survive my arrows. Drona must have taught him the manthra of ‘Shiva Kavacha.’ You surely know its effect. Let it be. But now see what I shall do.”

Arjuna shot the *Manavasthra* missile.³ Ashwatthama cut it in pieces in the middle by intercepting it. Sri Krishna insisted on a second time use of the same by Arjuna, who did not agree. “The missile will come

³ The same that Lord Sri Rama used against Maricha, as a boy of less than thirteen years of age, to throw Maricha away to a corner of the globe as if he was a dried leaf wafted, by a whirlwind. It is a cool, but ferocious fast missile.

back to hit our own army, as it failed in the first attempt. Wait. There are others in my store." He used a variety of missiles now and got Duryodhana bleeding in swoon, and stuck arrows in the neck, eyebrows, armpits and elsewhere. Shiva Kavacha was dispelled in totters. Sri Krishna admired this and blew the Divine conch again.

Now Bhurishravas, Shala, Karna, Kripa, Shalya and Ashwatthama together opposed Arjuna to save Duryodhana from death that was imminent. They had colourful flags and signs on them - a lion's tail, a golden necklace, a bull, a peacock and a plough as well as an elephant, respectively. They surrounded Arjuna from all sides, against war-codes. But Arjuna stood where he did, turned around himself circularly, swiftly and dispersed them all like moths surrounding a lamp. Duryodhana was now realigned after gaining consciousness and his serpent flag was aloft here and there. Arjuna never bothered about these 'sundry' heroes, but was on the search for Saindhava's hide out. His Boar-emblem-borne flag was spotted at some distance, and Sri Krishna rushed the chariot there at once! Arjuna was now in total command, in good mood and spirits.

Drona viewed this with sullen anxiety and rushed to the spot, to save Saindhava, in the full view of Duryodhana and his six associate heroes who had all been defeated and scattered by Arjuna.

The situation was grim now. Yudhishtira arrived to assist Arjuna, as the door of the Vyuha had now been destroyed, and all the Pandava army surged into it like waters of a pent up river. The Kaurava army, which had not expected it, did not know where to concentrate

the fight and with whom! Drona too now lost direction, and had to engage Yudhishtira instead of Arjuna. Yudhishtira's chariot was pounded and powdered into pieces by a tired Drona, who was disappointed that his fight with Arjuna was avoided by this interference. Bodyguards took Yudhishtira into a safe spot.

Arjuna had by now destroyed Kshema Dhurthi, Viradhanva, Niramitra, Vyaghradatta and other famed heroes on the other side. Duryodhana's brothers, Durmukha and Vikarna ran away at this sight, to save themselves. The sons of Draupadi now killed Shala who was an atiratha. Bhima who was engaged with Alambusha - son of Rishyashringa by a Rakshasa woman - now made the demon retreat. But Bhima's son by Hidimbaa, Ghatotkacha destroyed him at one stroke with his powerful mace. The Pandava army roared in delight with these quick successes. The Kaurava army had suffered heavy losses and reverses.

Yudhishtira now returned to the centre stage along with Satyaki, and the two together pounded Drona. Yuyudhana had saved Yudhishtira. Satyaki defeated Kritavarma and prevented him from joining Drona. The Trigarthas had lost their elephant division since morning; here was Jalasandha also dead, on their side. Drona fled from Satyajit in sheer tiresomeness and restlessness, to save himself. Satyaki killed Sudarshana, and lots of armies of Yavanas and Kambhojas. Duryodhana and brothers ran away helter skelter in total confusion. Drona abused him for their cowardly act.

It was the approach of evening and still Arjuna had not even reached Saindhava! Yudhishtira was anxious.

He could not spot Arjuna, not knowing about his safety or Sri Krishna's strategies to fulfill his friend's vow.

Drona on his run was accosted by Bhima! Drona escaped him and attacked the Panchala army and killed Viraketu and other heroes. Dhrishtadyumna found it difficult to oppose Drona. Drona was now regaining strength and was claiming success in the war on the Kaurava side, gradually. This was unthinkable until a few hours back! Brihatkshatra, Dhrishtaketu and Sahadeva (Jarasanda's son). Kshatrardharma (Dhrishtadyumna's son) were all fodder for Drona's weapons in no time. Chekitana ran away.

Yudhishtira was worried, and now sent Bhima to know about Arjuna, his condition and strategy if any, as it was late evening. On his way Bhima found eleven more sons of Dhritarashtra wandering aimlessly. Bhima was only too happy to kill them all in a moment. He now met Drona, and destroyed his chariots eight times, one after another. A frightened Kaurava army ran away. Bhima located Arjuna, went near him, and roared in joy. Yudhishtira heard it from a distance and understood that all was well with Arjuna, and heaved a sigh of relief. Karna now attacked Bhima, but could not stand long and so ran away.

Duryodhana observed all this, came to the Acharya and taunted him as usual. The enraged Drona replied equally in a befitting foul language with irony, innuendo and ridicule.

Bhima chased Karna, destroyed his chariot and killed another brother of Duryodhana, by name Durjana.

That day's tally alone rose to some twelve of the Kaurava princes! Durmukha attacked, and was killed! So the score rose to thirteen. Three more followed by Durmarshana were added taking the count to sixteen. Seven more still ... and the score went on rising.

Ashwatthama and Karna together attacked Arjuna, got defeated and ran away in shame.



Satyaki's sole responsibility on that day was to stand by Yudhishtira as guard, so that Drona could not take him captive, while Arjuna was busy with Saindhava. But he was now approaching Arjuna, as the day was close to an end, and this naturally worried Arjuna. He asked Sri Krishna anxiously : "What is this? Why is Satyaki coming here? I doubt about the safety of Dharmaputra! Unfortunately the sun is setting and I have no success yet, with a heavy vow yet to be fulfilled. Sri Krishna, I am also getting tired, like our horses. See this bloody Bhurishravas, whom I am engaging for long, does not seem to be tired at all! What must I do now?"

Sri Krishna did not reply but simply pointed at something and said : "See there!"

There was a crucial fight between Satyaki and Bhurishravas : There was an old ancestral feud between them, and scores had to be settled one way or another. Shini, father of Satyaki, during the marriage of Devaki, had insulted Somaka, father of Bhurishravas, by dragging him by the tuft of hair. He had also kicked him.

(Vasudeva was the brother of Shini.) Somaka, unable to bear this insult had gone to the Himalayas, to do penance and obtain boons from Rudra, for revenge. Rudra granted that he would beget a son that would avenge the insult. That son was the same Bhurishravas. In this present combat he was now dragging Satyaki by hair, and lifting his sword to kill him at one stroke. The act would have been perpetrated if Arjuna had not gone to the aid of his friend and pupil Satyaki. This was what Sri Krishna was now drawing Arjuna's attention to; Satyaki was really helpless,⁴ without weapons, without chariot, and his strength gone. Sri Krishna said : "See, this great charioteer, my discipline and your friend in his present plight; Do something."

Arjuna looked, and in a moment, with the shot of a single arrow cut off the uplifted hand of Bhurishravas!

With the arm gone, Bhurishravas, viewed Arjuna angrily and chided him : "What is this, Arjuna, that you have done, that brings shame on you? Who taught you such an undignified act? Indra, your father? or Rudra? or Drona? How will you justify this shameful act to your brother Yudhishtira? I was not engaged with you at all, but with this villain here, to settle an old score. You had nothing to do with it. Wherefore did you interfere in what you were not concerned with? Do you think that even Sri Krishna would appreciate

⁴ *Kshinayudhe Sattwate Yudhyamane Tato[bravid Arjunam Vasudevah |*

Pashyaswainam viratham yudhyamanam rane viram sarvadhanurdharanam || (142-48)

this heinous act? Or else, the degraded Yadavas, 'Vratyas'⁵ and taken to lower professions may, after all, approve of your present deplorable act."

Arjuna : "They say that a man on his death-bed becomes senile and stupid, losing all sense and propriety. You are an illustrious example. What meaning do your words have? You killed my son Abhimanyu from behind, when he was not engaged with you! Where did your wisdom lie then? A Kshatriya's duty is not merely to fight, but also defend a friend or dependent. Satyaki is my disciple. He is like my right hand. It was my bounden duty to save him, while this happened in my own presence. I have saved my own right hand, metaphorically.⁶ Moreover he is tired, weaponless, on the earth and helpless. Do not Shastras tell you that this is no time for killing such a man, even if he is your sworn enemy? Having given up your Dharma, you are pointing an accusing finger at me! Surely you have lost all brains."

Bhurishravas could see the point, and so was deeply pained. He was also ashamed of his role in Abhimanyu's slaughter. By nature, he was pious, austere and a sincere devotee of Sri Krishna. He now renounced war, spread his arrows on the ground, sat on them, looking at the

⁵ A 'Vratya' is a Kshatriya, who has given up observances due to the Varna, and has fallen. It is true that Yadavas were fallen due to Yayati's curse, and had taken to all sorts of other professions.

⁶ *Mama bahum rane Rajan! dakshinam yuddha durmadam | Sachatma rakshitavyo vai Rajan! ranagatena vai || (143-22)*

sun about to set, held his breath in a yogic posture of Pranayama, and was reciting the Holy Eight Syllabled manthra of Lord *Narayana*, steadfast in meditation.

This was extraordinary by itself. But Satyaki was so enraged that he lost all self-control, rushed forward with a bare sword and removed the head of Bhurishravas, while armies on both sides were witnessing it in unbelievable awe and wonder.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna had, a moment earlier, tried their best to prevent it, to no avail. Satyaki roared :

“When this rogue was a willing party to your son’s assassination where had his Dharma gone? Why are you all now taking sides with him? He is a hypocrite and his austerities are a mere show. There is no sin in killing him.”

Still, few supported Satyaki’s justifications. Nor did any approve of Arjuna’s intervention. It was a crisis in ideas of Dharma that had started this war, after all! Now that revealed itself at every stage and caught even conscientious, intelligent people into confusions and conflict. This was what Sri Krishna had called “Dharma Glani” in his Divine Exhortation to Arjuna on the opening day of the war. People felt sympathy for Bhurishravas, still sitting in a meditative mood, with head rolled on, and right arm lost!

Arjuna too melted and whispered : “Oh, brother of Shala, I loved you once as much as my own brothers. I swear on the name of Sri Krishna, and on my own name. May you attain heavens. May you share heavens with Shibi of the past.”

This was real generosity on the part of Arjuna, whose son had been brutally killed by villains and this same Bhurishravas among them.

Sri Krishna's judgment and grace was unparalleled: He said : "May you attain my Abode, far distant for even Brahma and Rudra to reach. That is the world of immortality. You will ride on my vehicle Garuda, and move there swiftly."

Bhurishravas was in reality a saintly figure. It was unfortunate he obeyed Drona in that evil act. He could not disobey either. Anyway it was a mess, and none could escape the black mark that stuck to them on that ill-fated previous evening.



Duryodhana felt a fear enveloping him as he now saw Arjuna's chariot fast approaching the spot where Saindhava lay hidden. He said to Karna :

"Radheya, this is the best moment for you to manifest your heroism and skill. Protect Saindhava, somehow and prevent this Arjuna. There is not much time left before sunset. If we can pull on till then, the war will end in our favour with Arjuna's self-immolation in fire. Time is what matters."

Karna was however, in no mood to listen or act. He replied feebly : "See friend. This Bhima here has pierced my body on all sides with deadly arrows, making me bleed profusely. I am burning with blood sores. What I need is urgent rest. I have no strength. Still I shall fight with Arjuna to the best of my ability.

I cannot say I shall save Saindhava. Let me tell you, victory is impossible without God's grace. Time matters no doubt; but even more does God matter!"

Duryodhana was stung by this 'discourse' on God, coming from the mouth of Karna, a rather unusual reference, in tones of renunciation and dejection. Arjuna could not be stopped by anyone - Ashwatthama or Kripa. He threw the Indra missile. It began to burn the Kaurava army, and dispersed it in confusion. One could now see only rolling human heads, truncated bodies, cut-off arms, corpses of elephants and horses, and blood stagnant here and there and broken chariots. Arjuna looked like Yama, God of Death, to whosoever was still alive then or there. He shot some sixty-four arrows at that villain Saindhava, and cut off his Flag-post. His chariot was pounded and powdered, with its horses dead. Saindhava was alone, and stood on earth trembling in fear, but still surrounded by a fort of human wall of soldiers.

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, not much time is left for sunset. But you have to eliminate all the *maharathis* around him, before touching him. It consumes time and is quite risky. So I shall adopt a strategy."

Sri Krishna, the great Yogeswara, the great Yogiswara, now caused an illusion of 'actual sunset' that only Saindhava could experience! The others saw nothing of the kind and stood their grounds, while a jubilant Saindhava, deluded, rushed out of his coat of protection saying : "I have won! I have been saved! The Sun is set! Let me see Arjuna falling into fire!"

Nobody could stop him, as he rushed out himself from his hide out⁷.

Saindhava was looking, for too long, at the orb of the setting sun, in those earlier moments of his anxiety, and as he turned his attention away at others, a blindness covered his eyes, as it naturally happens, and that he mistook for sunset and descension of the night.

The Kaurava heroes shouted for safety and cautioned Saindhava to run back into the hide out. Saindhava mistook all that for his victory and congratulations and stood there like the devil.

Arjuna would not believe his eyes, and broke into loud laughter.

Sri Krishna : “Laugh later! See the Sun has not yet set... He is there yet. All are looking at it. Now take the *Pashupatastra* and shoot it at this villain’s neck to take it off. Quick.”

Arjuna quickly obeyed and was about to release the weapon. A Heavenly voice then said :

⁷ *Tata[srijat tamah Krishnah Suryasyavaranam prati |
Yogi yogena samyukto yoginamisvaro Harih || (146-68)*

Krishna’s words :

*Yogamatram vidhasyami Suryasyavaranam Prati |
Astangata iti vyaktam drakshyatyeka sa Sindhurat ||*

It is strange that some scholars interpret it as a day of solar eclipse! This is against the text. If it were so all could have seen it! The Kannada poet Kumaravyasa says that Sri Krishna ‘covered’ the sun with his Divine Disc. If so, there should have been greater light, as *Sudarshana* is described as *Kotisuryasamaprabha*. The simple straight explanation is that of hallucination for Saindhava caused by Sri Krishna.

“Arjuna, care yet again. While Saindhava loses his head, see that it does not directly roll down on the earth. If that happens, you will die as per the curse of Saindhava’s father, Vriddha Kshatra. So take this cut head through another arrow, and see that it falls into the lap of that old man, Saindhava’s father, who is now sitting in Samanta Panchaka, nearby, doing his Gayatri Meditation. When he gets up, let that son’s head roll down from his own lap, so that father shall die too, like son, as per his own evil curse.”

Arjuna now quickly shot *Vajrastra*, another missile in the name of ‘Aindra’, and wafted that head through the skies at that distant spot where the old man was performing Sandhya.⁸ Immediately the old man stood up, with his son’s head rolling down his lap; there was a loud explosion, and the old man’s head went into splinters and got blasted. All who heard this sound, ran to spots of safety.

A profound fear surrounded the Kaurava camp! For sometime no one understood what had happened, or why Saindhava ran out of the safe hide out! No one saw his head either! But the trunk stood a witness to the fact that he was no more alive. No one could blame Sri Krishna, as the ‘illusion’ was not universal.

Arjuna too wondered at this unique feat :

Arjuna : “Who was that in the air that directed me to waft this head to Samantapanchaka?”

⁸ Custom requires Sandhya to be performed : 1. before sunrise in the morning 2. before the sun comes down the zenith at noon, and 3. before sunset in the evening.

Sri Krishna : “The same that predicted his death at the hands of an extraordinary hero on the earth. After hearing that, the villain’s father pronounced the curse that, in that case, he who fells the head of his son shall also die with a blast in his head.”

Arjuna : “Extraordinary! But my question is whose is that voice?”

Sri Krishna : “Of someone who always cares for the welfare of the earth.”

Arjuna : “That should be yourself! Who else?”

Sri Krishna : “Take it as you please.”



Yudhishtira hugged Arjuna, and heaved a sign of relief. Bhima’s tally was thirty-one Kaurava princes for the day.

Arjuna : “You have fulfilled my vow; so thanks.”

Sri Krishna : “The much greater one is yet awaiting fulfilment.”

Arjuna : “What is it?”

Sri Krishna : “Tying the tuft of your wife, Draupadi’s scattered hair.”



CHAPTER 31

WAR AT NIGHT

Was there not still sometime for sunset? The Kaurava heroes looked at the sky, and were chilled in fear at the unforeseen forces that had flushed out Saindhava from safety into death at Arjuna's hands. On the other side :

Arjuna : "Friend, if you had not helped me at at this moment, where would I be? This success is yours, and not mine."

Sri Krishna : "All success is God's for a man of devotion. All failures are attributed to Him by the weak-hearted and all success arrogated to themselves by those blinded by ego. One thing is certain : I had said that I shall not wield weapons in this war. That was to Duryodhana in your own presence at Dwaraka. That fool mistook me, and discounted my 'will' or 'Sankalpa' also as a weapon, among others. This is a kind of Wheel or Disc too, that turns time in cycles, years, year-halves, months, fortnights, weeks, days, minutes and seconds. They call it 'Sudarshana', the spirit of Time that reflects my Will, and is symbolised by the Sun, as the keeper of Time. It was this that deluded Saindhava. Real success belongs to Him."

Here was the Kaurava army running, before sunset. Arjuna, intoxicated by the success of the day wanted to finish off what contingents of army still remained there. Sri Krishna did not prevent it. Kripacharya now came upon the scene with an effort to realign the demoralised army. But Arjuna sent him to swoon at once; Karna and Satyaki were locked up elsewhere on another front. Karna ran away only to be intercepted by Bhima, which was worse. Karna now resorted to oral abuse of Bhima, in his usual style or 'choice' words like 'Tubaraka' which meant 'one with an over grown body for his age.' Bhima never minded them, as he had heard them umpteen number of times. Arjuna ran there and chided Karna :

Arjuna : "You fool! You are resorting to mean and cowardly tactics unbecoming your tall claims and your friend's overestimation of your powers. Bhima would have finished you here and now, but for the prophecy that your death is at my hands. I am also abiding by my time. After all your mean words have exposed your debased culture. Who can hide it?"

It was sunset now.



Voices were drowned; all was silent in the Kaurava camp. Drona was reclining on his couch, eyes closed, and mind engrossed in finding out what had gone wrong, and what could have made Saindhava, voluntarily rush into his own death. Doctors were plucking out arrow-tips stuck in his body and were dressing up the wounds with ointments. Drona found it difficult even

to breathe at that moment. Duryodhana was at his bedside, on the ground, with a bent head, sighing and weeping. He had a lot to talk to Drona, but found the time unfit, and so was waiting for a proper moment. Karna was on the opposite side, at Acharya's head, on the ground, in a posture, similar to that of Duryodhana, not knowing how to begin talking in that forlorn mood of the Acharya. Time was slipping fast. Kripa was still in swoon in his own camp. Dusshasana was near enough to Duryodhana, moving to and fro expecting urgent commands for being carried out. Ashwatthama was helping the doctor and serving his father regain strength and some rest, which others had no patience for. Messages, secret reports frequented through errand boys, keeping Duryodhana perturbed and restless, all through.

Drona woke up, after the doctor left, watched those around him, and again closed his eyes. He was tired and did not want to face anybody or engage in unworthy wordy duels, as before. Actually he had not swooned. He was cursing himself for having been caught in this cruel war, with no real stakes for himself or his son. He could neither retire, nor continue, at this advanced age when the world had not expected him to fight.

Duryodhana made bold to draw the Acharya into the necessary, urgent consultation, after making sure that Drona was neither asleep nor so miserable in wounds so as to be beyond talking :

Duryodhana : "You are witness, Acharya, to our enemy's practice of Adharma at its height! That bloody and villainous cowherd played foul with his

conjurer's tricks, to draw an innocent Saindhava, out of safety to an unbecoming death at Arjuna's hands. Or else, Arjuna should have died, and victory would have been on my side. It is unfortunate you did not utter one word of protest even! You failed to protect Saindhava; also in your vow you would hand me Dharmaraja, over, as a live captive. I have lost as many as thirty-one of my brothers to Bhima. You did nothing to Sri Krishna or Arjuna. All that you have done so far is, to waste four precious days as General on my side. To whom should I confide my anguish? How many more days shall I waste?"

Drona : (Tries to get up by half, to a sitting posture from lying, while Ashwatthama brings pillows to the back of the Acharya.... the surgeons stop their treatment for a moment:) "Duryodhana! listen to the final ultimatum by me. It is not just four precious days I have wasted in your service, but a good half of my life in your evil camp! You have not changed a bit. You have wasted your whole life in the hatred of the Pandavas, Sri Krishna and all these good souls who have been advising you against your suicidal policies. You are still blurting out your own versions of things that happen in their course, given certain preconditions. Time neither pleases you nor displeases anyone. You are reaping the fruits of your past evil crimes. You say that war has taken on an *adharmic* path. It began yesterday with my order to kill Abhimanyu by any means, good or bad, at your behest and on your pressure. Why did you not complain of Adharma yesterday? Because

it did not suit you! You are an *adharmica* par excellence and have lost all rights to comment on Dharma. When have you seen or talked as a mature statesman? I am your General. But I have my discretion, and my own understanding of situations and the power to judge them from my own angle of values. I cannot exchange my values for your disvalues. You have Karna, here to sing to your tune or dance to your rhythm. Take him as your General, here and now, and leave me to myself. You describe Sri Krishna as a 'bloody Cowherd'; this, after seeing his cosmic form, when he was on his peace-mission! What can I say to this? Fools want victory against the God of gods. Your father is 'blessed' with blindness, and you are 'cursed' with vision! What difference is there between the two of you? You are blaming me for not winning against God! Are you sensible? If a patient is addicted to drinking poison everyday, and at the same time blames the doctor for not curing him of it, what can the poor doctor do or say? Go out of the way, hit your head against a boulder, and blame that, it has come in your way!! What else are you doing now? You say Sri Krishna practiced a 'trick' to create an illusion. Yes. But this is perfectly according to *Shukraniti*. You are not bound by any code except opportunism! What standards do you really have in criticising Sri Krishna, or passing strictures on him? Tell me, when you and your henchmen molested Draupadi, and attempted to disrobe her, what dignified 'codes' did you follow? You are questioning the way

Arjuna eliminated Saindhava's father, *Vriddhakshatra*; but tell me what good was contained in this old man's granting that converse boon to his son? You got Draupadi dragged into the assembly hall, while she was in her periods. Who was that astrologer who fixed up that auspicious moment to disrobe her? Or advised you so? Was not this wicked friend of yours, Karna, who instigated you for it? Why did you not ridicule him then? You thought then that it was good policy, good code, good conduct and quite Dharmic? Now what is not in your interest is Adharma; is that your view? Tell me this finally, when you have lost faith in me : Why did you not try to protect Saindhava yourself or make alternate arrangements, when you had lost trust in me? Why did Kripa swoon, before Arjuna? Is all this also illusion, or deceit? You have wasted full thirteen years after that fatal gambling, and learnt nothing all these years. If your brothers die at Bhima's hands in a straight fight, what can I do? Can I arrange individual Vyuhas for all your brothers? Do you think war is an one-man affair?"

The Acharya stopped only when he had nothing more to say. Duryodhana listened in petrified silence, totally taken aback and fumbled for words, for long. Still, he did not see Drona's point; he did not change his own views.... Finally, when he regained courage he said this :

Duryodhana : "Acharya, tell me one thing finally : What is at your heart? What is really your intention behind your acts or words?"

Drona : “Who cares for it? Should this be another wordy battlefield?”

Duryodhana : “Please answer my question. Do not question me.”

Drona : “Then, get into a compromise with the Pandavas, share the kingdom with them, to save yourself and the other remaining brothers. You will not take this advice, I know. But this is the answer to your question. I have said it because of your insistence.”

Duryodhana : “Was it for this, after all, that I sacrificed my dead brothers, Bhishma, and all other brave soldiers and horses?”

Drona : “That is your question, not mine. Why do you ask me something which only you can answer? Have you not seen that your decisions are not wise, and not in anybody’s interests, least of all your own?”

Duryodhana : “You are mocking at me sir, in my adversity, and pulling down my legs! Unbecoming of you... very..”

Drona : “You are mistaken, boy. I am trying to pull you out of an unquenchable fire! I am attempting to pull you out of the jaws of death! You are not able to see things right or appreciate my spirit.”

Duryodhana : “I do not understand your clichés, your metaphor or threats. All that I understand is that your words tend to discourage me instead of enthusing me, when I need strength.”

Drona : "I cannot help your misunderstandings ! You understand things, and are free to do so in your way. But tell me now, what you want me to do, instead of all this round-about talk, and insults that are not new."

Duryodhana : "Then listen : I am ordering you as King, and you are, as a General, bound by my orders - that war will continue this night. Our enemies are tired, and do not expect us to attack them; they are drunken, celebrating yesterday's brittle victory. This is the right moment to destroy them, this very night. Bring me the heads of the Pandavas, and let the war be over."

Drona : (Bursting in anger) "What did you say? Night-war? This is against our convention or covenant. It is against all sense of morality. I cannot agree for this."

Duryodhana : "I said that this is Royal order. Violation will have to be punished. Besides, no conventions or mutual agreements are in effect now, after our enemy has flouted all those agreed upon."

Drona : "Ah! Woe be unto dependence!!" (reclines on the bed suddenly)... "Then, if you insist at all, we have to send advance notices to the Pandava Camp. If you do not agree, and order fighting those in rest, here am I renouncing war once and for all."

Karna, Shakuni and Dusshasana get up and pacify Duryodhana and warn him not to enrage the Acharya. Drona stares at them! Ashwatthama is violently angry and looks at where his bow and quiver of arrows were resting in the corner, with significant meaning.

Duryodhana : "I should have trusted Karna"

Drona : "Wait for one more day for that..."

Duryodhana : "What do you mean sir?"

Drona : "The meaning is that I shall die tomorrow and then let Karna take over, as per your wish."

Duryodhana is now touched, falls on the feet of the Acharya, and begs for forgiveness. Then a long silence. Then slowly Drona speaks :

Drona : "Foul - mouthed prophecies of those who are impure of heart are coming true one by one.."

Duryodhana : "Who is that fellow?"

Drona : "See, you are so self-degraded that you do not even realise you are that one! You wish yourself ill fate!!"

Duryodhana : "This is a canard! This is impossible! Acharya ; why do you accuse me of these mean things?"

Drona : "On the very first day itself how did you introduce your leaders to me? - 'Here are people who have given up their lives for my sake'.¹ Did we not already appear to your clouded eyes as dead people, then? What else is the meaning? Why would not you say : 'here are people willing to fight for victory on my side?'² - You were not conscious of your own meaning! Your tongue was but an instrument of Fate, and that foul prophecy

¹ *Madarthe tyaktajivitah*

(Geeta, Ch.1)

² *Madarthe tu jigishavah* - he could have said, equally well!

is coming true. Bhishma has already fallen. Tomorrow is my turn. Karna's is next ..."

Duryodhana : (Struck with strange fear) : "Did I say so actually? I am sorry sir."

Drona : "You may forget and say sorry now, which is of no use. How can I forget? Did I prompt you to do it?"

Duryodhana : "No use, this unwanted examination of a past event. Please tell me what should be done now."

Drona : "I have already told you all that. If you still want something over and above that, ask Shakuni to protect you and your residual army from tomorrow onward. Is it not he who has brought you to this brink of tragedy? He must, sure, have plans to save you! Give him a chance, and make him your commander when I am no more ; or else ask Karna to take over. One thing is certain. I shall die or rest before I kill all the Panchalas. I shall clear your debt, anyhow before dying."

Duryodhana stands with downcast head, not knowing what to say.

Karna : "Friend, you have gone too far in haste and wounded the feelings of the Acharya, beyond comfort, forgiveness, or regret. He has been fighting excelling all expectations beyond age or infirmity. You have to blame your bad luck only for whatever has happened. Saindhava could not have been protected better, or more skillfully. If Sri Krishna's magic powers played foul against us, who can

blame whom? Actually we also played foul with the Pandavas and dispossessed them of their all by evil means only. It is the fruits of this, we are reaping now; poisoning of Bhima, attempts to burn the Pandavas alive, sending them into exile - all these were foul tactics.³ Otherwise why should their small army destroy our larger, mightier army so decisively? Is not God against us?"

Duryodhana had not expected Karna to join Drona, in enforcing the same unwanted teaching at this crucial moment. He was fuming with anger now. Drona did not wish to drag on this unpleasant moment, and so took up his conch and blew it for long. Then all the drums, kettles and other instruments made a terrific sound at that dead of night to awaken the Pandavas into quick action.



Sri Krishna was resting at that moment with his head in Arjuna's lap and feet in Yudhishtira lap, and discussing the next day's strategies. He got up suddenly and responded to it with the roar of his Panchajanya. Bhima, Arjuna and others also joined by turns, and soon the entire Pandava army understood this signal and responded equally mightily. Soldiers danced, hugged each other, without sluggishness, sleepishness or unpreparedness.

³ *Nikritya vanchitah Parthah vishayogaischa Bharatha |
Dagdha jatugrihe chapi dyutena cha parajitah ||
Rajanitim vyapasshritya prahitaschaiva kananam |
Yatnena cha kritam tattat daivena vinipatitam ||*
(How strange for Karna to say this!)

An errand boy rushed into the camp to tell Arjuna what had transpired in the enemy's camp, in all detail. Sri Krishna smiled, as if he had expected some such precipitate action in the Kaurava camp. The soldiers were in jubilant moods after the previous evening's victory and Arjuna's fulfilment of his vow. They were neither drunken nor overcome with pride or arrogance, as Duryodhana had expected. The army marched to the battlefront even in advance of the enemy movement, and were ready for feast!

Margashira, fourth night of the darker half of the fortnight! There were millions of burning torches in the air, floating as it were, on the battlefield, with dim dark human shapes below them, looking like the skies reflected on sheets of water below on a lake. Each soldier held such a torch in his left hand, sword in the right hand, with shields hanging behind at the back. The moon was late to appear, and so this arrangement was inevitable. On horse backs, behind cavaliers, sat additional staff, waving burning torches to show them the way. Similar arrangements were there for elephant riders and charioteers also. When the opposing armies clashed and dashed against each other, it was as if there was a commotion in the skies, stars hitting stars in rows and rows, a phenomenon no one could expect to watch in the high skies.

Duryodhana was in the forefront of his forces along with Drona. Whether he did not trust him, any further, in view of the conversation, or a redeboulded vigour to snatch victory somehow, had possessed him, in the wake of the last evening's debacle, no one knew. Yudhishtira confronted him and in a short while

Duryodhana was defeated, and so ran away. The Pandava forces destroyed the army that was running in fear. Drona stopped these forces and punished them effectively. Shibi, one of the Pandava heroes was now dead at Drona's hands. Bhima killed the Kalinga prince to equal the accounts, at the same time. Two more brothers of Duryodhana - Dushkarna and Durmada were now killed by Bhima. Somadatta had been defeated by Satyaki on another front. The war was drifting.

Bhima remembered his Rakshasa son, Ghatotkacha. That demon immediately appeared before his father and asked : "What can I do?"

Bhima : "Son, you are unequalled in skill in this night-warfare. Destroy the Kaurava forces immediately."

Ashwatthama now came forward to oppose the demon prince; he made some impact on this terrible figure and attempted to scatter his unconventional army behind. Ashwatthama killed other sons of Drupada. The Pandava army retreated. Arjuna now came on the scene, united the running army, fought with Drona and Ashwatthama, defeated them and made them run away. Again Ashwatthama and Ghatotkacha were face to face now again. Duryodhana wondered at the skill of Ghatotkacha, feared him and was totally non-plussed, and did not know what to do against this unexpected force. He had come that morning to see defeat, when Saindhava could not be saved; and here again defeat stared at him, in the night. All hopes of this war ending in victory left him now. Who knows, how many such unknown formidable surprises the Pandava army has, and when they will spring up? The night war was his

choice, and imposition on Drona, against his will. Here was Ghatotkacha upsetting all his plans and hopes. Duryodhana looked back.

Somadatta was in swoon. Bhima had killed Vahlika in the early hours of the night. Ten more of Duryodhana's brothers, had been killed by Bhima.⁴ - Nagadatta, Dridharatha, Mahabahu, Ayobhuja, Dridhasuhasta, Viraja, Pranathi, Ugra, Anuyayi - were the unfortunate souls! Bhima roared in intoxication of victory. Karna's brother Vrikaratha also was killed by Bhima. Seven heroes on the side of Shakuni, five of his brothers - Gavaksha, Sharabha, Vibhu, Subhaga, and Bhanudatta - were also killed by Bhima. Drona tried to catch Yudhishtira, but had to run away in sheer defeat. Duryodhana, ran to Karna, in distress and prayed to him : "Friend, this is your moment to repay me for all that I have done to you, so far. See, our General himself is running away! My army is being butchered by those cruel Bhima and Arjuna. Help."

Karna encouraged him : "Friend, I have that missile vouched to me by Indra, in exchange for my chest-shield with which I was born. I shall use it now to end this war."

Kripa was watching this. He was generally reticent. But now he could not tolerate Karna's boastfulness, and to bring a touch of realism to this unnatural war, he told Duryodhana:

⁴ If it appears, in such accounts, that Dhritarashtra had more than a hundred sons, we can only reconcile these with saying that other than the well known hundred, Dhritarashtra had more sons by wives other than Gandhari - There were such wives both official and non-official.

Kripa : “Prince, do not rely on this villain. He also will let you down. He has never stood by you in hours of your need, after egging you on to numerous foolish, rash, adventures. Now do not listen to his usual boastful words. Karna, you ought to be ashamed! In the past, how many times have you faced Bhima and Arjuna, do you remember? Have you defeated them at least once? Do you remember how many times you had to run away, in this war, alone? I have seen all these occasions? Duryodhana has overtrusted you! You are a hero only in words and not in action, just as Brahmins are good in debate; Arjuna is a real hero. You are heroic only in dreams and fancies.⁵ Wishful thinking does not make or mark a true warrior as muscle power.”

Karna : “ See this, Duryodhana! Did I enrage Kripa by any means? Like Drona he is also prejudiced against me. You are surrounded by such traitors! What can I do alone?”

Ashwatthama was enraged by this mean description of his father and uncle, and all Brahmins in general, as was often the practice of Karna. He lifted up his sword to kill Karna, and rushed at him saying :

“You villain! If my uncle praised Arjuna, he was only paying a tribute where it really belonged! Why should you be jealous? What have you lost by this? He just held a mirror of your weaknesses. If you were serious, you should have used that missile gifted to you

⁵ *Bahubhih Kshatriya shurah vagbhi shura dvijatayah |
Dhanusha Phalgunah shurah, Karnah shuro manorathaiah ||*
(158-23)

by Indra, in a foolish exchange for your naturally gifted chest-shield, against Arjuna when he was about to kill Saindhava! Why were you silent then or inactive? You are a worm; you are the traitor; you are mean, and cowardly; your death will diminish a weakness on our side."

Kripa intervened and prevented Ashwatthama from executing Karna, then and there. Karna could not contain and abused Ashwatthama in the filthiest, unimaginable words:

"You are a degraded Brahmin! When have your tribe ever stood by Duryodhana? You are all partial to the Pandavas, and disloyal to your patrons. You are short-tempered, stupid and a braggart. You could have saved Saindhava, along with your father, as you were duty-bound yesterday! Did you attempt, ever? Why do we blame the Acharya who is doing more than what permits of age?"

Duryodhana intervened, bowed to all concerned and appealed for peace, order and whole-hearted joint efforts.

Ashwatthama's anger turned at Duryodhana!

Ashwatthama : "You foolish Prince! You have no trust in anyone. That is your basic defect at the root, of your losing temper so frequently and your abusive tongue. Let us grant that the Acharya, being a common teacher of both families, is partial to Arjuna or his brothers. What is wrong in it? They are steadfast in Dharma, unlike you, and are more skilled than you or your brothers in the same weapons or missiles taught to both! They trust Dharma, and you rely on crooked tactics."

Duryodhana turned away without a reply. News of defeat was being brought from all sides : Somadatta was now dead at Satyaki's hands. Here was Drona fighting with Yudhishtira in dense darkness. In each chariot there were five torch bearers⁶, on elephant backs three each, and on horse one each, in each camp. One could know the opponents and what they were riding on, thus, from counting the number of torches on the other side.

Virata's brother was dead at Shalya's hands. Slowly the balance tilted in favour of the Kauravas, as the Pandava army was now running away in defeat.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna held an urgent consultation, and decided to use Ghatotkacha against Karna. Ghatotkacha accepted the challenge, bowed to all the Pandava heroes along with Sri Krishna and pursued Karna!

Red-eyed, big-bodied, red-haired, yellow-moustached, long drooping-eared, long-armed, wide-mouthed Ghatotkacha had extra teeth protruding at the tips of his mouth, and with a loosely hanging red tongue, his very appearance was enough to dread his opponents. His dark, prominent eyebrows, bulging nose and a disproportionate face was really frightening to one and all. He wore a chest-shield on his mountainous body and at his sight, the Kaurava army ran helter-skelter!

⁶ *Rathe rathe pancha vidipakastu, pradipakastatra gaje trayasch |
Pratyasvamekascha mahapradipah kritastu te Pandavaih
Kauraveyaih ||* (163-16)

Duryodhana sent Alayudha - also a demon hero to meet him. Bhima opposed him and prevented his advances.

Here was a decisive combat in its last stages between Karna and Ghatotkacha, past midnight. The irony was, that except Karna personally, none in his army behind him was willing even to move towards Ghatotkacha. On the other side the demon went on gaining strength as the night advanced! Besides, the Kaurava army was dead-tired, as it had engaged itself during daytime also. Ghatotkacha possessed a missile in the name of Rudra in addition to various tricks of illusion and secrecy, and devilish missiles created by Maya, the demon king. His army was such that each warrior was equipped as well as Ghatotkacha! None of them was tired. This guerilla method of unconventional fighting was totally unknown to the Kaurava forces, and they had least expected the Pandava army to push him to the front on that ill-fated night.

See these styles as samples : Ghatotkacha would rain stones on the enemy from nowhere! Then would follow iron spikes in similar fashion, raining from above. Suddenly he would disappear. When the enemy was heaving sighs of relief, he would roar, as if from nearby. He would become invisible but throw away Karna's chariot into the skies! The missiles of Karna did nothing to him, and failed one by one. Ghatotkacha was expert also in disc-throwing, like Sri Krishna. Thousands of discs thrown by him at midnight shone like untimely suns in the skies, striking fear in the minds of the enemies. Nearly one whole division of army (one *Akshowhini* in the count of those days - including

proportionate numbers of horses, elephants, charioteers and soldiers) had been wiped out by him in a short while, night still pending and hanging heavy on the enemies who had begun this war, without expecting these severe consequences. Once Karna had almost killed Ghatotkacha! But he sprang from death, by some magic power and had squeezed Karna's blood out, as if Karna was a puppet. The Kaurava army could not stand in one place, let alone united! Ghatotkacha let go Rudra's missile on it, at last, which eliminated lots of enemy's army.

Alayudha was now dead at Ghatotkacha's hands. Karna stood on ground, as he had lost his chariots successively, with nothing more to replace.

Karna had now only Indra-Shakti, a missile which he had exchanged for his Divine Ear Rings, which, otherwise, he had reserved for Arjuna. He had avoided the temptation to take it out so far, for so trivial an opponent.

Now he forgot himself and the care about that deadly missile, unable to bear Ghatotkacha's tortures! Kripa shouted : "No, Karna! Not now.. Please, do not waste it.. wait.."

Karna heard it but had no use for this advice of patience. His body was dripping in blood, and he did not know the next move of the Demon.

He took that missile out, as he now felt, otherwise he would not live to face Arjuna or use it against him, at all.

Ghatotkacha and his followers in the air, stared at

it from their heights in the skies. It was dragon headed, and spouting fire terribly. It was as heavy and long as the Vindhya mountains! Karna lifted it up with all his strength, used the right formula, remembered Indra, the donor, weighed it in his right hand and threw it at Ghatotkacha!

At that time Ghatotkacha was invisible, but shouting, roaring and making sounds of terrific jungle-animals from various quarters of the skies, frequently changing places, sometime suddenly showing his frightening faces, in abnormal sizes, to the enemies. The sheer fear-tactics had unnerved the enemy.

Karna ordered the missile : "Find him out, wherever he may have been hiding, pierce his heart, and kill him."

That terrible missile first tore up Ghatotkacha's powers of illusion and rendered him powerless in this most important respect, so much relied upon by him all this while. He was now visible to all. Next, the missile pierced his chest, came out at the back, causing the springing of blood in profusion, and shot into the skies and disappeared.

The dead body of the demon fell down with such force, like a meteor, and crushed thousands of Karna's soldiers under it, when it fell down on the earth. The demon thus destroyed even in death, and rendered great service to the Pandavas, who had employed him. It was a very severe loss indeed.

The Kaurava army celebrated it by beating of drums, blowing of conches and shouts of joy into the skies.

Drona, was removing his chest-shield when Duryodhana and others approached him to offer greetings.

Drona pointed to Karna and said : "There .. There .. express your gratitude to him, not to me!"

The Pandava forces relapsed into that same sorrowful mood as on the evening of their loss of Abhimanyu, and the daybreak brought unbearable gloom to them.



GLOSSARY

<i>Acharya</i>	Preceptor, teacher
<i>Adityastra</i>	A missile in the name of Sun-god
<i>Adharmic</i>	Something violating Dharma, or God-ordained law
<i>Ajatashatru</i>	'One for whom no enemy is born; another name for Yudhishtira, or Dharmaraja, the eldest son of Pandu
<i>Akshata</i>	Rice-corn in yellow (turmeric) soaking, signifying auspiciousness
<i>Akshowhini</i>	a count of the army size, in units of horsemen, elephant brigades, charioteers and foot soliders
<i>Amavasya</i>	New Moon day
<i>Amrita</i>	Elixir, or ambrocia, nectar, a drink leading to immortality
<i>Anantha</i>	The Divine Serpent, bed of God Vishnu
<i>Anjalika Bandha</i>	A trick used in elephant fighting or taming. The hero, stuck to the animal's downside of the abdomen, teases it until the creature is tired to death
<i>Ankusha</i>	A sharp, daggerlike weapon or instrument used to control a moving elephant and direct its movements
<i>Apsara</i>	Watery Nymphs, of unmatched beauties, used often by gods to test the purpose and direction of austerities of <i>seers</i> , <i>sages</i> , <i>yogis</i> . They were born during the process of churning the Milky Ocean, along with Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth, and spouse of Vishnu
<i>Artha</i>	One of the human ends, meaning desire for pelf and prosperity. Technically in the context of royalty it means the State, its gain, protection, preservation etc., in the Kautilyan sense. There were great manuals to guide the king even in pre-Mahabharatha ages too.

Ashrama	The four-fold Hindu division of the individual's life comprising stages learning, householdership, asceticism and renunciation
Ahstakshara	The Eight-syllabled 'manthra', magical incantation, invoking the blessings of God as Narayana - <i>Om Namo Narayanaya</i> '
Ashtami	The Eighth lunar day of each month in the Hindu Calendar, in the fortnights, to be specified so, as 'dark' or 'bright'
Astra	A missile in the name of Gods - Agni, Varuna etc.,
Atatayin	a traitor, one who works against Dharma and humanity; one who sets fire to a settlement, disrobes a friend's wife, steals his property, annexes his lands or territory, or poisons his enemies etc.,
Avatara	The Incarnation of God in the Hindu philosophy, called also 'Descents'. Ten are supposed to be important, though some twenty four are mentioned in <i>The Bhagavata</i> . Actually they are numberless. Note that it is not man ascended to Divinity, but God come down in history without compromising Divinity, though under a self-chosen cover.
Avatari	Sri Krishna, in the context of the concept of Divine Incarnations, in the background of the belief that God manifests as a role in the history to set right its flow.
Bhagavan	An epithet meaning the 'venerable', or 'holy', usually associated with God or the Godly
Bhagavatha	Devotee of God, a Vaishnava
Brahma	The first crature of God, born of His Naval-Lotus, four faced, repository of all Vedas
Brahmachari	A bachelor who lives in God, for God, life-long in austerity, penance, and spiritual activities away from worldly snares for long

<i>Brahmastra</i>	The missile in the name of Brahma, unmatched or unopposed, as the most powerful ever, one can use
<i>Brahmin</i>	The Caste or Varna, first in social structure, with its duty of discovery, dissemination and preservation of all knowledge, including the spiritual, held in great respect
<i>Bhrashta</i>	a fallen man; one who gives up vows or oaths, one who renounces rules of Varna or Ashrama
<i>Bhakti Yoga</i>	Devotion to God as a means to attainment of Immortality. (Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga, all three are taught in the Gita. [These paths are interlinked and not mutually exclusive. All are involved in all three; it is the emphasis, or the stage of advancement that marks each as such.]
<i>Chakravyuha</i>	The deadly army pattern in which Abhimanyu was locked and killed; circular in shape, with blind alleys unexpectedly for those who entered it so that return was impossible, unless he broke it to scatter it.
<i>Champu</i>	a Sanskrit composition using prose and verse alternately in an intermixture, in lovely style
<i>Charanas</i>	a kind of celestials given to constant movements in skies
<i>Chitragupta</i>	accounts-keeper of Lord Yama, god of death; who keeps count of good and bad deeds of souls, in Hell, to fix the nature, kind and amount of punishments, due to each
<i>Dakshinavarta</i>	Movement in the clockwise direction
<i>Dakshinayana</i>	The darker half of the year, in the solar count
<i>Dharma Sastra</i>	Hindu law books credited to Rishis.
<i>Danda</i>	Rule by fixed policy; also punishment; tax

<i>Dharma</i>	Cosmic - law upholding and governing all life, physical, as well as spiritual, from which conventions and rules could be derived, for detailed specifications, even in changing circumstances
<i>Dharma Kshetra</i>	Another name of Kurukshetra, literally meaning "a field sacred for practices of piety and austerity"
<i>Durvasa</i>	an ancient Rishi, notorious for short temper; supposed to be born as an aspect of God Rudra
<i>Dwadashi</i>	The twelfth lunar day of each fortnight of the month, sacred and meant for the breaking of the fast of the previous day called <i>Ekadashi</i> , also holy.
<i>Ekayana</i>	An ancient Vedic path for god attainment, holding a monotheistic concept of godhead as containing all in Him
<i>Gandiva</i>	Name of Arjuna's famed divine bow, bestowed on him by Agni, God or Fire
<i>Gadadhara</i>	name of Sri Krishna, signifying his wearing of the divine Mace
<i>Gandharva</i>	A species of beings welded to sensuous ways of life, given to music, dance and sorcery. Kubera is their head.
<i>Ganga</i>	Name of the most sacred river of the Hindus
<i>Gavyuti</i>	a measurement of space equivalent to six miles
<i>Ghosha</i>	a royal 'pen' of cattle in the forests, kept in order, by paid cowherds
<i>Glani</i>	cover, or cloud (usually in the context of Dharma being eclipsed)
<i>Gowri</i>	Lord Shiva or Rudra's wife
<i>Guru Dakshina</i>	a voluntary fee that a disciple ought to pay a perceptor
<i>Jnana yoga</i>	The path of salvation by 'knowledge' of the self

<i>Jyotisastra</i>	A missile that inundates the field with blinding light, dispelling the densest darkness
<i>Kali</i>	The name of the fourth cycle of time, marked by retardation of Dharma or the decimation and violation of all god-made laws and goals of life (the others being <i>Krita</i> , <i>treta</i> and <i>dwapara</i>)
<i>Karkotaka</i>	name of a Naga chief
<i>Karma</i>	The Hindu concept that holds that the deeds of a man - good or bad - recoil on him to shape his character, to mark his destiny. A concept that accounts rationally for bondage and freedom in life; desire for action.
<i>Karma kshetra</i>	A field of sacred activity, duty
<i>Karma yoga</i>	The path of dutiful action to salvation
<i>Kartika</i>	A lunar month in which the full moon happens to be in the star of Kritika
<i>Kavacha</i>	chest-shield used by soldiers
<i>Krauncha</i>	name of one of the famed seven mighty mountain ranges on this earth
<i>Krodha</i>	Anger, hatred, ill will, jealousy
<i>Kshatriya</i>	The warrior caste or 'Varna' in the Hindu social order responsible for the preservation of law and order, public administration, of society, and the preservation of national integrity and sovereignty
<i>Kubera</i>	Gandharva-god, lord of wealth
<i>Kumkum</i>	The red vermillion mark adorning the foreheads of women - folk as housewives, as an auspicious sign
<i>Lila</i>	'Sport'; a view that explains life processes as the divine sport of lord Vishnu
<i>Lobha</i>	Lust, greed
<i>Mahakaali</i>	Goddess of Death, wife of Rudra in his most terrific form', also Durga or Parvathi

<i>Makha</i>	Name of a star presided over by Indra
<i>Mandala</i>	A circular shape of army structure
<i>Manthra</i>	a cryptic formula with coded meaning, meant for silent grasp in ponted meditation
<i>Maricha</i>	a demon in Ramayana, uncle of Ravana, who ensnared Rama by assuming the form of an illusory deer
<i>Margashira</i>	Name of an autumnal month, auspicious for austerities
<i>Maruts</i>	Wind gods, agents of monsoons, tornados, whirlwinds and distortions of air, following Indra in war
<i>Matsya Yantra</i>	The famous target that Arjuna shot with a single arrow, by viewing it in a reflection on an oil - filled basin, to wed Draupadi, daughter of Drupada, at the city of Kampilya
<i>Mlenchas</i>	uncultured peoples who lived outside Aryavarta, a sacred land in India, between Sindhu, Ganga and Yamuna, given to barbaric customs and cruelty as a way of life
<i>Maya</i>	a demon prince who was also founder of an architectural style which went by his name, who built the Hall of Fame for Yudhishtira, under Sri Krishna's command
<i>Narayanastra</i>	A missile in the name of God Narayana which had no match, nor nullifying weapon except by surrender of those against whom it was used
<i>Nirukta</i>	The Vedic science of etymology, in the name of Yaska as now available, predating the Mahabharata
<i>Panchakshari</i>	name of a mantra, a magic formula to invoke Lord Shiva or Rudra - 'Om Namah Shivaya'
<i>Pashana Yodhins</i>	a kind of guerilla fighters using stone instruments, who sided with Duryodhana

<i>Pashupatastra</i>	a missile that Lord Shiva blessed Arjuna with, in a mock fight with him, during one of the exiles of the Pandavas, in the Himalayas, the same that killed Saindhava
<i>Pishachas</i>	flesh - eating demons, a class of sub humans
<i>Pitamaha</i>	grand father
<i>Prayaschitta</i>	An expiatory ritual to wash off one's sins
<i>Panchajanya</i>	Sri Krishna's famous conch, (bone shell of a demon by that very name, killed by Krishna, while rescuing the son of his teacher - Sandipani, from his kidnapped hide-out in the sea, on a lovely island
<i>Prag Jyotisha</i>	Name of the capital of Narakusara and later on his son Bhagadatta, situated on the East coast of China, so that the rays of the rising sun fell for the first time on the earth here only! (that is its etymological meanng) It is so described in the text of Mahabharatha, that armies of Bhagadatta were yellow in skin colouration
<i>Pranam</i>	respect for a holy man, a teacher, a family elder or god
<i>Pranjalika</i>	name of a missile bestowed to Arjuna by goddess Parvati, as companion to Pashupatastra
<i>Pranayama</i>	Breath control, an important step in the eightfold yoga, described by Patanjali, and known earlier to Vedic seers
<i>Prapanna</i>	One who has surrendered himself and his all to God to remain but as his agent, duty- bound, and so is eligible for salvation under His Grace.
<i>Pundarikaksha</i>	"The lotus eyed one", name of Sri Krishna
<i>Rakshasa</i>	A ruffian, barbarian, cruel, inhuman, living on violence, murder and loot, uncontrolled by any human laws or niceties of behaviour, conduct or code

- Rahu** Name of a planet, shadowy in nature, mystically son of the Sun god born of the wife Chaya, or Saranyu; causes eclipses of the sun and the moon
- Raja Dharma** The concept of royal duties as ordained by cosmic laws, corresponding to governmental responsibilities in any modern day constitution, the difference being that manmade constitution can change whereas god-made duties are inviolable, as upholding life for all times and places
- Rajas** Another quality of matter propelling the mind into thirst, tireless activity, violence and greed, leading stress, disappointment and sorrow
- Saashtra** A science, or a code of instructions, or a lore of learning (ranging from spiritual to secular fields like Ayurveda, the science of Archery or Dhanurveda, music and so on)
- Sam Shaptakas** 'A suicide squad', vowing to kill the enemy or die by self immolation; there were rites for them so as to swear. It was the Trigarthas led by Sudarshana who so vowed to kill Arjuna, but were eliminated by him. Their actual names were Satyavrata, Satyavarma, Satyaratha, Satyeshu and Satyakarma, also called Susharma, Surathi, Sudhrama, Sudhanva and Subahu
- Samkalpa** Urge, or determination to launch something usually associated with God's will, as destiny
- Samrajya** Dharmic Empire built by one who performs the Rajasuya Yaga and brings all the world under the rule of Dharma, and is crowned as Samrat
- Sandhya** meditation on God, at morning dawn and evening dusk times, also noon time, when light and darkness meet in mutual fights; it also means the worship of light by the holy and devout twice born, praying for the victory of light over darkness, as enshrined in the Gayatri mantra

<i>Sankhya</i>	An ancient school of Hindu thought that discovered god, matter and soul as mutually distinct entities, as founded by Kapila and factorised matter into the three temperaments of <i>Sattva</i> , <i>Rajas</i> and <i>Tamas</i> 'gunas' (qualities) and some twenty four evolutes. Later, two different schools arose in it, one holding that there is no god and the other that there is god!
<i>Sarvatobhadra</i>	Name of an army structuring; also a royal seat of ease
<i>Sattva</i>	A guna or quality of physical matter congenial for peace, tranquility, equilibrium of mind, as a liberating agency
<i>Shanaischara</i>	Saturn, so called because of his slow movement
<i>Sharnga</i>	Vishnu's famous bow
<i>Shastra</i>	A weapon
<i>Shataghni</i>	A gun that could kill hundreds at a time
<i>Shata Rudriya</i>	A section of Krishna Yajurveda, full of praise for Lord Rudra, consisting of one hundred invocations
<i>Shukra Niti</i>	An administrative, moral, diplomatic manual or code, that prescribed that evil must be met with evil to conquer it, that 'wrong' means could be adopted to achieve 'right' ends, if the enemy is wedded to such; something, that the other code of Brihaspati abjures, holding that means and ends must be equally good. Shukra is its author, being the perceptor of Demons
<i>Siddhas</i>	a kind of celestials with exceptional achievements
<i>Sudarshana</i>	name of Sri Krishna's Disc, gifted by Vishwakarma, architect of the gods
<i>Supratika</i>	name of the notorious mischievous elephant of Bhagadatta that Bhima killed
<i>Suryopasana</i>	meditation on the sun as god

<i>Swastika</i>	a cross-mark of auspiciousness like 卐
<i>Swabhava</i>	physical temperament
<i>Swadharma</i>	one's God-ordained duties within the Varna frame
<i>Takshaka</i>	a Naga chief hostile to Arjuna, who once ruled over a territory of which Takshashila was the capital - the modern Taksila in Baluchistan, once Western Hindustan
<i>Tamas</i>	The quality of inertia promoting non-relish of aestheticism; indulgence, sleep, ignorance and dimness of views, as desirable ends of life, taking man to the animal level
<i>Tambula</i>	Betel leaves and areca nuts as respectful offerings to a guest, marking auspiciousness
<i>Tapas</i>	Penance
<i>Triambaka</i>	Name of Rudra or Shiva with 'three eyes'
<i>Tula</i>	Name of one of the zodiacs, owned by Shukra
<i>Tyaga</i>	renunciation as a basic value of Hinduism
<i>Upanishad</i>	Esoteric teachings, as end-parts of branches of Vedas. They are mainly counted as ten; but there is no fixed number (known also as Vedanta)
<i>Vaishya</i>	The merchant-class in the Hindu social order
<i>Vayuvya</i>	A missile in the name of god Vayu
<i>Vedanta</i>	The highest form of Hindu thought, meaning literally the 'end of Vedas', as its 'conclusion' or its metaphysics
<i>Vishaka</i>	Name of a star
<i>Vishnu Shakti</i>	The mysterious power of Lord Vishnu
<i>Vyuha</i>	An army structure (like Padma, Chakra, Makara and so on)
<i>Yaksha</i>	celestials given to ways of sports and other sensual pleasures

Yogeshwara

Lord Krishna, who blesses his devotees with appropriate gifts to suit their stages of minds' developments, their qualities or attainments

Yuddha

war

Vritra

the all - encircling demon who had prevented the flow of divine waters of the seven rivers, and who was slain by Indra in the Vedic myth of multiple allegorical meanings

Vaijayanti

Name of the Divine Garland of Lord Vishnu



IMPORTANT DRAMATIS PERSONAE

<i>Abhimanyu</i>	Son of Arjuna by Subhadra, martyr in the plot of Chakravyuha
<i>Alambusha</i>	Son of Rishyashringa by a demon wife; fought on the side of Kauravas
<i>Arjuna</i>	Third son of Kunthi by god Indra, known also as Phalguna, Kireeti, Partha, Shveta Vahana, Krishna, Vijaya and so forth
<i>Ashwathama</i>	Only son of Drona by Kripa
<i>Baladeva</i>	Sri Krishna's elder brother, known also as Bala Bhadra, Sankarshana, Bala Rama; incarnation of Adi Sesha
<i>Bhagadatta</i>	Son of Naraka (slain by Sri Krishna) with a famous elephant brigade
<i>Bhima</i>	Second son of Kunti by god Vayu, known also as Maruti, Vrikodara
<i>Bhishma</i>	Shantanu's son by Ganga, great devotee of Sri Krishna, repository of all ancient learning spiritual as well as secular, care taker of the throne of Hastinavati. General of the Kaurava army for ten days in the genocidal war.
<i>Bhurishravas</i>	Son of Somadatta, hailing from the same Kuru dynasty
<i>Daruka</i>	Sri Krishna's charioteer
<i>Dhaumya</i>	Preceptor of Pandavas
<i>Dhrishtadyumna</i>	Eldest son of Drupada born of Fire; General of Pandava army for all the eighteen days of the war.
<i>Dhrishtaketu</i>	Son of Shishupala, Chedi king, (killed by Sri Krishna)
<i>Draupadi</i>	Daughter of Drupada, wife of Pandavas, known also as Panchali, Krishnaa, Yajnaseni; Fire born

<i>Drona</i>	Son of Bharadwaja, Preceptor royal at the court of Hastinavathi teaching the Pandavas and the Kauravas all the sciences of weaponry and warfare
<i>Drupada</i>	King Yajnasena of Panchalas, ruling at Kampilya; one time class-mate of Drona
<i>Duryodhana</i>	Eldest of one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra by Gandhari; the others being called Dusshasana and so on as contexts reveal in our text
<i>Dhritarashtra</i>	The blind king, uncrowned, yet who ruled in place of his crowned younger brother Pandu, after his self-abdication and death; sinful minded, selfish father of a hundred sons like Duryodhana, whom he survived by cruel fate, destined to die in a forest fire as a recluse in the end
<i>Ekalavya</i>	Nishada prince, son of Hiranya Varma, denied discipleship of Drona; joined the Kaurava forces
<i>Gandhari</i>	Wife of Dhritarashtra, sister of Shakuni, mother of Kauravas
<i>Ghatotkacha</i>	Demon-son of Bhima by Hidimba
<i>Iravan</i>	Son of Arjuna by Naga Princess, Ulupi
<i>Jarasandha</i>	Ruler of Magadha, killed by Bhima
<i>Karna</i>	Son of Kunthi by the Sun-god, grown under the care of Adhiratha; known also as Radheya; Chief advisor of Duryodhana, crowned as king of Anga; general of Kaurava army for two and a half days or so.
<i>Kripa</i>	Son of Sharadvanta, first preceptor of the Kauravas at the royal court of Hastinapur; survived the war as an immortal
<i>Kritavarma</i>	Yadava chief, son of Hridika, who joined the Kaurava side, with a huge army called Narayana Sena
<i>Kunthi</i>	Daughter of Shura, sister of Vasudeva, mother of Pandavas; called so because of her adaption to Kunti Bhoja, another Yadava chief

<i>Nakula</i>	First son of Madri (second wide of Pandu), sister of Shalya, prince of Madra; born of the grace of Ashivins
<i>Pandavas</i>	The five sons of Pandu, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, called together as Pandavas
<i>Rukmi</i>	Prince of Vidarbha, brother in law of Sri Krishna, whom neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas entertained on their sides in the war
<i>Sahadeva (1)</i>	Second son of madri (Second wife of Pandu), sister of Shalya, prince of Madra, born of the grace of Ashivins
<i>Sahadeva (2)</i>	Son of Jarasandha; on the side of Pandavas
<i>Sage Veda Vyasa</i>	known also as Krishna, Dvaipayana, Parasharya, father of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura by <i>Niyoga</i> ; son of sage Parashara by Satyawati, known also as Kali, <i>Yojanagandhi</i> . Author of this narration of Mahabharatha as Epic, Sri Bhagavatha and other Puranas, <i>Brahmasutras</i> and some law books also.
<i>Saindhava</i>	Jayadratha, prince of Sindhu, husband of Dusshyala, the only daughter of Dhritarashtra
<i>Sanjaya</i>	Charioteer of Dhritarashtra, disciple of Vyasa, and the narrator of War-events to the blind king
<i>Shakuni</i>	Uncle of Duryodhana, brother of Gandhari, evil genius, advisor and co-sharer of all plots to eliminate the Pandavas
<i>Shalya</i>	The Madra prince, brother of Madri, who sided with the Kauravas, and later became General for a day and half
<i>Shankha</i>	Son of Virata by his first wife
<i>Shikhandi</i>	Drupada's daughter; became man at the hands of Sthunakarna, a gandharva surgeon; incarnation of Amba, whom Bhishma had wronged, and so born for revenge

<i>Shveta</i>	Son of Virata by his first wife
<i>Sri Krishna</i>	Lord Vishnu's Eighth Avatara or Dscent from Devaki and Vasudeva in the Vrishni clan among the Yadavas. The stage-manager of this epic drama. Nephew of Kunthi, the mother of Pandavas.
<i>Subhadra</i>	Wife of Arjuna, sister of Sri Krishna, mother of Abhimanyu
<i>Susharama</i>	Prince of Trigarthas, head of the suicide squad called Samshaptakas.
<i>Yudhishtira</i>	Eldest son of Kunthi (Pandu's wife) by god Yama, known also a Dharmaraja
<i>Yuyutsu</i>	Son of Dhritarashtra by a Vaishya woman; on the side of the Pandavas in the war
<i>Vidura</i>	Royal Prime Minister to Dhritarashtra, and later to Prince Yudhishtira; son of Vyasa by a maid servant of Ambika, the mother of Dhritarashtra, Incarnation of god Yama.
<i>Vikarna</i>	One of the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari; wise in counsel and wedded to Dharma
<i>Virata</i>	The king of Matsyas, who sheltered the Pandavas for a year during their incognito-exile
<i>Uluka</i>	Son of Shakuni
<i>Upa Pandavas</i>	Sons of Draupadi by the Pandavas, headed by Prativindhya
<i>Uttaraa</i>	Sister of Bhuminjaya, wife of Abhimanyu, and mother of Parikshita

(and many other minor characters)



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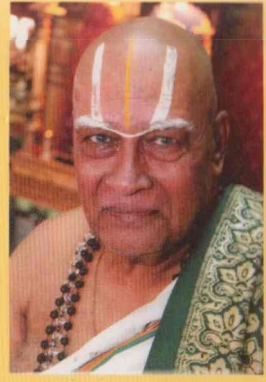
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Born in 1933 and educated at Mysore, (Maharaja's College and Yuvaraja's College), **Sri K. S. Narayanacharya**, popularly known as Ramayanacharya, is a B.Sc. (P.C.M) B.A. (Hons) English, and M.A. (Modern English Literature) coming from an orthodox and devout family of Vedic scholars. His Doctoral thesis is on "**The Influence of Indian thought on the poetry of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot**". He has studied the



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For his services to Indian literature and spirituality through works, speech and discourses, the Karnataka State Open University, Mysore has awarded him recently (18th March, 2005) an Hon.D.Litt. degree.



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