



Those Eighteen Days

Vol : II



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. II

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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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 values of the ancient culture of Bharata for our present generation, keep alive the memory of our forefathers and to awaken the dormant spirit of nationalism and patriotism in the minds of the youth. It is a platform for the exchange of ideas and information, for the promotion of research and scholarship, for the dissemination of knowledge and for the advancement of the national cause. It is a forum for the discussion of the problems of the nation and for the formulation of policies and programmes for the development of the country. It is a centre for the collection and preservation of the national heritage and for the promotion of the national spirit. It is a platform for the exchange of ideas and information, for the promotion of research and scholarship, for the dissemination of knowledge and for the advancement of the national cause. It is a forum for the discussion of the problems of the nation and for the formulation of policies and programmes for the development of the country. It is a centre for the collection and preservation of the national heritage and for the promotion of the national spirit.

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 defeat these short-sighted cynical forces. Our only monument is knowledge. *Na hi Jananena Sampattem*. 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 Sriman
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 modern 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

23.07.07

K. S. Narayanacharya

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

CONTENTS

Vol. I

Ch.1	- Bhishma's final Decision	1
Ch.2	- Duryodhana Remembers	22
Ch.3	- Who will command the forces ?	44
Ch.4	- Yuyutsu expelled - Bhishma's vow	64
Ch.5	- Dhrishtadyumna as Pandava chief of Army	82
Ch.6	- The Rejection of Rukmi	100
Ch.7	- Uluka's Embassy	115
Ch.8	- The Armies move in marked movement-patterns - Vyuhas	128
Ch.9	- Sanjaya endowed with special visual powers	149
Ch.10	- Oh ! Shikhandi !! - Bhishma remembers...	169
Ch.11	- Day one - Arjuna's misplaced compassion	177
Ch.12	- The divine Teacher and his Celestial Teachings	193
Ch.13	- Yudhishtira's Masterly Act !	204
Ch.14	- The First Day of War	224
Ch.15	- Results of The Second Day	239
Ch.16	- Two more days of Pandava-Progress	254
Ch.17	- Four days more - Death of Twentyone more Kaurava Princes	270
Ch.18	- Sri Krishna Weilds the Disc again on the tenth day !	285
Ch.19	- End of Bhishma's Generalship	305

<i>Ch.20 - Advice from the bed of Arrows</i>	325
<i>Ch.21 - Drona as general</i>	340
<i>Ch.22 - War on the Eleventh Day</i>	364
<i>Ch.23 - The 'Suicide Squad' of Samshaptakas</i>	376
<i>Ch.24 - Bhagadatta Eliminated</i>	390
<i>Ch.25 - The Chakravyuha</i>	406
<i>Ch.26 - Abhimanyu in the Chakravyuha !</i>	424
<i>Ch.27 - Abhimanyu Slain</i>	442
<i>Ch.28 - Arjuna vows to kill Saindhava</i>	459
<i>Ch.29 - Counter-preparations in the Pandavas' Camp</i>	482
<i>Ch.30 - Saindhava Falls!</i>	499
<i>Ch.31 - War At Night</i>	520

Vol. II

<i>Ch.32 - Sri Krishna Explains the Significance of 'Loss' as 'Gain'</i>	541
<i>Ch.33 - Virata, Drupada and Drona Die</i>	554
<i>Ch.34 - Karna as next General</i>	577
<i>Ch.35 - Karna Brags, Shalya hits back and insults</i>	598
<i>Ch.36 - Dushshasana despatched to Death</i>	620
<i>Ch.37 - Karna's Missile Fails; Miserable plight of Karna!</i>	644
<i>Ch.38 - Karna's End</i>	667
<i>Ch.39 - Shalya now leads the Army of the Kauravas</i>	694

Ch.40 - Shalya's brave fight	715
Ch.41 - The Fall of Shalya	741
Ch.42 - Where is Duryodhana?	759
Ch.43 - On The Banks of Lake Dwaipayana	779
Ch.44 - Duryodhana comes out !	798
Ch.45 - Death of Duryodhana	820
Ch.46 - Arjuna's Divine Chariot reduced to Ashes !	850
Ch.47 - The Murder of the Panchala Princes in Cold Blood !	871
Ch.48 - Bhima Protected !	897
Ch.49 - The Curse of Gandhari	931
Ch.50 - The Kauravas Cremated	959
Ch.51 - Yudhishtira Crowned	983
Ch.52 - Epilogue - Sanjaya Reviews	1008

CHAPTER 32

SRI KRISHNA EXPLAINS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'LOSS' AS 'GAIN'

There were signs of daybreak in the East, though night was not yet out completely. It was as if the night was weeping in sympathy, and daylight was afraid of being ushered in, in view of what happened on the battlefield.

Sri Krishna was still in his seat as charioteer of Arjuna. When Ghatotkacha fell with a roaring thud, Sri Krishna hugged Arjuna, patted him on the back, got down the chariot, danced, again hugged him, clapped his hands and exclaimed with uncontrollable joy as if an achievement had been made by him.

Arjuna did not understand this strange behaviour of Sri Krishna, which seemed rather misplaced, as it was a sad occasion to have lost a mighty hero on their side. What was there for him to celebrate now, that he did not know? At the same time he could guess that Sri Krishna must be having very valid and undoubted reasons for such behaviour, he thought. So he now asked him :

Arjuna : "Keshava! What is this strange behaviour on

your part? I do not understand what is there to celebrate now at this actual moment of sadness! Tell me if you have any extra reasons.”

Sri Krishna : “There may be gain in loss, as well as loss in gain also. It all depends on who gains what, and who loses what. Think and see if you can understand this puzzle.”

Arjuna : “It makes no sense to me! How can loss be gain or its converse?”

Sri Krishna : “Tell me what we have lost.”

Arjuna : “Ghatotkacha, is important to us as Abhimanyu. Yes”

Sri Krishna : “What have your enemies gained by this our loss?”

Arjuna : “Victory in the night’s battle.”

Sri Krishna : “What use is that victory for its own sake? Can there not be a need to sacrifice something to gain that vain victory?”

Arjuna : “Are you suggesting that, conversely, in the loss of Ghatotkacha there may also be a gain for us?”

Sri Krishna : “Replace the shadows with visible concretes, and you will be nearer the truth.”

Arjuna : (Thinking, seriously) “Well I see that Karna has killed Ghatotkacha with the *Aindra* Missile.... That means we have lost our hero and Karna, his valuable missile... Conversely, Karna has got victory for his army, while we have got none?”

Sri Krishna : “That is a bad equation! Does not the loss of that missile mean also a gain for us? Substitute the vague elements with the concrete ones, and you will see who is saved on our side!”

Arjuna : “You mean, I have been saved?”

Sri Krishna : “Exactly; it was meant for you, and is now wasted. You and I will manage other plus elements and special weapons, as and when occasions arise. That is what I was celebrating and not the death of Ghatotkacha, as many may have misunderstood. This Karna born of a divine element, by his over generosity in thoughtless moments has lost his chest-shield, earrings and precious missiles. All his charity and showy respect for Brahmins and cows will not save him hereafter. He is now an ordinary mortal man. Killing him should not be difficult for you. That is the achievement! You asked me ‘what is this misplaced excitement at a moment of sorrow?’¹ Are you now answered? I have been eliminating mighty ones for your sake, one by one.²

Arjuna was puzzled and insisted on knowing connections among all these that happened severally, separately in time and space sequences.

Arjuna : “How is Jarasandha connected here? Ekalavya,

¹ *Ati harshoyam asthane tavadya Madhusudana |
Shokasthane to samprapte Haidimbasya vadhena tu ||* (180-6)

² *Jarasandhah Chedirajah mahatma mahabhahucsha Ekalavyah
Nishadah |
Ekaikasho nihatah sarva ete yogaistaitaih tvaddhitartham
mayaiva ||* (180-32)

I understand. But where does Ghatotkacha come into this picture?

Sri Krishna : “See, if they were not eliminated then in what you called ‘several, separate’ contexts, they would all be here now with Duryodhana against you?”

Arjuna : “But I had not wronged them?”

Sri Krishna : “They all hated me. You are my close friend. I am known to stand by you in thick and thin situations. So when I took your side, naturally they would have aligned opposite me, that is you. That you did or did not wrong them is no consideration. Had I wronged a Pootana, a Shakata, a Kamsa, a Shishupala or even Jarasandha? They knew I would be on the side of Dharma, and their inclinations were towards Adharma. That is enough reason for hate. Do you understand?”

Arjuna : “You said ‘strategies.’ What other one had you planned for Jarasandha, that I may not have known till now?”

Sri Krishna : “Oh, you want to know that? Well, listen. Before we retreated to Dwaraka, my brother was on one occasion locked up with Jarasandha, in single combat. That demon threw a terrible mace at us. That terrible mace flew at us in terrific speed, tearing the skies in its speed and force. I had a neutraliser mace with me, gifted to me by Sthunakarna, a follower of Kubera, and they were all known as Guhyakas. I threw it at him and his missile. That terrible weapon fell to the earth with a deafening thud and killed that Demoness Jara and

her family. It was she who had given life to that villain by joining the two halves into which he was born, cut in two as it were, at the time of his birth, and so abandoned in a dustbin outside the royal capital. The death of Jara, made it easy for Bhima to kill him later on. Any further questions?"

Arjuna : "How about Ekalavya?"

Sri Krishna : "He comes of the Nishada tribe, and suffers from extraordinary pride. Now you see he is on the side of Duryodhana, with an ambition of his own. If Drona had not taken his right hand thumb used for aiming the arrows, as the 'offering for the teacher' ('guru-dakshina') how much more dangerous could he have been for us now? He is already dead by my 'Samkalpa' or will power. Even those killed by Bhima - Baka, Hidimba, Kimmira and others, - were done so at my urge, as the Indweller of Bhima. They were all Brahmin-haters, Veda-haters and belong to the same category. Ghatotkacha too!"

Arjuna : "Ghatotkacha too? But he fought on our side?"

Sri Krishna : "Yes; this time he did so. But left to himself, that was not his alignment of choice. He had all evil tendencies in him. I know how many Brahmins he had killed and how many sacrificial centres he had destroyed. He had broken time-honoured divine customs and convention.³ Dharma was not respected by him, and you know who such

³ *Esha hi Brahmanadveshi Yajnadveshi cha Rakshasah |
Dharmasya lopta papatma tasmadesh nipatitah ||* (181-27)

people are in reality - 'Dharma-Violators.' You will ask me, then, why I did not kill him myself earlier, as I did the other demons. I did not want to wound your feelings, as he was related to you by blood. Besides, he was to serve us yet as in the present case. But do not equate him with Abhimanyu. If he had not now died at Karna's hands, I would have to deal with him at a future opportunity, myself.⁴ Now two things are achieved; loss of a missile in Karna's armoury, and this demon's death."

Arjuna listens, but still lost in the mysterious intentions of Sri Krishna, or the justifications of his ways, and the historical details revealed by him, looks gazingly at Sri Krishna, in a mood lacking conviction.

Sri Krishna : "Do you remember what I told you on the first day of this prolonged war? That all my Incarnations are meant to protect Dharma, the Eternal Law, and remove Adharma? Do you remember your doubts and my clarifications? Good people may be on your opposite side too, and evil ones on your own side, in unnatural alignments. That is the complication of this war of this age. Dharma is universal cosmic law, that no one shall violate. Whoever disturbs it will have to go. I shall come down in age after age to uphold this.⁵ There is no secret about it, either. It is well known. Now Karna remains. For the time being, forget him.

⁴ *Yadi hyenam nahanishyat Karnah shaktya mahamridhe |*

Maya vadhyo [bhavishyat sa Bhimasaini Ghatotkachah || (181-25)

⁵ *Ye hi Dharmasya loptarah vadhyaste mama Pandava |*

Dharma samsthapanartham hi pratijnaisha mamavyaya ||

When his turn comes I shall let you know how to eliminate him. You will have to do that one-day. Duryodhana will be looked after by Bhima.”



Sanjaya narrated to the blind king Dhritarashtra how the Pandavas lost Ghatotkacha, and Karna his divine missile. He regrets and says : “Is Karna so foolish as to waste that missile over merely a trivial enemy?- a single target, instead of a whole army? It is like a fight between a dog and a pig; in the death of either, it is a ‘shvapaka’⁶ who benefits. The beneficiaries are the wretched Pandavas! It is all the treachery of Sri Krishna. Even if Karna had been killed by Ghatotkacha, they would have benefited.”

Sanjaya : “Do you think Sir, Sri Krishna would have permitted that to happen at this juncture?”

Dhritarashtra : “That is another matter. But I ask you: Why did not Karna use that missile on Yudhishtira? It is like a fruit in the hands of a lame person, taken away by a mighty rowdy! Was Karna so unthoughtful? Was Sri Krishna so crooked in his machination?”

Sanjaya : “What can I say? War is war; tricks are tricks; winning is all that matters. Can you say that is right when your son practices it, and wrong when his enemies practice the same? Sri Krishna believes in using the same practices of the enemies against them!”

⁶ an outcaste who has nothing to eat but dog’s meat. The comparison shows the meanness of Dhritarashtra’s mindset!

Dhritarashtra : “Karna is intelligent; but should he not, understand Sri Krishna’s strategies? Why did he not take out this missile all these fourteen days, to use against Arjuna? Why did he waste it for so silly a cause? I was telling him all along – ‘Karna, use it against Arjuna and finish him.’ Why would he not listen? Sri Krishna is the root of the tree called the Pandavas, Arjuna being the trunk, and others its branches. Panchalas are the leaves. If Karna could kill at least Sri Krishna, the war would have ended. Why did he not do it.”⁷

Sanjaya : “King, Karna would enter the war-field every day with that determination only! But Sri Krishna, Lord of the worlds, who controls the senses of all living things and blesses them with memory and forgetfulness, as is appropriate to their *Karma* contexts, would take this idea off his mind, and so Karna never even considered this then. Would he not protect Himself, this Vasudeva, who protects Arjuna? See, Satyaki directly asked Sri Krishna, this same question once.”

Dhritarashtra : “What question?”

Sanjaya : “Karna had this missile, but never even once thought of using it against Arjuna! How is that?”

Dhritarashtra : “What was Sri Krishna’s answer?”

Sanjaya : Krishna replied : ‘Satyaki, Karna was being

⁷ It is difficult to believe that Dhritarashtra actually said so! But read his own words in the original text :

*Hanyad yadi hi Dasharanam Karno Yadava nandanam |
Kritsna vasumati Rajan! Vashe tasya na samshayah ||* (182-26)

instigated to use it so, by Duryodhana, Dusshasana and others in the last four or five days. Ten days before, while Bhishma was alive, the question did not arise at all. Karna would promise so. But I made him forget his resolve all these days to protect Arjuna.⁸ These four days I have not slept well in my anxiety to save him. Even occasional victories of Arjuna have not pleased or satisfied me. I was always worried about this deadly missile of Indra in Karna's possession. Let me tell you this truth. I have never loved my father Vasudeva, mother Devaki, or Yashoda, friends and intimate relatives like you, brother Balarama, or even my own soul as much as I love Arjuna.⁹ Rule over all the three worlds,¹⁰ or any other achievements, even if easily accessible, will not be enjoyable for me without Arjuna. He is the one supreme object of my care or protection. Today he has had a new lease of life. That is what I celebrated as that missile became wasted.' That was Sri Krishna's lengthy answer."

Dhritarashtra : "I can only say this : my son is ruined in three ways - by his own stubborn foolishness, by bad advice, and by these tricks of Sri Krishna. Who will save him now against these? Tell me what further things happened."



⁸ *Ahameva tu Radheyam mohayami Yudham vara* | (182-40)

⁹ *Na pita na cha me mata na yuyam bhratarastatha* |
Na cha pranah tatha rakshyah yatha Bhibhatsurahave || (43)

¹⁰ worlds of Earth, Skies, and Light

Yudhishtira felt terribly upset by the news of Ghatotkacha's death. He even felt guilty. Sri Krishna's explanations did not bring him any comfort at all. He looked at it from other angles :

“When we were in trouble, groping in the dark, on our escape from that deadly attempt to burn us alive, it was that demoness Hidimba who showed us a way, helped us by joining us, by even forsaking her brother to the furies of Bhima. Now is this the way we treat her only son, our own family member? I loved him as I love Sahadeva. Sri Krishna and Arjuna were not near us when we lost Abhimanyu; now what is the use of their being near, when in their own presence Ghatotkacha was killed? Arjuna should have killed actually Drona; but he killed Saindhava for the only reason that he prevented us from getting in. I did not like it.¹¹ Arjuna has to account for this and more.”

Veda Vyasa appeared then and persuaded Yudhishtira with reason and wisdom.

Veda Vyasa : “Child! Do not see things with a clouded mind. Do not underestimate Karna or this missile of Indra. It was no easy task, saving Arjuna. Sri Krishna did the right thing by offering it an alternate target to waste it. This is for your good. In another five days you are going to be crowned as Emperor of all this earth. It unbecomes you to grieve so at an untimely moment for losses that are

¹¹ *Alpe cha karane Krishna hato Gandhiva Dhanvana |
Saindhavo Yadavashreshtha, taccha natipriyam mama ||* (183-46)

natural in war; and wars are unavoidable as long as evil exists in life.”



Soldiers on either side were tired beyond words. They fell asleep where they were, after Ghatotkacha's fall, and when war halted. They forgot opposite sides, and night gave them the neutrality and protection they needed by impartially embracing all of them.

The Acharya had hardly returned to the camp, with news of Karna's victory, and the fall of Ghatotkacha, when Duryodhana appeared there, as usual, to blame the Acharya, as routine 'ritual.'

Duryodhana : “You are here at rest, while my army is facing the fury of the enemies! You should direct them at this moment of our small victory and the enemy's heavy loss!”

Drona : “I am as sleepless as the soldiers, beyond my age. Should I order those that are well-armed, well-equipped and missile-holders on our side, to kill the innocent on the other side? I have brought you victory today also. But you are not satisfied. All right, I shall proceed and rest only when the Panchalas are dead.”

Duryodhana : “To hell with Panchalas! Why did you spare Arjuna today also?”

Drona : Ask Sri Krishna! It is he who determines lengths of lives of all, even of you and me. Do you expect me to curtail Arjuna's length of life also?”

Duryodhana : “So you are a Vedantin when helpless in arguments! See, today myself, Karna, Shakuni and others will curtail that Arjuna’s life. You go on praising Sri Krishna, after that.”

Drona : (with a derisive scorn) “Go, go and achieve it if you can. I shall thank God if you can return alive after getting near Arjuna. That is the surest way to end this war. Fellow, I have told you times without number, that your chief defect is that you do not trust anyone! It is this that will surely destroy you. You said something of a joint attack on Arjuna. But wait : Push Shakuni, first forward. Was is not he that brought you to this plight? Let him also win the war for you, as he won the gamble then! Fellow, you have to use weapons here, and not dice. And weapons do not obey one wedded to untruth and immorality. Wars have to be won with righteousness on one’s side, also. If God is against you, your mightiest weapons will be of no use, let me tell you.”

The Acharya yawned widely in utter tiredness.

It was no use talking to this old man, thought Duryodhana.

It was announced officially now that the war at night was over, and soldiers could steal sleep until daybreak, and till they finished their morning necessities and dressed up again. Now it was a sight to see in pity. Soldiers slept wherever they were on horsebacks, on elephants, on chariots, on the ground - all kinds of

helpers, arms-suppliers, cooks, doctors, drummers, bugle-blowers, torch-men, flag-bearers and so on.¹²

Sleep was now a grotesque interlude between death and barbarism, life and peace, eluding all. Remember it was the war-field where nothing grew, unlike any other field, agricultural, mercantile or educational where people prepared for life. Here it was all death and destruction. They had to kill each other for no fault of theirs, but for the payer's satisfaction. Who should keep an account of such cruel histories? That has always been the fate of the common soldier. The one hero with a steel heart at that hour was Bhima. With a remarkable degree of self-control, even at the loss of his valorous son, Bhima did some meditation and proceeded for his morning ablutions.



¹² *Aswaprishteshu chapanyane ratha nideshu chapare |*

Gajaskandha gatha | chanye sherate chapare kshitau ||

Sayudhah sagadaschaiva sa khadgah parasvathah |

Saprasa kavachaschanye nara suptah prithak prithak ||

(184-38, 39)

CHAPTER 33

VIRATA, DRUPADA AND DRONA DIE

The Sun rose, anxiously but hesitantly, wondering perhaps who else among the living heroes were destined to die and at whose hands, as it were!

Young warriors with nimble feet and quick muscle-movements, with agile bodies were bathing in Hiranvati, and offering watery offerings to the Sun god. Some were still in the waters, standing absorbed in meditation. Drona was the first to have finished such morning routines and to be in his chariot, ready for that day's war. He did not appear to be tired, though in reality, he was!

Now ill omens appeared aplenty! The axle of his chariot broke, and Drona had to ride another. Ominous birds hovered over him in anti-clockwise direction. Foxes and dogs were moaning all around.

Drona sighted Drupada and Virata and directed his charioteer to take him where they were. He now remembered old wrongs, both avenged and to be avenged, and threw sharp lances at Drupada and Virata, simultaneously, and cut off their bows. Virata replied by shooting ten arrows at Drona. Drupada had a steel shaft (Shakti) decorated with gold and jewels, and

worshipped long in his chambers. He now threw it at his sworn enemy. Drona now threw two more lances, and Virata and Drupada fell dead at that stroke. The main stay of the Pandava forces was thus destroyed.

Drona, however, was still burning with anger and went on destroying the Pandava forces, chasing now Dhrishtadyumna. The Kekaya princes prevented that advance, and fought with him. Drona finished them too, before long. Three of Drupada's grandsons were food for his angry weapons also.

Dhrishtadyumna was enraged beyond words : "Drona, if I cannot kill you today, to avenge these losses, let me not reach heavens of my forefathers" - he shouted, and rushed at him.

Duryodhana was proud of the Acharya's advances and the successes of the day. The death of Drupada and Virata in particular had pleased him beyond expectations. He came to the Acharya and expressed his admiration, loudly. Drona did not even look at him. He was beyond praises or blames of this villain, after all his words of taunt, all these days. Karna and Shakuni too came there at the same time to congratulate the Acharya. Drona relished none of this. He was now directing his chariot at where Bhima stood. The other two also followed him without an alternative.

Bhima was at the back of Dhrishtadyumna, rousing him to greater heroism and vengeance for the deaths of his father and brothers.

Nakula fought with Duryodhana and made him retreat on another front. Sahadeva was taking care of

Dusshasana, nearby. Now Karna fought with Bhima here. On the main front it was now Arjuna rushing towards Drona, who, however, avoided him and went for Dhrishtadyumna, who had now been joined by Nakula and Sahadeva. Satyaki had tired Duryodhana into a forceful and convincing defeat.

Drona was really, dead tired, for all his brave acts. The battle had inclined in favour of the Kauravas, somehow, heavy losses having been inflicted on the Pandava side. What even Bhishma could not achieve in his ten days of Generalship, Drona had achieved in four and a half days - namely the elimination of Drupada and Virata, and their large armies in part.

Sri Krishna was worried, and spoke to Arjuna :

“Friend, let me tell you the truth for the day : as long as the Acharya holds the bow in his hands, victory will elude us. We have to see to it that he renounces arms, on his own, somehow, but just now; here and now. Or else, you will have no army left behind you to follow you to war tomorrow. We have to adopt a strategy. Remember, this was the very man who gave orders for attacking your son from behind, to kill him. That did not seem to be Adharma for him! Why should we not follow his own tactics now, against him?”

Arjuna : “How is that possible, Sri Krishna, against a Brahmin, a teacher?”

Sri Krishna : “Had he been a true Brahmin, he would not be on the war-field. Had he been an honest teacher, he would not have taken sides. Had he been still, at least an honest man, he would not be party

to the cruel orders to butcher your son in such barbarous ways. He is a demon governed by nothing, no laws, no principles, and no codes. Practicing tricks against such a man is no sin."

Arjuna : "What you say may or may not be true; yet it is impossible to make him lay down the bow on his own. Tell me now if there is a way, and then we can discuss his rights or wrongs."

Sri Krishna : "You are a proper fool not to remember the Acharya's own hints in this direction, on the first day, when all of you met him before war started!"

Arjuna : "That is a long time ago by now, and how do I remember small details in a crafty and cunning war that is pulling on?"

Sri Krishna : "I am glad you have called this a 'cunning' and 'crafty' war - two words that I want you to remember just now. Did not the Acharya say then that he would relinquish war if he ever heard a 'lifetime's unpleasant' piece of news?"

Arjuna : "May be! But there is no such news now! Ashwatthama is still alive! I said the war is 'cunning' and 'crafty' because our enemies have made it so! What has this to do with what we can do now?"

Sri Krishna : "It has everything to do with our business on hand. Ashwatthama must die."

Arjuna : "But he is blessed with immortality - they say!"

Sri Krishna : "Long life is one thing; immortality is

another. Do not mix-up. Secondly even if Ashwatthama lives, it is enough if his father can be convinced otherwise; a man may be 'dead' in a hundred ways - physical death, eclipsing from public memory, outliving one's purpose or meaning in life, or losing one's character and name and fame; becoming a coward and being lost in the world of ordinary mortals and so on."

Arjuna : "What is this discourse a prelude for? In what way do you wish Ashwatthama to 'die'? Without his death, how can the Acharya be convinced about this unpleasant bit of news?"

Sri Krishna : "You yourself said this is a crafty and cunning war?"

Arjuna : "I said it, but have not practiced it."

Sri Krishna : "How else did you kill Saindhava? Or his father? Without resorting to tricks and cunningness could you have sent Bhishma out of the battlefield? Let there be no self fooling! Partha! This is a war with unfair, wicked villains. Whether I practice tricks for you, or you yourself do so, it is all the same. I have no ulterior motives of a selfish nature, except success for the Righteous forces of Dharma."

Arjuna : "I am confused! How should I kill Ashwatthama?"

Sri Krishna : "Remember what I said, and use Shukra Niti."

Arjuna : "I still do not catch your meaning."

Sri Krishna : "Whether Ashwatthama is alive or dead, Drona must come to believe that he is no more. Make your brother Yudhishtira announce this in the hearing of Drona. That will give us the result desired, and hinted at by Drona himself earlier."

Arjuna : "This makes the task doubly difficult. Yudhishtira will not agree to speak the lie."

Sri Krishna : "Then you have to go back to the forests only."

Arjuna : "What if someone else amongst us speaks so?"

Sri Krishna : "Drona will not believe. He will believe only a fanatically truthful person like Yudhishtira, without even self-interest. Let him serve at least this one useful purpose on the war-field."

Bhima, who was listening to this persuasion now resorted to a plan. He attacked the Malva king Indra Varma, and killed him. It was well known that he had a famed elephant by name Ashwatthama. Except this elephant and Drona's son there were no other living creatures by that celebrated name. Bhima killed that elephant too, and shouted loudly enough for Drona to hear :

"Ashwatthama is dead"

He repeated it thrice. First time, he felt a little inhibited for its double meaning, particularly the wrong and false meaning that Drona was to catch deliberately. But second time he felt justified that after all he was speaking the truth, whatever Drona would understand by it. Third time he had no difficulty at all.

Drona heard it! He looked at Bhima, untrusting. He felt that this cannot be, as his son was blessed with long life. Even then he felt giddy, and saw that the world around him went into darkness, in his condition nearing fainting.

Next moment, he felt a strong urge for retaliation, and took out Brahmastra for the first time. That deadly missile killed five hundred heroes of the Matsya contingent and six thousand among the Panchala forces, immediately.

Arjuna was desperate now with the boomeranging of the 'untruth', Bhima had uttered! He looked at Sri Krishna, with guilt-filled eyes. Sri Krishna was undisturbed.

The sages like Vishwamitra, Jamadagni, Vasishtha, Kashyapa and others appeared in the skies for Drona's view and spoke :

"Drona, what are you doing? Is this killing, part of your Brahminical duty? The war has been following an unfair course, mostly because of you. Did Parashurama teach this? Your time of death has arrived. Throw down the weapons in your hands, and at least in death, follow the way of a true Brahmin. You are no ordinary Brahmin. Your mastery over the Vedas and Shastras is unparalleled. The first error of yours was to have entered the war-field in a partisan way. Now the use of the Brahmastra, whose deadly effects are known to you! Whom are you punishing and for whose faults? Entertaining malice or deep rooted hatred for Drupada is unbecoming of you. Forgiveness should have been your forte. You have insulted the entire community of

Brahmins, and among them, sages like us, by your bad example, bad deeds, till now. Stop at least now, and die honourably.”

Drona shifted his attention on to the field before him and saw dead bodies strewn everywhere, and felt remorse. He was now convinced of what the sages had said, and felt ashamed of what he had done. Even innocent men like doctors and material suppliers were dead in large numbers! There was no count of dead animals, at all!

He now looked at Bhima again to confirm the truth of what he had just said. Bhima's firm profile, and the way he stood with his mace in victory on his shoulders, made him entertain the fear, that after all he might be speaking the truth! Why would the sages accost him in the skies, otherwise, as never before? He looked at Bhima again and again; each time he felt that Bhima was ridiculing him with that announcement. Drona felt small before his own disciple. He looked at Dhrishtadyumna, who also was grim in expression.

There was no one else trustworthy to confirm the truth or otherwise of what he had heard.

Drona left his chariot and was now seen approaching Yudhishtira!

Sri Krishna, now felt terribly upset and anxious that this 'hero' would spoil all the game plan and strategy he had carefully worked out so far. Sri Krishna's chariot was very near that of Yudhishtira, so that in the hearing of the Prince, Sri Krishna spoke :

“Now all depends on you. If you allow this

Brahmin half a day more of life, he will destroy whatever is left of your army, and bring victory to your enemy. Win, you must; that is the priority now. He will ask you whether it is true that Ashwatthama is dead. Speak as Bhima did. What you say will not be untrue, and will yield the meaning that is the key to our victory. Do not fear.”

Bhima rushed to Yudhishtira and said :

“Brother, we are passing through a crisis. Even an untruth is permitted in such moments, for survival. Untruth can save us even if Ashwatthama, the man, is still alive; as for truth, the elephant by that name is really dead. Tell him what I said is the truth.”

Drona was now still at a distance. He saw Arjuna, Sri Krishna, Bhima and Yudhishtira together and this was perhaps an emergency council, in view of the large number of soldiers killed by him with the Brahmastra!

Sri Krishna said :

“Yudhishtira, do not become a liability to your own army. Speak what is desirable and needed. The Shastras permit you to say what is crucial now.”

Yudhishtira was not in a mood! He had no conflict, no agony; no weighing of pros and cons. His expression communicated the meaning : “No untruths at any cost.”

Bhima : “Brother, make the statement; quick, Drona does not trust anyone else. All depends on you now. You are not greater than Sri Krishna! He is the embodiment of Truth and Victory - Dharma and Jaya. If you fail, all of us will die.”

Yudhishtira's self-confidence was now melting like ice, at these importuning force of Bhima and Sri Krishna. Again and again he looked at them, waveringly, almost ready for what he was urged upon to say.

Bhima made one last effort : "Brother, do not spoil the plan; say quickly Ashwatthama is dead. Drona is nearing us and he can be here any moment."

Drona was near enough now; drooping eyebrows, looking like bushes over shining eyes, which had lost most of their power, could not match the valour with which he was fighting that day. The sun was blazing in the sky. Drona held his right palm, as a cup to shelter his power of sight and looked at Yudhishtira for a firm statement :

At the crucial moment Yudhishtira made a slight addition to what he was expected to say. He said his reply in two statements, the first one loudly, and the second one inaudibly, as if speaking to himself :

"Ashwatthama is truly dead"¹

"But that is only an elephant"²

Yudhishtira's chariot, at this moment sank into the earth by some four inches. It was a fabulous chariot,

¹ *Asvatthama hatah*

² *Hatah Kunjarah*

There is a popular myth that Sri Krishna blew his conch, while Yudhishtira was uttering this latter part, so that Drona could not hear it! This is against the original of Vyasa! Even in the Kannada version of the epic, this myth is absent. It is natural that a hero in dilemma should speak with different emphasis, the two parts, as is faithfully described in the original.

never touching the earth, as long as he was in it, because of his virtues, particularly his truthfulness. Symbolically his self-esteem and glory also sank at that moment of great consequence.

Yudhishtira did not speak any untruths! But, while the second part of his utterance did not fall on the ears of Drona, and so he heard only the first part, the effect was calculated to produce a delusion on the mind of Drona, and what did not look like an untruth finally, did produce the result that only an untruth could produce!

The army knew that Ashwatthama was alive! Those that knew this, condemned Yudhishtira, while others stood stunned in skeptical states of mind. Yet others suspected some foul play, while most could not fathom the mystery of what was happening.

Sri Krishna heaved a sign of relief! Bhima beamed a smile of satisfaction. Arjuna looked at Yudhishtira with contempt and would not face Sri Krishna.

Here was Drona fainting, and on earth, with the bow and arrows rolling away from his hands. That was only for a brief moment. For in the next instance, he rose up miraculously and ordered his chariot to be taken near Dhrishtadyumna!

Sri Krishna was surprised : What was the plan of this wicked Brahmin now?

Yudhishtira sent a large contingent of army to the aid of the Panchala Prince. They all surrendered to Yudhishtira's orders so totally, that Drona simply could not escape now, as if in a death trap. Drona realised

this; and again looked at Yudhishtira's face. He was torn between vengeance and renouncement of arms. Yudhishtira said nothing again. The earth trembled then and a wild wind swept away the Kaurava forces in dust and din. Drona looked at his weapons, which now appeared to be burning with demoniac lustre. The horses of his chariot were shedding tears. Drona felt his enthusiasm for war sinking in him.

The sages again appeared in the skies and continuously implored him to lay down arms and retire. Drona felt profoundly disturbed. He had, by the end of the day, destroyed some twenty thousand horsemen and ten thousand elephant brigadiers, and countless foot soldiers. This was in addition to the havoc created by the Brahmastra. Dhrishtadyumna stood totally weaponless, and anything might have happened to him had not Bhima been there to protect him now.

Bhima looked at the Acharya with rage, in a gaze that made Drona stand fixed, with no longer any desire to fight. Bhima gave a vent to his anger :

Bhima : "You villainous and fallen Brahmin! You were once our teacher and the object of our veneration. But you have lost it all, by this your conduct in the war, the side you have taken, and the mean tricks practiced by you to bring victory to villains against us, who have not swerved from sworn-codes of morality. If we had resorted to evil methods like you, this war would have ended some thirteen years ago, in the Gamble Hall, without millions having to die on either side. You could not realise even so much, as a Brahmin. They say

Non-Violence is the greatest duty of a Brahmin. As for us, violence permitted by Dharma, to protect our subjects, is our bounden duty. The position cannot be exchanged. You had the honourable additional duty to protect all souls under the Sun, in addition to respecting the four-fold social order and their respective obligations. You are not unintelligent or unlearned not to know all this, and to learn it from someone like me. But you have betrayed yourself, the Vedas, the people, and your God-prescribed duties. There are outcastes who kill dogs, cook their flesh and eat. Tell me, you wretched Brahmin, if there is any difference between such a fallen man and yourself? Did you have to nurture hatred for a single individual, Drupada, for so long, just to bring up your son, or live by an honourable livelihood? Where was the compulsion for you to sell yourself so totally to Duryodhana, as to obey all his evil commands? Did you ever examine in your mind if there was a better alternative still open to you? See: you have violated all your codes. We are doing only our duties. Tell me whether I should kill you or not, or why I should show mercy to you ! Ashwatthama is dead as Yudhishtira has announced. For whose sake do you still want to live or fight? Have you still any sense of shame or honour left in you? If we fight with our enemies, it is for a right cause, as even your corrupt conscience would tell you. But tell me what cause do you have to fight with us, your own disciples, who have not only not wronged you, but have honoured and fulfilled your desires, as even

our enemies know? It is because of your intelligence that our enemy is emboldened to fight us. If you had played your expected neutrality, perhaps, the war would not have taken place. You do not believe even Yudhishtira. Fie upon you!"

Drona was thoroughly exposed and humiliated now. He had no answers for any of the questions of Bhima, and he felt justified in being rebuked by Bhima in words of justice and measurement. He laid down all arms finally. He announced his decision.

Drona : "Karna, Duryodhana, come here and know my vow : I shall not fight any longer. You can fight the war to the end if you so desire. But I pray to God that victory be unto the Pandavas."

Drona spread arrows for a seat, squatted on them in a cross-legged posture, meditating on God, by chanting the Holy Eight-syllabled Manthra and breathed his last by the Yoga method, by Pranayama.

Just at that very second, Dhrishtadyumna jumped from his chariot, rushed to where Drona was squatting, and with one stroke of the sword held in his right hand, cut off Drona's head, while holding his tuft of hair in the other, for a firm grip! Many did not know that Drona had already discarded his mortal coil, and thought that Dhrishtadyumna had actually killed the Acharya. Yet it was gross dishonour for a teacher in his last moments! One view was that Dhrishtadyumna was but fulfilling the oracular prophesy and so there was no impropriety; fewer yet could tell whether Drona deserved this fate at the hands of a former pupil. Dhrishtadyumna had cut off Drona's head; whether the Acharya was still absorbed

in yogic brace, or really dead, or dying in his last moments no one could say.

Wonder of wonders happened then : A light of super-effulgence emanated from Drona's body, competing with the Sun in the skies, as it were, in brightness and disappeared into the air. Only five persons could see it. Sanjaya, Kripa, Arjuna, Sri Krishna and Yudhishtira. If you discount Sanjaya who was not actually there on the battlefield, you could include Bhima.

This scene made them stand up in reverence for the departed soul, and soldiers on either side paid their last respects to a mighty hero.

Dhrishtadyumna stood stunned in silence. Those around him, in his own army, were blaming him in open harsh words. The 'murderer' stood without a reply or remorse, unfazed by criticism even by his own camp.

Anyway, another CHAPTER of war was over.



Ashwatthama was away when all this happened in the main front. He raved in fits of anger when he knew of it, and wept for the deplorable, demeaning way his father had been killed. He would not believe it at all.

"Did Yudhishtira utter that lie that I was dead? Did he descend to this mean depth? Could my father's own disciple kill him without an iota of gratitude or respect? Was it proper to attack a person in Yogic practice?"

He went on asking people around him.

Duryodhana was too deeply filled with sorrow for

his own reasons to answer these questions. Tears were his only answer. The running army of the Kauravas was no sight to bear for Ashwatthama; he felt further humiliated.

Ashwatthama did not weep! He exploded like a fire-filled mountain and asked for more details : It was Kripa who had the composure of mind to tell him all about the circumstances.

“Boy! Yudhishtira uttered that lie in my own hearing. It was Sri Krishna who instigated him to do so. Bhima cursed your father in words no one can imagine, repeat or entertain. The sages in the sky told your father to lay down arms. Your father obeyed, sat on a seat of arrows, in trance. It was then that Dhrishtadyumna cut off your father’s head, shamelessly and dishonourably, by dragging him by the hair-tuft on his head. But your father had already breathed his last. It was his body that was rudely dishonoured in the view of all. Had he not renounced arms, even gods could not have touched him, let alone defeat him.”

Ashwatthama : “How could Yudhishtira agree to tell this shameful lie?”

Kripa : “At first he would not agree. But Bhima gave some scope by creating an excuse. He killed Malava king Indrasena’s famed elephant, which also bore the same name as yours, and urged him to say this at least, that Ashwatthama - the elephant - is dead.”

Ashwatthama : “How could this confuse my father? It was a mere elephant?”

Kripa : “Yudhishtira did not say it all in one breath!

He broke it into sentences : like -

“True, Ashwatthama is dead.

But, that is only an elephant.”

The first one he uttered very loudly, but the second one in inaudible whispers; so, confusion was created deliberately. It was this that did the harm.”

Ashwatthama was now uncontrollable in anguish and shame. He shouted :

“This is deceit! This is evil, unbefitting the Pandavas. They have followed barbarians in this foul act. If my father had died in the routine course, it would have been another matter. But now, touching the hair of a holy Brahmin while still alive, is an unforgivable sin. It is an act of disrespect to the entire Brahmin community. I curse myself for not being near my father to protect him at his last moments. Dhrishtadyumna shall pay dearly for this. Yudhishtira too.”

So saying Ashwatthama drew out Narayanastra, which no one had used in this war so far. Drona had obtained it from Lord Narayana himself after being in yogic presence in the Himalayas for long. It was a difficult penance and the supreme Lord would not yield to anyone easily. Drona might have asked for immortality. (Neither Dhruva nor Prahlada also had asked for it earlier, though in his presence for various reasons in varied circumstances. The mysterious power of the Lord, Maya, deludes us from this highest goal by offering minor temptations as hurdles, to test the eligibility of the candidate). Drona was full of the Kshatra spirit - improper for a true Brahmin - and so

asked for this Narayanastra³. God granted it, but offered some limitations and conditions for it to be used : “You cannot use it without weighing the consequences. You or anyone to whom you teach it have to follow this caution or else even those that ought not to be killed will die by its misuse. For, there is no anti-missile against it. If the targeted ones surrender to it abjectly and throw away all weapons, and prostrate, it will spare them.”

Drona had to teach it to Ashwatthama in a difficult moment. He had prescribed the precautions too. But now in his fury Ashwatthama forgot them or belittled them : He said : “Let not a Pandava live hereafter; let the Panchala race be erased from the earth”, and threw it on the Pandava army. The Kaurava army roared in joy expecting the war to be over in a few minutes. Drums, kettles sounded and bugles tore the skies in deadening sounds.

The Pandava army was already in sorrow at Drona's death in despicable circumstances, its leaders being torn in their opinions, disagreeing with even Sri Krishna's strategy; this jubilation in the Kaurava camp added to their anxiety. See this picture of confusion in Arjuna's words..

Arjuna : “Brother, Yudhishtira, you should not have uttered that cursed lie! After all Drona was our teacher. Dhrishtadyumna should not have killed him like a slaughter-animal. Ashwatthama will avenge

³ Bhagadatta, before, possessed Vaishnavastra, a variant of it, acquired from his father Narakasura; it had similar conditions too.

this by let-losing a deluge! This situation is akin to Lord Sri Rama's killing of Vali from behind a tree. The infamy will live imperishably long after the perpetrators and the victims are no more. Drona had placed in you unfailing trust, and you have betrayed it! You are a traitor. You may justify that you confirmed the death of no more than a mere elephant of that same name. It is a thin false cover, for a calculated untruth for a vile, selfish purpose. It is the falsehood that disarmed Drona and killed him. How can you escape blame now? You are the proper instrument of the Acharya's death. Do you remember how much the Acharya loved you, though we had nothing to offer him, and it was Dhritarashtra who maintained him ? He loved us more than his son or his benefactors or patrons. I should have killed Dhrishtadyumna before allowing him to do that mean act. What ignorance covered me, I do not know."

Arjuna was in the same identical mental condition as on the first day, before Sri Krishna taught him 'Gita.' The same delusion, the same forgetfulness of convictions, the same aimless sorrow, the same morbidity and cynicism were there. It was now Bhima's turn to attempt to bring them back to senses, and the world of practicality, ethics, morality and duty and social as well as individual responsibility. Sri Krishna was watching the patient in a relapsed condition of disease and the new 'doctor' administering to him the old medicine in new dosages.

Bhima : "Arjuna, can you lose your conviction for a silly reason? Are you a recluse in a forest hermitage?"

In a cave? Why are you blaming Yudhishtira? If you had finished this wretched Brahmin on an earlier occasion - there were plenty of opportunities for you to do so - would we be blaming each other as now? You and I are Kshatriyas by birth, with a God-entrusted duty to protect the innocent, pious and good persons from the evil ones. What else do you or I have to do in life? Can we go on forgiving all as 'innocent', indiscriminately, like a woman? How will good people get on? Ultimate Good for us is through action and duty alone - not inaction, confusion, loss of conviction and vision when Good and evil fight! Why are you speaking like a fool? Are you not an extraordinary hero? Does this ignorance befit you, or this argument in favour of inaction? You are Incarnate Indra, and are bound by Dharma. Or else how did you tolerate our enemies all these thirteen years? Was not Dharma, our word and our honour that bound you and me to this endurance of all unspeakable suffering? Now why do you target all this in a moment of misplaced, unbecoming pity for the Acharya? Can we go on pitying all dying or dead men? Do we not have things to learn from them, and our right to criticise them for our benefit, without malice or favour? Should you not remember all our earlier occasions of humiliations at the hands of these unworthy or worthless fellows, our enemies and their supporters in silence, Bhishma, Drona and Kripa? When Draupadi was sought to be disrobed, why did you not pity her or kill our enemies? Is Drona more worthy of compassion than Draupadi?

Tomorrow you will pity Karna, Duryodhana and other devils too! Do you want to forget all our sufferings? Was it proper for us to wear forest garments like Brahmins, at the instance of our enemies? Were we born to rule or live like animals in forests? I have tolerated all this out of my respect to Yudhishtira! Now the only good and sensible thing that this unfortunate brother has done for the first time in life is to fell Drona with a seeming untruth? Instead of congratulating him, why are you blaming him? You must actually celebrate it! Do you remember your words to the blind King through Sanjaya? 'We are ready for war' - You said. This is war, and anybody can die in it. You are now indulging in splitting our own units while we are striving our best to achieve success. Would there be success without Drona's fall? Drona is an 'adharmi', an evil doer, the moment he opted to join Duryodhana. Why can't you see this? The teacher in him is a thing of the past, and countered by this choice he made. Do you expect a teacher to fight against pupils, if he is still a teacher? Your criticism is an indirect accusation against Sri Krishna also! Instead of praising him for a timely, friendly advice, you are praising this fool of an ass, Ashwatthama - short tempered, rash and a braggart. Does he equal Sri Krishna in a fragmentary virtue even? Why do you frighten ? You are like Hiranyakashipu blaming Lord Narasimha!"

Dhrishtadyumna supported these arguments of Bhima.

Dhrishtadyumna : “Arjuna, cool down, and think calmly. I have not killed a true Brahmin engaged in his God-ordained duties of teaching, learning, conducting sacrifices, leading such practices for others, receiving charities, making them and what these six duties comprehend among themselves. Drona is ‘fallen’ - *bhrashta* - a fellow who has given up what is proper for him. He chose to fight like a warrior, came on the war-field, joined evil forces, and stood against us! What is my duty? Is this a school, a forest *Pathashala*, where a teacher is expected to be revered by pupils? When he challenges us to fight, we have to fight; fighting is for achieving victory; in this course naturally unavoidable for me, I had to fell him and I have done my duty; and for your sake! Did any one use the Brahmastra till now, although situations so warranted time and again? Should this ‘Brahmin’ use it against innocent people? Let alone Brahminhood. Do you see in him minimum qualities of at least a normal human being? You accuse me of treachery to a teacher! Well, do you remember the oracle, which said at the time of my birth, that I was destined to kill Drona? I am the instrument of God, and no more, chosen so, long, long ago. A similar oracle had also predicted Kamsa’s death at Sri Krishna’s hands! Do you blame Sri Krishna also? You and I and all others are all agents and instruments of God. Mutual blame does no good to anyone now. This wretched fellow killed my father, children and grand children in your presence! Why did you not blame him? When you killed

Saindhava and threw his head elsewhere to destroy another soul, you did not think it improper or evil! Are there different standards for you and me? Bhagadatta was your father's friend too. Yet you killed him! Why? Because relations are immaterial in war. For your foul criticism, I should have killed you too; but I have spared you as you are the husband of my sister. Do not misuse liberty or friendship⁴. An elephant bends down on forelegs for a known rider to act like a ladder, so that he may climb on its back. Should the rider misuse this goodliness to kill that very elephant? This is a crooked Brahmin, in the guise of a pious, respectable one. He has resorted to evil tricks against us many times as evidenced in your son's butchery! We have to use such tricks against him, when it is our turn. Sri Krishna, Yudhishtira and myself have done no more than this.⁵"

Sri Krishna was listening to all this with patience, while Aswathama's Narayanastra was fast approaching the Pandavas.



⁴ *Sambandhat avanatham Partha, na mam tvam vaktumarhasi |
Svagotha kritasopanam nishannamiva dantinam ||* (197-41)

⁵ *Tatha mayam prayunjanam asahya Brahmanabruvam |
Mayayaiva vihanyat yo na yuktam Partha tatra kim ||*
(197-27)

CHAPTER 34

KARNA AS NEXT GENERAL

Ashwatthama shouted : “You, Yudhishtira, you are responsible for my father’s renouncement of arms, by your lie! After all, my father was doing his rightful duty in a straightforward war. You fools, had no courage to stand before him in a straight war! You will reap the consequences of this evil act here and now.”

Thus speaking, Ashwatthama had thrown the Narayanastra. It began to burn to death even the Kaurava army that stood between him and the Pandava army. But the Kaurava army circumvented the missile, as if by advance notice and ran in different directions. It was the unfortunate Pandava army that had no prior notice or preparation and so stood exposed to that missile helplessly. The Sun was eclipsed as it were, and a darkness of unimaginable magnitude descended on the earth, while the Pandava army felt the brunt of it like an ocean exposed to the raining of stones. With opposition mounting, the missile grew stronger. Yudhishtira said to Sri Krishna : “Friend, after crossing oceans of the magnitude of Bhishma ¹ and Drona, we

¹ *Bhishmadronarnavam tirthva sangrame bhirudustare |
Nimajjishynami salile sagare Drowni goshpade ||* (199-29)

are now getting drowned in a roadside ditch called Ashwatthama! What is this irony? Find a way to save us!”

Yudhishtira was so crestfallen that he forgot that surrender was the only way to conquer this missile. So he ordered Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, his brothers and all others nearby, to run. He said this to Sri Krishna also!

Sri Krishna stood smiling without moving. But Yudhishtira relapsed into his usual defeatist refrain : “Krishna. Enough of this war. I shall immolate myself with brothers in fire, for having started this wasteful war!”

Sri Krishna : “When are wars productive? What do they produce except victory, if fought fairly, for the Right?”

Yudhishtira : “Where is fairness here? I am instrumental for the Acharya’s foul death. Even Arjuna blames me, you see? I simply followed you, and your instruction, with implicit trust that your advice is always the best course to follow. Why does not Arjuna understand this? I am also responsible for the death of Abhimanyu. I should have avoided sending him unprotected into the midst of those merciless wolves. I have blundered throughout. I played that shameful gamble and got all my brothers and wife into that dreadful crisis. I couldn’t even answer that question of Draupadi whether it was proper, or in order, for me to pawn her away, after pawning myself earlier! I was thus responsible for her humiliation and disrobement.

I gambled away her sons also... So let there be a final expiation for all this chain, in my death by burning myself into ashes."

Sri Krishna : "Brother, this is no time for sorrow or gossip, or review of the irrevocable past. Just lay down your arms and fold up your hands in reverence. The missile will cool down."

All the Pandavas, and their army immediately obeyed - excepting Bhima!

Bhima had no intention to disrespect the missile. But his anger on Ashwatthama blinded him to that urgent necessity. So he went on fighting with his mace, that impossible missile. He shouted also :

"Do not surrender like cowards. I shall defeat the intentions of this wicked son of the Acharya. There might be no countering of this missile so far. But there is now Bhima, the invincible. Arjuna, do not lay down your Gandiva. If you do so, it will be a blot on you for all time to come, like the black marks in the moon, for all his beauty and splendour."

So saying Bhima began fighting the Narayanastra. Arjuna did not care for Bhima's impulsive advice. He shouted back.

"Bhima, my vow is well known that I shall not lift my bow against Brahmins, cows, and Narayanastra. I shall not break it now."

Bhima : "Then go to hell with your vow! But I shall not rest contented with a cowardly surrender."

Arjuna was worried about Bhima's obstinacy, and

in fear and confusion, he too forgot his vow and used Varunastra against that missile. But it chased Bhima, and fell on his very head. It began to burn him immediately.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna now ran to him, took the mace out of his hands, and disarmed him of his other weapons too and appealed to him to fold up his palms in reverence. Bhima was still roaring with anger : “Leave me alone, I shall still teach this scoundrel a lesson.”

It was obvious that Bhima was not really confronting the missile so much as the villain that had engaged it. Surrender thus, meant, in his misunderstanding, surrender to villainy! Bhima had never before behaved so rudely or shown disrespect to Sri Krishna or a missile in his name. So it required some more persuasion.

Sri Krishna : “Bhima, don’t you listen even to me?”

He pulled Bhima out of his chariot.

The missile was now diffused; it calmed down and disappeared, but not before it destroyed an entire division of the army, (one ‘Akshowhini’ so to say) to the credit or discredit of Ashwatthama, for the day. The quarters were now clear of clouds and mists, and a cool breeze began to blow, cooling the army scorched by the missile’s heat and radiation.

Duryodhana was disappointed that the Pandavas still remained alive, against his calculation, and that Sri Krishna had warded it off cleverly to save them. He said to Ashwatthama : “Friend, use it again.”

Ashwatthama replied : “I could use it only once in my life, a condition that my father made me abide by, when he taught it to me. So I cannot violate it. If Sri Krishna had not intervened, your enemies would be dead by now. It is he who knew its only limitation - surrender as counter - and used it effectively in favour of the Pandavas. What more can I do?”

Duryodhana : “Then use your next best, for our enemy-army is realigned and marching against us in determination.”

Ashwatthama did not care; he did not even reply. The war drifted without direction or result, for the Kaurava army had no General to direct it now.

Meanwhile, by the way, Ashwatthama assumed powers to kill the Pandavas by the use of a missile like Narayanastra, and advanced against the enemy; many in the Kaurava forces thought that he had been named the next General, pending formalities! He now used the Agneyastra - the Fire Missile. But it also failed to hurt the Pandavas, although it worked havoc otherwise on a great scale. Sri Krishna and Arjuna remained unperturbed. Veda Vyasa came to Ashwatthama and said :

“You great fool! Here is Narayana, beside Nara. You are using Agni Missile, while Agni is only one of the killing agents of Rudra. This Rudra is an aspect of Narayana. How do you expect this to work against Sri Krishna? Have you any senses? Stop this stupidity.”

Ashwatthama felt ashamed. The Kaurava Princes

got closeted for consultations as to who should be their next General.



An unseemly wordy duel was going on between Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna, now.

Satyaki : “Dhrishtadyumna, it is not fair you killed Drona in that foul way, when he was sitting in meditation. You say that Arjuna too eliminated Bhishma in similar circumstances - but listen, there also your own brother Shikhandi was instrumental. There was at least an excuse there that Bhishma wished it to happen like that. What excuse was here, for you? Shikhandi - I shall grant - was born for vengeance against Bhishma. What reason did you have, here? If ever I hear you justify the unjustifiable, I shall kill you. A Brahmin-killer cannot be purified in this life. You are his disciple too!”

Dhrishtadyumna : (turning to Sri Krishna) “See, Sri Krishna, just because I listen in silence, this villain is making all sorts of accusations against me. He talks of forgiveness. But what is our context? Whom should we forgive and for what? Remember yesterday? You also advised this fellow some silence. You fellow Satyaki, how did you kill Bhurishravas? Apply your own standards and see where you stand. Did you not fight with Arjuna himself? Do you now teach me respect for a preceptor, which you did not follow? It was my sister who was humiliated before all elders like Drona! What did this old man do then? Would you have spoken to me like this if Draupadi was your own sister? Why have you not opened your mouth against the perpetrators of evil, earlier? Even once? Did you condemn when

Shalya was drawn to that side by easy tricks? Where were you when they killed Abhimanyu in unprecedented barbaric circumstances? We are paying them in their own coin - that is all. Rightness or otherwise are no considerations here, or hereafter. Just mind your business, and do not divide our army and its leaders at this crucial moment. You are expected to fight the Kauravas. Do not talk of 'Dharma' that leads to cremation-grounds, nor go back to Dwaraka like a coward, shielding one's life."

Satyaki raised a mace to kill Dhrishtadyumna. Sri Krishna intervened and pushed Bhima between them to stop hostilities. Bhima consoled both. Sahadeva too joined and prayed : " Friends, we depend heavily on you both for victory. What is this you are now doing?"

Drona, thus, even in death, divided his 'enemies' in mutual hate, which did not blaze, but generated a lot of suffocating smoke, smouldering slowly! Drona helped none !



It was the sixteenth morning since war had started. The question was who shall lead the Kaurava army as General next. Ashwatthama collected a consensus and conveyed to all assembled.

"Friends, elders say that means for success must be achieved through five sources: friendship, diplomacy or strategy, ability or efficiency and experience or expertise. But all these depend on a sixth factor - namely God, or Destiny, and fate or fruits of Karma - as elders say. Unfortunately, this sixth factor seems to work against us. That is our experience so far. Otherwise, how

would Bhishma and Drona fall so easily to mean tricks of our enemies? Now our only choice is Karna; only he can bring us victory through his loyalty to us, his unquestioned valour and inheritance of war-lore from Parashurama."

All accepted the same and war-drums greeted this decision loudly. It was not questioned by anyone, not even Shalya, who might be the only rival.



There were no special features in arrangements on either side. Not much army was left as compared with what prevailed on the starting day. Not much enthusiasm too among those that lived, as either side had lost important leaders like Bhishma, Drona, Virata and Drupada, without yielding definite results in any inferable direction.

Karna had formed the Makara Vyuha, and the Pandavas offered the half-moon Vyuha as a counter challenge.

Bhima killed Kshemadthurthi, an important hero on Duryodhana's side. Draupadi's son by Yudhishtira, Prativindhya, scattered the Kaurava forces, and made them run for life. Ashwatthama had to bear the fury of Bhima, and run away at last. Arjuna chased him and tired him in a long drawn fight, but at last allowed him to escape out of consideration as his teacher's son.

But Ashwatthama, who, so ran away out of Arjuna's mercy began to destroy the Pandyan army on the side of the Pandavas, without any consideration, at all. Sahadeva fought with Dusshasana, while Nakula engaged

Karna. Yudhishtira was successful in forcing Duryodhana to an unwilling retreat. Satyaki attacked Karna and destroyed a large segment of the Kaurava army.

It was evening time and the war was to come to an end soon. It was a very tiring day for both sides, and with no decisive moments for either, although the Kaurava army had suffered large losses in terms of numbers, and the Pandavas had avenged the use of Narayanastra, and its consequences, in the hands of Ashwatthama on the previous evening.

Duryodhana was worried as ever. Karna had 'wasted' a full day without proving his tall claims or fulfilling any of his promises. On the other side, Arjuna had 'finished' off whatever had remained of the 'suicide squad' of the Trigarthas, and of Vinda and Anuvinda of the Kekayas. The Kauravas had killed the brave Pandyan King under the leadership of Ashwatthama, no doubt. But that was no match for the losses they had suffered. Here were the Pandavas victorious and had wiped out the Elephant brigade of the Pundras, and the princes of Anga and Vanga. Karna had attacked the Panchala army with small successes. At the end of the day, Satyaki had defeated Karna and made him run away in shame. Arjuna had destroyed lots of The Kaurava forces. How could Duryodhana feel enthused? What had happened to Karna? Why did he not fight even like a common hero, let alone like a General?

The night council started with an ominous silence. At last, Duryodhana began :

Duryodhana : “Friend, Karna! I have trusted you now as never before, and as I did no one earlier. But today you too let me down. A day is wasted in full, and our army got exposed to the full fury of the enemies. What shall we do?”

Karna was stung! He did not understand this last question or the suggestion behind it. What was there ‘to do?’ Did he mean replacement of leadership? Did he mean rapprochement? Did he mean an ignoble ‘run away?’

Karna : (hissing like a furious serpent) “Friend, I could not keep any of my promises, today, true - But the odds are heavy against us; against me in particular! I realised it just today.”

Duryodhana : ‘Odds’? What do you mean? Why only ‘today’?

Karna : “Please do not misunderstand me; have patience, listen, and then see what you and I can do.”

Duryodhana had certainly no ‘patience’ now, as he thought this was a mild preamble or excuse for ‘something’ not to be relished, or a wish to retire like Bhishma and Drona! He looked at Karna blankly :

Karna : “What I mean is that I do not have as good a charioteer for me as Sri Krishna is for Arjuna! What skills, what strategies, what diplomatic moves, what sense of timings, tactics and presence of mind!! I do not mind a hundred Dhrishtadyumnas or mere Arjunas. But this rare combination, in any case, is beyond me to break. It is an envy. See how

the two wasted Aswatthama's Narayanastra? What is the use of heavy and powerful missiles in my possession when the enemy is so skilled and protected, well advised and ready to waste my best? Can you get me a charioteer like Sri Krishna?"

Duryodhana : (Relieved to some extent that Karna was not pleading excuses as he had feared), "Friend, remember we have wasted sixteen precious days! I waited for this moment of your Generalship. It has come. It must not go unfulfilled in impossible excuses or demands. Where can we find a match for Sri Krishna? I feared a Sri Krishna with weapons in his hands, and so in my bargain asked for his army of Yadavas to be on our side, imagining that a neutral Sri Krishna would be harmless. Even when he assumed the role of a charioteer for Arjuna, I ignored the dangers he would create by advices not in my interest or by violating norms that are taken for granted! Are you joking at this moment of my helplessness? How can I find you another Sri Krishna?"

Karna : "Listen to me fully, please"

Duryodhana : "I have been listening and listening and have become deaf by now. Could you waste your Indra - missile against that mere ruffian Ghatotkacha, so thoughtlessly? I do not know what will happen to other missiles too! Friend, how many more 'tomorrows' will have to be hurriedly consigned to the load of 'yesterdays' without actually becoming 'todays' in-between. Is there no gap? Or should that gap merely be filled with waste or rubbish? Do you

simply belong to the 'tomorrow' that may never materialise, or the 'yesterdays' that do not reappear? Do we have nothing to do with the 'present' todays? Talk, friend of the immediate, today, now, this moment!"

Karna : "Friend, you are understandably impatient; but understandably over-anxious, and impetuous. We cannot have any and every thing in our own way, always. Reverses are to be taken as challenges.... See I have a divine bow called 'Vijaya', which means 'victory.' Indra used it once, and achieved victory over demons, as it was made by Vishwakarma and presented to him for that very purpose. I am no inferior to Arjuna in aiming, targeting, in missile power, in the many niceties of archery, in might, in valour, and in many other ways : I am a direct disciple of Bhagavan Parashurama, whereas Arjuna is only a grand-disciple, and his expertise is second-hand, whereas mine is first hand. My bow is also known as 'Bhargava' as it was handled by my teacher for some time. It was my Guru that gave it to me. But there is now one handicap...."

Duryodhana : "What is it, if I can remedy it?"

Karna : "I told you... I do not have a charioteer like Sri Krishna, unlike Arjuna."

Duryodhana : "Where can we find a second for that arch-mischief-maker?"

Karna : "He may be an 'arch-mischief-maker' for you! For Arjuna what an able guide, helper, adviser and strategist? There is one nearest substitute on our

side too. If you can persuade him that will equal the chances between me and Arjuna.. Will you try?"

Duryodhana : "Is it true? Why did you not tell me so beforehand? I shall try to provide him for you... Who is he?"

Karna : "Do not be so self-confident! Such an one does exist on our side indeed. But it may be difficult for you to persuade him in to this role."

Duryodhana : "Never mind... I shall get you anything as long as it is available on this earth. Name him."

Karna : "It is Shalya, the Madra prince! He is very proud, caste-conscious and may not think much of me. But he possesses all the qualities of Sri Krishna."

Duryodhana : "Is this all? Anything more?"

Karna : "There are two more things that I do not have, but which you cannot provide me with: a quiver of arrows that never becomes empty, which is in Arjuna's possession, and as endowed by Agni; and a chariot that no arrows or missiles can destroy, also a gift of Agni, along with immortal horses. Can you give me these two? No, you cannot; so I am not asking for them. It is enough if you can persuade Shalya to the role of a charioteer for this war with Arjuna."

Duryodhana : (Doubting for a moment) "Surely I shall try... but are you sure it will solve your problem? How do you equate him with Sri Krishna?"

Karna : "You try, please. It may solve my problem.

Sri Krishna and Shalya are both equally mighty warriors. Both have studied "Ashwa Hridaya" (the science concerning the classification of horses, their training, their selection, and the science of knowing and the art of commanding them to quick and different commands etc.), under eminent experts. They are equal in power of single combat also, and in a variety of ways. In the wielding of Mace, Shalya is equal to Balabhadra; Sri Krishna is known as Gadadhara !. If Shalya somehow agrees, think, you are lucky and that this war is over, as I shall kill Arjuna, surely."

Duryodhana was momentarily happy, though still anxious about Shalya's possibility of willingness to so act.



Duryodhana : "Uncle, I am in great difficulties, and it is only in your hands to help me and relieve me of this difficulty."

Shalya : "I understand. You have lost Bhishma and Drona in dubious circumstances. Destiny seems to be against you, young man. It is still not too late for peace. What can I do in these odd circumstances?"

Duryodhana : "Sir, you too are impatient. I have not come to you for a discourse on the advantages of peace or rapprochement with the enemies. Bhishma or Drona are no more to be lamented. I am not daunted by the adversity of destiny or reverses on my side. I have come to ask you for immediate help..."

Shalya : “Help? Immediate? But you have crowned Karna as your present general? What is my special need now?”

Duryodhana : “You have to function as his charioteer to equal the role of Sri Krishna as Arjuna’s charioteer. That is all the help I require of you immediately.”

Shalya : (Taken aback, though flattered being equated with Sri Krishna) : “What! You want me to serve that Sutaputra?² He is arrogant, boastful and beyond advice and beyond persuasion. He will not cooperate with me if I guide him, on the spot, taking decisions on suitable strategies to be followed. Moreover, I am a high Kshatriya, having my own reputation and status, hard earned by my valour and victories severally. What is this Karna’s achievement? He is unfit to become even my charioteer! Now you want me to serve this mean fellow?”

Duryodhana was struck into silence for sometime by this outburst, which was not totally unexpected. But not in these foul terms of firm contempt, almost totally spurning his request, once for all! What was there more to speak or implead? In what words to persuade an equally foul-mouthed braggart? It was not as if Duryodhana did not know the nature of either of the

² ‘Suta’ in ancient India was a caste, born of a Brahmin mother and Kshatriya father; they were not a despicable people, as is today misunderstood. They had access to all the knowledge of a Brahmin, had performed high offices in Royal courts, like Sumantra of Ramayana. There was also Suta Pauranika, an illustrious disciple of Vyasa.

two heroes he wanted to bring in the same nature of either of the two heroes he wanted to bring in the same chariot. But necessity required them to cooperate in that way, as there were no more heroes of that stature left on his side, to undertake united efforts at this crucial hour. Shalya must be persuaded somehow! But how? Duryodhana made one more effort, now, using his little knowledge of ancient Pauranic love as he had heard:

Duryodhana : “Uncle. It is difficult to talk to a person like you, who has forsaken his own nephews, in my favour, for the sake of truth, the word given to me. Truth, honour, chivalry are dearer to you than your own life or comforts, or even temporary benefits that vulgar souls seek. Now if you do not see my point, or appreciate in which context I am make impossible requests to you, I am only unfortunate! You are an equal to Bhishma or Drona! Did you not work under their command? Did it demean your status?”

Shalya : “Do not compare this low-born Karna with those stalwarts! That is another story all together! Bhishma is elderly, and divine; an unquestioned hero in his own right; an illustrious disciple of Parashurama. Drona had impeccable character; he was the preceptor of a good many heroes who have been fighting here or just been dead on both sides! He is also elderly to me, and respectable by hundreds like where does this Karna stand?”

Duryodhana : “Is Brahma superior to Rudra or no?”

Shalya : “What irrelevant things of mythology are you

talking? What has that to do with your present problem?"

Duryodhana : "Uncle! Things that appear to be irrelevant gain relevance if we see them in the right perspective. Tell me the answer to my simple question. You know it."

Shalya : "Well, is it such a difficult question to answer? Brahma is the first creature of God Narayana. Rudra is Brahma's child. The father and the son take care of creation and dissolution respectively. The relation is that between a father and his son. You are asking me who is superior. The answer is obvious."

Duryodhana : "It is not obvious! It was not so for Brahma himself on a crucial occasion!!"

Shalya : "What is this new story you are now telling me, that I do not recollect to have heard? When was there a confusion in this regard?"

Duryodhana : "The context is in the Vedas - that of slaying the Tripurasuras - Taraksha, Kamalaksha and Vidyunmali - by Rudra. These demons had obtained a boon that they should be unconquerable until a Divine Warrior, driven by a greater, superior Divinity them himself should fell them in a line with one single throw of a javelin or an arrow, one only, when their wandering citadels came in a straight line, in their natural courses of moving orbits! The fellows presumed this to be a sheer impossibility and so took it for granted they were blessed into immortality. The gods were oppressed, not to speak of the fate of human and other beings.

The gods represented it to Rudra, the war - god, and the General of the Divine army. Rudra desired his father, Brahma, to drive his chariot. The earth agreed to be that chariot, the Sun and the Moon its two wheels; Indra, Varuna, Kubera and Yama agreed to play to horses to draw it. Dharma, Tapas, Truth and Artha acted as bridles. The Samvatsara, the year as Time - was the Bow, and its string. Mahavishnu himself sat in the tip of the arrow and became a mere instrument in the hands of Shiva-Rudra. Now tell me uncle, whether Rudra alone achieved victory? By playing the role of a charioteer, did Brahma go down in the world's esteem? Or did Vishnu lose his pre eminence by becoming a mere instrument of his own grandson? You are now Brahma; Karna is Rudra. The Pandavas are the Tripurasuras. Kindly agree and save me."

Shalya : (Thoughtfully, still worried, and shaken in self-esteem a bit) "Well, you have tied my tongue in a way. Still there are things to be sorted out. One : is this your own idea or Karna's suggestion? Two : I have conditions to offer if this is to materialize at all, if I am convinced that this will really be for your good."

Duryodhana : (Gladly) "Uncle, Karna has lots of respect for you. Think, why he chose you of all people on our side. He would himself have spoken to you. But he is hurt that even cultured people call him 'Sutaputra' and so did not feel like approaching you out of inhibitions and hurt sentiments. Tell me uncle, whether valour or powers are bound by caste?"

Shalya : “That is fine. It is not caste I had in my mind for my reservations about him. It is his excesses like boastfulness, thinking too much of himself, taking independent decisions rashly etc., that I do not like. That brings me to my second point of reservation. Will you make him agree to my conditions?”

Duryodhana : “Uncle, do not be too rigid at my moment of need and go on adding impossible conditions. If they are reasonable, I can persuade him, or he will himself agree. Any way let me know them.”

Shalya : “Do not feel upset, or suspect me of offering objections out of unwillingness to help you. Let me say for arguments’ sake that I agree to your proposal. Do you think Karna will really face Arjuna? I will have to make him face Arjuna, and stand firm in aim or choice of the missiles. Remember how he wasted the Indra Missile against Ghatotkacha? That should not repeat. Does not Arjuna accept every suggestion of Sri Krishna and obey? A similar understanding is needed between him and me. I want him to avoid impetuosity, and weigh consequences. If he overlooks, I have to tell him what he must aim at, what weapons to choose, and use them when. I may also have to take him to retract if his life is in danger, or lead him to proper quarters for easy fight with exultant enemies in unexpected moments. He must not question me about these things, for there is no time for arguments in war. Quick understanding is all that is needed. I shall not be a mute charioteer, Party to all his

foolish movements or acts. Being elder, experienced and sounder in judgment, I have a right to guide him. He must obey without murmur or malice, and understand my suggestions with an open heart. Can you make him promise these? I doubt whether the arrogance of your friend will permit him to agree! He will see it as his humiliation, perhaps."

Duryodhana : "Uncle, what you say is reasonable, and is unquestionably in my interest. Why should Karna reject these conditions? I shall speak to him and see that he agrees."

Shalya : "Oral agreements are easy to make as well as break. It is the 'Swabhava', temperament, mental habit, or make up of a man's psyche that is not easy to mend. For all your liberal promise, I doubt whether this arrangement can work for long. Do not think I am discouraging you or doing any negative thinking right at the start. When we plan, we must count the negative points also to take care of them. If the arrangement can work, nobody will be happier than I; first speak to him and then let me know. Be quick."

Duryodhana : "I shall be quicker than you expect, with a positive result."

Shalya : "Do not commit on behalf of someone whose nature you may not know well."

Duryodhana : "What is this misgiving, uncle, after all I have said, to all of your doubts? Do you not believe me, still?"

Shalya : "I believe you. But I am yet to understand your friend or his intentions about you!"

Duryodhana : “His ‘intentions about me? What do you mean? Is there something seriously wrong that I do not know or count?”

Shalya : “If Karna is so good and trust - worthy a friend of yours, tell me why he did not lift up his bow against your enemies, during Bhishma’s leadership of ten days? Is this predictable temperament? I want a firm answer! Was not Bhishma your well-wisher? Why did Karna let you down? A similar thing should not repeat it?”

Duryodhana : “Sir, there is neither time nor patience to rake up the past for solutions that are too late. It is all over. Why talk about it?”

Shalya : “It is not over! Habits and temperaments are not matters of the past. If patient remedial precautions are not taken, the past goes on repeating, tirelessly, robbing the present of its power to create meaningful futures. It is the man that must change. Bringing the different people together is not difficult. Making them an understanding, cooperative pair requires self-adjustments. Tell him this in advance with all your forcefulness. Or else....”

Duryodhana : “Or else?...What?”

Shalya : “I have to quit in the middle abruptly. Do not misunderstand.”



CHAPTER 35

KARNA BRAGS, SHALYA HITS BACK AND INSULTS

It was now the seventeenth day of war. Arjuna sighted Shalya leading the chariot of Karna and burst out into uncontrollable laughter, against his normal habit of self-control! Sri Krishna was surprised and turned back at him as if to inquire what was so funny or ridiculous in sight.

Arjuna : “See there ... The impostor claiming to be a counterfeit Arjuna on the other side, and his new ‘Sri Krishna’, in a counterfeit *Avatara*, of Shalya! That is what the braggart has been telling all in the opposite camp. Today Karna will kill you and me to end this war! What more grotesque combination can we expect to see in this unentertaining war?”

Sahadeva and Nakula arrived there, stuck aghast at this ‘wrong’ their uncle had inflicted on them. They approached Sri Krishna and Nakula said :

Nakula : “Krishna, I cannot believe that our uncle is really serious about joining the enemy camp or in his intention to harm our cause or destroy us. Something has gone wrong somewhere. Deceit has

been used against us; or we have not approached him properly perhaps. What is this ridiculous combination of Karna and our uncle, in the same chariot?"

Sri Krishna : "(Very thoughtful for some time, and then in a slow pace, as if weighing words) "Do not worry. This will not last long; he is now no longer your uncle, either. That relation is a past factor. Moreover this is also for your good only."

Sahadeva : "How?"

Sri Krishna : "Among physical elements also there are matching combinations, as well as mutually destructive combinations. Wind and fire go together. Water and fire do not! Understand?"

Sahadeva : "Karna is a braggart, and so is our uncle."

Sri Krishna : "That is it. So both of them will mutually get eliminated by their own acts and words, before long. Instead of one enemy, you will get rid of both of them, without much of your effort. This, I think, is for your good."



Karna's chariot was entering the battleground in initial rolls, with his own army making way for forward movement. Shalya was grim in face and gruff in attitude, without looking back even once.

Karna began his bragging, as usual : "Mr. Charioteer, you will first take me to where Arjuna is stationed on the other side. For I want to kill him first and show to the world who I really am. After that, take

me to Bhima's place and of others also. Let Arjuna see a bit of my skill in archery before dying."

Shalya became terribly angry with this empty boast; he turned back and said!

Shalya : "Fellow, I do not like these impotent words. First, listen to the sound of the bowstring of Arjuna. It will be an appreciable task for you to remain rooted in your chariot, then or afterwards. Similarly, 'enjoy' the scene of Bhima riding on an elephant with his mace in his hand, resting on his right shoulder. If you cannot run away at this, let me then advise you suitably. Now you shut up your foul mouth, and move on, until you reach, at least one hero on the other side; otherwise our own soldiers will laugh at you and may even ditch you and run. Let us not start an unworthy wordy duel right now even before the day's war starts."

Karna did not like these words, sprinkling cold water, as it were, on his fire of enthusiasm. But the words were so very reasonable that he had nothing to retort against them, and had to keep silent, swallowing his anger for the time being.

The chariot advanced some more distance and Karna relapsed into his habituated boastfulness.

Karna : "Warriors on our side, listen to my vow. Today even god Yama cannot save Arjuna from my arrows. For I am determined to end him. Even Varuna and Kubera, together will not protect him. I shall kill even gods if they rush to their help - the help of all the Pandavas."

Shalya turned back in uncontrollable anger and chided him.

Shalya : “Fellow, what is the use of these words, sharper than your arrows? Even weapons do not move quickly! They take time, opportunity, position, aim and propriety unlike your cheap words. Is there any comparison between you and Arjuna? See his self-confidence and your inner tumult and discomfiture, which you try to hide in your bragging! Can you kill him with this mental make up? Shall I drive home to you this truth? Remember the occasion when Arjuna took away Subhadra for wife from Dwaraka with Sri Krishna’s consent and aid? No Yadava army could do anything to him. Have you ever done a thing like this? Arjuna defeated even Rudra in single combat and obtained a missile in his name from him! Which god have you defeated, where and when? Tell me. Arjuna burnt the Khandava forests and fought Indra, alone, to defeat him. Could you ever dream of it? Let all these be : you egged on your friend Duryodhana to humiliate the Pandavas in the forests, under the pretext of ‘counting of cows’ - Ghoshayatra - and the result was his capture by the Gandharvas! When he cried for help and release, while being taken to that world as eternal prisoner, where were you, fellow? You were the first to run towards Hastinavati! Was it not Arjuna that got your friend released from Chitrasena’s captivity, by mere application of friendlessness and diplomacy without the use of a single arrow? Am I telling truth or concocting stories? In the Virata capital-outskirts too, during

the 'cow-capture' - 'Gograhana' episode also, you were the first to run for life! Arjuna defeated all the Kaurava forces alone, including Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Ashwatthama and your blasted self. Remember? You had not a single rag on your body, and you ran naked, remember? If you want to save your life, still, first run away from here, instead of this bragging, which will save none, and fool nobody! But if Arjuna spots you, you are sure to die this time, as he will not forgive you as the instigator responsible for that unforgettable episode in which Draupadi was sought to be disrobed! Run, here and now and stop this bragging."

Karna could contain no more at this unashamed praise of Arjuna, and discouragement to himself, although Shalya was only full of facts. He forgot his promise made to Duryodhana, just a day before; but with remarkable poise made an attempt to answer Shalya :

Karna : "Friend, it is improper for my charioteer to praise my enemy, while in my chariot! You and I are but serving Duryodhana, out of our free will, and you are on my side, not Arjuna's. I shall not tolerate a repeat performance of what all you have said. Silently drive on obeying my orders."

Shalya pocked this insult and drove on, for some more distance. Silence fell on either side, for some more time. Now Karna was on the field. Again, Karna forgot his word with Shalya and began with this outburst :

Karna : "Heroes and soldiers on our side! Hear from me this announcement : He who shows Arjuna to me, will be rewarded with cash, jewels and

ornaments and costly clothes as much as he wants. Arjuna would have hidden himself somewhere on hearing that I have vowed to kill him today. So this announcement. One who shows me Arjuna will get hundreds of cows and villages to rule over as gifts too."

Duryodhana heard this and felt for a moment as if Karna had already killed Arjuna, and felt exhilarated! He shouted with joy.

Shalya felt terribly irritated at his advice being so flagrantly thrown to the winds, even before entering the arena; and this, for a third time! He retorted :

Shalya : "Karna, there is no need to waste the exchequer for so silly and trifle a reason. I shall myself directly take you to Arjuna in a moment. That is not the great thing. Arjuna will not hide himself as you imagine. Since boyhood, you have squandered money given by others to you in the name of wasteful charities, earning titles from your gullible admirers and flatterers. They will take you nowhere or stand by you in the hour of your need, which may be any moment from now on! That will be now an achievement if you can save yourself, and not spotting Arjuna. Wait. Arjuna himself will appear before you, in a moment. He will already be searching for you. You think that foxes can kill lions! Can this happen? Can you kill Sri Krishna and Arjuna? Why not silently fight to your best? Why do you immolate yourself in the fire of Arjuna? You are trying to swim with a stone around your throat, in an ocean disturbed by whirlwinds!

My real duty is to find you a good protector, now; my job is to save you, and so these words of friendly advice. Take the army with you and do not rush in a foolhardy manner. If you live, it will be in the interests of Duryodhana also. Generals cannot be found everyday at will. Trust me and follow my advice."

Karna forgot himself and all promises, all propriety, and his present responsibilities. He shouted venom at Shalya :

Karna : "You enemy in the guise of a friend! Do you frighten me in the name of advice, in sweet words that are poisonous for me and my trusted friend Duryodhana? Do you think I am dependent on you? My announcements are backed by my valour and missile power, not your help or guidance. Who are you to tell me what I must or must not say to enthuse my soldiers? These words were meant to boost the morale of our army - which simple thing you cannot understand! I shall find Arjuna, myself, even without effort or your guidance. Nobody can make me swerve from my oath. What I have said, is said once and for all."

Shalya : (Coolly) "You will regret for all these ill-considered words of rashness and fury. A child in the lap of its mother, in the proverb, asks for the moon; and the mother is helpless, which the child does not understand! Don't be that silly child now. I am not praising your enemy. We must gauge the enemies properly and have true estimates of targets, which may or may not be within our reach.

In fact, you should have a full grasp of the nature of the person with whom you are fighting now! Boastfulness makes you over-estimate yourself, and under-estimate your enemy. Miscalculations of this kind are fatal. It is my duty as a charioteer to advise you in such matters in your interest. Do you think I am your enemy, for this act, which is free from blame? You should be really thankful and not malicious."

Karna : "Fellow, only a virtuous man can really understand another virtuous man. You are seeing only evil things in me! What good qualities do you possess to see my virtues? In fact, you are the really boastful fellow, the braggart that you seek to see in me! You should have advised me only if I had asked for it. You go out of your sphere of duties to frighten me under the guise of a charioteer. Do you think I am unaware of Arjuna's armoury or potentialities? Do I not have the famous Naga missile? ¹ I have got a special quiver made for it, and am worshipping it daily, counting my right moment of its use. Let me see how Sri Krishna, with all his cunning, will save Arjuna from it. A hundred Arjunas and a thousand Sri Krishnas shall come today to receive my arrows and see what

¹ This was a deadly missile of the Naga Chief Takshaka, bestowed on Karna, to kill Arjuna. During the Khandava - burning episode, Takshaka lost his wife and daughter in law, though he himself had escaped somehow. The atrocities of Nahusha and Dhritarashtra on Naga Women were already there fomenting communal hatred. Now Takshaka had empowered Karna with this poisonous missile for the sake of revenge.

kind of a unique hero I am. I shall kill them all today.² How can you understand my valour as you hail from an uncultured country? You seem to be terribly afraid today, as you have never seen a war like this or participated in it. How can I take you for a cultured warrior? The tradition of Kings of Madra province is known for its treachery. They have never trusted friends, but always betrayed them at the nick of the needed moment. You are no exception. Otherwise, would you have let down your own nephews to be here? What harm have I done to you to deserve this ill-treatment at your hands? There is no end to the chain of evil acts, which you have just begun. Shall I tell you more? Leave aside your foul tongue; people in your country are indiscriminate in sex-satiation. Who does not know it? Father, daughter, son, mother, brother, sister, mother-in-law, father-in-law, daughter-in-law, uncle, son-in-law, grand children - have all no inhibitions in enjoying each other in acts of copulating, with no moral codes to restrain them or customs for preventing them from these. The people of your land enjoy even servants and maids as a matter of right. Their lust is unparalleled! Why do women folk in your country prefer always to move amidst men of all sorts? They want someone to satisfy them; it does not matter who or his background. How can I expect cultured behaviour from you? Even in food matters, your folk have

² *Vasudeva sahashram va Phalgunanam shatani va |
Ahameko hanishyami Joshamasva kudesaja ||*

no discrimination - any kind of meat will do, pork, mutton, beef, fish, fowl or even dog's flesh. In drinks too! Liquor or beverage made of rice, wheat, or rotten fruits - anything can intoxicate your men and women into shameless sex-acts in public streets, amidst shouts, screams, and excited babblings, in nude acts of a hundred varieties. How can we expect Dharma from one hailing from that country, king or layman? Gandhara people, your neighbours are equally brutish! Warriors in your country perform roles of Brahmins, to deprive them of their legitimate livelihood. These Brahmins in turn have all taken to menial service to become Shudras. The folk are so degenerate that if there is a case of snakebite, they resort to magic and occult practices for relief better than medical treatment. How can one born among them like you have sense or presence of mind? Drunkards, while drinking, touch each others' buttocks and sing, even among women :

"Husband, I shall donate;
 Son, if necessary, I shall give you;
 Take from me what else you like;
 But not this cup of liquor."³

Fellow, these women wrap themselves in rough woolen sheets that can be dropped at will! Coming from

³ *Suvirakam yachamana Madrika karshati sphichow |
 Adatu Kama vachanam idam vadati darunam ||
 Ma mam suvirakam kaschit yachatam dayitam mama |
 Putram dadyam patim dadyam na tu dadyam suvirakam ||*

(Suviraka is a variety of local liquor of Madra in those days.)

such shameless country, you make bold to advise me? I have tolerated you so far, for the sake of Duryodhana and Dhritarashtra. Or else I would have killed you.”

Karna could not have bettered himself in raillery and in the choice of the most abusive words, and accusations! This was not a moment's composition, but a product of long premeditated contempt, observation and composition of invectives. The escalation was unparalleled - from personal abuse to society, nation, and customs and manners from a sweeping angle of 'no-holds-barred.' The irrelevancies were obvious and too indecent even to hear or translate, reflecting on Karna's own tastes and culture. There was no need for this far, if it were merely a question of disagreement! But Karna's relish of gossip and sadistic satisfaction in hurting others, and picking up only negative things in others were all demonstrated here plentifully. Shalya, though sharp-tongued, was still within limits of facts, care, duty, and relevance. Karna exceeded all this!

Shalya now found an occasion to hit-back in equally foul terms, with his resourcefulness in similar black spots in Karna's cultural background and social set up.

Shalya : “You bloody idiot! You are mixing up issues, and seeing things other than what you ought to. My advise to you was my duty, and in the interests of our army, our cause, our success, for which you and I are instrumental and even responsible. Boastfulness will destroy your focus, and waste your energy. Had I not been your well-wisher, I would not have accepted this mean function of

a mere charioteer. And I did so on Duryodhana's importunate requests and persuasion, in spite of my knowledge of your ways of thinking of things on which you and I have radically different views. Why bring in my country, my folk, their weaknesses and pleasures of a hundred varieties? Shall I reply to you in your own language? Do I not know of your people, their vulgarities, inhumanities, weaknesses and so on? Why do your people throw a patient outside their villages, towns and cities without getting them medical aid? Are they human? Why do your people sell away their wives and children like cattle? Is this culture by any standards? Nude dances of drunkards are a practice amongst you also! Good and evil practices are everywhere! All are experts in criticising others only. You are half a hero, as Bhishma counted correctly on the day before the war started, as you are not self-aware of your own defects, your own potentials, and not rooted in self-confidence on a basis self-examination!⁴. What use are missiles in the hands of one like you? You do not even trust me! That ought to be the first requirement to be fulfilled by you! A good charioteer is expected to be an expert in the study of situations before him as they crop up when and where. He must share this knowledge with the hero in the chariot, and guide him too. He must know the proper use of weapons, missiles, their turnings, targets, and tactics of delicate use for sure success. He must know the conditions of

⁴ *Paravachyeshu nipunah sarvo bhavati sarvada |
Atmavachyam na janite janannapi cha muhyati ||* (45-44)

his horses from time to time, and of the chariot too. Dangers ahead will be first known only to the charioteer, and not a blind person like you. If you are determined to die pitifully, I cannot help. Go to hell."

Karna : (cooling down somewhat) : "Do I not know the greatness of Sri Krishna and Arjuna? Do I not know my limitations too? Should you remind me of these when I require encouragement from you? Is this the time for you to tell me of my drawbacks or weak spots? Or to praise the enemy? I learnt warfare from my teacher Parashurama, by professing a lie that I am a Brahmin, and he cursed me when he came to know of it! It is eating into me, like your untimely condemnatory words! I also killed a Brahmin's cow, inadvertently during a hunt, and that Brahmin also cursed me saying that my missile - knowledge shall be of no use to me at the moment of my need and that the wheels of my chariot shall get stuck up in a mire of blood in the last moments of my life. Should you add to this itching awareness already in me? Let that moment come, we shall then see - that is how I have taken these curses. You are no well-wisher, obviously. How can old habits die? Your own background, food habits, social set up, evil practices are speaking through you to reveal themselves. All sorts of uneatables, you and your people, eat."

This wordy battle continued even right into the battlefield, which the chariot had reached by now. The abuses were now loud enough for even the Pandava army to hear! There was laughter there, on seeing this

new and unexpected combination !! They were comparing with all kinds of known and unknown oddities. "It is like a dog being driven by a fox into a field of caresses!" - said someone!

Here was Duryodhana with folded hands appealing to both to stop this unwanted entertainment to the enemies, at self-cost. Karna and Shalya, sulked, withdrew into their spaces, for the time being.



Karna was thus unspeakably gone down in his enthusiasm to fight, even at the start of war, on that morning. Shalya for his part, was waiting for an excuse to get out. War started in this low mood in the General's count, on that seventeenth day.

The opposite camp formed Vyuhas of their choice, and now the war started. In his highly disturbed mood, by the taunts and accusations of Shalya, Karna found a target for his anger in the Pandava forces, and he began to destroy it with reckless showering of arrows in all directions. Seventy-two heroes on the Pandava side, known as Prabhachakas were killed by him in no time. Twenty-five heroes on the Panchala side were fodder for his weapons soon. Similarly, several thousands of soldiers of the Chedi Kingdom⁵ lay slaughtered elsewhere. Bhanudeva, Chitrasena, Senabindu, Tapana, Shurasevaka - five more Panchala heroes were also finished by him. All this happened in a very short time, soon after the war had started, and it enthused the Kaurava forces.

⁵ followers of Sahadeva, son of Shishupala

On the other side, Bhima killed Bhanusena, Karna's son in his own sight! Karna could not prevent it, and felt that all his other achievements on the day's start were rendered null and void by this. Another son of Karna was being jointly attacked by Nakula and Satyaki. Karna was now chasing Yudhishtira to capture him. But he was sent into a swoon after a long drawn fight. Yudhishtira had tired him so much that Karna could not open his eyes for a long time. The Kaurava heroes expressed helpless concern from safe distances. Satyaki, Yuyutsu, the Pandya king, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, Nakula and Sahadeva, Bhima - all now joined together to corner and attack Karna's brave son Vasushena, who held them all together like the earlier Abhimanyu.

Meanwhile Karna woke up and retaliated in his fight with Yudhishtira, and went on destroying the Pandava army mercilessly. Rivers of blood began flowing in minutes, and the Pandava army retreated, whatever remained of it - at this ghastly sight. Bhima reassembled the running army and put up a stiff fight with Karna, and made him retreat.

Six of the unfortunate sons of Dhritarashtra came in the view of Bhima, just then. Shrutarva, Durdhara, Kratha, Vivitsu, Vikata, Sama, were supported by minor heroes by name Dushpradharsha, Subahu, Dhanurgraha, Durmada, Jalasandha, Shala and others. Together they attacked Bhima. Bhima just destroyed Vivitsu with a single lance; the others ran; Bhima chased them all and wiped them out totally. Now he rushed towards Karna. An elephant brigade came to the succour of Karna. Bhima destroyed this with relish and heroism.

Kripa had defeated Shikhandi, on another front. Dhrishtadyumna defeated Kritavarma, to equal the account. Ashwatthama had put Yuyudhana into a tight corner, destroyed his charioteer, and rendered him helpless. But Yudhishtira rushed to his aid quickly and made Ashwatthama retreat. Nakula and Sahadeva together tackled, Duryodhana and inflicted heavy injuries on him. Dhrishtadyumna took on a running Duryodhana, who had never before run so well to save his life. Karna had destroyed a large contingent of Panchala forces. Arjuna had made Ashwatthama run too. The battle was more or less equal, yielding no results for long.

Duryodhana was angry and disappointed that half a day more was wasted, with Karna doing nothing substantially to turn the events of the day in his favour. He went to Karna and said :

“You have the Bhargava and other missiles. Why can’t you use one of them at least now?”

This was improper! Karna also did not think of the consequences. It should have been used against a definite target for sure success, instead of being aimlessly used on the army at large. That was the mistake that Ashwatthama also had made with regard to Narayanastra. The Bhargavastra was unique like Pashupatastra or Nagastra, specially bestowed by Parashurama on Karna, with heavy words of caution and oath. Karna had already wasted Aindrastra over Ghatotkacha for petty success. What was to be expected of this Bhargava missile?

Karna thought for a while, hesitating, and then used

that deadly missile, aimlessly, against the segment of the Pandava army that came on his sight.

The missile did its work by destroying whatever, came in its sweeping campus. Soldiers, elephants, horses, stored weapons, suppliers, chariots, spare Flag-posts, cooks, doctors, messengers, errand boys and a variety of odd men of services got reduced to ashes indiscriminately in moments. This was no strategy at all on the part of Karna!

Whoever remained outside its sphere, shouted to the skies for help. Mutilated bodies lay in heaps along with dead ones, with not many to weep for either or even recognise them, let alone rush to the help of whoever could be saved! Destruction to no purpose!

Arjuna had not expected this devastation! He looked at Sri Krishna, meaningfully as if to ask for guidance, or explanation as to why Karna had used it at this juncture, and what could be done now or hereafter to contain Karna's mischiefs without rhyme or rhythm.

Sri Krishna : "Frustrated men will do anything. Cynics need not have purposes in all their mischievous machinations. This is no time to seek explanations. See your brother Yudhishtira has returned to the camp suddenly! This is odd and ominous. Before he is up to some unexpected, unconscious mischief, we must meet him, know what he means, bring him back and then attend to Karna, decisively today."

Sri Krishna called Bhima, immediately, laid the heavy weight of responsibility of protecting the army

and rallying it behind Dhrishtadyumna, appropriately, in addition to retaliating on the Kaurava army for the disasters inflicted by the Bhargavastra, and took Arjuna with him to meet Yudhishtira, to find out his meaning.

Yudhishtira was surprised to see Sri Krishna and Arjuna at that busy hour where they were required on the battlefield and felt that the war for the day was over. He questioned:

Yudhishtira : “What! Has Karna been killed, after all? Sri Krishna, did the Kaurava army find a new General? Or have they run away, accepting final defeat?”

Arjuna explained how Karna had used the Bhargavastra and demoralised them all.

Yudhishtira : (angrily) “You are a proper fool, Arjuna! Is all your preparation of these thirteen years at a waste? Could you not reply to that missile and diffuse it? Where are your skills? Where is your vow? Why do you still tolerate that villain still? Have you nothing in you to finish him once for all?”

Arjuna was angry, and nearly lost his usual poise and respectful manners and grace towards his elder brother! Sri Krishna sensed the impending danger, intervened and replied :

Sri Krishna : “Brother Yudhishtira, Karna is no matter. He lives because other things are on our hands. But tell us why all of a sudden you are back in the camp ?”

Yudhishthira : “My sorrow has no bounds today. We have not much army left; we have already eliminated major heroes on the enemy side, and still success eludes us. We are all tired and do not know how long this war will pull on. I have none else to help and relieve my mind and enthuse me. In a tired, confused, heavy mood of dismay, I returned here, seeking nothing in particular. I cannot even think of the next step.”

Sri Krishna : “Next step? That’s what we were worried about, and apprehended some unexpected action or decision by you unilaterally. Brother, sorrow is as great an enemy of man as anger or lust or malice. It makes you lose your vision, purpose and self-confidence. In that mood anything against one’s self interest can happen! That’s what we have come to prevent.”

Yudhishthira : “Krishna, how many more thousands of innocent men must die for my sake, before some decision can come of this?”

Sri Krishna : “So, it is the same old song, same old tune! Who can predict the future for a man not now here to act rightly? It is all in your hands in a way. Let Arjuna finish this Karna and let Bhima finish Duryodhana and Dusshasana here and now. The war will be over. First fulfill your oaths and then sit down to sorrow.”



Meanwhile the Kaurava Army was caught between Bhima and the god of Death! It could neither stand nor

run. Death was the only way out for anyone on whom Bhima cast his eyes. Karna was totally helpless! He couldn't know what weapons to use to neutralise Bhima or rescue his army. With Arjuna joining Bhima, the situation became worse! It was like a dry forest enveloped by unquenchable fire on all sides.

Shakuni ran to escape Bhima as death-trap! Duryodhana followed him. And this totally demoralised all his army behind him.

Karna remembered his Generalship, all of a sudden, and realised the pity of the situation. This had not happened to the army under Bhishma or Drona! He could only be angry and fulminate helplessly. He wanted to do his best somehow.

Shalya was mum totally, rendering no 'advice' or 'guidance' after the day's initial, wordy skirmishes. Karna was too proud to consult him and too shy to ask for guidance, after all the abuses he himself had heaped on him. He looked of his charioteer with a fixed gaze, imploringly as it were, in meaningful silence.

Shalya : "It is a pity you cannot give up your rusticity and lack of pointed action. You destroyed the enemy's army aimlessly, and they are doing the same to ours; both have lost focus! Should you not have concentrated on Arjuna, with your Bhargava missile in your hands?"

Karna : "He was not to be seen at the moment."

Shalya : "But you announced heavy rewards to your soldiers to tempt them to show you Arjuna? Has he been hiding? Is he not standing in your own

presence, right opposite you? Have you lost yourself?"

Satyaki now killed Prasena, another son of Karna, in his own presence! Karna was too shocked to do or say anything and he forgot why he was on the field!! He could not remember even one missile's name to be used - Agneya, Vayavya, Varuna, Soura.... etc. Parashurama's curse had been acting, reminding him that the end was not far off.

On another front Dusshasana neared Bhima, without realising that Bhima's fury was unmatched that day, with no tangible results yet in his direction. He was dressed in the costliest of jewels and clothes, as if it was an occasion of marriage or jubilation or festivity! Poor fellow!! He did not know that it was the occasion of his death!

Bhima burst out into a peal of laughter at the sight of this incongruity, this grotesqueness, approaching him on his own!

Bhima : "Ah! Death is bringing you here securely, you fool! Are you ready to celebrate your own death? Let me remind you of your evil acts one by one, if you have forgotten them. For I have to settle all accounts today once for all, and render you heavy interests on all capitals of crimes. You brute that dragged my wife by her hair! Come, Come! You remember my vow on that day? Come, quickly, near me, yourself. Or else I have to capture you in my firm fists, which will be more painful to you, and you may die even before you realise death, giving me no satisfaction even in your death."

Dusshasana : “We shall see who dies in whose hands!

If you were a man, you would have acted long before now, to avenge the ‘wrongs’ that you have tolerated all these years. Does not the world know you as an excellent cook, and a more barbaric glutton? Come, kill me, if you can. Why waste words?”

Bhima : “So, there is no realisation on your part even at this late hour! I am sorry there is no alternative for you except to die. Your villainous father is not here to see this ghastly sight but anyhow he is blind and so blessed. I shall not wait for him. Your brothers - whoever still lives of them - Duryodhana and Karna are anyhow here, and they will be witness to my oath being fulfilled here and now.”

Dusshasana : “Stop this bragging. You and your brothers should have died like rats in a hole long ago! I relish having attempted the exposing of your wife naked in public in the royal assembly! Oh what sensation was it to see her so exposed in your own presence!”



CHAPTER 36

DUSSHASANA DESPATCHED TO DEATH

Dusshasana was one of those millions of rough souls that believed that life is not meant for realisation of values, or lessons on its way. It is merely an occasion to 'enjoy' at others' costs. The before- and after- life never mattered. Where was proof of such things as a future or a past for human life? This view was in the blood of all his brothers too. Lots of women, and lovely women at that, sold themselves and their 'dignity' (whatever it meant) for money, fame, position, pleasures and a hundred other considerations, around them. The stubbornness of a Draupadi in refusing to disrobe herself for the pleasure of the Royal court was a challenge to him and his brothers and friends like Karna. What was wrong if Dusshasana made an attempt to make her obey, and provide thereby pleasure for all? What impropriety had been committed by him in the course of carrying out the royal command?

This was the mood of this villain till his moment of death came to him - "What sensation was it to see her exposed" in the presence of her husbands!

Bhima roared : "You would not have lived to say this, had not my brother Yudhishtira prevented me from killing you then and there."

Dusshasana : "Enough of empty threats. Do it at least now if you are a man! Your brother is not here to prevent you now!!"

Dusshasana had never been 'inhibited' by a sense of shame, of right and wrong, or responsible thinking, speaking or action. He was as rough as a stone, never softened by wind, weather or water.

Bhima silently went into action, focusing all his anguish, anger, power and energies on one thing - killing this villain as brutally as he could afford, for all to see on the battlefield. With sharp arrows, he cut off the villain's bow, flag-post, and the charioteer's head. He struck sharp arrows in the forehead of the ruffian. Yet this rouge took an alternate bow and shot some dozen arrows at once at Bhima.

Wonder of wonders! They hit Bhima, and stuck to various parts of his body, and sent him to a swoon. The Kaurava army felt enthused and they celebrated it with loud shouts and blowing of conches.

The Pandava army was scared by this rare feat, which had targeted their pet leader, and was downcast for moments. Moments only; for Bhima got up with no assistance or help from doctors or aides, and roared in such a loud way that the enemy army felt convinced that it was Yama, god of Death that had come alive now in Bhima's rebirth as it were. Bhima now shot some sixty arrows at his target. When they were intercepted and rendered ineffectual, Bhima took out a shaft and threw it at the fellow. That javelin emitted fire as it advanced towards the enemy, while Dusshasana used ten more arrows to waste it.

Nobody had thought that the villain had so much skill or power of archery, even to daunt and dare Bhima!

Bhima realised that his mace was the best to be used now and so lifted it up and said : "You bastard! I shall crush you and drink your blood." With this, he threw the mace with terrific force and speed. Dusshasana threw a trident to stop it and waste it. But it failed, as the mace destroyed it into splinters and fell on the head of the villain, making him bleed through his nose and mouth. His chest-shield was now torn and jewels lay scattered on the earth. The villain rolled on the earth with a thud. He had lost his chariot, charioteer, horses, aides and all supporters. The Pandava army was jubilant, and roared with enthusiasm.

Bhima now caught the villain in his firm hands and was roaring in anger that had achieved its satisfaction in the capture of the villain; this created a terrific scene and petrified soldiers on either side. Fear of an abnormal type possessed even Karna, in his helpless condition of mind as the General stood watching that grotesque scene whose outcome was a foregone conclusion, in the vow of Bhima, some thirteen years ago, in a turning point of the history of the Kuru race!

Dusshasana was bleeding with terrible head-injuries, and Bhima was dragging him by the hair all over the ground, making loud noises of relish and satisfaction that rent the skies. The villain repeatedly tried to escape Bhima's clutches and run away somehow. Bhima did not want to kill him all at once, as it would not satisfy him! It had to be a prolonged killing, in tune and in rhythm with Bhima's pent-up malice, sense of wrong

suffered over years of suffering, and had to yield him total satisfaction, as the occasion could not repeat. If it were possible Bhima would have liked the idea of killing Dusshasana several times in all the varieties of brutalities known and unknown to mankind. Besides, Bhima wanted the watching crowd to be 'entertained' as never before in unforgettable flashes of barbarity.

Bhima shouted to the prey in his hands : "You villain, which was the hand you used to expose my wife naked on that evil day, on which I wrote your death sentence?" Dusshasana could not respond as he was unconscious or semi-conscious. So Bhima dragged on that body in a circle repeatedly until blood oozed out of the pores of skin.

Bhima was not satisfied and so threw this challenge:

"You Karna, arch villain, you Duryodhana, King of the wicked, you Kripa, impotent even in Dharma, you misfit Ashwatthama! You all, several heroes in your own right on either side, divisional commanders, and whoever lives still destined to witness an event that none other than Bhima can show you, now come and save this fellow if you can!"

He dragged Dusshasana towards Karna!! Karna did not make movements either towards Bhima, to save Dusshasana, or away from him, though in fact instinctively he recoiled and felt like running away. That would have shown him as a coward to the world. But coward indeed he was at the moment as he could not think of saving the victim by strategy or valour. Karna remembered no missiles, no formulae and no weapons

that could save Dusshasana. The curse of Parashurama had begun operating!

Duryodhana felt that all was over, and a strange kind of fear possessed his mind. Yet he wanted his 'resourceful' friend Karna, to do something to save his dear brother! He looked at Karna's face as if to beg of him the life of that villainous brother! He dared not look at Bhima, nor attempt saving him himself.

Bhima held his sword in his right hand, throwing Dusshasana on the ground, with his left foot on the throat of the villain, so as to prevent his breathing. The villain's stomach went on swelling, with breath stuck up in the throat, and eyes bulging in a ghastly manner staring at the sky blankly.

Bhima : "Fellow, you once described my wife Draupadi as a cow, not 'wedded' to any particular 'bull', so as to suggest the vulgar sense that she was a prostitute for us, the five brothers. You did this several times in that shameless assembly both during her humiliation, and at the time when we left the capital on the mission of exile. You widow's son! You bastard, repeat it now if you have the courage or breath, let me see! Which of your hands was it that touched the hair of my wife as you dragged her like a butcher dragging a cow to an altar of a cruel goddess? It was anointed with holy waters on the occasion of Rajasuya by no less a person than Sri Krishna, just a few days back, and you defiled it with that foul hand publicly! It needs to be taught a lesson; so lift up that hand, if you still have the courage."

Dusshasana was enjoying, still, the scene of Bhima's anger and anguish, at his cost; that is to say, that he could still be the source of so much agony for Bhima, after thirteen years! Vulgarly so possessed him till this last moment, making him a blot on humanity in his conduct. Could people remain so unchanged and condemned to a behaviour of which even animals would be ashamed? This was a demonstration for all to see and wonder - a philosophical moment on a war-field!

Dusshasana, even in that pitiable situation raised up his right hand, to the extent his breath permitted, as if to reply : "yes; this was that hand! So what? I shall use this hand again and again to humiliate your wife, if similar situations arise! I am not in the least repentant or apologetic about it. Do what you can!"

He also said something to this effect by making incoherent sounds from a throat that was stuck up, so as to convey his meaning to the people around him, to enrage Bhima further.

The Kaurava army clapped in vulgar pleasure, gaining some breath, some inspiration, some 'strength' from a totally demoralising situation, showing to what depths Duryodhana had plunged them in his long rule, and commanding their 'loyalties'! This was corruption of conscience beyond cure, justifying the holocaust into which the civil war had drawn a society beyond redemption.

Bhima was further deeply incensed that several 'Dusshasanas' still lived on the opposite side! He threw

away the sword, increased the pressure of his foot on the villain's throat, and with both of his hands, plucked out that hand of Dusshasana, as if he was tearing a branch of a tree from its stem. Now this pulled-out hand itself served as a mace in his hand, and he hit the face of the lying villain so many times that Dusshasana's face was deformed beyond recognition, and the hand and the arm which had served as the mace looked like a brush dipped in blood, as it was in shreds. Bhima was not quenched, yet, in vengeance. Dusshasana lay in total unconsciousness, nobody knowing whether he was dead or alive after all this 'operation' by Bhima. To prove that the villain was dead, now, Bhima plucked out his head, turning it around from the trunk of the body, as if he was rescuing a ball stuck up in mud or clay, and threw it to the skies!

The crowd ran into whichever direction they found it safe to escape, expecting that Bhima would mete out similar treatment to all those who had clapped and greeted the words of the vulgar hero who was now no more! Still, they were curious to see what next he would do, and who else stood the next chance.

Bhima, now tore open the abdomen of Dusshasana, took bowls of warm blood from there, took them to his mouth and made sounds to express the sense of his relishing the blood of the killed demon! This was no doubt, part of his oath, but none had seriously thought that Bhima would actually do this, the drinking of the blood of a cousin. which no cultured warrior would ever do. While tasting the villain's blood, Bhima often said:

“Fellow, Duryodhana, you rascal Karna, see that I have just fulfilled one vow of mine now. I am telling you the truth - really the truth, believe me - that all drinks or juices that I have tasted so far - milk, curds, ghee, honey or even *Amrit*, the Elixir of the *Naga* world, or even the breast milk of my mother Kunti - do not match the beauty of this taste, this villain’s blood! If you do not believe, come and share it with me to verify what I am saying! Come, come, anyone with daring.”

The earth trembled then, and a thunderbolt sounded in cloudless skies. The gods of high heavens, the sages, and celestial saints and other beings trembled at the sight of this abnormal feat! The soldiers on earth who witnessed it went into swoon; still others ran for shelter; yet others were uttering incoherent words and muttering curses on evil doers, not meaning Dusshasana or anyone else in particular, out of fear or suppressed mentality.

Karna stood with bent head, as a helpless commander who could not save a ‘hero’ on his side, being killed by the enemy so brutally and so near himself and with no effort on his part to save him or attack the enemy! Duryodhana was so stunned that he could not chide Karna, as he did often Bhishma and Drona ! His silence was more painful to Karna than his vocal condemnation could have been.

Here was Bhima cursing Dusshasana for dying so quickly as not to yield him any more sadistic pleasure to quench his deep-developed hatred :

“You bastard! You have escaped more pain at my hands in this quick death! You should have died hereafter; it was your duty to have yielded me full

satisfaction. You have failed in this account too. None of your brothers, yet living, can give me that satisfaction that only your prolonged tortuous death could give.”

Bhima kicked the enemy's dead body, which bounced aimlessly all over the field, and uttered words of rare abuse:

“Call us names now, let me see? Dance around us in devilish glee as you did at the dice, abusing us, let me see? Get up if you can and fight with me, repeating those foul words, let me see? Lift up your hand again, that I may pull out again, so you can feel the pain again, let me see? Fellow! You are saved by death, which has been extremely good to you. Who had thought that you would die so quickly? A fellow of your stuff should have had more grit to fight and endure the punishments of Bhima for long! What will the world think of me and my valour now?”

Bhima then turned to the skies and roared to the gods above :

“Ye, gods, you are witnesses to the fulfilment of one of my oaths today. You shall be witnesses to more shortly. I have to break the thighs of that other villain that lives yet. But you have taken away this victim, this time, without yielding me absolute satisfaction. The old king, root of all this evil still lives, and his evil counsellors too!”

Bhima, again, kicked the dead body of Dusshasana and took his mace on his shoulder, indicating that the ‘operation’ was over. He then wondered how Draupadi would have enjoyed that scene, had she been there, and

what dialogue would have ensued between them...
Bhima went into a lovely trance.¹



Bhima has sent for Draupadi with the good news of the villain's death, and now her part of the oath remains to be fulfilled. She must soak her hair in the villain's blood, and comb it with his teeth and allow Bhima to make a tuft of it, decorated with befitting jewels, 'flowers' and other ornaments. The gods of heaven and all the army below, his brothers and Sri Krishna must be witnesses to this unique event.

Now Draupadi arrives on the scene of the oath's fulfilment accompanied by maid-servants, friends and well-wishing companions. She looks like Vijayalakshmi - one of the eight forms of the Goddess of Success, Luck and Victory, in her most glorious Incarnation. All the army makes way for her with utmost respect and reverence, and stands apart. She walks like cupid's intoxicated elephant in the myth, in grandeur and majesty, which adds to the loveliness of her personality. She looks at the victorious husband in contentment and pride, that he alone among her husbands could achieve such deserved success and come to her aid to fulfill her vow! She beams glances of love-laden admiration at her husband, and that relieves Bhima's fatigue, and diverts his attention from the feeling of dissatisfaction

¹ This next imaginary vision of Bhima is not part of the original text. Draupadi was then at Kampilya, her father's capital, and not on the field. This part of our story is inspired by the Kannada poet Kumara Vyasa and his celebrated work in Kannada. But this is no translation.

that Dusshasana's quick death had robbed of him. But his present appearance, his demeanour, and facial expression frighten even her somewhat! Blood dripping from his mouth and hands, eyes turned red, with rolling eyeballs, make him an unusual Bhima, resembling the Man-lion *Avatar* of God in many respects, and even Draupadi for a moment stands stunned in fear! She turns her back and wants to leave the ghastly scene behind :

Bhima : "Wife dear, I have fulfilled your vow today, as well as mine; can't you feel a sense of relief and satisfaction?"

Draupadi : "Who is this fellow, headless and armless, a mere lump of flesh at your foot?"

Bhima : "Can't you imagine who it is, from my blood-dripping hands and mouth? I have drunk his blood, as per my vow!"

Draupadi : "My lord, there are many villains who have troubled me, of whom so many are dead already. Of the remaining ones, who is this one whom you have just now killed?"

Bhima : "Is this not the same villain Dusshasana, who dragged you by hair, and attempted to disrobe you?"

Draupadi : "Oh! Is this that fellow!!" (Her face blooms.)

She nears the dead body of the villain and looks for that severed head that lay at a distance, after tossing in the air for sometime, disowning the body and finding

no one to own it, in a mass of pity! She goes to it, recognises it, and looks back at Bhima, in disbelief!

Bhima : “You still do not believe me? See there, his pulled out arm that perpetrated dishonour on your hair and robes. I have hit him hard with this torn arm, until both are destroyed. See how it is reduced to a brush beyond recognition.”

Draupadi kicks the head of Dusshasana with her left foot, and her eyes acquire a fierce look as on that day of the dishonourable act, and emit fire as it were. Then she breaks down into tears and hugs Bhima in joy and fulfilment. Bhima consoles her silently. Then:

Draupadi : “Lord, there are plenty of warriors who make vows at will and also do not care to fulfill them later on. One can be brave in words easily and cowardly in action, under various excuses including Dharma, propriety and misplaced moral codes. You are an exceptionally manly hero endowed with all qualities of perfection. You are indeed like Rudra. A fiery woman like me deserves to wed you, and I am lucky too, to have you, and get my pledge redeemed today.”

Bhima : “What is the use of praising me, my dear, now? You had to wait all these years, passing through untold travails, like hiding in holes like rats, begging, exile, life incognito, allowing the perpetrators to enjoy all our hard-earned wealth, in health and happiness? Another more manly husband would have killed these villains then and there and not allowed scope for your humiliation at all!....

Anyway, sit down, here.... very near me.. I have to dress you, decorate you and make you acquire beautifications that other women would shudder even to think of."

Draupadi : "Decorations? Beautification, you said? Here on the battle-field?"

Bhima : "Was it not for that purpose I sent for you, and you are here now?"

Draupadi : "Is this a saloon for beautification, Lord? Speak your mind?" (Feels shy.)

Bhima : "My lady, the materials you get here to decorate you now, you will not get elsewhere in the world, or at any other time. No other husband has ever decorated his wife as I am going to do, now, or will ever attempt to do in future! Come... see, this is the blood of that villain who humiliated you! This is your perfumed oil in which I am going to soak your hair. (Bhima takes it out in bowls of hands and pours it on her head.).... You have to bathe first in this blood, as per our oath.... What? Do you say that this ritualistic gesture is enough? That will do then.. Now I must get a comb to soften, smoothen your hair. (Bhima kicks the separated head of Dusshasana, and pulls out the lower jaw of teeth from it and says :) here is your comb. Come near... (He combs) Let no one say I am not an expert in this art of decoration. My methods may be unique; so also my tools. Only an extraordinary hero's wife can secure this treatment! Now what remains for you is to be dressed in a saree made of the skin of this rogue!....

(Bhima tears out bits of skin of that dead body and tucks them up in her dress... and acts as if all that saree is now turned into the skin of Dusshasana.) Here are going to be the flowers you must wear on your hair. (Bhima tears out parts of the villain's intestine, curls of which serve as garlands made of red flowers). Have this *Tilak* on your face now. (Bhima puts a red mark on her forehead, with the blood of the villain.) Now let the gods above, and all living beings on earth see that Bhima has fulfilled his vows and those of his wife too."

Bhima sits on a broken chariot-seat, taking Draupadi on his left lap, and putting the dead body of Dusshasana on the right, with the rest of the villain's intestines as garland round his neck and declares :

"Those that did not have the good luck to live and see Narasimha Avatar, during that age, shall see it enacted here and now by Bhima, Kunti's son! There is still one marked difference to note. The Lakshmi of Narasimha of yore, could not bear to see that ghastly sight, much less participate in it, and so ran away! My Vijayalakshmi is here now to fulfill that vacuum, and set the record straight."

Draupadi enjoys being so decorated by her husband, and now she appears like Durga or Kali to the eyes of the enemy army! Bhima consoles her when she gradually breaks down into tears, after all this detailed fulfilment of her oaths.

Bhima : "Dear lady, do you remember, during our exile in the forests, we drank all sorts river waters, pure and impure, that could never cool me down, quench

my thirst, and calm my disturbed mind. Do you remember how eager, anxiously during summers I used to drink waters of pools and ponds? Now after thirteen years, two or three handful bowls of blood of this bloody fellow here have quenched my fire of anguish of all these years. They have done that. Is it not a wonder that blood can quench thirst rather than water? Remember, it is no ordinary thirst! Even gods could not give me this satisfaction that a mere villain could give! What a wonder! There are some more oaths to be fulfilled like this. I have to kill all the brothers of that arch-villain Duryodhana, myself; and I have more or less achieved this target barring a couple of those evil-destined fellows. In a day or two more, the account will be complete. Then I have to break the thighs of that Duryodhana too! You who have gathered around him, have no doubt that this Bhima will achieve them too as truly, as he has demonstrated his power now, in the act you have all witnessed. You gods, take it from me, that all your collective might will not save that dog Duryodhana from my fury, even if you want to save him. I may do unto you what I have done here, if ever- if ever - you so decide to side with evil.. Take care."

Draupadi, gets up, embraces Bhima, looks at him amorously so as to thank him for fulfilling her oath, and then departs with all her retinue, while they hold covers for her on all four sides.

Bhima pushes Dusshasana's dead body from his lap, and again kicks it up in a repeat of welling anger.

He puts on *Tilak* on his own face with the blood of Dusshasana, with his finger. He now beams a diabolic smile of satisfaction on all gathered around, gets to his chariot, washes himself from a vessel of pure water there, removes all blood marks on himself and applies the costliest natural scents stored there, and gets ready for the war for the rest of the day. He shouts loudly:

“You, Duryodhana! I shall still bestow on you one more opportunity to stop this war and the unnecessary slaughter of innocents for your sake : Surrender yourself peacefully to me, submit to what I have to do to you as per my oath, and return our kingdom to us. I shall anyhow fulfill my oath, have no doubt about it. You Karna, Kripa, Ashwatthama, all similar women dressed in men’s clothes, come now near me, if you dare!”

Bhima stands there for sometime, as if expecting Duryodhana to surrender to him.



Bhima wakes up from this lovely vision now! While still he is recollecting its most delectable moments, ten more brothers of Duryodhana approach him to avenge the killing of Dusshasana. “Unfortunate souls!” - says Bhima to himself.

Those fellows tried to put up a brave fight, and covered Bhima with their sharp arrows from all directions. But Bhima overpowered them all, standing before each of them, in quick, nimble movements. With a steel helmet as head cover and a coat of steel for the chest, Bhima stood firm, unmoved by any of their weapons. He looked like the god of Death to them, and

gradually their enthusiasm cooled down, and they became food for Bhima's unabated fury in no time. Their army ran away in disarray.

Karna was again a mute witness! Duryodhana observed this with shock and dismay and in uncontrollable anguish spoke to him : "Friend, I had banked upon you very heavily! But you have ignored the safety of even these few unfortunate brothers of mine, as Bhima went on devouring them! I am most unfortunate."

Duryodhana broke into tears. Karna had no answer. He was no match for Bhima in strength, strategy, or unconventional warfare. Nobody expected Dusshasana to die that way, not withstanding Bhima's cruel oaths. Karna stood with no attempt to answer!

'Bhima now observed this and roared to him :

"You son of a tch! Come, come Let me despatch you also into the world of Death. I have other important works to attend to. Come, come let us end up all war today once for all."

These words stung Duryodhana and Karna further, as they were already too depressed at the way defeat was staring them in their face everywhere.

Shalya now told Karna, at last, after a studied long silence :

"Friend; this is no time for grieving, but action. In war, it is natural that human lives are the pawns, in this gamble. Death and loss are unavoidable both in victory and defeat. Have presence of mind and attend

to the immediate next step. See Bhima is dispersing your army with his mere stare. Your duty is to gather that fear-stricken army and infuse them with some confident action. You catch hold of Arjuna and fight with him. Let there be a diversion to this ghastly death of Dusshasana, which we cannot help now. You seem to possess the Naga missile! Take it out now. This is the time for it or else you will all die, and your opportunity to use it will never come, perhaps."

Arjuna himself came on the scene, taking over from where Bhima had left and attacked the dispersing army of the enemy with a remorselessness that Karna could not match. It was noon time.

Ashwatthama got down his chariot and neared Duryodhana, on foot. Duryodhana looked at him in perplexity, wondering if he had any plans to save the army.

Ashwatthama : "Friend, do you trust me?"

Duryodhana : "What are you saying, son of my teacher? What do you mean by your sudden question?"

Ashwatthama : "You must understand! The leisurely times where you and I could take pleasure in meandering doubts, disbelief, perplexities and refusals to understand inconvenient questions are over. Quick understanding alone will save the situation."

Duryodhana : "Well, I am ready. Speak what is on your mind so as to make me understand. What is so urgent?"

Ashwatthama : “No, no. You have to make your efforts to understand what I shall say, as never before. What I may say is not unusual; but your usual refusal to understand it will be a stumbling block this time and too costly for relief.”

Duryodhana : “Stop this mystification and be plain in words and meaning.”

Ashwatthama : “That is what I am trying to convey, but the trouble is on your part!”

Duryodhana : “What is it that I am refusing to understand?”

Ashwatthama : “Unavoidable total defeat!”

Duryodhana : “You too say it? Is this a preamble for you to quit?”

Ashwatthama : “It is not a question of my quitting. It is time to end the war and collective quitting. Let us concede defeat and come to some agreement with whatever honour we can save the lives that depend on us.”

Duryodhana : “You mean I must surrender to the enemy after all my sacrifices, after all my efforts to win the war?”

Ashwatthama : “If you look at it that way, I cannot help! Death and total destruction are in store for you. The man now warning you is your close friend and no enemy. See it from a realistic angle. Your brother’s unheard way of death, Bhima’s fulfilment of his oath, the fall of Bhishma and Drona, Karna’s helplessness, the loss of your brothers in very good

numbers, and the scanty army that remains awaiting its end in a matter of a few hours perhaps - all point to one end unmistakably : God is against you for all your effort to wrest victory from the jaws of destiny. Nobody can prevent Bhima from fulfilling his other oaths too, unless we make alternatives, amends, and see the writing on the wall....”

Duryodhana : “So, you too think that this is the suitable moment for you to frighten me and leave my side? Did I expect this from you?”

Ashwatthama : “If reality is frightening, I cannot help, I have said. This reality is not of our making. It is in spite of our best efforts to shape it otherwise. Now if you do not make determined efforts to avoid that direction, you will not live to re-examine the events and the causes that led to them. As a friend it is my duty to save you, to advise you in your interest. So let us stop the war. Or else...”

Duryodhana : “Except stopping the war if you have anything else to say, let me hear. Do not tell me of compromise or running away from the battlefield.”

Ashwatthama : “If you have any such alternative way, you tell me; I shall arrange to carry it out, however difficult it may be.”

Duryodhana : “Then kill all the five brothers yourself and bring me their severed heads. That will end the war nobly or else you bring Yudhishtira a captive, alive before me. I shall invite him for a gamble again, which he will not refuse. I shall gain

all again and drive him to the forests. That will also end the war. Both alternatives are open before you, friend."

Ashwatthama : "The first is what we have all been trying all these seventeen days, with no results. Sri Krishna will not allow that to happen. The second is what my father tried and failed in. I am not braver or more skilful or diplomatic than my father. Thirdly what is there for you now to 'gain' from Yudhishtira, when you yourself maintain that he has gambled away everything once for all, so he possesses nothing to lose? How can he bet what is now yours? Will the world understand these undecipherable niceties now, after failing to answer Draupadi in that unenlightened assembly, thirteen years ago? So forget these impossibilities. Speak affirmatively. I shall persuade Arjuna to stop this war. Yudhishtira desires peace always. Now unless both these prevent Bhima in ties of brotherly bondage he will not spare you, truce or no truce. We may even persuade Yudhishtira to accept a part of the empire, so you keep the rest as before, rule in peace with no challenge from them, and reconcile to whatever has happened, the death of your brothers and the loss of elders like Bhishma or my father.

Duryodhana : "Is it for this ignoble compromise that I sacrificed all my brothers, Bhishma and your father? Let me fight to the finish, and see what happens... But I am sorry you are also advising me in the negative!"

Ashwatthama : “Negative or positive courses are the results of the gamble, you won some thirteen years ago. Now you are losing. If you still want a ‘positive’ advice with a sure negative effect like what you are suffering from, go to Shakuni! Can he win a war as easily as he won a gamble? You choose your well-wishers now! Do you think this Karna will rightly advise you, let alone win the war for you? Could he save your brother? Why was he silent all along? What does that prove? If you still do not trust me I am even more unfortunate that I cannot save you in the only way that is now open to you. Do you think I am selfish in this unsolicited advice? Dismiss this treacherous Karna, and do not trust him any longer. He has harmed you enough both before the war, and also now, during this war, in participation as well as abdication.”

Duryodhana is stunned by this analysis, this advice and this light in which he places Karna, his ‘trusted’ friend.

Duryodhana : “How has Karna harmed me? He has been fighting as bravely as Bhishma or your father. His loyalty is unquestionable. Bhishma or Drona also could not save many of my brothers. Could I give up them then? Can I give up Karna now? Am I to be afraid still of the outcome of the fight?”

Ashwatthama : “Your defence is surprising! Have you not known that Karna has vowed not to kill the brothers of Arjuna? Only Arjuna seems to be his

special target; this also he cannot achieve if you look to the way he is dilly-dallying! So where does he stand?"

Duryodhana : "So what? Bhishma also had similarly vowed not to kill our main enemies, the Pandavas! Your father also avoided it with all skill. Both were interested in destroying the enemy's army. That is what Karna is now doing. What is wrong is, with my fate, not my decision of war, or the choice of commanders, or the way they are fighting. I cannot let them down now."

Though Duryodhana rushed through the routine reply as if by heart, he remembered Yuyutsu's words about Karna, even before the war had actually started. So he could not put his heart in his own words.

Ashwatthama : "That means you are justifying all your doings, choices, and their consequences - those that have happened, or that are to happen! If this is your final decision, even God cannot save you! Unless the Pandavas die, this war will not end in your favour. If you allow it to find its own end, you will not live to see that end."

Duryodhana sank in enthusiasm; his head reeled and he felt a blank darkness descending on his mind's sight! Yet he spoke :

Duryodhana : "Friend, even granting what you say is true, and your advice is right, and your analysis sound, I have this to ask : if I stop the war, or if Yudhishtira offers me all my kingdom out of generosity - for arguments' sake - for whose sake

should I rule? Should I welcome stopping this butchery? Without my dead brothers, without Bhishma or your father to bless me of what use is kingdom to me? It is better to follow the unstoppable course and die in honour and self-satisfaction!"

Ashwatthama : "That means.....?"

Duryodhana : "That means, it is not the Pandavas that must die hereafter, but I myself! It is my death that will stop it."



CHAPTER 37

KARNA'S MISSILE FAILS; MISERABLE PLIGHT OF KARNA!

War is now dragging on, on the afternoon of that seventeenth day. The morning has bestowed victory on the Pandavas. No one could ever forget the grotesque manner of Dusshasana's death at Bhima's hands. Enthusiasm was at its lowest in the Kaurava camp when war was going on now, on the same day.

Bhima was encouraging Arjuna : "I have fulfilled one of my vows. You too shall fulfill yours."

Arjuna sought Sri Krishna's concurrence on the use of Brahmastra. Sri Krishna said : "Use, by all means. End the war soon." But Karna intercepted it and diffused it to the wonder of Arjuna and Sri Krishna! This was no small achievement!!

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, this fellow is proving himself as extraordinary. Brahmastra cannot be otherwise stopped by an ordinary hero. Now he counts upon you as his target pawn, just as he is yours. There is thus a direct fight between you two.. Go on, settle the old score and finish the war.

Among gods, demons, Yakshas, Pishachas, Gandharvas, Guhyakas, Nagas and others there was a strange polarisation! Some took the side of Karna and wished him total success, keeping in mind the injustices and indignities he had suffered so far in life, and the cruel circumstances in which he could not assert his full mettle or potential. It was not so much a wish 'against' Arjuna, as a wish 'for' Karna. All evil cross-breeds of humans, semi-humans, demi-gods, products of inter-caste marriages, forces that worked against the natural courses of life's movements took the side of Karna; no wonder!

Arjuna was hailed by all counterparts, the gods above, the Brahmins, rightful warriors outside the field of war, saints, sages, spirits of mounts, rivers, groves, trees, creepers and other dwellings of divine beings and natural forces as God ordained.

It was as if forces of Nature and rebel-antinatural forces were symbolically fighting now, with the Earth and the Sky in the forefront, respectively. This was the most unusual feature of this day's war.

Vasuki, Chitrasena, the Garudas, and some Naga leaders wished Arjuna success, while a majority of Nagas, hostile to the civilization, represented by Sri Krishna and Arjuna wished Karna all the success.

Polarisation happened among birds and reptiles too. Even the planets took sides! They were calculating in their own self interests. A majority of opportunistic merchants, menials, and other low professionals took the side of Karna, expectedly while those in Dharma and established orders of society took Arjuna's side.

This was no mean betting or gamble with idle pleasure. Heavy stakes lay in the outcome of this war, and it was extraordinary that Karna could set in turmoil earth and heaven, divide universal loyalties and bring about confusion on the cosmic scale, as neither Bhishma nor Drona had done. It almost reminded the Rama-Ravana war!

Initially Karna's strength was low, and there were some reverses, and his army began to run in fear of Arjuna. Duryodhana rushed there and enthused him and regathered the demoralised army. The battle now gained equilibrium gradually.



"You are not Radheya, son of Adiratha and Radha, but my son, Kunti's own son, elder son by right. So Arjuna is your own brother..." these words from nowhere suddenly began to ring in the ears of Karna, to his disquiet!

Karna recognised it as the voice by Kunti and suddenly looked round to see if she was around! He found none. Again the same words were heard, this time more loudly and from still nearer quarters. Karna began to sweat!

The voice said again : "you are my first child; Arjuna is your blood-brother!"

Karna remembered that these were the same words he had heard from Kunti, when Sri Krishna's mission for peace had failed, and Kunti met him on the sandy banks of Ganga, during noon, when he was worshipping the Sun-God.

Kunti had said : “You and Arjuna ought to live like Balarama and Sri Krishna, and not fight on opposite camps, when Arjuna has not wronged you and you have no reason to join evil Duryodhana’s camp!”

The words had had no effect then when the war was still not on. But now, when Karna was diffident, when Dusshasana met with such ghastly death in his own helpless leadership, and with total defeat almost certain for his side, and with stalwarts like Bhishma and Drona disappearing from the scene in pitiful circumstances, the words assumed a force and a prophetic meaning that he was unwise to neglect all these days! The words now appeared as counsel of a wise mother, whom he had earlier spurned as a cruel, selfish and even opportunistic demon, come to divide him and drive him to death, at the moment when destiny had thrown a chance of holding his head high as the equal of any other hero born high and in proper natural circumstances. Karna did not know what to do with that voice, either! It was too late to obey, even granting he was ready. But there was no such question of readying for a cause he had hated all along. He had to move on, and on, towards the inevitable, knowing what it would be like.

The voice only weakened his determination to fight Arjuna, at this moment, when he wanted encouragement, rather. Karna tried to find comfort in the explanation that it must have been his imagination, in a tired moment of action and so ignored that voice.

But the mind failed and more voices were heard:

“Karna, I am your father, the Sun-God telling you

what is in your interest. Kunti is telling the truth. Listen to her wise words and act accordingly.”

Karna was stung this time! And his bow slid from his sweating hands; he soon heard another voice :

“Mother, I shall not kill your other four sons. Be assured about it. But between me and Arjuna, only one of us will live to make you still a mother of five, as the world has known so far, rightly or wrongly. The sixth one has no place on this earth as your son.”¹

This was his own promise to Kunti, which was also reverberating in his ear, now, at this unexpected moment! This was his own unprovoked promise to her, while she had not asked for protection of Arjuna from him, which would have meant demanding his death at his hands!²

Kunti was not so cruel. He had made that promise, being unwilling to send her empty handed, while she was pleading for peace and unity among the brothers, owning him as son, at this odd juncture! He was glad and disturbed at the same time now.

Kunti had repeatedly pleaded :

“It is now in your hands to avoid this genocide. It will be your life’s glorious moment. I shall announce you as my eldest son; you should find an end of all your humiliations. Yudhishtira and others will own you and give up claims to the throne in your favour. Your

¹ *Na te jatu na shishyanti putrah pancha yashaswini |
Nirarjunah sakarna va, sarjuna va hate mayi || (Ud 146-23)*

² *Na cha te jyam samarambhah mayi mogho bhavishyati |
Vadhyam vishahyan sangrame na hanishyami te sutan || (21)*

evil friend Duryodhana, if he really loves you, should welcome it and propose you for the throne and proclaim you as the Emperor. Bhishma, Drona, Ashwatthama and Kripa will all welcome it. It will be a decision to the satisfaction of all, if only you can make up your mind.”

Karna now could not avoid the good intentions of the mother behind her words. But he could not help feel that the same words had the capacity to unnerve him against Arjuna before him.

Karna stood stupefied for some moments as Arjuna was nearing him and his sharp arrows were now piercing into his body at this moment of reverie and inaction. Now he appeared as death incarnate instead of like a brother!

“Use me! I am also marking my time! Arjuna is not only your enemy, but also mine”

- Another voice was heard now from very close quarters. Again Karna looked round and found none. He thought it must be a fantasy of a distracted mind divided against itself. But no! Casually he drew an arrow, a missile, from his quiver. It happened to have a serpent's face for its sharp pointed edge, and was slightly longer and thinner than his other usual arrows. Oh! Nagastra! The one which he had worshipped every day, and reserved for an emergency against Arjuna, all these days. Karna did not exactly remember the circumstances as to how it came to join his armoury - though he tried his best. The missile was powerful, shining with a glow at the mouth emitting poison and fire. Karna wondered whether the voice he had heard could be of this missile! How could inanimate things

speak? Why is he going so crazy all of a sudden? Could someone have practiced black magic to weaken him at this most important moment?

“No.. No... There is no black magic.. Nor am I inanimate as you fancy. I am your best aid. Use me immediately.”

This time Karna stared at the twisted body of the missile and was certain that it was addressing him. Karna ordered : “Speak, Why I must use you so urgently. What is your own urgency?”

The missile revealed that its head was of Ashwasena, whose body was reduced to ashes in the Khandava fire, and it was Takshaka, who had grafted that head on a missile of poison for revenge against Arjuna, who was the cause of that devastating fire in which Takshaka lost his wife, daughter-in-law and all others taking refuge in the forest against their enemies. The missile had sought protection in Karna’s quiver, waiting to be used at the right moment for revenge, all these years.

Karna felt that this was a good omen, and without a further thought held it up, and yoked it into his bow, and aimed at Arjuna’s throat!

Shalya looked back and warned in loud, firm, words :

Shalya : “Famed hero! The missile is all right. But the aim is risky. You will sure kill your target if you aim it a little lower, say at the heart of Arjuna. Remember Sri Krishna on the other side. He will do something so that your aim is missed. At the most you will hit Arjuna’s crown then. But if you

aim at the heart even if the enemy lowers himself by some trick, it will at least cut his throat. Believe me, and obey. Quick."

Karna : "You fool! What do you mean? How can my aim be unsure or altered? How can it fail ever?"

Shalya : "This is no time for vain glory or ego-exhibition! Let us not waste time in needless arguments. Change your aim at once. Believe what I say. I know your enemy better. Sri Krishna will not allow you to hit your target so easily. See sense and obey; or else you will waste a valuable missile."

Karna hesitated now; something told him that Shalya's warning may come true, as Sri Krishna was a master-strategist and resourceful with a unique presence of mind. He looked at the missile firmly saddled in its seat in the bow waiting for its moment of discharge. He realised that the enemies also had noted it and were dreading its flight at them. If the aim was altered now, they would laugh at him, which would further demoralise him! So he said, mildly.

Karna : "Friend, I do not underestimate Sri Krishna or your advice. But you should have pointed it out before I took out the missile or aimed it at the enemy's throat. What can I do now without altering the fixed aim?"

Shalya : "I am glad you realise my point at least now! But you did not consult me before you took out this missile or aimed it, otherwise I would have advised you then only! But what is wrong in

changing the aim, when it is not too late still? Do not make it a prestige issue! Change it at once!"

Karna : (Reverting to his stubborn posture again) "No, that is out of question, now. This Karna will never change an aim once taken."

Shalya : "Do you fancy you are the Sri Rama of *Tretayuga*?"

Karna : (Irritated by this ironical taunt) : "No, but I am the disciple of Rama, Bhagavan Parashurama."

Shalya : "Then your foolishness is beyond rectification! It does not matter whose disciple you are. What matters is what you are. When the target is easily within your reach, if only you can slightly alter the aim..... but you are dilly-dallying sentimentally without weighing consequences! You are Parashurama's disciple, no doubt; but remember also you are under his curse! Did your *Guru* not withdraw from his oath to kill Bhishma, when he found it impossible in the nature of things? Anything can happen in war where life is the pawn of gamble! Winning is all that matters. Did you stand on prestige, manners or etiquette when you attacked Abhimanyu from behind? Where was your chivalry then? If that was fair then why is it not (changing your aim) so now? After all it is your own minor adjustment. Do not be fickle-minded and find pretexts for self-defeat or suicide. Only Lord Sri Rama never altered his aims. He never used the same arrow or missile twice! Do not equate yourself with that Divine Incarnation. Are you going to

falsify Valmiki's dictum that only Rama can equal Rama? Come, Come, alter your aim."

Karna : "What is this bossing over me? Your presumptuous manners have crossed limits of decency! Why do you bully over me, pester me, leaving me no freedom? You can take over the fight from me if you do not like me! Do not say another word. Shut up your foul mouth!"

Shalya : "I am here at your request only, and not presumptuously; I have told Duryodhana already that you shall fulfill my two conditions - that you shall listen to my advice, being one of them. You have violated it for no valid reason.. Secondly *you* have to shut up your foul mouth. I am but doing my duty. Where is the excess? You have seen my point and conceded its rightness! I shall take over the fight as and when my turn comes; not from you. Your fall is imminent perhaps."

Karna : "You are my enemy number one, not really Arjuna! Why do you pull me down again and again? Why do you discourage me for one false reason or another?"

Shalya : "God is punishing me for assuming the charioteership of a characterless person coming from a non-warrior, inferior order! I curse myself for having succumbed to Duryodhana's pressures. It is you who are abusing me; it is not I abusing you. I have done my duty of advising you as per expected, prescribed code; not violating my borders of decency! But what do I get from you? Abuse

from an uncultured tongue!... Look This is my last warning. If ever you behave like this again I shall be at liberty to break my covenant and quit this responsibility. To hell with your 'aim'; go ahead and be accursed."

Karna was realising all this while that Shalya was right after all and it was he himself who was out of his senses! He regretted his retorts in foul language, and his unreasonable position about the 'unalterable aim' after his own behaviour at Abhimanyu's slaughter for which there was no defence, then or now. Every word of Shalya was rightly piercing his heart.

He looked at Sri Krishna on the opposite side and felt a ridicule on his face mixed with looks of pity, sarcasm and irony! Arjuna was fixed in a cruel gaze at him, he could see, and was waiting for orders from Sri Krishna. Arjuna had also noticed the risky aim of Karna, and was not in the least in fear, he could make out. Perhaps the two had heard this wrangle between himself and Shalya, and laughed to their heart's content.

Karna sighed deeply, and at last shot the missile at a ferocious speed! The sky was over-flooded with its light, eclipsing, as it were, even the sun in its extraordinary brightness, and for a moment warriors on either side, stood stunned watching its source and movement.

Karna cried in triumph : "Arjuna, you are out now! None can save you at this fatal moment."

Sri Krishna had expected this. Sitting on the seat of the charioteer, he applied great force on the right

toe as he drove, and made the chariot sink into the earth by a few inches. The ground was already a mire with incessant flow of blood, and the horses stumbled for a second and sat on their fore knees, further downing the position of Arjuna's seat, without throwing him out! The chariot sank substantially into the earth by a foot or two, so that what was now available as aim for the missile was the long crown of Arjuna, once gifted by Indra, so that he was known as 'Kiritree'³. Shalya's calculations came true!

The missile hit that empty crown with a thunderous force, and took it away to a distance, leaving Arjuna fuming and fretting as it was an insult he had never before suffered! The missile not merely carried it way, but also burnt it in the skies! It was as if a star got burst in the skies, or two stars out of their orbits dashed against each other, and the sight blinded all below on the earth.

Arjuna did not know what was happening for a moment. He was confused when the chariot sank and the horses stumbled, and before he could understand why, his crown was carried away leaving him in a state of humiliation. The sequence and their connection was an enigma for him. In this state of perplexity, it was strange that Sri Krishna embraced him and congratulated him!

Arjuna : "What is this untimely jubilation and over a humiliation of mine, in this confused state of

³ During Arjuna's visit to the world of Devendra, on his destruction of demons opposed to the gods, Devendra had bestowed on him this unique Crown (Kirita), which had earned him this new name.

affairs? Why did the horses stumble? Why did the chariot go down? My divine crown is gone!"

Sri Krishna : "But your head is saved! That is what I am celebrating and congratulating you upon."

Arjuna : "What had happened to that head that you now say is saved?"

Sri Krishna : "It was about to be knocked away, off your shoulders! Did you not see Karna take out the Naga missile and aim it at your throat? Had I not pressed the chariot down and made the horses bend on their knees, you would not be here to ask me this question! I actually wondered at Karna's might, and appreciated the successful launching of that missile."

Arjuna : "I do not understand at all, Keshava! I would have destroyed that missile anyhow in the natural course. I do not know why you should appreciate Karna on his failure, or my failure to intercept it! You never gave me a chance! The world of warriors will now think that I have saved my life at someone else's cost! Should I not live in my own right, without expecting someone else to donate it to me as a gift?"

Sri Krishna : "Do not talk like a fool! See the facts straight. Did Drona, Rudra, or Indra ever teach you this Nagastra? It is a demoniacal missile, unique in destructive power, and known to and made by only Takshaka, who still means to kill you at all costs. Having not been taught about its use by a proper teacher, you are not able to intercept it or

render it futile. No other missile known to you would be good against it! That left me with no alternative but to try methods other than straight fight, to save you. I appreciate Karna for the successful launch of that missile. For in the hands of a careless warrior it would have back-fired! Skill in the hands of a confused soldier, is highly appreciable. He will be the first and also the last to use it in this war. I paid my tribute to him in the best traditions of warfare; that is all. It does not mean I wanted you to be killed. I knew what to do, and so lowered your chariot and made the horses bend. This does not mean an ignoble act either on my part or on your part to be so saved. It is my duty to protect you, and I did it well and in time. Life is no gift by anyone except God. If he had wanted you to die, no one would have saved you. It is He who saved you! Do you feel humiliated now?"

Arjuna : (Pleased and satisfied by these relevant explanations) : "Oh friend, I never knew that such a missile ever existed on earth, especially in the possession of Karna! How did you know all this?"

Sri Krishna : "The science of polity expects a hero of fame to know all about the strength or weakness of his counterpart. Do you remember how Ghatotkacha died? Karna is by nature an extraordinary warrior possessing unique missiles and weapons. It is his bragging nature, his forgetfulness, his *adharmic* actions and thoughts that have rendered him vulnerable to you. Mere

possessing of weapons does not make one great. Vishwamitra, in the past, made the same mistake, in bygone ages. He targeted a poor Brahmin, Vashishta, respected even by gods and beings out of Aryavartha⁴ and with the mightiest of weapons and donations gifted by Mahadeva Rudra! The result? He was routed out by the Brahminical power of the sage as assisted by even barbaric armies outside the normal cultural boundary of the Bharatha Empire! Like that ill fated king who later became a Brahmin himself, Karna believed only in arms-power, acquired them variously, from Parashurama, Indra, Takshaka and others. We have wasted two of them; one in this case, and another in the episode of Ghatotkacha. Bhargavastra is still there and we shall see when the turn comes. Ghatotkacha paid for you then; now your crown has made itself a martyr for your sake.”

Arjuna : “Could we not avoid martyrs or scapegoats and fight straight?”

Sri Krishna understood that Arjuna was referring also to Abhimanyu and remained thoughtful for a moment and then said :

Sri Krishna : “All are martyrs in a way, if they die for a good cause. We had to save you, and waste Karna’s Indra-missile, by offering an unavoidable

⁴ The land sacred for the ‘Noble’, ‘the Cultured’ as the land between Ganga and Sindhu was once known, in the subcontinent. But there were Hindus outside the India of those days who joined to crush Vishwamitra’s huge army drawn from all warrior kings within India, then.

aim. I shall not call this a 'scapegoat'. That is an evil context. Now Duryodhana made scapegoats of Bhishma and Drona for his evil cause. Your son Abhimanyu comes under neither of these categories. Drona created a dead-lock type of situation, which could not be broken open by you or me as we were elsewhere. Your son volunteered to be of help. That was not of our suggestion. I doubt whether Drona also intended it. It happened by divine design. Let us forget it now. Turn to your question. If straight wars were possible in this age of *Dwapara*, close to *Kali*, shortly, we would not have had to fight after some thirteen years of perpetration of an unforgivable crime! Wars are never straight in any age, because Evil is a universal factor."

Arjuna : "If there were no Sri Krishna to save me here today, Arjuna would be no more, and the war would have ended!"

Sri Krishna : "But that could not be, because there is only one Arjuna and only one Sri Krishna to save him on this war-field. Your Sri Krishna wasted this Karna's missiles in planned strategies to save you and retain you for a greater purpose. Do you say that is wrong?"

Sri Krishna, got down, patted the horses, helped them to get up, and adjusted the reins so as to relieve them from their slight misery. The animals licked his hands and desired more comforting from those hands. Sri Krishna told them : "That is enough for now, as there is no time now. Let the war be over, and you will have your heart's full." Sri Krishna took out arrow

edges, stuck up in the bodies of the horses, applied ointment, and again patted them. They stood up straight to draw the chariot with renewed vigour. The doctors who had rushed to help the horses with medicines, inhalers and ointments, withdrew to safe distances. The war had halted all this while. Arjuna continued the discussion :

Arjuna : "Friend, you said that this Nagastra is an unconventional missile. What do you mean?"

Sri Krishna : "It means that it is not handed on by tradition, and is unusual."

Arjuna : (laughing) "I did not ask for the meaning of words or their etymological explanation. Tell me its background, and how it came to be in the possession of Karna, if you know."

Sri Krishna : "This is your additional lapse - this non-remembering of its origin on your own part. Do you remember how you made history when you burnt the Khandava forests?"

Arjuna : "What has that to do with this weapon, now?"

Sri Krishna : "Your ignorance is deeper than what I had thought of! You made several histories then: burning of that forest for the first time, defeating of India again for the first time. Two more historical records were established by you also : listen - Takshaka, the Naga leader in exile and in fear of enemies from both within his camp of Nagas, and Danava forces of Maya of the South, was in hiding in a secret camp somewhere, deep within those jungles. When fire enveloped him fatally, he tried

to escape with all family. Unfortunately his wife and daughter-in-law (who was pregnant) died in the fire. The pregnant lady delivered prematurely, and the baby's body was also consumed by fire! Takshaka escaped somehow with the unburnt head-part of that child, named as Ashvasena. It is this head, the poisonous sharp face, that adorns the notorious Naga Missile, specially made by Takshaka to kill you in vengeance! You know this Naga chief as well as Maya are diabolical engineers in competition with the Divine Mason Vishvakarma, and unlike his missiles, which are traditional, they have also made counterparts, which cannot be multiplied or passed on, on regular formulae. They are a sort of 'use-and-throw' missiles. This Nagastra is one. If it is wasted, it is gone for ever unlike Ageneya, or Brahma or Ashvashira missiles. But wait... something is happening there; see."

Shalya had started another row with Karna on the wasted Naga-missile. Sri Krishna and Arjuna watched and heard it :

Shalya : "You bloody fool, I forewarned you and the same has happened! See who is wiser! You have lost a precious missile as well as a fine opportunity to kill your sworn enemy."

Karna : "You did not tell me before I would aim it; 'Wisdom-after-the-event' is what anybody can claim to possess. If you were sincere why didn't you tell me in advance?"

A miracle happened just then! The missile hissed back in a terrific rush towards Karna, and everybody

thought it was backfiring at him in disappointment and disgust. But it came to the ears of the hero and pleaded: "Warrior sir, you did not aim me well. Doesn't matter. Use me again well a second time and aim it at your enemy's chest! Quick .. Do not waste time before the enemy wakes up!"

Shalya looked at Karna reproachingly in scorn, as if adding emphasis to the voice of the missile! Karna was sad and adamant. Shalya was loud in his curse now:

Shalya : "Karna, you evil fellow! You are the real enemy of Duryodhana by your refusal to aim the missile again at the enemy's chest, as I advised you earlier! I should have killed you now, had I not been here in your charioteer's seat. See, even the missile is begging of you in a miracle. Do not hesitate or waste time. This is your last opportunity. There is no counter for it. All tricks of Sri Krishna will not now save Arjuna."

Karna took time to reply. Meanwhile a flood of blood flowed from the opposite side down towards where Karna's chariot had been stationed, and came up to cover parts of the rims of its chariot-wheels. They got stuck up inexplicably in a gradient which was already steep for the over-tired horses. Karna was now ready with his reply to the missile.

Karna : "You, whoever you may be at the war-head of this missile, thank you for your suggestion to use you again. But listen to my well-known resolve: this Karna of mighty fame, will never use an once-wasted weapon, as third-rate heroes might. What is wasted and thrown and past is wasted once

for all. I also did not know you were taking shelter in my quiver for so long. I shall not allow you to get there again. Why are you so troubling me so importunately? Who are you?"

The Missile : "I am Ashwasena's head. This head was once on the shoulders of Takshaka's son who died in the Khandava fires. I seek Arjuna's head for revenge. I shall get you unfailing victory if you can use me again. Your success is my success too."

Shalya seconded it with all his persuasive force. Karna was silent for a moment and then said :

Karna : "Do not mix up your goal of vengeance with what I must or must not do now for your sake. I cannot serve your cause, as I am not your servant or agent. I have my own cause, my own aim, and my own vision. Go away and find someone else for your purpose."

The Missile : "They say that the enemy's enemy is a friend. Can't you look at me from this strategic point? Am I so cheap to be dispensed with?"

Karna : "Look, you did not speak the truth when you sought refuge in my quiver, nor asked for permission. This is transgression, first. I never sought your help on my own, second. You failed to hit my target when I shot you in spite of these factors. If you can come back now, surely you could have lowered yourself to hit my aimed part of enemy's body. It is your failure, even if the enemy practiced tricks to save himself. Why did you not chase the enemy in all directions, straight or crooked, as Rama's arrow chased a mere crow? You come here and talk tall! Get away without another word!"

The missile wept, cried, urged repeatedly arguing that this was no time for niceties of moral values or scruples. Karna would not budge; then the missile said in firm resolve :

“Then you will regret this when you die before the evening.”

The missile disappeared with a terrible hiss, and in a cloud of smoke.

Shalya : “I have not seen a greater dunce than you before! I repeat, call the missile, and use it at once, if you want to win.”

Karna : “Winning is secondary. Honour is primary.”

Shalya : “As if you have always cared for honour! Remember your earlier behaviours! At the gamble scene, the outskirts of Virata’s capital, or in your role at Abhimanyu’s death!! You are head-strong and use whatever arguments can help you to support your prejudiced resolves. You are an opportunist first and foremost! How can you say winning is secondary? What are you chosen for as General? Exhibition of your fictitious ‘honour’? Or victory for Duryodhana?”

Karna : “Do not mix up issues. Contexts are different to determine the nature of action.”

Shalya : “If the person is to remain the same in varying contexts, on different issues, he must have something called ‘character’? Have you ever heard of it ? You villain?”

Karna : “Are you saying I have no honour or character? You rascal! You have started your older game of

letting me down and insulting me, again. Do as I say and drive the chariot."

Shalya : "If you say character also is secondary, why fight? Go and surrender to Arjuna, here and now. Dharma requires nothing short of it for all your evil deeds of the past. Tell your friend, Duryodhana, to stop this war. Let at least those alive on the war-field have a reprieve and live hereafter. Do not indulge in self-fooling. There is no time before death for further dishonour."

Karna : "Even if I am faced by a hundred Arjunas I cannot give up Dharma. I cannot use a wasted weapon again,. Why all this useless talk?"⁵

Shalya : "Advice is not useless talk. Face just one Arjuna, let me see. The other ninety nine shall wait for your next birth."

Karna : "I regret having sought you as my charioteer."

Shalya : "I regret equally having accepted it under Duryodhana's requests and repeated pressures. Let no one blame me hereafter. I am now free from my bondage, and you are free to follow the course of death so widely open to you now."

Shalya quits in a huff, jumps down the charioteer's seat, and moves to the camp at ease, and with dignity.



⁵ Na Naga karno[dya rane parasya balam samsthaya jayam
bubhushet |
Na sandadadhyan dvih sharam chaiva Naga yadyarjunanam
shatameva hanyam (Karna 90-41)

Arjuna : “You did not tell me why Takshaka is so hostile to us, princes of the Kuru race.”

Sri Krishna : “Takshaka is a Naga prince too with his once capital city in his own name still there, Taksha-shila or Takshakavati. His kingdom was annexed by Kuru Princes, and lay waste as jungle in the Khandavas, as they did not develop it, nor cared for his people. The Nagas are a proud people, with great culture, with their own music, painting, sculpture, artifacts, war-machines, war-codes and literature. When so neglected and overpowered, they withdrew out of the main stream of civilization, and came to be ‘tribals’, ‘jungle men’, and their standards fell. Added to it, from Nahusha to Dhritarashtra, all rulers of your race have insulted their women and forced them to prostitution, producing a large tribe of men and women bearing allegiance by blood to their progenitors. Takshaka cannot forget all these, without a proper share in the Kuru empire as rulers, a share in the civilizational spheres and due recognition in all fields of culture. Even Bhishma could not respond. So these Nagas wait in lurch for their time. One of my ancestors through Devaki was a Naga; one of yours through Kunti was a Naga and your wife Ulupi is a Naga princess. Some Nagas are good to us like Vasuki, Shesha, Anantha and others. But Karkotaka and Takshaka are dead against any ignoble truce. The Nagas are now a divided a lot. Actually all this land of Kurus was once the empire of Nagas. How do they forget past glories? Look; even if Takshaka fails now, he will use another occasion for the Nagastra against you.”



CHAPTER 38

KARNA'S END

Sri Krishna and Arjuna felt it funny that this alliance should end in such tragic circumstances! It was a foregone conclusion, though, as the temperaments did not match right from the start. But this was a moment when Karna needed his charioteer most, and there was neither moment nor choice to replace; Arjuna waited with his arrow sharply aimed at the tragic prey without mercy.

The Pandava army got lost in waves of hilarious laughter, as they were expecting this moment for long.

Karna's chariot-wheels now got stuck up in a mire of blood, and the horses drifted with no one to command them into any meaningful direction. The field reflected Karna's own state of mind, sanguine in mood, divided, drifting and against self-interest.



Duryodhana observed Shalya's return from the battle front, and his mind sank at the thought that now Karna was alone, helpless and ready as victim for Arjuna's arrows. Though he had persuaded Shalya to take up his charioteership, right from those first moments, he had misgivings that this combination was artificial,

brittle and would break any moment. Two earlier events of the day, also, weighed against hope, since that morning. Dusshasana's cruel, tortuous death and Ashwatthama's advice for peace and settlement. Merely discouraging facts. Here was Karna deserted. But earlier Karna did nothing to protect that dear brother from Bhima, with all tall talk of missile power and archery. Whether Dusshasana could survive Bhima's fury anyhow was another matter. But why was Karna so inactive? This eldest son of Kunti also was now a silent spectator, if not a betrayer! Let alone other Pandavas; at least Arjuna could be killed, as per the rumoured vow of Karna!! Duryodhana silently followed Shalya to know from him first hand as to the circumstances leading to that exit.

Duryodhana : "Uncle dear, stop! Why are you back, and away? Why did you desert me at this most needed hour? Tell me all."

Shalya : (Turning back in anger) : "I had forewarned you that your engaging me to this headstrong fool would not work. I had also imposed conditions, with your interests in view. But the villain violated all, abused me, and wasted missile after missile by thoughtless aims, and with empty moralisation on moral standards he would not violate, when success was so near. How long should I tolerate and obey? You compared him to Rudra and me to Brahma!! Here is death-dance all around, and the enemy forces are in unabated laughter!"

Duryodhana : "You should not have deserted Karna at this juncture and in this crisis of mine! You

should have still been there whatever the provocation or your own compulsions.”

Shalya : “Do you know what really happened? That fool aimed the valuable Nagastra at Arjuna’s throat against my advice. It knocked off his mere crown, as I had foretold and anticipated! The missile came back with a request to re-employ it, and I tried to persuade the dammed fool. But he claims to be a new reincarnation of Lord Sri Ramachandra, and would not re-employ a wasted arrow or missile! He showered on me the choicest of abuses since morning whenever I tried to advise him, and I bore all that till now for your sake! Dear nephew, I have come here, after all, for your sake and not for that braggart. You have not been lucky in your Generals so far! What can I do?”

Duryodhana : “So, what I saw burn like a fallen star in the skies is that crown of Arjuna!”

Shalya : “After you have seen it, what more is there for me to say or add? If you have anything else to command me to do within my reach, do so.”

Duryodhana : “Uncle, can you not change your decision for my sake, this one time, and go back to Karna, in this most difficult hour of mine, which is also a harrowing period for him?”

Shalya : “Think of my difficult hour and harrowing period also! Is not honour for a warrior the most priced value? There is no use even if I change my decision and go back to him. He will not allow me to do my job with that unique foul tongue!

There will be no progress; you will go on losing brothers, relations, friends and dependents, and I will have to be only a silent witness from close quarters at the most! What purpose does it serve, in this way?"

Duryodhana had no answer for this, and was perplexed by this behaviour of Karna? He stood there with a heavy heart and turned back, and noticed Arjuna ready to resume fight. He had now a white turban for head-gear, which promoted his glow even more than the crown that was knocked off and burnt away by the Naga Missile. The day was drawing to a close but Arjuna did not appear to be tired, and he and Sri Krishna were enjoying their mutual dialogue interspersed with laughter. Why war had stopped was not understandable!

Duryodhana sights Karna, and stares at his plight with tear-filled eyes. Even Karna is in a similar state—eyes filled with tears, hands unable to hold the bow or draw arrows, and gazing aimlessly with nothing in view. What has happened to him? Helplessness? Repentance? Regret for difficult tight-corners? Loss of presence of mind? Or is this also a strategy to let him off, as Bhishma and Drona did earlier?

Duryodhana noticed that the wheels of Karna's chariot had, almost to the half, got stuck up in a mire of blood! Upto the axle! There was none to help. The charioteer had quit.

Arjuna was now ready to resume the fight. Sri Krishna was signalling it with loud blowing sounds of the conch! His Gandiva was lifted up in the left hand, and the right one was drawing up arrows. But Karna

was not ready at all! Oh, God! What a miserable sight!! Karna was pity embodied, distress incarnated, and destiny in angry moods! He was trying to drive his own chariot with reins of horses tied around his left wrist, holding also the bow, and the other one picking up the arrows from behind his back, in the quiver without disturbing the horses in their directed movements. The hand holding the bow as well as the reins was overburdened with heavy and contradictory responsibilities disturbing his aims.

Duryodhana wondered how he could help Karna now. But going there was a problem. Arjuna would not spare anyone trying to rush a fresh chariot, charioteer, body-guards, arms-suppliers, or army behind or a different target for Arjuna to relieve Karna from there.

Arjuna's chariot was at a higher plane, better situated in every way.

Even if Duryodhana could go to Karna, what could he ask him? - "Why can't you use the Nagastra again?", "Why did you force Shalya to quit with your foul tongue?" "Why can't you fight with your heart?" All three would further estrange him from him.

Bhima was rushing from behind. He was rumoured to have taken a toll of some twenty five thousand soldiers till then, since morning. Duryodhana had to run to escape that fury leaving Karna to fend for himself. Karna could not be defended from outside, with external support. If he could not rely on his potentials, it only meant that his end was near. So what else could be done?



Sri Krishna and Arjuna were engaged in a dialogue, somehow allowing Karna, some needed time.

Sri Krishna : "For all his wicked qualities, lapses, and short comings, Karna is an extraordinary hero."

Arjuna : (Surprised by this misplaced compliment) "How do you say that? What heroic feat has he performed at least since the start of the war?"

Sri Krishna : "You have seen that this morning, yourself! He could throw away this chariot of yourself with you and me as heavy weights in it, by about ten feet distance, as if a wind did it, by the mere force of an arrow! Later you forced that chariot of Karna, in a similar exhibition of skill by about a hundred feet. But that is not much!"

Arjuna : (Not pleased with this contrast, and not able to understand Sri Krishna's meaning), "Not much? Really? How?"

Sri Krishna : "Your chariot by itself is Divine; that is one weight; next, your bow Gandiva; that is second; then myself. They say that there is nothing heavier than myself. This is third as Narayana. Then you are the fourth weight as Nara, as an aspect of mine. Come to the fifth factor and see Hanuman on top, at your flag-post. These five weights together are an extraordinary phenomenon and to repel this by ten feet distance is no ordinary matter; and in this sense your reply was by far easier. I say this as a matter of fact, and not to discourage you." Arjuna was surprised.

Here, Karna did not appear to be pleased; he was in a very odd situation and wondered why Arjuna was delaying the war in his helpless situation. Somehow he managed to control the horses, and drove the chariot, and shot a dozen arrows together on Arjuna, and they missed their aim and hit Sri Krishna, who became now angry! Karna was unmindful of this and now he showered arrows continuously on Arjuna, in an unusual exhibition of skill. Arjuna hit back by shooting ninety arrows at Karna, which pierced into his body, destroyed his ornaments and jewels and exposed his bare body for further attack now! Karna had lost his shield on the chest also, and went into a swoon!

Sri Krishna : "Do you see? How compassion is costly on the war-field? I felt a little slack, as Karna was in a mess, and indulged in a side talk on some explanation of what happened in the morning. But our enemy is not in the least discomfort and see how his skill or enthusiasm is not at all affected by his distressing situation! Even if you show mercy he will not respond by a corresponding gesture. Even without advance notice, by conch-blowing or some such chivalrous act, he can take disadvantage of our slackness. That is the kind of enemy you have now! He does not remember even the elementary code that a charioteer must not be attacked. Has Karna changed? Have circumstances mellowed him? So now you have to finish him straight, without further consideration and fulfill your own vow just as your brother Bhima fulfilled his, this morning. With his death, possibly the war itself may come to an end. Where does Duryodhana

have another General or an army to be commanded by him? So be quick.”

Something happened to Arjuna, now, all of a sudden! An abnormal sense of compassion welled up from within him inexplicably! He sighted Karna steadfastly in his helpless condition. Karna's chariot had got tilted to the left precariously. The wheel was stuck up almost three fourths in the mire created by the flowing blood that had frozen there for sometime. Any moment that chariot could crash on the earth along with Karna, the horses finding the burden impossible to drag or even keep it on the earth in its position firm. Karna was wounded miserably with blood oozing from his body on all sides, and with no doctor around to treat him, and with no time to withdraw as no one else was there to his help.

Arjuna began to sweat and looked at Karna again and again.¹ He now noticed very strong resemblance between Yudhishtira's face and Karna's as never before. He laid the bow down. Sri Krishna noticed this abnormality :

Sri Krishna : “What is the matter, friend? What are you doing?”

Arjuna : “Tell me Sri Krishna, Who is this Karna in reality? I feel a strange affinity with him, instinctively. There must be some mystical reason for this feeling felt in the blood at this moment.”

¹ The following dialogue and this situation are not detailed in the original text. Our picture follows the Kannada version by Kumara Vyasa.

Sri Krishna : "The truth about him is that he is now your enemy. This is 'intimate' reality. Leave 'ultimate' reality to philosophers who live in dream-world's of their own. There need not be meanings for all imaginings or fancies one feels, which tend to unnerve a man in an otherwise serious situation. You are seeking explanation for failings and weaknesses. This is no time for it. Why should any evil fellow look like your brother? You are going mad! Should I teach you another 'Gita' again?"

Arjuna : "Call it failing or weakness... Why should it arise now all of a sudden? Is this also one of your tricks?"

Sri Krishna : "Good God! You have to explain your odd behaviour, and not expect me to invent reasons for your fancies! Why should it be a trick of mine? Get up and let us finish this job now. Stop your sentimental nonsense."

Arjuna : "I am fully in my own senses and not giving way to sentimentality, and that is why I seek an explanation for a strongly felt feeling. Can't you see?"

Sri Krishna : "People out of their senses, do all speak this same language. No one admits his derangement of mind! Even mad people think they are sane, and it is the others who are mad."

Arjuna : "Say what you will; but tell me the truth about Karna."

Sri Krishna : "Shall I tell you? This is the man who instigated Duryodhana to expose your wife naked

in the assembly! This is the same fellow who had no scruples in attacking your son Abhimanyu from behind, and was responsible for his butchery. This is the brain behind Duryodhana's plots to eliminate you all in cold blood. This is the fellow seeking now death at your hands as reward for all his evils. Do you doubt? Are you answered?"

Arjuna : "Why do you not see his brighter side? Good qualities?"

Sri Krishna : "I am eager to know if you have discovered any."

Arjuna : "Did he not part with his nature-born ear-rings and chest-shield as gift to Indra? Is he not known for making enormous gifts to others?"

Sri Krishna : "Yes, he parted away with those nature-born things; but, for exchange, for consideration, to obtain a missile from Indra; to the best of my knowledge such transactions are not called 'gifts' but selfish exchanges, commercial in nature; he sells and buys. Do you accredit him with this decrepit episode as a matter of gift? Secondly, all that he gifts away as you say, are themselves gifts to him from Duryodhana! What is his speciality in this? What has he earned out of his own effort, prowess, genius, to give away so as to make him a hero as you also say, like the foolish world of flatterers around him?"

Arjuna : "Sir, you are gifted with words and you can paint anything in any colour, black or blue!"

Sri Krishna : (in mild rage) : "Do you want me to

quit you like Shalya, in all this unwanted gossip? You know Karna too well to ask me for more details. Do as you please....”

Sri Krishna gestures his relief from duty by laying down the horse-reins and his whip. This frightens Arjuna :

Arjuna : “Friend, do not forsake me; I am neither gossiping nor bargaining. I just felt a strong blood-bond with him, and wondered if there could be some mystery behind. That is all. If there is, please tell me; if not forget about it.

Sri Krishna : “That is something. Do not blame me with tricks, or God with evil plans, or others of plot against you in such situations. Man is responsible individually for his own joys and sorrows. We call it *Karma*. To see your enemy as your brother is indicative of a mind out of order! Examine yourself. Even if Karna has a good quality or two for argument's sake, is this the moment for you to meditate on them lovingly for your fulfilment? Is he God? You are not his judge here, but an executor, an instrument of God on the battle-field. You are a mere agent of this. Know one thing : if bad qualities outnumber the good ones, how do you label the man? How do you grasp his final character? How will such marking help you at a given time? Do assessments matter or no? So also when good qualities outnumber bad ones! A piece of sandal wood rolling in a cow-dung-hill will not emit its fragrance! See Karna's company, his upbringing, his tastes, his vulgarity, rudeness,

barbarity, sadism. How does his heroism shine? How has all this helped even Duryodhana? Let alone the rest of the world? What use is he for mankind after all the humiliations heaped on you by your enemies through his instrumentality, provocation or instigation? We have no gains or losses from further analysis of these traits. Chitrugupta² is there for that.”

Arjuna : “But see Sri Krishna.. Duryodhana is feeling restless that he is unable to rush any help to Karna... while Karna stands helpless. They know that they cannot save the situation.. Now is it good for one to take disadvantage of this situation? Is it a matter of just behaviour for a true warrior?”

Sri Krishna : “Then eliminate that Duryodhana himself first! The war will naturally come to an end, in addition to solving his agony and restlessness. Karna will then be a superfluous weight on this earth, who cannot independently act without an evil base.”

Arjuna : “How can I do that?”

Sri Krishna : “What else are you here for? You do not want to win? Then do another thing.. Go and join Karna as a charioteer and help him kill your brothers. I shall continue the war with Bhima in your place. He will not violate my orders and can even use weapons against you without questioning me or wasting my time.”

² The mythical minister of God Yama, who keeps secret accounts of good and bad deeds of all living beings for proper treatment in Hell or beyond, according to Hindu mythological accounts.

Arjuna : (Stung) "Do not ridicule me Sri Krishna! Do I not know that in war relationships do not matter? Even brothers are enemies if they stand on opposite sides; I know; but why do I feel a strange feeling in my blood, in my intestines, at this sight of Karna?"

Sri Krishna : "Chronic diseases have no cures sometimes! I have told you what you need to know. Why did this fellow not look at your son with any similar compunctions felt in blood, if reciprocation is a proof of relations that cannot be identified openly? Are relations only one-sided? Products of fancy? Foolish concoctions that unnerve the manly heroes at unmanly hours? This fellow calls your wife a prostitute - a *bandhaki* - in your hearing, and here you are looking for a brother in him! How can I cure you of your foolishness?"

Sri Krishna pictured to him the scene of the gamble in its true colours. Arjuna's face acquired tightening, and a sense of determination gradually emerged in his sight and demeanour. The arguments stopped, stuck up in firm action and the hero in him reemerged. He lifted up his bow and yoked in it an unusual missile called *Sarpamukhastra* - a thing that had a reptile's mouth - and shot it at Karna.

By now Karna was somewhat ready, and destroyed this missile with a suitable counter part. This was unexpected, the waste of a valuable instrument for success. Sri Krishna was angry.

Sri Krishna : "You fool! Is this the time for wasteful expenditure of valuable missiles? You should have

used that '*Pranjalikastra*', a companion to '*Pashupathastra*', and gifted to you by Goddess Parvati Devi. You do not seem to remember it even? You have wasted time in dragging me into futile discussions on trivial things, and thus given time for this evil fellow to recoup, equip, and get ready for war. Can you see how strong his impulses for evil are even in distress? Finish him without another word."

Arjuna was totally convinced and his strength gained by this encouragement. He remembered his son, and imagined his last moments and Karna's evils at that cross point of time. He drew the '*Pranajalika*' missile and aimed it at Karna's heart.

Karna's chariot again got stuck up, and he was down on his knees, trying to give the wheels a lift. With no crown or any headgear to protect the bare head, and bow and arrows laid in the seat of the chariot, Karna was trying to pull the wheels out of the mire! This was his last self-effort under the untenable presumption that Arjuna would not shoot arrows or missiles at this miserable moment of his! Strange! A fellow that did not practice scruples or chivalry took it for granted that his enemy, his opponent should show him what he had denied to his young adversary, Abhimanyu. That was what Sri Krishna was also thinking of, at the time.

Karna was never before in a situation like that. The wheels did not rise even by an inch! He sweated a lot, and while wiping it from his forehead and chin, the blood of the mire got smeared all over that tired handsome face, making it look awful and ugly. Karna

cried in help, almost instinctively, and said in a tight low voice "Ma ... Ma...", and that brought before his mind's eye the pitiful face of Kunti, begging for peace, pleading for cessation of hostilities, and appealing to him to join the Pandavas, so that both sides could elect him King, mutually in happiness. This unnerved him further and Karna felt his head reeling in extreme discomfort. "You are my son.... your are indeed my son" - that voice of the mother, a belated confession, began ringing in his ears. Karna was unhappy that he was not in a position to obey the mother or fulfill her dangerous request that would have destroyed in one stroke all his carefully built image of self-personality. That would have meant Karna 'exposed' and not Karna 'revealed.' He didn't want to show himself as an opportunist then as now. A hero had to stick to decisions taken once, for good or evil, especially in matters concerning character... Karna remembered Parashurama also, without effort, at this same moment of crisis and remembered his parting words : " You are unfit to be my pupil!... You have ambitions greater than your status permits, and greater than your potentials will allow you to realise. This will lead you only to a tragic end of disappointment, frustration, sadism and disillusionment. You have concealed the circumstances of your birth, and status from me and told me lies, unbecoming of a pupil of mine. The learning you have thus inherited from me in an improper way, deceitful way, shall be of no avail in the most needy moments of your life!" The unalterable curse! Could this be that last, needy moment? Karna remembered also that holy man that noble Brahmin, whom he had insulted once, and his curse that took the form of chariot wheels stuck in bloody mire.

"All curses have conspired! "Karna said to himself, trying to reconcile to his fate.. But pride gained ascendance over humility as a deep rooted in-built character, and he began searching for other outside factors that so 'let him' down! He wanted to put the blame on Drona and Kripa who had refused to entertain him as their pupil. He wanted to blame the mother who disowned him for so long; he wanted to blame the society around him caught in a degenerating 'caste' custom, and 'caste' status... But the goodness that still remained within, without being uprooted in all these stormy years of wicked friendship and evil plots, failed to accept these false excuses and explanations and squarely pointed the finger at him : "You are to blame! You and you alone are to blame !"

Karna regretted his Brahmin-baiting, and the humiliation that he had perpetrated on a helpless Draupadi. He remembered her frightened face, looking for help, crying for succour, and her helpless condition for which he was responsible in no small share. "Curse of a pious lady wedded truly to her husbands" - said his mind in a low but firm voice. Abhimanyu's face, staring at him in his last moments, ridiculed his present plight, too! Karna felt self-betrayed beyond redemption... for a moment. But he could not accept Fate's retribution, and the will to survive shamefully got the better of the tendency to accept death as a decent solvent for all his crimes! Irony triumphed over tragic honour and he shouted to Arjuna:

Karna : "Arjuna, look. It is improper to take disadvantage of my distress and kill me in an

unwarrior-like manner. I am no coward to deserve that treatment. See, I have no weapons in hand and am out of my seat in the chariot, which is stuck up, unable to move; I have no charioteer to help me either. I am not begging for mercy, nor am I surrendering. I am only asking for equal conditions between you and me to fight in a balanced and fair combat. Tradition sanctions it, and chivalry prescribes it. Give me just time.. nothing more... just time... wait until I get this wheel up again. Do not be a coward yourself to kill me in unheroic circumstances. I am appealing in the name of Dharma. It is unrighteous to kill one³ or hurt, when he has disheveled hair, or is running away, or in surrender. A Brahmin in distress or with hands bowed in bowl, or one who has laid down arms, or begs of life, a soldier with exhausted arrows, or torn chest-shield, or broken weapons, broken bow or missiles, - all deserve heroic consideration as per age - old Dharma. You are too seasoned or experienced to know such things from me. You know codes, traditions, lores, and have obtained divine missiles from even gods. I am afraid of neither Sri Krishna nor yourself. And I am not speaking out of fear. I am demanding only what is right conduct from you, that is all. Be fair."

³ *Prakirnakeshe vimukhe Brahmanestha Kritanjalous |
 Sharanagate nyastrashastre yachamane tatharjuna ||
 Abane bhrashta kavache bhrashtabhagnayudhe tatha |
 Na vimunchanti astrani shurah sadhuvrate sthitah ||*

These words threw Arjuna, back into a state of moral tumult and confusion! He lost confidence in the only course of action open to him, to which Keshava had got him committed just a few minutes ago!

Sri Krishna saw this relapsing ignorance and confusion on the face of Arjuna, as he too heard these words! He got down Arjuna's chariot and stared at Karna, as if to burn him with his fixed gaze. Karna was quite unmindful of this and was muttering words of curse, inaudibly, lost in getting the wheels up again. One curse, he heard somewhat loudly, which now enraged him : Karna was now cursing even Dharma!

"*Dharma*, they say, protects one that upholds it. We have always upheld that *Dharma*; but that blasted *Dharma* is now letting me down when I need its shield most, for self-protection. Therefore we have to conclude that it is false to say that *Dharma* protects always its practioner."⁴

Karna made several false claims, and several accusations on *Dharma* such as - he was always a follower of *Dharma*, he had never violated it, he always upheld it, that sages gave a false assurance about *Dharma*'s efficacy, its protective power, that *Dharma* can let down even one on the righteous path, and that *Dharma* was thus undependable and useless! In one

⁴ *Dharmapradhanam kila pati dharmah Ityabruvan dharmavidah sadaiva |*

Vayam cha nityam prayatama dharme charthum yathashakti yatha shrutam cha ||

Sa chapi nighnati na pati bhakthan manye na nityam paripati dharmah ||
(Ibid - 86)

stroke he had condemned all the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Dharmashastras* and wise sayings and practice of all the sages of the present, past and future, and knocked the bottom of Righteousness, good conduct and the moral basis of distinction between Good and Evil. What more was there? Civilization and Culture were attacked by this villain for a mere personal reason, in a context where he had to pay for his past, as per *Karmic* laws. Attacking universal principles for selfish reasons is nothing new, but Karna pretended to be a follower of Dharma all this while throughout his life, and this claim for righteousness by a fellow steeped in evil and steadfast in immorality and sadism was too much for Sri Krishna to bear! He thought : "this fellow deserves self-awareness on his death-bed; he must not die in self-deceit; mere dying will not help. That is the way of worms", and so Sri Krishna addressed Karna :

Sri Krishna : "Radheya, it is strange that you too remember Dharma at death; it is good in a way, but not in the manner you discredit it, to pat on your back... What did you say? That you have always practiced Dharma? I would like to know when and where all, you have done so? Is it when you instigated Duryodhana to expose Draupadi naked? Is it when you encouraged that fellow to draw Yudhishtira for that ignoble gamble, when you knew that the prince was not good at it? When you insulted further a humiliated prince, and invited his queen to sleep with Duryodhana, how much Dharma did you practice? How much Dharma did you practice in the many machinations and encouragements you offered to Duryodhana? You

argued at Virata's capital that the stipulated period of exile and incognito-living was not over when your own party men Bhishma and Drona opined that there was no violation of the time-period! Well, how much Dharma did you practice even arithmetically? Astronomically? Politically? Dragging even God-made facts and factors in life in your own away to suit the purposes of your vile friend, that was all Dharma, was it? Did you even once examine whether Dharma was on your side or on the side of the wronged Pandavas? Perhaps you never needed to remember this consideration at all as an unfailing guiding principle in all the lives of all the people on the earth, past, present or future! Now you bring it in just to hang it by giving it a bad name! Some people have the habit of blaming God, Dharma or the Cosmic Principles of life, whenever they are in self-made troubles and traps. They are small people, hardly above the brutes in manners, wedded to ignorance, selfishness, convenience and immediate profit. You belong to this category and have no right to drag Dharma into the brawl! Self examination was never a part of your life so far! Even now, if you still want to claim to be *Dharmic*, call your friend, that evil incarnation, Duryodhana, and advise him to hand over the empire to the Pandavas. If he does not listen, give up his side, at least! Retire to the forests and do penance to wash off your sins. Life is still open before you. The whole world will forget your past if you can but place this one, sure step in the way of Dharma. I know you will not do it! My advice in this respect has been rejected by you for good

some twenty days ago! Do not try to justify yourself falsely to fool others now when you have to pay for your sins, as per the laws of *Karma*. Repent, repent and repent! That is the only way open to you before death! Your 'culture' is irredeemably low, vulgar and debased, in spite of the good blood that bore you! It is man that makes his own destiny by his own choices of good and evil. God simply administers their fruits and sees that you cannot escape them. Die like a hero, and not talk of concessions you must obtain from a confused Arjuna! Why should he be gracious to you, generous to you, conciliatory to you, after all your disgraceful acts, your entrenched and purposeless hatred, and self seeking? If Arjuna lets you go by any chance, here am I to administer that last stroke of justice that you cannot escape as per Divine Laws!"

Sri Krishna's lips quaked with anger even long after he finished his words, and he was in tears of compassion remembering all the humiliations of Draupadi and her husbands, all through. Arjuna too was in tears and was now a totally transformed hero, determined to mete out 'justice' to Karna, in a mood such as never before!

Wonder of wonders! Karna too felt convinced, remained answerless, and for a second his hand attempted a posture of folding in the meaning of paying respects to Sri Krishna; but that act did not materialise because of the character of Karna that had crystallised otherwise than in this direction of a devotee bound to Dharma, *Tyaga*, *Tapas* and other ancient values. Sri Krishna observed this too and continued :

Sri Krishna : “Karna! Stop this meaningless gesture. It is empty and not prompted by a deep-based feeling of duly felt respect for what I stand for. Mechanical movements of hands or head have no capacity to fool those who are steeped in *Dharmic* practices. Remember whether there is any unity in all your actions. How could the same hands cut off Abhimanyu’s bow, when you came stealthily from behind that unsuspecting boy? Do they want to fold up now for me, without your undergoing repentance or punishment? Are you fit to offer me any respects? Even one who wants to offer respects must be eligible to so offer, and not merely the object of respect that receives it. See now, before you there is only one Arjuna. He is not anxious to kill you from behind. Don’t think it is Fate that has landed your chariot-wheels in quagmire. It is your Adharma that is so paying you; your own; if you want, you can examine. In every particle of that mire, that blood mixed-earth, you can see your Adharma printed, stamped and clamped. You can neither transfer it to another, nor relieve the wheels, if a hundred Karnas can come to your aid. Do not shout, cry, and blame Dharma! Fooling others is a crime too in *Dharmic* matters.”

Arjuna was weeping, in the memory of his son, Abhimanyu and the last cruel moments of that heroic but helpless boy. Here was Sri Krishna offering nectarine words of philosophically weighed tunes of comfort and justice, to whosoever wanted it or heeded it. The tears that rolled off his cheeks were burning and Arjuna was

unmindful of it, in comparison with the tumult or discomfort of his mind. Sri Krishna resumed :

Sri Krishna : "Karna, you will be no more in a few more moments. That is not great! What is great is that you must hear my words and die in the conviction of a criminal owning up those crimes. This last arrow that Arjuna will shoot to end you is an extraordinary one, more powerful than a missile as it contains several factors, products of your own sins : Draupadi's sorrow, Arjuna's grief at the loss of his dearest son, Kunti's anguish at the needless sufferings of her sons, Bhima's suppressed anger of all these years, the curses of the silent Twins, and the sattwic world you have put into turmoil - all these sharp edges are contained there. You will die in one stroke for all these evils, whereas you should have died several times, once for each of these. Death is no solution to any problem. And your death will not end up all the problems of life once for all! More Karnas will come up in future, perhaps, with greater capacities for evil. Let them learn, if they can, lessons from you. That will be to their accounts. But it may be the only consolation for you that you, you of all criminals - are dying just once for all your crimes! Do not talk of Dharma, now, any more, that same Dharma you have let down."

Karna bowed down his head, and did not lift it up for sometime. The effect of Sri Krishna's words was so deep and inescapable that Karna stopped, stunned, dumb founded.

But the *Asuri-demoniac* force latent in him swelled up with redoubled pride and arrogance, the very next moment and he hated Sri Krishna for refuting all his claims to Dharma so effectively, as to render him argumentless. He gave up the task of lifting up the wheels, went back to the chariot, and took up his bow and quiver, ready for the fight.

Sri Krishna looked at Arjuna as if to say: "Do."

Karna was in the most disturbed state of mind now - his own situations, Sri Krishna's taunts, the indelible memory of his past sins, their undeniable acceptability to his mind as Sri Krishna's arguments forced on him, - all sapped his energies and mental power of concentration. Special was that curse of his preceptor Parashurama - "Thou shall not remember the formulae for the missiles at the most needed moment of action!" Now the more anxious he was not to forget those right formulae, the more they tried to elude him.!! The fight with memory was even more terrible than fight with Arjuna, who was at least concrete. The formulae faded, frowned on him, and frustrated all his hopes to fight as a man!

Sri Krishna was telling Arjuna : "See this confusion! He is out of his senses; the curse of his teacher is hanging heavy on his mind. Do your best this very moment."

Karna tried to remember *Brahmastra*, with trepidation.... Fortunately he could remember the right formula. He used it. But Arjuna nullified it by using

another Brahmastra against it! *Varuna, Agneya, Kubera, Yama....* all followed. Arjuna destroyed them all.

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, I told you already to use the *Pranjalikastra*! Why are you dilly-dallying? His end must be in it, through it, I think."

Arjuna drew that deadly missile in the name of Durga. The earth trembled, and the soldiers on either side closed their eyes; the gods wondered what would now happen, and blessed Arjuna with success. Even Duryodhana closed his eyes in dread at the lustre and roar of that missile.

Now was the moment for Karna to use *Bhargavastra*, which might have been the only counter for Arjuna's missile. Neither of them had any idea of the effect of it, as the world did not yet know such a terrible missile at all, till then.

Duryodhana was hopeful that Karna would use it successfully; and wished all success for his friend.

Karna tried to remember the right '*Mantra*' the appropriate formula... it failed!.. memory faded! .. he heard the scornful curse of his preceptor reverberatingly on his ears... Karna frowned... fretted.. he shouted... "you blasted missile! do not fail me... I have worshipped you all these years with faith and devotion.. I have not sinned against you. Do not disappoint me. Please favour me this once..."

But the missile did not yield and was as far away from his memory as the infinite unfathomable past, as if Karna was no disciple of Parashurama, and had

nothing to do with him or the missile in his name! The obliteration was so complete that Karna was totally non-plussed. He had no more divine missiles in store; he had either used up or wasted all of them without exception.

All that Karna could now remember was the analysis of his evil deeds by Sri Krishna and the direction of their logic dooming him to death. Distressing defeat!...

He took a last look fixed on Sri Krishna's face, in a daze.

Here was Arjuna : "If I have earned any merit through penance, if my teachers are pleased with me for my service, for my manners or respects to them, if the scarifies I have performed are to reward me with due fruits, let them all now come on me unitedly to end this villain's life, and bless the rest of mankind. Let truth prevail over untruth, good over evil, and peace over turmoil. Let this missile take away Karna's life."

Karna could now realise the difference between his own arrogance in cursing Dharma, and Arjuna's humility and heavily banking on the same Dharma and unconsciously as it were, muttered in audible praises for that behaviour of Arjuna! He almost envied Arjuna - for his *Dharmic* sense, his devotion to his preceptor, his luck in being guided by Sri Krishna, his perfect memory, his sense of right aiming, his lucky circumstances, and his unswerving faith in the onward marching forces of life.

Arjuna's missile rushed at Karna, who now stood with closed eyes, and took off his head, emitting a blaze parallel to the light of the setting sun!

Karna's end enthused all the Pandava army. Sri Krishna blew his *Panchajanya*. Shalya was searching for Duryodhana in the darkness that followed!



CHAPTER 39

SHALYA NOW LEADS THE ARMY OF THE KAURAVAS

Duryodhana saw Karna's head rise in the skies at the stroke of Arjuna's missile and fall to the ground. It symbolised to him complete defeat. It was his royal umbrella as it were, that was cut off, thrown up to the skies and let down on earth with no one left now to uphold it, as it were! It was his hope of success that lay in the earth. Karna, for all his heroism, was after all as much mortal as Bhishma or Drona! But how could the guiles of a crooked Sri Krishna defeat all his Generals in so shameless tricks, in their moments of distress? This was an impossible achievement for the Pandavas! Fate was partial to them and everybody and everything was against him! Could there be conspiracy on this scale? Heaven, earth and the nether world - all plotting against him?

Karna's head was tossing up and down between sky and earth, not decided as to where to lie, or not sure where his soul would like to settle or move on. It fell at all sorts of places before finally resting at a place near about where Sri Krishna stood. Mother earth had sheltered this severed head of a hero with dubious honours and achievements.

Kunti was not there to see this sad end of her eldest son. She was blessed in that. But Karna had kept his word that he would see to it that she had five of her sons alive, whoever survived between him and Arjuna in the final count. But this was no generosity. It was only a necessity imposed by circumstances, and anyhow Sri Krishna was there to fulfill it. Was it not Sri Krishna, after all that had so decided, even in Arjuna's moments of vacillation?

It was mother Earth that had lost her bravest sons all these seventeen days, without an outburst of sorrow or tears. Even if she had wailed loudly at the slaughter of innocent heroes, who would have heard it or rushed to her rescue? No Duryodhana or Dushshasana, who had imposed their cruel decisions on mankind in a polarisation of good and evil forces that would happen once in a thousand or ten thousand years. The madness of war is an expression of mankind's collective instinct of suicide between ages of reason, sanity and sound values of life. Here was Sri Krishna 'descended' as Avatar to set the balance right in a nonstop struggle between sanity and madness, between reason and dogma, between the desire to live, and the desperate wish for death.

Arjuna was staring at the severed head of Karna, and Sri Krishna explained its significance, ironically :

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, God has blessed every living being with brains in heads. He does not provide empty heads, or mere skulls to anyone. Karna too was so blessed with brains, intelligence, power to discriminate between right and wrong, good and evil, and duty and indulgence. But he never used

it! So the head became an untenable weight on his shoulders, like heavy ornaments on a dead body! You, as an instrument of God, have relieved that weight and brought comfort to the many innocent people whom he had wronged, your wife Draupadi being the most prominent among them. The war is over !”

Arjuna : “Over? How? Duryodhana is still alive!”

Sri Krishna : “Say he is flickering like the flame of a lamp about to blow off, with oil exhausted, and the wick dried. It is a matter of moments; your victory is assured and now nobody can reverse this direction.

Arjuna : “Shalya is alive; so is Ashwatthama; there is Kritavarma; Kripa too. How can war be over?”

Sri Krishna : “Ashwatthama and Kripa cannot die; they are condemned to ignominiously long lives to tell their shameful stories to the future generations. That is neither immortality of a desirable nature nor survival of value over disvalue. It is shame monumental pointing to blunders of history, indelible or unforgettable, which every one must know. Mere stubs! Mere stumps, with neither meaningful present, nor hopeful future, but only dead weight of a past. They call these ‘ghosts’ - ‘*Bhuta*’, in the etymological sense of that word too! So forget them and discount them.”

Arjuna : “Shalya?”

Sri Krishna : “Aey... Shalya! Do you know what this name means originally? It is ‘a piercing edge of

a sharp lance'! Yes! Shalya, your uncle, now on the other side is a thorn in your flesh. It is to be removed. Let us see which one of you, the five brothers, is destined to achieve this."

Arjuna : "Will he be the next choice for Generalship for the villain leading the war now?"

Sri Krishna : "So I guess! Who else is there?"

Arjuna : "Kritavarma? Of your Narayana Sena of Dwaraka?"

Sri Krishna : "As far as I know, Kritavarma will not go so far."

Arjuna : "How do you say that?"

Sri Krishna : "He has the politeness to decline offers when they do not suit him. Had he been offered this in the place of Karna, perhaps he would have accepted it. Now he, like all others, knows, that the war is over except for unavoidable formalities. Someone will have to be the General now. He may not want to be that 'someone' to put the seal of final defeat on Duryodhana's side."

Arjuna : "You mean...."

Sri Krishna : "Yes... I mean he is an opportunist."

Arjuna : "How do you predict all this so accurately?"

Sri Krishna : "I have an idle mind, sitting as I do here, calculating these things, with nothing in particular to aim at as you do. I have no responsibilities. I have only calculations."

Arjuna : "Come, come. This is a horrible self-

underestimation! Are you not the Director-General of this war, on either side?"

Sri Krishna : "This is a horrible over-estimation of an idle fellow with no formal training in any lore, good at only cow-tending and gossiping with milkmaids! Do you not know my history?"

Arjuna : "There are a good number of historians to testify to that, starting from Pootana, up to Jarasandha, with Naraka, Shishupala, Paundraka, Shalva, Kalayavana, Kamsa, and thousands of others in between ! Can we forget a Bhagadatta? A Bhishma, Drona, Saindhava or even Karna, just now? Sri Krishna, are you not the really great hero of this war with me only as your instrument?"

Sri Krishna : "Stop this misplaced praise while the war is still on and your enemy still alive! Let us go to the camp and meet Yudhishtira, who will be expecting us any time now. We must now plan for a decent end of this war, keeping the cunningness of Duryodhana in mind and the many strategies he may adopt to pull on the war endlessly. What if he disappears and goes into exile? How will you win without his death?"



The Sun was setting now; the Sun who is witness to all deeds of all living things, both inside and outside. The same Sun who was supposed to have fathered Karna in Kunti! His other sons too had earned notorious names - Saturn (Shanaischara,) and Rahu, the big headless shadow, who would often eclipse his own father in predictable shadows at prescribed moments for world

calamities. The slow moving Saturn would tease beings for seven and more years at a length and so nobody liked him too. This was a paradox or irony - that he who gives illumination, life and strength to all life should produce sons of Darkness that torment the world of living beings. "The Sun swallows darkness, and so, that food is turned into his sons of darkness" - some would explain in a lighter vein. A father who produces such sons would be ashamed of his very existence! That was why it appeared that the sun, set in the West, as soon as Karna died and his dark *CHAPTER* of life was over. But his anguish still lingered in the Western skies in the form of dusk red, for some more time.

Where was Bhima during that hour? Oh, Bhima! He never minded the sunset and with his mace on his shoulders he moved at random in the enemy army, and went on destroying the disorganised army with its wandering elephants and horses. His roars frightened even the running army that was leaderless and demoralised it. Those that disappeared in the darkness could save their skins, leaving the other less fortunate ones to the fury of Bhima.

The war-field was deserted, desolate and wild in its eeriness, as if invisible ghosts were hanging about everywhere. The wounded lay in heaps, crying for help that was not available. What difference was there between the dead and the alive? The Age of Kali personified as Duryodhana sat in a corner there, as if to keep a count of the still living and to see if his calculations were right. Shalya was approaching him.



A tired Yudhishtira had returned to the camp after sunset, anxious to know about the latest turns in Karnarjuna fight. A doctor was applying medicated oil on his wounded parts of the body and removing sharp edges of arrows stuck up here and there. Yudhishtira, thereupon attended to his evening Sandhya worship and reclined in the bed.

Nakula rushed in and announced : "Karna is dead."

Sahadeva too joined there with more detailed news of the circumstances of Karna's death. The brothers embraced each other as they heard the reverberating sound of Panchajanya blowing.

Yudhishtira took time to say slowly:

"We had to wait all this long to see Panchali's sorrows at an end. It is all God's will!"

Darkness enveloped and servants came to light the lamps in the camps, as Yudhishtira just went out of the camp for a moment. He could hear the groaning of dying warriors and the millions wounded on that day, and sighed in profound despair: "God knows how earnestly I tried to prevent this slaughter of the innocent! I begged for five villages, a mere five. I reduced my request to at least one! What else could I do to avoid this? The fool refused even that much. But should all this happen because of me? My Rajasuya was not well-timed perhaps. The death of Shishupala augured this in advance. We did not need the signals of God."

Yudhishtira wept, with hands on eyes, like a child in shame, at the enormity of the devastation that war had caused. His brothers also joined and shared this anguish silently.

Yudhishthira again : “Should Duryodhana still live after all this?”

Nakula was silent. Sahadeva just looked at Yudhishthira, with no answer, blankly.

Yudhishthira : “Where is Bhima now?”

Sahadeva : “He is chasing the Kaurava army. Perhaps he will return only after there remains none to be destroyed.”

Yudhishthira : “This is Dharma *Yuddha*! Should he not know that this is unfair? War at night?”

Nakula : “Brother, where is Dharma now? The war has violated all codes for the past few days. What difference does it make to one who dies, whether in day time or at night? Any way it may not take much more time to end. Let it be over soon.”

Yudhishthira : (angrily) “Who says so?”

None dared answer this question, as there was none ready.

Yudhishthira : “Bhima is not wise to wander alone, while all the anger of Duryodhana is now concentrated on him at this moment of his total loss and defeat! He can do anything now! Who can drive this home to Bhima’s mind in his excessive daring and exposure to danger? Go and see; bring him here with suitable persuasion.”

Nakula and Sahadeva go. But they hear sounds of horses’ hoofs, and movement of chariots in the distance and the roar of the Monkey God on the Flag-post of Arjuna, and this diverted the sorrow of Yudhishthira in

a measure. Lights in the corners of the camp were brightened by servants, and drinks were kept ready for the victorious warriors in return at reachable points near chairs.

Servants rushed outside to assist Sri Krishna and Arjuna alight, and relieve them of shields and other equipments in the chariots. Arjuna got down first. Sri Krishna helped him alight, as usual, with a helping hand. Servants relieved Arjuna of shields on chest, forearms and feet and carried Gandiva on head with respect and devotion, to its due place of worship. Sri Krishna handed over the reins of horses to other servants, so that they could be relieved, carried to stables for treatment, and that the chariot could be oiled, cleaned and got ready for the next day's war. Sri Krishna and Arjuna slowly walked up to the entrance of the camp to meet and greet Yudhishtira in tears of joy. They touched his feet and Yudhishtira got them up, embraced them and comforted then.

The rest of the heroes on the side of the Pandavas assembled there in no time to celebrate the victory of the day, and drums began to sound to the rhythm of bugles and conches. It was an unusual welcome for a unusual victory, over Karna!

Bhima was still not there and everybody missed him. Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Yuyutsu and others arrived one by one to discuss the results of the day and work out the strategy for the next crucial day, eagerly awaiting announcement of the next General in the enemy camp. Talk began.



Shalya touched gently the head of a sighing Duryodhana sitting in that desolate corner of the dark war-field. This gesture brought tears into the eyes of the helpless Kaurava hero, who was feeling all was over. He stood up and gazed at Shalya with a meaningful look that said : "Uncle! Did I deserve this at the hands of fate?" Shalya's gaze too reciprocated it as much to say : "Friend, you stood high with unbent head, once, not caring for another; unto such a hero, should this happen now, bringing him on his knees before powerful fate?" Yet neither spoke for some time, then both shared the same seat of that broken chariot and the conversation began thus :

Duryodhana : "Uncle, what has happened to my pride and self esteem? I have lost all my army, my strength, my heroes, my Generals, and most of my brothers. Karna and Dusshasana met with unimaginable ends in my own sight and nobody could save them! All my calculations have gone wrong. Sri Krishna deceived me by promising not to wield weapons and be neutral; but he arranged a chain of deceits in a most partisan manner to help the Pandavas. It was his advice that destroyed Bhishma, Drona, Saindhava, Karna, each individually invincible in straight wars. Could he be so crooked? I never expected this betrayal on this scale, uncle! For whose sake now should I carry on this war? How shall I live in a world without Karna or Dusshasana? What shall I tell my parents now? Uncle, can you do me a favour?"

Duryodhana looked at Shalya, imploringly with a most

most disconcerted, desolate look! Shalya could not understand his meaning; so he shook his head and spoke:

Shalya : "Child! speak. I am here for your service and comfort, as all the world knows, and as you know too... Tell me what you want."

Duryodhana : "Kill me with the sword, here and now, and end the war, so that at least the rest of the army may survive. It will be a respectable death for me also. I have neither the desire for success nor the hope of a win. Even if I live, it will be for nobody's good hereafter. Instead of dying an ignoble death in the hands of the enemy, it is better I die here in your hands. Don't you appreciate?"

Shalya : (With tears welling up in his eyes) "No, no, no, Prince! Excuse me; this is what I cannot do. Do not speak like a coward. Do you think both parties can win in any war? Defeat is inevitable for one! You have done your best, after all. Your heroes have fought bravely - each one of them. You had your time and fortune at the gamble. That was a favourable period then. Take this defeat now in the same spirit! This is also a gamble! Victory is tilted in favour of your enemies no doubt. But you have not yet lost your all. I am here for instance. Ashwatthama is there; Kripa is there; Kritavarma is there. See those alive, and do not grieve over the dead or count them. That is of no avail. You have to plan still for the war to continue. After all Karna met with a heroic death after putting up a brave fight. Why grieve? Have you ever seen

before, a war of this kind? Did you see how much he tormented Arjuna? But if only he had listened to my advice, we could have won the war by now! He stuck to his foolish decisions, and was stubborn in stupidity. The Nagastra should not have been wasted; he could have easily replied to all the viles of the enemy with that one missile, if only he had re-employed it. Would any hero miss this opportunity? Regarding Bhargava missile, it was tragic he could not remember the appropriate formula. The Guru's curse killed him ultimately, and not Arjuna or the guiles of Sri Krishna. Do not take to heart. But take heart."

Duryodhana : "May I say something, if it does not anger you?"

Shalya : (angrily anticipating what he might say)
"I know what you mean! Do you still feel I should not have deserted him after all his rebuffs, disobedience and arrogance? Don't say what I did is wrong. I knew this would happen, and had forewarned you. In fact it was your luck that I bore with him even for so long as I did. It was my love for you that made me swallow my pride that long. If you were in my place, you would not have carried on even for a minute, with your terrible pride! He claims to be a parallel or equivalent for Lord Sri Rama!! What nonsense! Do not mention him to me again."

Duryodhana : "My intention was not to blame you, uncle; it was a mere wish that he should have been blessed with your aid till the end; then he would

not have been in that pitiable condition. It was all my bad luck... anyway it is over. Let it be...."

Shalya : "Let it not be that way. We must have a deserving reconciliation. You must still respect me and not feel I have let you down. If you stay here longer, as leader, in this God-forsaken place, the rest of the army will be further demoralised. Come, let us go there."



Bhima had now joined his brother; Sri Krishna, Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki, Yuyutsu and the brave sons of Draupadi all were there by now.

Yudhishtira : "How can you roam about the empty war-field, Bhima, with no body-guards? Our enemy will not hesitate to use any unscrupulous ways to steal victory somehow even at this last moment! He is still alive and there. He is an arch deceiver, trickster; he claims to have powers of black magic, of nocturnal powers, supernatural agencies. What can he not resort to at this disconsolate hour of defeat?"

Bhima : "Brother, his tricks are at an end. There is nothing more he can do now; the worst is over. We have cut off all his inflated roots. Just two more villains - Shakuni and Dhritarashtra are alive. I was in search for that foxy Duryodhana all this while, so that if I could kill him, the war would be over this very moment. Tomorrow I shall find him to end this war."

Yudhishtira : "It is true that tomorrow's war is going

to be decisive. But I wonder who else is there to be made the General."

Dhrishtadyumna : "The choice is only among three - Shalya, Kritavarṇa and Ashwatthama. Kripa is too old and inactive to be the choice, I feel. But there is still a hitch. Kritavarma's is a borrowed army, and he may not opt to fight openly against Sri Krishna, for his own reasons. He may wait for another moment. He is no admirer of Sri Krishna and is very ambitious of great goals to reach. Why Sri Krishna forced him on our enemy is a reason, which we may also consider. That leaves only two: Ashwatthama is no doubt brave but inexperienced as a strategist, as an organiser, and too impetuous to follow or obey Duryodhana. The villain knows all this, and at the most he can use this Ashwatthama as a valued weapon, but not trust him as a leader. Ashwatthama, for his part, is very contemptuous of the foolish prince and has often quarrelled with him openly on questions of caste, contempt, hierarchy and choice. He is too open and undiplomatic unlike his father to be trusted by a schemy Duryodhana. That leaves only Shalya, if my logic goes right and straight.

Arjuna : "I agree with your analysis. But if this happens, war must end tomorrow by afternoon. There is not much army left on either side - some few thousands perhaps."

Bhima : "No, no. It is not the army numbers that matters now, and the war cannot be over until Duryodhana is caught and killed. If that can happen

even now, this very moment war will end, Shalya or no Shalya. Leave him to me. I have a hunch that this villain will hide somewhere in the last moment to escape my fury, dodge me and not give us a decision on his own so easily. We have to wrest it from him perforce. I have therefore made my own arrangements with Intelligence agents to bring me news of his hide-outs, his plans, his activities, his courses, and his movements, moment by moment, from now on, promising them huge rewards. There are spots in the woods around, in the hilly tracts, river banks, lake surroundings, and underground bunkers, where he may seek shelter, leaving the war for the next General, as mere tactics to gain time! I have instructed my spies to - not merely keep a watch, - but also take action themselves, in case the enemy tries to escape. His death is all that is important. Dead or alive he must appear before me for the final account."

Sri Krishna admired this foresight of Bhima and his prompt action in advance.

Yudhishtira got all details of the war of the day and how Karna met with his end from Arjuna and Sri Krishna and sighed with immense relief.

Sri Krishna : "Brother, we had only heard of the war between Indra and Vritra, and not seen it. Today we could witness something of that order. Karna was no ordinary warrior. His fall signifies the fall of the chief pillar of Duryodhana's dream of a pleasure-palace."

Sri Krishna narrated briefly also how Arjuna took pity on the distressed Karna, wanted to spare time and opportunity for him, and said many unworthy things at the moment of fight, how Karna pleaded for help in the name of Dharma, and his own befitting reply to him and how the end came about. Arjuna smiled!

Yudhishtira and Arjuna stole some sleep that night while Bhima recalled the scene of Dusshasana's death at his hands with relish, and avoided sleep in the anguish that a similar fate could not yet be meted out to Duryodhana. Sri Krishna had a bath, and went into a yogic trance, unmindful of the events of the day or the anxieties of the next day.



Camp Duryodhana :

Kripa : "Duryodhana, has anyone benefited from your rash decision to impose this unwanted war on yourselves or your opponents? You listened to no one! Bhishma, Vidura, Sri Krishna, Drona, your own mother, Parashurama or even Veda Vyasa! You were advised and guided by ignorant men of no vision and have ended up in this mess. You have lost practically your all - your brothers, well-wishing elders, friends, and a large innocent army, lots of wealth, and relatives of a hundred varieties... (Kripa throws a glance at Shakuni, who stood with a bent head!) Now at least.."

Duryodhana : "Acharya, I shall put the same before you in another perspective... Tell me who remains with me to enjoy peace, even if I stop the war at

your advice? Who will benefit? What will be my gain if I so stop?"

Kripa : "That means you want the rest also to be killed so that war can stop without your consent, without your active cooperation! Should war end in spite of you? Know this : that myself and Ashwatthama cannot die! We are condemned to witness what should not be seen, perhaps. I had told you right in the beginning that I did not like this war. But I joined you because of bread-bond; because I was on your pay-rolls. Ashwatthama too. Two villains who egged you on to this disaster are no more - Karna and Dushshasana! Shakuni awaits his fate. Will you now crown him as your next General?"

Shakuni was enraged at this ironical, piercing, insulting reference, and wanted to say something. But Kripa did not allow him time or scope and continued:

Kripa : "Do you think this fox, this arch-deceiver will stand even for a moment against Arjuna? Did not Vidura predict this end? 'Seeing Arjuna and Sri Krishna in the same chariot will mean the end of your race' - he said. That has happened. What alternative do you now have?"

Duryodhana : "Old Sire! Do not attempt to frighten me with the past; inspire me with a future and through a tangible present. Is it not human nature to dream of bright things even in sad circumstances? Do you suggest that I should surrender to the enemies? Did I do all this for this despised end? Do you discourage me at this moment of my dire

need of warriors like you? Help me on with a forward ray of hope.”

Kripa : “Every past moment was once open to you as a present one, with choices before you. They gleamed as dreams presented themselves before, and you stamped them into the unalterable past, which now stares in your face! This is all your own making. To say this is no unkindness on my part. It is good you still count upon me as a well-wisher! Look : Fate will bend you, if you do not bend on your own. Stubbornness is death; flexibility is life. You have ignored this basic principle of survival. War has now come to a state of standstill where you cannot continue for want of a leader to lead a few people, which you call your army! Where are your stores of arms, your numbers in the army, and warriors to follow you? I am not discouraging you but only picturing your condition realistically. I am interested in your good even at this moment.”

Duryodhana : “What more ‘good’ is there to befall me now? Without Karna and Dusshasana, what meaning has life for me? I shall die as a hero and not surrender anyhow.”

Kripa : “You need not surrender. But you can certainly stop the war. Tell me firmly you want peace. I shall inform Sri Krishna. He loves peace most. You will be allowed to rule still, if you can swallow your hatred of the Pandavas, and show your willingness for co-existence and rule unitedly over all that you have been ruling! This one thing will be binding on you - peace with the Pandavas; no more hatred,

no more plots, no more deceptions. If your father sends for Yudhishtira and requests him to relinquish the rulership in your favour, he will certainly agree even at this late hour, in the interests of peace for the world.”¹

Duryodhana : (with a devilish smile) “Is it not to avoid this humiliation I chose war as a nobler alternative?”

Kripa : “What have you achieved of this ‘nobler alternative’? Death of all that you loved, loss of all that you did not want to part with! Do you not realise your foolishness at least now?”

Duryodhana : “All must die, one day or another! Infinite choices are not always available always, after you choose one at a time! A choice once made has to be accepted and respected, right or wrong. It is only the end that shows what it really is. Life is a gamble too with life as a stake. Suffer now and be happy at the end, is one way. Enjoy now and suffer later, is another way. I chose this. Our enemies chose the former. But both ways are mixtures of happiness and misery. So ultimately what is the difference?”

Kripa laughs derisively! ‘What stupid logic by this villain!’ - he wonders. The laughter does not stop, unusually. That is against the nature of Kripa, whom Duryodhana knows as generally given to reticence, or few words. What does he mean? Duryodhana fails to comprehend the meaning of Kripa. At last :

¹ Vaichitryavirya vachanath kripashilo Yudhishtirah |
Viniyunjita rajye twam Govinda vachanena cha ||

Kripa : “Life has taught you nothing! or, you have refused to learn lessons from it! It is very strange, your absoluteness, your aloofness, your impregnability, your immunity to the bonds of life, your attempt to skip all time - past, present and future with an irrationality unimaginable and unnatural to life! Young man, are you alive or dead? Do I hear a man with the thirst for life, speak like this? Or is it the death-wish of a dying man, half-dead? You say there is no difference between life and death, as both are mixtures of happiness and misery! What philosophy is this? Who taught you this pervert Vedanta? Should not death also be meaningful or be productive? Is it a gain for you that you have pushed so many millions to death? What is your achievement? Ignominy, curses of the innocent!”

Now Duryodhana laughs derisively and replies :

Duryodhana : “Acharya, you are old and senile. Not that I had much respect for you while you were younger still! Listen : it is always the survivors that write the histories of wars. Naturally they paint the defeated as devils and themselves as angels. What objective-meaning does ‘fame’ have now? It is a relative term that can be tossed, twisted and trampled at will. Look sir : This is my final word: Even if I agree for peace, will Bhima forget his vow? Will Draupadi forget her humiliation? Will Sri Krishna crown them before eliminating me, without seeing that I am dead and am incapable of mischief any further? Who can envisage

co-existence between us? Is it not like fire and water you wish to coexist? Stop your unwanted sermons. War will continue tomorrow at any cost. If you have suggestions as to who should be the next General, you can speak.”

Kripa closed his eyes with profound silence.. indicating he was out of contest. Ashwatthama shook his head. Shakuni looked at Shalya with meaning and warriors shouted : “Hail Shalya, Shalya the General.”



CHAPTER 40

SHALYA'S BRAVE FIGHT

Shalya knew that his turn for Generalship was at hand as Duryodhana had no better alternative left. But he did not want it, or relish the offer now. On the other hand he was in no position to avoid it either! How strange, life offers opportunities when you cannot enjoy them! What use is a comb for an old man who is now bald?

Fact was that everybody's calculations had gone wrong, Shalya's as well as Duryodhana's.

When soldiers shouted his name and greeted him with "jai", "hail", Shalya's face was dry of expressions and blank of feelings, unusually. He was sitting, holding his head in his arms, resting them on his knees, sad in a terribly depressed mood. He was examining his wrong steps, and equations that had gone wrong, one by one now. He also reviewed links in the bridge that gave way one by one.

Bhishma ! What a great, invincible hero!! Who could stand in comparison with him in war-lore, strategy or valour? Drona! The preceptor of both branches of the Kuru race, and trainer of even heroes on the opposite side! No match for him in the entire war-field. How could both lay down arms and be counted out in shameful circumstances? Who had expected these victims

to cooperate with fate in their downfall? Take Ashwatthama! What was his visible achievement till now? Why was he wasting time? Karna, of course! The braggart that agonised every body including his own charioteer, Shalya! He let down Duryodhana at the most needed moments of his trusted friend, witnessed the gruesome death of Dusshasana at Bhima's hands, silently! Was this the expectation from a General? What stupid pretences, what loss of opportunity, and what a loss of memory!

Shalya had these puzzles examined and re-examined Bhishma chose the Kaurava side, when the divide was unavoidable. But did he not examine the pros and cons? Did it mean that the Kauravas had Dharma on their side? Could he dare oppose Sri Krishna without that confidence? Or was it an opportunistic decision? Did he flicker, flounder? Was it a calculated fight particularly against Sri Krishna, as he well knew how it would turn out to be so, finally? Like in the earlier episode where he had to oppose Parashurama, he must have had some reason to oppose Sri Krishna, now, both being *Avatars* of the same Supreme God that he worshipped day after day with a devotion that the world well knew. That was what all had thought as a satisfactory reason for Bhishma's behaviour! But the end revealed a totally different Bhishma; Bhishma in conflict, in a sense of guilt that he had wronged the other side; Bhishma in repentance and in a mood of expiation for his sins; Bhishma tormented and torn in loyalties between the cousins, between morality and immorality, between God and the Demons! It was this that had felled Bhishma and not the arrows of an Arjuna.

Drona's was no better condition! Conflict again unnerved him, not merely the trick on Ashwatthama's death.

But how could Duryodhana not know that this would happen to them at this last hour?

Shalya thought of his own situation as none the better. Where did his calculations go wrong? Duryodhana had trusted three persons in the main, Drona, Karna and Bhishma - and all of them died in predictable conflicts. His own calculation could not count this 'conflict' as a major factor for defeat for the Kaurava side. So he thought it fit to join the winning side, which was a gamble too, in the final analysis! Risks, at first were not great. But when even Bhishma dragged for as many as ten days, with no determination or confidence to win, the first signs of doubt appeared to surface. Drona's death confirmed it; and Karna's death put the final stamp of defeat on the Kaurava side! It all hinged on one's unquestionable conscience, rooted in *Dharmic* Consciousness. This was the factor he had discounted in his initial calculations.

Was he in guilt? Had he wronged his nephews? He had brushed it aside, then, as a question of gratitude to whoever had treated him to rest and refreshment on his way to the war-field; and it had just turned out to be the wrong side! This was 'true' in a sense of civility as his conscience was now pricking him, as the greater factor deciding the choice was the chance of winning, and being on the successful side. How could he undo it now? Or make the world believe otherwise? How could he answer his own conscience in trouble? Would

he also meet the same fate of Bhishma and Drona or Karna?

Shalya was sweating in shame and rage against himself for swerving away from the paths of Truth and Honour.

Shalya searched more deeply for reasons, for his extraordinary behaviour; he now remembered the occasion when Bhima visited him before Yudhishtira's Rajasuya, with a huge army and a humiliating alternative: "Join us as a chieftain under Yudhishtira, or fight with us. Peace will be with you as an honourable chieftain, if you pay token gifts and taxes, to my brother. Or else life will be the penalty, and someone else will rule in your place."

This was humiliation, which he had to pocket in the circumstances of those days! There was no alternative then. Shalya never forgot this affront to his self-dignity, and was in search of ways to escape it. That opening came when Duryodhana announced the war against the Pandavas. He threw himself whole and soul on the Kaurava side both to escape humiliation and assert his freedom and self-dignity, if not a burning sense of hatred or dislike or contempt for his own true nephews. All the excuses he had built up to deceive himself earlier, or fool the rest of the world, were now fast melting like snow at sunrise, in the last few days. How could he now refuse the 'Generalship' which was about to be thrust on him? How could he accept it either, which meant the destruction of all that he had loved earlier, freedom, unfettered and independent rule, and neutrality between the fighting cousins?

He saw how his dream castle began to crumble brick by brick - Bhishma eliminated, as per his own suggestion that favoured the Pandavas; Drona betraying himself with the secret that he did not love the news of death of his dear son! No one thought Saindhava would be drawn out of the *Vyuha*, voluntarily, to be food for Arjuna's missile! Bhurishravas deceived by Satyaki, Arjuna and Sri Krishna!! Now Karna, all his missiles failing!!!

What was that 'dream castle' founded on? What fond hopes had built that colourful castle? "Virata and Drupada are old and cannot stand for long. Yudhishtira's army is small, ill-assorted, and unmotivated. The commander-in-chief of the Pandavas is an inexperienced novice; a mere lad against stalwarts. Shikhandi - a former girl now turned boy, with not much manliness in him/her for all the boast; and Satyaki, an unknown man in war till recently! Above all, the illusion that Sri Krishna would not wield weapons in the war!

Shalya had only heard of Sri Krishna, being far away in Madra, far, far away from places, where Sri Krishna had chosen to exhibit his skills in fighting, war - planning and diplomatic moves of far-reaching consequences. On closer observation, Sri Krishna appeared the most experienced and unfailing strategist, with nothing to find fault in knowledge, experience, vision, strength, counselling and now charioteering! He wielded all the warriors, their futures, their loyalties, party-polarisation, balancing the power-struggle, and a bright goal beyond war for all peace lovers. They were there - plenty of them, outside the war-field, in spite

of the illusion created by Duryodhana that the war-fielded all mankind in mutual conflict. It was a partial war, after all, imposed on some war-mongering groups of ambitious rulers, drawn from all over the world no doubt, who saw nothing beyond loyalties to either family of the ruling race. This was not a realistic picture, Shalya realised as war was drawing to a close! Very shocking disillusionment!!

Shalya regretted not having joined Yudhishtira - that would have made him look a real upholder of justice as well as have assured him a share in the victory, peace and life, in addition to honour. The road not taken was now taunting him, teasing him, disturbing his poise and peace and of course, self deception.

Shalya did not now stick to this position, either; now, as before, he sought false justification in joining a party that had not hurt his pride, unlike Yudhishtira's. He was not responsible for the Pandavas' fall both before that gamble and after; and this 'would-be-fall' hereafter if his calculations had gone on as per expectations.

The most regrettable act that Shalya now cursed was his charioteership with Karna, which was a foredoomed failure and even disaster, satisfying none that arranged for it. At the back of this indelible memory, Shalya remembered an equally infamous moment, when he attacked Abhimanyu from behind, as per Drona's instructions. Future historians and analysts would not forgive him or be kind to him, he felt sure.

And now this unwanted Generalship! It was anointment for death. !! It was not Duryodhana that

was so crowning him, but God of Death himself! Here he was, with the original intention of recovering his lost pride. But should it turn out to be an invitation to sure death? If he refused it, it would show him as a coward, as a traitor, as an opportunist. If he accepted it, it would mean the end of his life, of all his ambitions, and all future once for all. No question of surviving the fury of Arjuna and Sri Krishna!

Shalya articulated this dilemma in its last crisp words, as if unconsciously, when Duryodhana was near him to crown him General, which he had hardly noticed.

He was offered a golden sword as a token on a gold plate; Tilak was applied on his forehead. Duryodhana touched his feet begging him for blessings and success. Shalya felt that the world was viewing this scene with a sense of irony, as results were foregone. He was in the position of a sacrificial goat, equally well being decorated and honoured before the butcher's axe fell on its soft neck. Shalya envied Rukmi, whom fate had spared and kept out of this fatal dilemma, though in shame.

Shalya lifted up Duryodhana with soft formal words.

Duryodhana : "Uncle, you are my sole refuge! I trust your heroism, your loyalty, and your self-confidence. May you be victorious against our enemies, and bring me peace."

Shalya felt touched and got his morale boosted for the moment, whatever might be the outcome of war. He said :

Shalya : “Nephew! I shall never let you down. I can assure you only this much. The rest is in the hands of God.”



Yudhishthira : “What is this, Sri Krishna? Should our uncle, our own blood-bond, accept this shameful offer from that villain, and at this hour?”

Sri Krishna : “What other honourable way of death is open to him at this late hour? You talk of blood-bonds! Are not political bonds surer and more attractive in war games? There is nothing strange or new. I had expected this long ago. Besides, independent thinking is of no use for gamblers. Pawn-movements are all that are important; they are dictated by necessities, situational forces and of course selfishness. Don’t talk of values or loyalties in this clumsy game. Bhishma and Drona themselves had no use for this independent thinking! Why should Shalya be allowed this wasteful luxury now? You have crossed terrible oceans like Bhishma and Drona; and crossed dark nether - worlds in Karna; this Shalya is a mere road-side puddle! Why should you be afraid of getting drowned in it?¹

Sri Krishna left for his camp, and others dispersed.



It was the morning of the eighteenth day, now. The deplorable death of Karna had cast a powerful shadow

¹ *Drona Bhishmarnavam tirtva Karna patala sambhavam |
Ma nimajjasva saganah Shalyamasadya goshpadam ||*

(Shalya 7-40)

on the Kaurava forces, in spite of a night's difference of time. It was a demoralisation that even the death of Bhishma and Drona had not caused. Everybody in that camp knew right from day one that Karna was the most trusted lieutenant of Duryodhana and over and above those elder sires with greater experience and war-records, impeccable. It was because of Karna's trust in Duryodhana's leadership and his loyalty to him, even to a fault, which was not to be seen in the other two. Bhishma was 'above'; Drona was 'aloof'; none of them were partners in Duryodhana's plots against his cousins, as Karna was, and if Karna did not have the first choice of the Generalship, it was for reasons well beyond Duryodhana's control, and reasons that he did not love but could not avoid. Now this valuable Karna was dead. The prospect of final defeat loomed large, while the soldiers alive were overtired and disillusioned.

In the Pandava camp too soldiers were tired, but bright hopes of final victory were strong, visible and clear to all. The Sun was unusually bright that day, even in the early morning. Karna, his son, was dead, no doubt, but the Sun was unperturbed as a true Karmayogin, being equal to all by nature and the position occupied by him among the celestials, the divine, and the force of destiny invested in him by God. He was Time, he was the manager of life's theatre, and the sequence was all that mattered to him, not actors, their histories or future. He had to bless those wedded to Dharma, perforce! He was not unhappy, either, in that job of an impartial judge.

Yudhishtira, after morning ablutions, bowed down to this visible symbol of God, and prayed for victory.

He said : “Oh God, you granted us inexhaustible food through that magic bowl in our period of exile in the forests and saved us from many a hardship, including the fury of fiery sages like Durvasa! Now grant us a final, decisive victory over the enemies of mankind, so that all hardship for the good and the pious, the saintly and sage-like might be at an end. We are but instruments in your hands. Grant us this unselfish prayer of ours.”

Sri Krishna came to him, before Yudhishtira climbed up to his seat in the chariot and told him :

Sri Krishna : “Brother, this is going to be your day, your bright day of record of victory over Shalya. You will make history today as your brothers Bhima and Arjuna did yesterday and the day before. God has destined Shalya to die at your hands. He is the son of Arthayana, and no small hero, just because his term has come at last. In the mace-fight he equals my brother Baladeva, the dear teacher of both Bhima and that villain Duryodhana at whose initiative innocent people on either side are killing each other! Fate has stationed this ambitious uncle of yours on that opposite side, so that he cannot back out or buckle at this unwanted moment of gloom and shame for him. He will not stand long before you, even for moral reasons but.....”

Yudhishtira : “What is this sudden doubt? ‘But’?”

Sri Krishna : “I fear trouble from your own side.. Your kindness unbound, is a liability at such moments. You are unpredictable because of your volatile heart, which can melt at real and artificial events

caused by the civil and the criminal alike! Misplaced mercy, out of place or context is dangerous. At the moment of Drona's death you caused us anxious moments by your indecision and vacillation. Remember? I shall give you a formula, to avoid this danger, if you want, and which shall ring in your most needed moments, moments of anxiety where quick decisions are unavoidable."

Yudhishtira : "Tell me, what I should remember."

Sri Krishna : "Very simple : *Shalya is a nobody to you! You are a non-entity for him too.* This is a nonrelational combat, where there is no mutual gain or loss. It is an unwanted apparatus on an overcrowded field with uncleared carcasses. One more dead body will not make a difference to that field. Throw him away at the earliest. 'Shalya' means an irritating sharp edge of a lance, an arrow or a missile. Do not allow that to enter your flesh. He has no excuse to serve Duryodhana, false pretexts of 'salt-bond' unlike Bhishma and Drona. He is most selfish with calculated actions, and in his joining that side, there was no self-fooling either. If he dies, as he should, today, at your hands, another *CHAPTER* of this war will be closed - the ignoble *CHAPTER* of selfish interests. Do not miss the opportunity to write this *CHAPTER* in glorious acts. It is my duty to warn you and you have done well in listening to me. The rest is action."

Yudhishtira : Krishna, your grace is extraordinary; it is this factor which has over weighed all others so far on my side, and upset all the calculations of

our adversaries. We need your caution and advice always. I have no soft corner in my heart for this 'uncle' with whom we have not had any intimate moments, or any reasons for compunctions. I am good at lance-throw, they say. I shall use all my skill today and carry out your instructions."

Sri Krishna : "Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, I hope separate words of advice are not needed by any one of you. Let us end the war auspiciously."

The chariots left the camp to the rhythm of drums and tunes of bugles and other instruments.



The armies clashed. Dead bodies began to get scattered in matter of moments everywhere. It was inspiring to heroes and frightening for cowards². Blood began to flow on a field already drenched in blood, with no time to dry! It was a flow towards the other world, that none could stop, blood mingled with blood on that cruel field bringing the opposing warriors closer in death than in life! Now all codes had been thrown to the winds, and it was a free for all. It was like a music concert where the vocalist sings for too long, and so misses his 'Sruti' or 'Tala'³.

The Kaurava army, even at the very start ran away at the sight of Bhima and Arjuna coming together at them. Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi blew their conches mightily for long. The Twins attacked Shalya with a rage that was not evident before.

² *Shuranam harsha janani, bhirunam bhayavardhani |*

³ 'Sruti' is a basic pitch, and 'Tala' is type or pattern in rhythm. |

The Kaurava army could not come under the full command of Shalya that day, either because he was a foreign commander, or because of overtiresomeness. They could not be brought together into any organised pattern, as they were running away again and again, or standing, staring, here and there, in bunches, in fear or indifference.

Three sons of Karna, - Chitrasena, Sushena, and Satyasena, - wanted to wreak vengeance on the Pandavas for the way their father was killed last night, and they now used all their collective courage and went on destroying the Pandava forces mercilessly. Duryodhana liked it!

Shalya himself rushed to their help. But Nakula intervened. Shalya destroyed Nakula's bow and wounded the wrist that held it, so grievously that this nephew found it hard to hold any weapon for long.

On this side, Karna's sons did not like Shalya rushing to their help, as they saw him as a traitor that betrayed their father, and wanted no part of their glory to be shared by this 'villain' as they considered him. They were now faced by Nakula. Alas; they were killed in no time by this seasoned warrior. It was as easy as reaping ripe corn on gray stalks! This happened right in the view of Shalya, and the army scattered and ran away to the dismay of Duryodhana who was watching it anxiously.

Shalya took it as an affront and got enraged! He went on butchering the Pandava army recklessly, which began to run helter-skelter right in the view of Yudhishtira.

Now Yudhishtira took on Shalya directly, with great determination and courage. Kritavarma and Kripa came to the aid of their commander. Shakuni was engaged with the sons of Draupadi. Duryodhana was being attacked by Arjuna elsewhere. Bhima was cornering Bhoja. Sahadeva had just killed Shalya's son in the very presence of his helpless father. Ashwatthama had destroyed the horses and charioteer of Bhima in a remarkable feat. Would Bhima let this go unavenged? He jumped off his chariot with his mace in hand, ran chasing a running Ashwatthama. Kritavarma too was now running away to safety. Shalya stopped Bhima and challenged him to fight with him instead of chasing running heroes. Bhima threw the mace on Shalya!

That mace shone in the air, in sunlight, like a meteor at noon, with its colourful stripes, pointed edge on top of its bulby part and on a strong twisted handle. It was worshipped in sandal paste and in perfumed materials and beamed a strange fragrance in a war-field stinking with the foul smell of dead bodies of men and animals! People stared at it in wonder, stood standstill and forgot sides. Bhima roared : "Foolish uncle! If you are a man, come, face this and fight with it!" The mace approached Shalya as a newly wed wife would rush at her husband in haste, anxiety and love to hug him.

Shalya jumped and moved aside to escape its fury. So it fell on his hapless horses and killed them at a stroke. The charioteer was crushed to death and lay in a lump! Shalya caught hold of a Tomara⁴ and threw

⁴ a weapon resembling a mace in its handle, but differing in the dome, replacing it with an oval-like, elliptic body with thorny spikes on it.

it on Bhima, who held it in his right hand in a good catch, for all its force and aim! Shalya was surprised at Bhima's dexterity and strength, and was wondering in appreciation while Bhima threw it back on Shalya! The Pandava army burst into loud applause!

Shalya was perplexed and felt in the same strait as Karna found himself at the end of the previous stage - with no chariot, no horses, no charioteer, no bodyguards or followers! Bhima was rushing at him with another mace in hand with fury multiplied and accelerated by the earlier disappointment of having missed his target! Shalya threw a counter mace to intercept it. The two met, hit each other emitting sparks that dazzled even in day light, fell down finally on innocent soldiers to kill them.

Shalya and Bhima repeated this experiment by exhibiting skills of varied kinds in mace-fighting, which the armies had rarely witnessed all these days since war started. Kripa seized an opportunity, when Bhima was picking up a new mace, to hijack Shalya to safety, without being targeted. The Pandava army laughed in ridicule, and the sound tore the skies : "See the plight of this commander! He requires to be saved by an old toothless Brahmin!"

Yudhishtira, on another front, had just killed two formidable heroes on the Kaurava side, by name Chandrasena and Drumasena. Shalya was angry at repeated losses and he now wanted to teach Yudhishtira a lesson. So he attacked him. But Satyaki, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva - all rushed to the help of the Pandava Prince. They covered Shalya with showers of

arrows. But Shalya dispelled it all, alone with redoubled vigour as it were. Shalya did not feel tired and there was no sign of his withdrawal, as earlier. The war continued for long, but Shalya stood his ground, firm and fierce. It was the Pandava forces that had to withdraw. Duryodhana appreciated it. It was noon-time now.



Arjuna : “Krishna, I shall not ask you now who this Shalya is, as I asked about Karna, yesterday. But tell me why this villain should be so loyal to Duryodhana and so much against us, as if for personal gain, which is not involved in this? Is there nothing to prick his conscience, if he has any? At least Bhishma and Drona had something like that. Karna’s case is understandable in his consistent, unselfish loyalty, good or bad morally, with some strong curses to undo him. This Shalya had no shame, no conscience, no curses, and his loyalty is beyond my understanding. How can we defeat him?”

Sri Krishna : “No, no.... ask me who this fellow is! Do not presume that you know him. However near a man may be by blood relation, or acquaintance, knowing him from the outside is one thing; Knowing him inside-out is another. You saw Karna as resembling Yudhishtira! That is from the outside, and irrelevant for our purposes. So I had to tell you about him, the inner Karna, who did not match that outward view. That dispelled your illusion.

Karna himself was forced to accept my estimate of him as a traitor to Dharma! That is his true character. No one appears publicly so as a traitor or betrayer of Cosmic Laws. A man is more than a body. He is a bundle of deeds - acts - each determined by its appropriate feelings and thoughts each of which has profound moral, spiritual and ethical laws to govern and judge by. It is these that determine his character - values that he lives by and guided by. In isolation of this, all men may look like the same. You will call them all good or bad and these labels have no meaning then. Did you ever try to estimate Drona or Bhishma this way? You simply thought they were elders that brought you up or taught you. They are more! They showed themselves away in their choice of Duryodhana, and their siding themselves with all that Duryodhana did to you! But, as you said, they had some shame, some conscience left in them; this fellow has none. They do not realise what it means to align against me!"

Arjuna : (Somewhat shocked) : "It pains me to brand them as traitors. Is this not overmuch ?"

Sri Krishna : "You are not seeing through my eyes. Bring your focus nearer to mine, you will agree."

Arjuna : "Get me your eyes, then!"

Sri Krishna : "I have not much time for teaching you. Listen with rapt attention. Your brother performed a Rajasuya; do you remember?"

Arjuna : “Were you not its manager, leader, overseer? Was that not the cause of this war, in a large view?”

Sri Krishna : “This means you have got my eyes and view point. Now see whether Shalya is a traitor to Dharma and to the nation as a concept based on it?”

Arjuna : “Eyes are not enough; view also is needed; a direction of observation too, and a hint or suggestion as to what should be looked for.”

Sri Krishna : “What a strange disciple, I say? How many times should I clear all this to you? Did Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra, Karna, Shalya or Bhurishravas, Saindhava, Bhagadatta and others ever dream that your brother Yudhishtira would so suddenly conduct the Rajasuya, which meant their enslavement unfailingly? It was a sudden decision though factors leading to it were steady, built up assiduously and with plan which you and I knew well in particular. They were all indifferent to you and even indulgent to you as they viewed you as orphans rehabilitated in Hastinavati, and Bhishma played his part of the drama by yielding a part of the empire that lay in waste. Nobody thought then, that this would involve the question of heirdom to the empire, or the sovereignty of the nation, and the next-generation-leadership, and would grow into proportions of irresoluble tangles, crooked machinations, plots of murder and acts of criminality and immoral political steps, involving loyalties of kings and petty rulers all over the world, bringing

them all on this war-field on either side. This was Bhishma's making in a way, as he could have solved this with ease when his authority and control on the throne had no challenge. He let go opportunities, committed blunders, procrastinated, vacillated, wasted the opportunities that destiny gave him; he became blind to problems growing under his own nose in a moral muddle of his own making."

Arjuna : "How is Shalya connected with all this? I fail to understand!"

Sri Krishna : "I do not expect you to understand this in a moment, what Bhishma would not understand in years then! (smiling) But, Duryodhana, Karna and Dusshasana understood it quickly, unmistakably with sharp and sure instincts!"

Arjuna : "I see! What did they understand?"

Sri Krishna : "If Yudhishtira performed Rajasuya, he would lord over all the earth and then they would all have to subserve him, become his slaves, and lose their freedom, glory, their wayward ways and styles of government!"

Arjuna : "Naturally! yes!"

Sri Krishna : "Brother, you say 'yes', and yet again complain that you did not understand! How can you not understand these implications without my analysis? See, whether Yudhishtira sought the permission of Bhishma to conduct Rajasuya? Did Bhishma understand the implication? What he gave

was just a piece of uninhabitable jungle-land, say wasteland - not an equitable share of the empire built by Pandu, or even a dignified half, as he should have given, even if he meant partitioning the country, against tradition, and law. But what Yudhishtira made out of it was a whole empire, swallowing even what Bhishma had withheld! That meant Duryodhana's subserving Yudhishtira!! Even Bhishma and Dhritarashtra, silently had to accept this yoke, actively or symbolically, however respectful your brother might be to them. Did Bhishma realise this then, at the time the great 'sacrifice' started? If he had, how would he not prevent that disgraceful gamble, or the pawning away of a rightfully built empire on Dharma, to deceitful wolves? How could he suffer it, witness it, and not prevent Draupadi's humiliation? He could have said a firm 'no' and stopped all this avoidable mess, humiliation, violence and now this war. Let this also be : now after your return from exile and life-incognito, why would he not tell Duryodhana firmly that he must keep up the terms of even that vicious gamble, and return the share of the Pandavas, what they had built lawfully with their might and straight behaviour? Just a handover of power? Do you think Bhishma abides by Dharma? Is this his loyalty to national forces of Right? Is he not fighting now against his own emperor? Is he not a traitor to Dharma and the nation?"

Arjuna : "If this can be analysed and delineated so simply, why did not the grandsire think of all these points, as he too is a statesman in his own right?"

Sri Krishna : “Nation-building is one thing; Nation dividing is another. Such persons do not understand the value or importance of National unity at such hasty moments. They understand it later on, for permanent repentance. What is the use? Yudhishtira and all of you, brothers, called ‘Samrat’ at the end of the sacrifice, are symbols of National unity, even now. Now if Bhishma wants this unity under the flag of Duryodhana instead of Yudhishtira, what does it mean other than loyalty to *Adharma* or evil or against laws of life? Is it not faith in treachery? I finished then the open enemies of this unity like Shishupala, Kalayavana, Jarasandha and others. But among hidden enemies there was this Shalya too! Do you now understand?

Arjuna : “It is this last which I still feel difficult to understand.”

Sri Krishna : “How many times should I attempt to convince you? Remember conditions thirteen years ago. There was no order or pattern of *Dharma Samrajya* - or *Dharmic* Empire such as followed *Rajasuya*. It all ended with the rule of Maruttha, one of your ancestors, and later rulers felt they were hereditary monarchs over simply what territories they ruled, and not also on others over whom they exercised power as sovereigns. It was then that those who were part of the central rule broke away silently, effectively, practically, forming several centres of rule unbecoming of a unitary state with federal status for various regions of these petty rulers. They were in this happy state of misrule,

until your brother performed Rajasuya. Shalya was one; Shishupala was another; even Duryodhana realised it rather late! There were also those who wanted to divide you, the Kuru clans, and enjoy the benefit out of this feud."

Arjuna : "Who were these latter?"

Sri Krishna : "Strange that you still ask me! Don't you realise that these are your very supporters, the Panchalas and the Virata forces, the Matsyas?"

Arjuna : "Then why did they support us, one of the factions?"

Sri Krishna : "They do not count upon you as the Kauravas any longer! They are now your blood-relations too! In your victory they see their own victory, and their ambition to beat the Kauravas is at least partially realised, as one of the clans is wiped out! They take credit!"

Arjuna : "This sounds unreasonable, as they will still be subservient to the other clan, ours, though, the one they did not like, is no more?"

Sri Krishna : "This is a matter of further attention, a matter to be looked after hereafter. But the old grievance is at an end, and the wrongs are avenged! Don't you feel convinced?"

Arjuna : "That would mean that at the time when we undertook the Rajasuya, there were none actively willing to come under this rule and be governed by the umbrella symbolising Dharma. Were there any?"

Sri Krishna : "Why do you discount them? There were many. Only they may not have appeared prominent then; they now do so."

Arjuna : "I don't see them! Who, for example?"

Sri Krishna : "I was there; our Yadavas were there! Can't you see?"

Arjuna : (with tears in eyes) "You! Are you not the keeper of Dharma, rather than one who follows it under the leadership of Yudhishtira? How can you demean yourself so much? Vasudeva! I meant to know if some others were there, not you!"

Sri Krishna : "Whether I am a keeper of Dharma, or its follower, it all means the same, whichever language my devotees may prefer. Dharma is as great, broad, and ancient as God. In its sweep it governs God also; metaphorically my devotees equate me with Dharma. You know I follow it as my guide. So the world trusts me and venerates me as its protector."

Arjuna : "I think of Bhishma. He expounded what you now say, so well, so clearly, so unequivocally - Dharma, and your being its Embodiment. But why does this same Bhishma fight against me, which is against you? Was not this that confused me on the first day?"

Sri Krishna : "I have answered all this, time and again! This is what I called Dharma-*glani*, i.e. Dharma-clouded, eclipsed, enveloped by darkness. He tried to appease evil, thinking that would satisfy it, and

stop it from growing. Bhishma also suffered from the ego that he was the throne-keeper, king-maker, protector of Hastinavati! This was offended seriously when your brother was crowned as *Samrat* - Emperor! Now in this war, your being assisted by the forces of Virata and Drupada, sworn enemies of Kurus, was also not to his liking. He thought he was fighting against them, and not you in particular! What self-deception!! Bhishma never counted me in all this equation, in all this calculation. It was too late on the tenth day where he realised the evil role he was playing in assisting Duryodhana. That was what broke his heart; Drona committed the same mistake. But Shalya didn't even have a conflict! He was very calculative when those calculations went wrong, and he had no qualms about making the best of this bad bargain. His loyalty is to neither of the clans, but to selfish interests."

Arjuna : "I now understand! Excepting you and the Yadavas, can I know who else really, heartily, wished to come under the royal *Dharmic* umbrella of Yudhishtira? Are they alive, dead, or imaginary?"

Sri Krishna : "Take the sons of Jarasandha and Shishupala. Take my friend and disciple Satyaki. Those others ignored by Duryodhana also; many of them with good relations between us."

Arjuna : "One more question : Why did you allow the Yadavas to join the other side? Or did they choose it on their own?"

Sri Krishna : “A faction of ambitious men under Kritavarma did not have much faith in me. Armies have no souls, no faith or goals of their own. They follow leaders. So I arranged it in such a way that there should be a choice by Duryodhana, as well as elimination of this ambitious group from our side. You were witness to it, were you not?”

Sri Krishna : “What will happen to the nation, in all this confusing picture?”

Sri Krishna : “The war will decide it. Some evil men want the country to be several nations, between the Himalayas in the North and the ocean in the South. I am against this vivisection. Vidura knows it, alone, among the statesmen of today. When I was at Hastinavati for conciliation, he had drawn my attention to this. He told me that all seditious elements were assembled there and warned me that my mission was foredoomed for failure. Shalya was there, too! What did it mean?”⁵

Arjuna : “If that villain had agreed to part with five villages, what would have happened to your concept of a unified nation on Dharma?”

Duryodhana : “Duryodhana would never agree, I knew. In mathematics you deduce the conclusion, about calculations, on the basis of the given data. Now here Duryodhana was a stubborn constant; Karna was no variable; Dhritarashtra was a mere stump of time, dead and rotten. How could I expect a

⁵ Udyoga : 92-25.

garden to grow in wilderness, without rains, and without the ground being altered? How can we unify darkness with light? Separatists never wish to come to terms with believers in unity. Now, come back to Shalya and tell me, whether one who is a separatist, and supports separatists can ever come to terms with forces of unity? What is he if not a traitor?"

Message came that Vidura had returned after completing his pilgrimage.



CHAPTER 41

THE FALL OF SHALYA

Vidura was now at the grand entrance of the royal palace of Hastinavati, and was received by guards and officials. Vidura enquired about the war, its direction, and the stage of its movement, of major heroes on either side. The messengers told him of Bhishma's and Drona's fall, Karna's pitiable condition of elimination and now Shalya's tenure also nearing its end. Vidura was not visibly upset as he knew of the coming events when he left for pilgrimage. Without loss of time and unmindful of his fatigue, he went straight to Dhritarashtra.

Sanjaya was just narrating how Shalya's brave fight could not make much headway at the end of the day. He stood up in reverence and moved away. Vidura touched the feet of the blind emperor and sat near him for talk.

Vidura : "Brother, this is now an unofficial talk as a brother speaking to a brother."

Dhritarashtra felt touched, wept and sobbed. This made Vidura and Sanjaya also sad. Vidura gestured to Sanjaya showing a seat so that he could also sit down and listen.

Dhritarashtra : “Vidura, I have deceived myself. I did not listen to your valuable and timely advice then. Fate is punishing me severely every day. All this disaster is because of that one headstrong son of mine, Duryodhana. You said so, and it is true, and has proved very costly. What can I do?”

Vidura : “Brother, I am glad you have realised your folly even if late. Let us do our best to save at least the rest. Order this war to stop. I shall persuade Yudhishtira for forgiveness; you will persuade your son to stop his hatred of the Pandavas, and to accept his fate for what it has blessed him with. He is alive, and let those among his brothers who are still alive, escape the fury of this unnecessary war. Let at least a few of your race, survive.”

Dhritarashtra : “Nothing seems to be in my hands now. Duryodhana may not like to live after all this, with his fault. Even if he survives, how will it compensate the deaths of my other sons? How can I be happy after all this? Is it proper for Bhima to have drunk the blood of his own cousin, my son Dusshasana? How could Arjuna exploit the miserable plight of Karna to kill him so mercilessly? Bhishma and Drona found excuses to let down my son, and betray him at the last moments! Who had expected all this? Did not my son trust all these for his victory?”

Gandhari also joined them, and began sobbing. Vidura felt that a sepulchral atmosphere was enveloping them all, even before a formal end for the war! The wives of the dead sons of Dhritarashtra were crying and sobbing. It was an intolerable situation, rending the

soft heart of Vidura. Even servants carried on their routine, rather mechanically.

Vidura had gathered much of this news even on the way to Hastinavati, and therefore there was nothing shockingly new in it. For that matter, even before war started, and long before he went on a pilgrimage, he had mentally pictured most of these results as a certainty in his mind. What was concrete and first-hand was this scene of crying and sobbing of the innocent. There was no comfort he could give now by words or by remedial action. There was no more advice also to be taken by the old King, after he spoke about the futility of stopping the war! What a strange thing is the wish to win a steadily losing gamble! Vidura did not know what else to say; he made one more desperate effort in the same direction of peace at whatever cost that was already paid :

Vidura : “Brother, it is well you realise your folly, even if late. You could have stopped all this and lived in peace at one time! You did not relish my words then; nor do you relish them now! Fate is strong in its grip over you. What can I do? In the first innings of the gamble whatever the Pandavas had lost, you had the power and generosity to return to them to show that you were the real power-centre. Did you consult your wicked son then? You were a free monarch then, as now. Similarly when Sri Krishna visited us on a royal mission, you could have agreed to return their kingdom back to them, if you had really wanted. I advised you so; many others also did. But you yourself did not like that

idea! So you have to take the blame for this war, loss of your sons, and all calamities that have followed till now. You underestimated the strength of the Pandavas, of Sri Krishna, and of Dharma against Adharma! This was a grave miscalculation on your part. Sri Krishna is no mere teacher, but also a person of action and planning for it. You complain about the way Bhima killed your son Dusshasana! Why don't you grieve about the way, your people killed Abhimanyu? You are upset about Karna's way of death! Why are you not upset about Draupadi's molestation by your villainous son in your own presence? That wicked Karna, not related you, called her 'a prostitute' in your own presence, in your hearing! Why did you not reprimand him then and there? Why did this flatter you then? When Shakuni said that he had won her for Duryodhana as a pawn, what made you swell with pride and gain? Was it moral, proper, or ethically justifiable? Bhishma and Drona were also a party to this 'celebration' then; but they got self-punished at the end. But God is punishing you, as you did not punish yourself or repent. You say Karna was deserted by your son's friend Shalya! But bringing these two persons of opposite temperaments together in the same chariot, was it diplomatically advantageous? So you go on blundering at every step, but find fault with the other side for the same! Now there are only two ways open to you : go on until the war takes its logical toll of all your sons, endure the consequences without blame; or stop the war immediately and save what can be saved even at this late hour."

Dhritarashtra did not relish this advice; Vidura left with a heavy heart; Sanjaya resumed his narration.



Ashwatthama was now fighting with Arjuna. The remaining heroes among Trigarthas had followed him. None had seen Arjuna in that extraordinary enthusiasm, till then, since the start of the war. The Kauravas suffered very heavy losses in a very short time, but Ashwatthama stayed well and firm. He threw a pestle-like weapon with iron spikes at him. Arjuna destroyed it and other weapons that followed.

A Panchala hero by name Suratha came upon the sight of Ashwatthama, and this duo held on for sometime, until that hero was killed. Ashwatthama was now in full fury.

Here was Dhrishtadyumna locked up with Duryodhana, who envied the luck of the Pandavas, and this General who had held his unquestioned ground all these seventeen days! Duryodhana pitied himself and the fallen stalwarts on his side, on their own, or as victims of circumstances hatched by the enemies! Even Abhimanyu had more self-confidence and a spirit of loyalty, beyond the capacity of his age than elders like Bhishma! Why did not God put him on his own side? Dhrishtadyumna had been under-rated so far, and that was a major flaw in Duryodhana's reckoning, he thought now.

He now looked at Shalya, desperately and felt a little encouraged by the scene. Shalya was not his direct relation, but distantly connected through Nakula and

Sahadeva, though. But his loyalty to Duryodhana was commendable. Actually Shalya was engaged with his own nephews, Nakula and Sahadeva, at the moment!

Shalya found them surprisingly sharp, quick, and experienced, as this was his first ever encounter with them. In a way he felt proud of them. But before he could enjoy it for long, he was confronted by Bhima now, and Shalya had to face him. When this fight reached a decisive phase, Bhima did not find Shalya opposite him, at all!



“Nakula, Sahadeva, leave him to me. I have his death in my hands. He is reserved for me, says Vasudeva Sri Krishna. You will function as protectors of my chariot wheels. Let Satyaki flank me on the right, Dhrishtadyumna on the left, and let Arjuna follow me as guard. Let Bhima drive away Duryodhana to another front; he shall lead me, with a united segment of the army” - ordered Yudhishtira.

The Kaurava army was frightened by this unique combination, and began to run. Duryodhana was so completely covered by the thick shadow of Bhima's arrows and so could not see what was happening before him; and he swooned also.

Bhima's army broke the Kaurava pride and marched relentlessly, unchecked, with enemy forces swooning, getting wounded and frightened. Shalya was now face to face with Yudhishtira.

Shalya lost his bow! But he caught hold of another quickly, and attacked Satyaki. Bhima threw a mace at

Shalya, which killed his charioteer and horses in one stroke. Shalya jumped on to the earth, as Bhima prevented him from taking another. But Shalya took revenge by killing the charioteer and horses of Yudhishtira. Now Yudhishtira too was on the ground. "He is nobody to you, as you are none to him" - these words began to ring in the ears of Yudhishtira, as Sri Krishna had taught and reminded him, at the beginning of the day. Now Yudhishtira took a close look at his uncle, and spoke thus :

Yudhishtira : "Oh, Valorous hero! Wars are caused by man's greed, lust, and hate, unavoidably. But you who could afford to be neutral have a special duty to stop this violence and madness, by right advice and righteous conduct. Can you pour oil on burning flames of malice and hatred?"

Shalya was taken aback, and bent down his head in shame as he could not face Yudhishtira's eyes full of anger and contempt, blazing with a shine due to devotion to Truth and Peace! After some moments he replied :

Shalya : "Nephew, should you not have addressed the same question to Bhishma and Drona? Even in altars of worshippable fire, we feed flames with ghee, do we not?"

Yudhishtira : "I am asking you this question only after asking Bhishma and Drona also, the same! Don't you think that your turn has come only after theirs? This raging fire of war - what do you think it is? Altar fire or destructive house-burning fire? Only irresponsible and mischievous men can

compare it to altar-fire? Should you not have some discrimination, sir?"

Shalya : (Cooling down a bit) "Yudhishtira, I have already blessed you in the beginning of this war! After seventeen days of destruction, doom and desolation, who can afford to have discrimination?" Let history decide what is altar-fire, accidental-fire, crematory-fire, and fire of malice or hate. It will also record who were all, that oiled it, fed it with fat and so on. Why do you single me out at this juncture? You pawned away your wife, and it produced that initial fire, that powerful spark which is now blazing and burning all your clan on either side! Why can't you blame yourself? You should have avoided that foolish gamble and that shameful pawning, and senseless game then itself! Having started all this disaster yourself, why do you blame me? Myself, Bhishma or Drona could have been spared of this agony, this conflict, had you been wise, responsible and dignified then! The world calls you Dharmaraja - Emperor, Justice-Incarnate! This is not your proper name, all of us know. How much all the more should you have deserved it at such moments of danger? I am after all a fly falling into this fire, you have ignited! Tell me whose sense of shame is more in proportion? I am a toy in fate's hand! You are Fate itself incarnate! Let history apportion blames."

Yudhishtira feels the sting of these just words and does not find words to retaliate. He feels ashamed, as a culprit, as a voluntary victim. He had never sought to justify his behaviour earlier, but the mystery of how

he could be an active party to that public shame still haunts him for an answer! This was no reply for Shalya's shame of opportunism! Still it silences him. One shame is no relief for another! The two are, he feels, two different accounts! Shalya is resourceful even in verbal attacks! Yudhishtira is dazed at his skill in defending himself, with counter attacks on those that object to his non-neutrality!

Yudhishtira wonders whether it was wrong on his part to have expected Shalya to follow Vidura's example of total non-alignment! It is true that Shalya had blessed him on the starting day of war. This in a way, means his confession of being in the wrong party. But what more could he expect now, when those that lived in shame were fast stuck up in hardened positions, being sucked into this all consuming conflagration of war ? Did it mean that Shalya knew that his end was near? The references to different 'fires' was an indication. There was time to know more of its significance from Sri Krishna, but now his first duty was to face this 'enemy.'

Yudhishtira possessed a powerful, unique missile in the form of a spear. It had a golden handle, and gems studding it everywhere. Its tip blazed like fire. He took it now in his right hand, closed his eyes for the final throw, and remembered Sri Krishna's words : "Shalya is nobody to you." He opened his eyes and viewed Shalya with cruel determined eyes and said :

"Uncle : Whether the responsibility for war is on me or someone else, destiny will take you to task as its spokesman, as you chose to speak just now ! Let us see whose is the real face, and who else's is a mere

mask. May you join Bhishma and Drona, in their fate, in their blame or praise beyond death.” Yudhishtira threw it at the target!

Shalya had not seen this missile before or ever even heard of it. Yudhishtira appeared like the god of Death, and the blaze of the missile now blinded his eyes, it flew at him with terrific speed with the impression, as if Mother Kali drew her red sharp tongue at him to draw him to her and swallow him!

Yudhishtira had been specially blessed by Drona with this, during the days of pupilship. It had marks of sandal paste, ‘Kumkum’ and other holy offerings made to it all these years. Drona had noticed that among all his pupils, this Yudhishtira was more prone towards this shaft-throwing, this javelin-throw, as a particular choice in which to specialise, more than in archery, mace-fighting or missile-shooting. So he had specially trained Yudhishtira in it and got him acquire skills that few could equal or excel. Now Yudhishtira remembered Drona and said within himself : “Acharya, this target is your offering today, my fees at your feet” and threw that deadly lance.

It had been manufactured by Viswakarma for Kalabhairava, a special form of Shiva, for times of mass destruction of evil forces. Now this was such a critical time, and Yudhishtira was an instrument of that god of Death-Dance!

The missile was decorated with several small jingling bells on the handle part, and at the tip there was a small flag also, just behind the pointed edge. This was further embellished with gems, making it shine with

abnormally noticeable lustre to attract the attention of all, so as to make them feel that this was no ordinary lance. It was made for the special purpose of destroying those that hated God and the Godly.¹

“Shalya! You are dead now” – said Yudhishtira in a fierce voice, when he threw it at him.

This new steel edge in the voice of Yudhishtira startled Shalya as he never before heard this determinedness or sharpness in that voice or this heroism or its ferociousness of his usually soft-spoken nephew : “This is now no Yudhishtira; but God Yama! Or God Rudra. This will finish now Shalya, leaving him no choice of survival” - shouted the soldiers on other side. They compared Shalya to Andhakasura who was killed by one sharp throw of Rudra’s trident!

The shaft now pierced into the heart of Shalya, entered through his chest, issued out of his back and got stuck up in the earth on the other side. That was its speed, direction and force. Shalya’s chest-shield was shattered into pieces, and blood sprang like a fountain and spilled into the air. Shalya’s eyes, nose, ears were also torn and began to bleed. The hero looked like a mountain vomiting blood on all sides. Soldiers had only heard of Skandha, son of Rudra Mahadeva, who killed Tarakasura in one throw of his Velayudha², passing through even the Krauncha mountain by carving a large hole in it. Now they could see a repeat of it in this fresh demonstration of Yudhishtira. Shalya fell with a tremendous thud.

¹ *Brahmadvisham antakarim amogham |*

² *A sharp spear for which he is known,*

The Pandava army shouted with joy and peals of 'hail' pierced the skies.

Sri Krishna embraced Arjuna and said : "You have won!" Bhima threw his mace into the skies, and held it firmly in his grip as it descended with a tremendous speed, and roared like a lion : 'We have won!'

Shalya's brother was now seen rushing forward to avenge his brother's death. Yudhishtira braved him quite fiercely and finished him off in no time. The handful army of the Kauravas behind him ran for safety. But Satyaki chased it, though Kritavarma prevented him from advancing.

Kritavarma was a strange hero. Coming from the Yadava side, he was no follower of Sri Krishna or Baladeva. He was an ambition-filled hero who sought independent recognition in this war. Satyaki had joined the Pandavas and Sri Krishna to thwart that ambition. By emerging unscathed so far, he - Kritavarma - had proved his value for Duryodhana, though it made not much difference in tilting the balance in favour of the Kauravas. Now would he be crowned as the next General? Kritavarma did not perhaps expect or want this dubious honour, when it was crystal clear that it was a lost battle for the Kaurava forces. Clearly Kritavarma was in a frustrated mood. He had survived, but that by itself meant nothing, no, not at this moment! But duty was there still. When he could not sight Duryodhana, he disappeared by gradual withdrawal, unnoticed by the enemies. Neither Ashwatthama nor Kripa could notice this as they were elsewhere.

The Pandava army celebrated the death of Shalya with loud drum-beats, and bugle blowing and conch-blowing. Sri Krishna led them all by his blowing of Panchajanya for a long time. Bhima took Yudhishtira on his broad shoulders, and danced to the rhythm of beating drums and tune of war-musical instruments.



It was past noon-time, and the Sun was descending slowly, steadily into the West, taking with him all the hopes of the Kaurava army also, of any chance of success. The sun was covered, even then, with dark clouds, presenting the picture of an abnormally quick sunset.

Not much army remained on the Kaurava side now: and even what remained of it was totally destroyed by Satyaki, Arjuna and Bhima - some seven hundred charioteers, (with chariots and warriors), lots of elephant brigade, twenty one thousand foot soldiers and the remaining sons of Dhritarashtra. This happened in minutes, with no one to protect them, hapless fellows.

It was Shakuni's turn now to use 'magic' and false means of war, in which he was expert. He had no army to lead! It was like playing chess without pawns on an empty board. He just wanted the Pandavas to die, and their army to run away.

But before any major mischief could be effected he was chased by Dhrishtadyumna. Six thousand soldiers behind him were after this prize-catch. Draupadi's sons too! Shakuni had never run like this before, with his army dying behind him as food for the Pandava-

General's arrows. The heads rolled on with thudding sound like palm fruits dropping in a powerful wind. Stray bodies got strewn everywhere; jackals, wolves and dogs moved everywhere without fear, having a feast as never before. They tasted warm blood and flesh without rivals, as each had plenty unto spare. Shakuni's sorcery had miserably failed, even to protect himself. Some heads of his soldiers were flying in the field with swift arrows stuck in them and were falling on living heads like meteors from above. The cries of these living heads were heart-rending, as they mistook them for effects of black magic, got stunned and died on their own, without the enemy's having to strike them. Shakuni's army died in this mysterious way.

Shakuni could not run further, as he was confronted by Sahadeva before him. Behind, there was Dhrishtadyumna!! Shakuni felt his end nearing.

Meanwhile Shakuni saw with his own eyes, his son Uluka dying, as game for a lance thrown at him by Sahadeva! The father got broken-hearted. He tried to hide himself among piles of dead bodies. But there was neither time to search for a safe hiding place, nor courage left in him. But Sahadeva was very near him now like god Yama.

Sahadeva : "You son of a bitch! You too want to save your soul? You too fear death? Do you want to live still after causing the death of all these on the battle-field, as its instrument in the main? Do not insult the warrior-class by your vulgar attempts to escape. Die in true spirit. Do not run, but face my weapons. You were scorning at us with derisive

laughter when you deceived us in the gamble by your notorious tricks! Where is that laughter now? Try to do that now, let me see?"

Shakuni had no words to say, as they stuck up at the root of his shrunk tongue now. His chariot had been powdered to pieces with its horses and charioteer despatched to death. Sahadeva now threw a sharp lance at the throat of Shakuni, which tore off his wicked head away from his shoulders on which it was a dead weight all these years.

Sahadeva's anger was not quenched. He got down and hacked the dead trunk bit by bit - shoulders, arms, legs, thighs and so on until his anger cooled.

Sahadeva now blew the conch. This was replied to from another quarter by Keshava and Arjuna, to mean that they understood it and they too rejoiced.

There were about three hours for sunset. Where was Duryodhana? Every body was anxious to know, to bring the war to an end, formally and logically.



"Keshava, the war on this eighteenth day is drawing to a close, with that villain Duryodhana still alive, and without our knowing his whereabouts" - said Arjuna, slowly unstringing his bow.

Sri Krishna : "It is not only today's war coming to a close, but the entire war. We have no time to waste. If we can locate that devil and finish him off, all will be over."

Arjuna : "That foolish fellow should have realised the way things would end at least when Drona and Karna fell, if not at the fall of Bhishma. I fail to understand his achievement now, with victory as a foregone conclusion in our favour. Or did he really dream he would win?"

Sri Krishna : "It is such folk that involve the innocent in such needless wars. One man starts, and others pay for it. You must know that. Even Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Kripa, Vidura and Sanjaya knew this - how the war would end and in whose favour. But they could not avoid it. It was Duryodhana's choice that ruled and yielded this result, known to all in advance. The harvest of sorrow is for Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, as Duryodhana will not be alive to see it or share it. Children born of malice were destined to die of malice. What can you and I do? It is all proper in the law of life, in the scheme of things."

Arjuna : "This 'propriety', this 'scheme' is beyond my understanding. I am distressed at needless blood shed, this senseless butchery, this violence on the innocent, and this grand resultant disorder." (sobs.)

Sri Krishna : "You said that this is beyond your understanding. Well; that is a sure sign that an Age is coming to an end. Even intelligent and responsible people fail to understand obvious things, otherwise, at such junctures. History moves on unperturbed leaving the inferences for those alive to learn. It all starts in the same way - some irresponsible fellow in responsible position makes a selfish

movement and the inevitable happens, in proportion to the position occupied, and the magnitude of the decision so taken. You had nothing to do with it. It was all in the hands of Dhritarashtra and Bhishma. To bring down that irresponsible person, Duryodhana, once he went for the war, was an irreversible act, necessitating this violence. If people on large scale decide so, what can we do?"

Arjuna : "What do you mean by 'People on a large scale'? You said it was the decision of a few? How are these others responsible?"

Sri Krishna : "The people who supported Duryodhana - they could have refused to join his side - Bhurishravas, Saindhava, the Kekaya princes, the Trigarthas, Kripa and Drona, even Karna! Many others."

Arjuna : "Did they have choices?"

Sri Krishna : "They had. They could have played neutral. Take Shalya, your uncle. Where was the need for him to take sides? So also all others took side! That is what is called 'death-wish' for this society. Even God is forced to use this man-chosen calamity for a greater good to be born out of the consequent chaos."

Arjuna : "Can I relish *Vedanta* at this moment of sorrow? Sri Krishna, can there not be another way of comfort?"

Sri Krishna : "Your relish is what depends on the culture of your mind. It is personal and so I cannot answer for you. As for 'another way of comfort',

if there is one, let me learn from you! But for those who may not relish *Vedanta* now, I have only one single message."

Arjuna : "What is it?"

Sri Krishna : "I have already told you on the first day."

Arjuna : "You have told me many things. Highlight the one you now mean."

Sri Krishna : "Be just my agent. Do not try to probe what is beyond your capacity to understand. Accept your limits, submit to me and my decision and act as my instrument. Peace will be yours."

Arjuna : "How do we know God's will?"

Sri Krishna : "If you know it in advance, what remains of your role in history? That will be revealed to you at the right time, if you are pure hearted. But wait till then without ego, passion, anxiety, selfishness."

Arjuna : "You are taking me into the past, from the present."

Sri Krishna : "No, no! There is a ghost of a past that is irrelevant in the present now, which is trying to accommodate itself into the future, illegitimately. If you can kill that ghost, the future will be bright. You are that instrument now. My messages are always for the future. Not for the past or present."



CHAPTER 42

WHERE IS DURYODHANA?

Dhritarashtra : “Sanjaya, what is the latest news from the war-front?”

Sanjaya did not reply for sometime. The narration had stopped a short while ago, even as Shalya was about to be killed. The blind king was angry with Sanjaya's narration of only news of death, defeat, destruction and had ordered him to stop this narration. Sanjaya had used this interval to go to the war-field to see for himself the actual conditions that prevailed there. He went in a palace chariot as far as it could take him into the war-field, but had to alight too soon than he had expected; the path was strewn with dead bodies of humans and animals, stinking, lying there uncremated, and as haunted by vultures, dogs and foxes, everywhere. There was no Kaurava 'army' left now, and Shalya lay there in a ghastly scene of death with no one to mourn him. The Pandavas were also not to be seen anywhere near; perhaps they were in their camps, holding councils, consultations or searching for the missing Duryodhana. Sanjaya felt like reporting this scene of desolation to the blind King, whether he was interested or not in listening to it. But the way back was not easy for Sanjaya. Heroes on the Pandava side were looking for

secret agents of the Kauravas, still in hiding in the battle-field. Sanjaya found it difficult to escape them; but somehow did it, reached the palace. But where to start reporting from? This story had no beginning or end, literally or symbolically! But he began somehow:

Sanjaya : “Oh king, bad news, boring news, disastrous news still awaits you aplenty! You have commanded me to stop narration of events of defeat and desperation. But, alas, there is no good news available. One has to reap the fruits of what one has sown! Any other way, is there?”

Dhritarashtra : “Perhaps you mean that Shalya was also killed by the Pandavas! Did they not feel any compunction for their uncle? Tell me at least if my son Duryodhana is still alive! Where? What does he want to do now? Kripa and Ashwatthama are immortals! Where have they gone? Will they not now help this son of mine, in this dire moment of need?”

Sanjaya : “Sir, even stories of defeat cannot be narrated in one continuous breath. They require digesting, courage and patient listening, unlike stories of victory, which can be summed up briefly. Sorrow has to be swallowed sip by sip. First let me tell you about Shalya : he fought with courage and determination for long. But even as noon time arrived he became food for Yudhishtira’s fierce lance. In war, blood relations have no meaning, no priority. There are only two considerations there - friend or foe. No scope for kindness or other values.”

Dhritarashtra : “I cannot imagine that Yudhishtira, known as Dharmaraja could stoop to this level of killing his own uncle, so ruthlessly! He was often condemning war itself as barbaric, but now how can he participate in it so actively? How shall I believe it?” (weeps.)

Sanjaya : “King, Sir! you must know one thing for certain : What I am narrating may be a sad story; but it has its own logic, and justice asserting itself everywhere in it. It is not a story of injustice triumphing over justice. Do not attach wrong values to it, or attribute evil to the victors. Your sons insulted a Queen, and humiliated her husbands, and drove them to the forests in a deceitful gamble, some thirteen years ago, and you now reap the fruit! That is the logic, that is justice, asserting itself now! You deplore the effect, but appreciate the cause! How illogical of you, Sir! You groan and grumble at the news of each loss of a hero on your side, and blame the Pandavas, who have not deviated from the path of justice and righteousness. Is it proper now? Yudhishtira has after all asserted himself, justified his name, and has been true to the duties of a warrior’s life. Why do you blame him? Who brought him on to this war-front here? Was it not your beloved son Duryodhana? When he, along with Karna and Shakuni, tried to disrobe Draupadi, why did you not condemn them, even once, or call them foul fellows? Why do you reserve these and other rare abusive terms for the wronged party, your brother’s sons? I have narrated the story of humiliation and retribution of your sons

so far, but you do not seem to have learnt lessons of detachment, true saving-knowledge, or wisdom! How strange! Is Yudhishtira heartless? Do you forget how sincerely he tried to avoid this war? Did he not bargain for five villages, at least? Or even one? No less a person than Bhagavan Sri Krishna came for a final patch up! Who rejected this peace offer? Do not again blame the Pandavas? War is always destructive and avoidable - even now. But until people of your son's like, live on this earth, wars cannot be avoided!"

Dhritarashtra : "Is my son Duryodhana still alive?"

Sanjaya is taken aback by this anxiety after all his detailed wisdom-filled explanation! What did it matter now whether Duryodhana was alive or dead? How was a live Duryodhana better than a dead one? But Sanjaya replied :

Sanjaya : "Do you think sir, that your question has still any meaning? Does his life, if he lives now or hereafter, have any sense, any value? Or do you still entertain hopes of reunion with him, and live hereafter? Do you yourself still want to live, after all this?"

Dhritarashtra : "Is it not natural, Sanjaya, for living things, to wish for long life, until death comes? Life is a hope, while death may be a certainty, though its timing is what no one knows in advance! Is it wrong if I wish my son alive, or for a reunion with him? Why do you speak as if all is lost?"

Sanjaya : "Sir, this is not a wise man speaking from within you! It is an answer, or retort from an

animal-angle! No hero - not even your son - would speak like this now."

The suggestion that Duryodhana is a 'hero' brings a little comfort to the old man's heart. But the snub does its work by stunning him to a silence.

Sanjaya : "King, the war is as good as over. There are no more Generals or heroes in the army, to lose for your son. All are dead. Pity! You cannot even feel the sense of loss, total disaster, and the pain consequent upon it. If you had any capacity for such feeling you would have experienced it on the day the Pandavas lost everything and left for the wild forests. For a cultured man, suffering is what matters; whose it is, does not. That was a gamble! This too is one. There were no pawns then, left, when the gamble ended. Now too there are no soldiers to be slaughtered, so the war ends. Even the one who egged you and your son on to wage the pawns then, and the war now, Shakuni, is dead too!

Dhritarashtra remembers Dushshasana, Karna and Shakuni and weeps silently. He sobs and sighs. Sanjaya continues :

Sanjaya : "Sir, let me tell you that this war was better than that gamble. Here lives were pawns and so there is no repeat of the war. But in the gamble preceding, it was honour, truth and property that were staked. Those that lost them came back with vengeance. Now both are at an end. Your sons, except Duryodhana, are lucky that they are not alive now to taste this total defeat and be depressed! Those that are alive are the most unlucky."

Dhritarashtra : “What is the use of these alternatives, or comparisons now? What was destined to happen, happened.”

Sanjaya : “This is the argument that has brought you to this sorry state, Sir! All through, you have justified the avoidable evil deeds of your sons, with this untenable, false argument! If destiny is all , what is your roll in life? What happens to your freedom? Your choice? Your ‘*Karma*’ as your own? Do you really think that my explanations are really of no use?”

Dhritarashtra : “Who will benefit from them?”

Sanjaya : “You questioned me, and I answered you! If you cannot benefit, who else will? How can your question benefit someone other than you?”

Dhritarashtra : “I? Benefit? I do not see your point! How is this going to benefit me after all is lost?”

Sanjaya : “Sir, I am sorry to point out certain truths; all is lost; yes; but you are still alive to feel this loss! You will be forced to remember all this throughout the rest of your life. It is you who require reconciliation; comfort; and acceptance of things as they have come to you. So my explanations must primarily make a difference to you hereafter. Will you not be haunted by the earlier gamble and this war and your common role in both, as the non-avoider of this twin evil? Your active encouragement to both? Your not restraining of those elements who pushed you into this pathetic plight? If you cannot understand even this much at this point of time,

you will be forced to live like a coward, having to bear all the ridicule of those in whose hands you have to eat, and be nourished hereafter! Do you still want to live?"

Dhritarashtra : "If death does not come to me, what can I do?"

Sanjaya : "How will the discovery of the whereabouts of your son relieve your agony? How will it help you endure your unbearable life? Will it not add to your sorrow further? Why can't you forget him at least now, and be detached?"

Dhritarashtra : "This is another question. Tell me where my son is?"

Sanjaya : "I cannot see him anywhere on the battle-field. The Pandavas are also searching for him."

Dhritarashtra : "You say you have visited the battlefield! Anything of special interest or observation?"

Sanjaya : "That I have come back alive is itself a miracle!"

Dhritarashtra : "Miracle? How? Why?"

Sanjaya : "Whatever army on your side was alive, is now in the possession of Dhrishtadyumna, as captives. Duryodhana must have run away to the East, in fear, it is suspected. His horse was found dead.¹ His mace is his only companion now. He was not to be seen. I was also looking for him when

¹ *Hatam svahayamutsrjya prammukhah pradravat bhayat |
Ekadasha chamu bhartha putro Duryodhanastava ||
(Shalya, 29-27)*

the spies of Dhrishtadyumna caught me prisoner. Satyaki was there too. Dhrishtadyumna took pity on me, as he knew me and said : 'Why did you arrest him? He is no soldier. He is simply an aide of Dhritarashtra, giving commentary on the war situation, so blessed by Vyasa, his preceptor.' He respected me with folded hands and gave me permission to leave. Satyaki did not agree; he said : 'Now when the war is drawing to a close, none on the side of Duryodhana should be allowed to live. His relation with Dhritarashtra, his loyalty to him is one enough reason to finish him off.' So he wanted to kill me with one stroke of his sword. but my divine teacher Veda Vyasa himself came there to get me released! My teacher's grace saved me; but you have served no teacher and earned no grace to save you from grief. It was with that gift of my preceptor I could narrate all the details of war, being away from the battle-field. Veda Vyasa took Dhrishtadyumna to task and commanded : 'Victory is all right; intoxication is an excess. Give it up and be sober. Do not kill the innocents. Go and Search for the *Kalipurusha* who has caused all this. Why do you kill this disciple of mine?' Satyaki threw away the sword; asked my forgiveness, and brought me here in all safety. It is not yet sunset, though evening is nearing it. All over the battle-field, vultures, foxes, wolves and even demons are roaming.... even demons..... yes, demons."

Sanjaya chuckled somewhat loudly so as to startle the blind King. Dhritarashtra was mystified :

Dhritarashtra : “Sanjaya, you seem to be enjoying something! Why are you excited or distracted? What strange thing happened?”

Sanjaya : “What can I say my Lord! I had not seen or heard of demons with holy habits of purity! The discovery startled me.”

Dhritarashtra : “What? ‘Demons with holy habits’? What do you mean? I hope you have no cracked wits? Explain.”

Sanjaya : “I do not know who is still left with sanity or who else suffers from cracked wits! After hearing those demons there was no go other than have madness. Or, all my madness was dispelled. Both mean the same now. Sanity and madness both mean the same now.”

Dhritarashtra : “I cannot follow a word of what you are saying! Can you not elaborate?”

Sanjaya : “It all happened before Dhrishtadyumna captured me. A pair of demons was roaming on the war-field. I heard them talking among themselves. one of them said : ‘Friend, I was tired of tasting the blood of ordinary heroes, day after day, as and when they lay dead here, with their blood still warm, in the expectation that Duryodhana too would die, making his blood available for me. But the fellow is dodging me, and is still alive! I was interested in Bhishma’s blood too! But the fellow would not die, after falling. Besides, there is no blood left in him now. Earlier I tried, as soon as he fell on the bed of arrows. But guards were there,

and so I dared not go near. After all, though a *kshatriya* by birth, he is almost a Brahmin in character, culture, by studies, habits of mind, meditation and what not. Many call him 'Acharya.' It is a sin to drink the blood of a Brahmin, or one who is almost a Brahmin. Leave aside Drona. Dusshasana's blood was one of my desires to drink. But Bhima himself finished it all, then and there, and left none for us. I could not even try if there was any drop left, as Bhima stood there with his foot on the dead body for long. He might have given me a bowl of it, had I begged him so. Our fellow-demons used to say that he was friendly with them, and even kind, in fulfilling their desires. Had he not so donated the blood of all other Kaurava Princes to us only ? Still, the circumstances in which Dusshasana lost his life brought fear into my heart, so that I could not even near Bhima.' Now, Sir, tell me whether this is not a demon with holy habits, with so much discrimination between blood that can be tasted and blood that should be avoided?"

Dhritarashtra's mind gets agonised at this reminder of Dusshasana's way of death as pictured by the demon, and he weeps profusely. The words of the demons pierce his hard heart, in all its irony and ridicule.

Dhritarashtra : "Sanjaya, are you telling me a factual story, or a concoction of your wild imagination? Can demons be so much interested in my son's blood?"

Sanjaya : "Sir, shall I give you an additional proof?"

If your son returns to you today alive, you can ask him the same question, and confirm from him of the veracity of my report. Since he is still dreaming of success, you cannot accuse him of concocting stories through imagination!"

The blind king is startled by this revelation!

Dhritarashtra : "What are you saying? You mean my son Duryodhana is still alive? Did this demon meet him too? What an evidence! What was that situation like? Tell me all quickly."

Sanjaya : "When the demons were exchanging their frustrations, travails and trepidations, mutually, Duryodhana was seen there passing through, towards the East. I was hiding myself behind a heap of dead bodies. The demons were excited to see him, and began dancing with joy. He must also have overheard their conversation, I felt. Now they said to him directly : 'You could not make your brother's blood available to us! We cannot still drink your blood, as you are still unfortunately alive! At least tell us when you will fall and get us the feast of your flesh and blood. Earn this much merit at least!' Duryodhana was burning with anger at these words. He lifted up his mace to throw at them. For a moment they disappeared. Your son looked around on all sides, and roared : 'You, devils! How eccentric are you to desire the blood of the living instead of the dead!! Can there be mad demons amongst you?' Now those demons reappeared, dancing around him, in strange rhythm, singing abnormal tunes and one of them said : 'Duryodhana,

now are you not the real mad one to think that you are still alive? Am I mad, who have interpreted for you the difference between life and death? You planned the murder of your cousins in that house of wax, and did that not show you to yourself as mad! After all we drink only the blood of those that are dead, as we do not kill them. But you? You kill first! Tell us who is eccentric. You have planned the death of your cousins several times, and failed. Now you have managed this enormous war, to kill millions of people for your sake, without drinking a single drop of blood of any of these who are dead! Tell me if this is not eccentric! I am after all dancing here with my fellow demons, without disturbing anyone, in our own rhythm and tunes - am I mad? You are the isolated demon, really! We are never so isolated'. Duryodhana felt ashamed and moved away lifting his mace on to his shoulder, in silent humiliation."

Dhritarashtra : "You did not talk with him, by chance?"

Sanjaya : "I did, sir. When the demons disappeared I went running to him and said : 'O, Prince! Where are you going now and for what? What will you do now, next?' I noticed that his face was not downcast, but had the same old lustre of militancy. He answered cryptically : 'Sanjaya, realise how accurate was Vidura's prediction! How great of him to know this in advance! What a man of character and righteousness!' "

Dhritarashtra : "Did he not reply to your questions?"

Sanjaya looks around to make sure there is no one around. But the blind man cannot observe this. He mistakes this for silence and so continues.

Dhritarashtra : “Why can’t you speak? Earlier you said he was not to be seen on the war-field. Now you say you saw him after I question you persistently! You are hiding from me many things. This is unfair. Please reveal all.”

Sanjaya gets up, checks the doors, and makes sure there is none overhearing, closes them, returns and speaks :

Sanjaya : “Lord, the Pandavas are searching for him everywhere. Surely, I am endowed with special powers to see everything on the war-field. Now if I blurt out details of your son’s whereabouts, carelessly, this may catch the ears of the Pandavas and cause him harm. I am neither a soldier, an informer, nor a spy. I am an ordinary servant of the royal palace. I must not be instrumental for any harm to the establishment, on my side, wittingly or unwittingly. My Guru Vyasa has warned me to take care in this matter that I should not take sides. Do you know? The Pandavas have announced huge amounts of money for anyone who can supply information about your son! If I leak out information carelessly, I shall get the final bad name that I sold him for money. That is why I am so careful.”

Dhritarashtra feels proud about this honest servant and his loyalty to him. He sobs and sighs in profuse tears. He contrasts the attitudes of Bhishma and Drona and regrets the situations as they came upon to take

away his sons. He even wonders if Sanjaya, or someone with this loyalty had been his first General in the war, whether results would have been different! As if guessing it, Sanjaya continues.

Sanjaya : “Do not mistake me sir; my loyalty is to Dharma; not so much to individuals. Whenever I speak to you in words that may look harsh, headlong, disrespectful or even bitter to hear or digest, it is with good intentions only, loyal to Dharma, that I speak, meaning well for the royal family. It is unfortunate that such words of mine have not saved you from this avoidable sorrow and gloom till now. Prime Minister Vidura’s advice too has fallen on deaf ears, sir, though with greater forcefulness, greater impact and weight due to position. I am neither a minister, nor an adviser nor a diplomat, with any such status. I am your humble charioteer, but with good intentions even in these excesses. But you could not be saved because of your faith in evil forces, evil ways and hopes to win over good. You will please forgive me for making bold to speak so. This is what I have been speaking all along. Shall I say how the end will be? Even your only son Duryodhana cannot hold long. You will get bad news soon; and get prepared. It is my misfortune that I have to relay to you such bad news as I see in those circumstances, soon. You are lucky to be blessed with blindness. I am the unlucky one, though blessed by Guru Vyasa, as I have to be witness to unpleasant facts and circumstances and to narrate them to you. How cruel of me that I still live to tell you all this,

without dying broken-hearted !” (Sanjaya breaks down. The King too.)

Dhritarashtra : “Say a hundred times that I am the sinner; that is too little of an abuse, as I deserve more. But tell me where my son is now, and what is his message for me.... the last message... the very last.. no doubt... Can you tell me? I am certain that the Pandavas will not allow him to live. Bhima will not spare him! Perhaps all is over by now... Quick, be bold to tell me all.”

Sanjaya : “I told you sir that I spotted your son at a distance of a *Krosha*² from the war-field, in a forest. His body was full of scars, bleeding and sore. On seeing me his eyes became wet. I felt dumb, and could not speak. He also felt nostalgic and wanted to say something, but could not, because of overwhelming feelings of frustration and desolation. I told him all that I saw. Only three of his party, Kritavarma, Kripa, Ashwatthama, remain alive - I said. All others are dead - I said. For some moments the Prince did not reply. He sighed for long then and said : ‘Sanjaya, tell father, that I am hiding in the nearby lake in the name of *Dvaipayana*. My body is burning, in the sorrow of loss of all brothers, all friends, all well-wishers, all followers. I feel the torment even inside the intestines. Sanjaya, who is there to whom I can tell all my feelings, of betrayals, all treacheries, all desolation haunting me now? I have no Karna, no Dusshasana, and no

² about three miles distance

Shakuni to listen to me. I promised to my father that I shall win. Now in utter defeat, how can I show him my face? What can I say to mother? I am instrumental in killing all my brothers, and causing unspeakable sorrow, unendurable pain to my mother, and without the power to quench it; how can I face my mother? First let me hide in this pond, cool myself and then consider my next step. If among my enemies, the Pandavas, at least one had died, my burning might have cooled a little perhaps. Even if I lost my all, at least if those brothers had died, my hatred would have cooled. Now the enemies remain, and the fire of malice in me fumes, and whom shall I find to put it down to bring peace to me. Tell father that I shall die? as a hero still - not in the manner of a coward bringing disgrace to my forefathers, my family. The war is not yet over. Whether hope of win remains or not, I shall complete the great war that I started in a way before I die - say this to him.' So saying he moved towards that holy lake with heavy steps."



Dhritarashtra felt more perturbed than ever before, after hearing these words. He asked for more details from Sanjaya, which he went on narrating

It was a secluded and peaceful corner of Kurukshetra. Sage Veda Vyasa meditated for some time on its banks and so it had become known in his name as 'Lake - Dvaipayana', this being another name of the Sage indicating that he was born in an islet of Yamuna, to Sage Parashara. (Later on Vyasa's disciple,

Vaishampayana also meditated there to attain perfection, and so it had acquired his name also later as Vaishampayana - Lake.)

It had steps on all sides to get down to the waters enshrined in its rectangular shape. It was crystal-clear water! On that evening it appeared peaceful and isolated, suitable for someone seeking lonely comfort, being neither too near nor too far away from the battlefield. It was like the mind of a *Yogin*, within and without the tangles of daily life at the same time. Was not the whole of Kurukshetra like this, once upon a time? Before this blasted bloody war started, it was also a holy place haunted by pilgrims, *yogins*, sages and saints, people of spiritual attainments! But now?

On the edges of the lake, tall trees had grown, to the North, providing cool shade in the warm afternoons. To the South there was a small hilly tract, bald and bare. On the East there was a slope from the lake, with neither grass on it nor trees or even shrubs, but sticky soil, something like clay, with an occasional mix of sand, until the ground was reached, where some vegetation had grown, strewn irregularly. To the West, on the contrary, there was a wide, even space, with an open field, with tall trees at distance protecting it, as some kind of natural fence. It was from this direction that pilgrims generally visited this place. In that lake no one washed his feet, or bathed, as it was sacred to Veda Vyasa; Pilgrims generally touched the water, took a little of it and sprinkled it on their heads, as a mark of respect, and got the blessings of that divine sage. That even open space was full of dry earth so that in

its four faces there were four different specialties, like the four faces of Brahma, reciting four different Vedas in varied intonations at the same time.

Duryodhana now approached this lake from the Western side, as that was nearer the battlefield. He stood there for a moment, thought of something for a moment, placed some backward steps, then moved forward, again reversed his direction, walked backwards towards the waters and got into the lake, using '*manthras*' (holy, sacerdotal utterances) to still the waters, held his breath and sank to its bottom, safe and alive. Sanjaya had seen this movement of Duryodhana, before returning to Dhritarashtra for reporting again.

Sanjaya saw on his way back to the King, three warriors of his side resting under a tree in its cool shade - Kripa, Kritavarma and Ashwatthama. They drew him into conversation :

Ashwatthama : "Where are you coming from, Sanjaya? What a surprise? You should have been with the King, making narrations to him now, but you are moving here! Have you been to the battle-field? What takes you there? Did the King send you on any special errand? Or have you your own mission or message to anyone still alive?"

Sanjaya : "Holy sir, what further narration is there now for me to make, after the war itself is over? The King too was tired of hearing news of daily deaths of his sons and bade him rest a while. I found the time to move about near this peaceful lake, to gain some solace as I too was sick of bloody reports

and narrations of futile death all these days. I have found that peace now.”

Ashwatthama doubted the truth of this explanation. He thought Sanjaya must have a more serious business, but was hiding it from him. He looked at Kripa’s face.

Kripa : “Sanjaya, we are also looking for him. It is not proper you hide from us what you know. The information you have may be useful to us, still to save the prince, if not the war. We are loyal to the King and to the establishment. We belong to the confidence of the king. Tell us all frankly on our oath of secrecy.”

Sanjaya hesitated and made some hasty steps forward, unwilling even to stop there.

Ashwatthama : “Trusted confidant of Dhritarashtra! You do not seem to believe us! It is not natural for you to be here at this hour. You must have come here on a special mission. Your countenance reveals fear of leakage of some important news that you do possess. It is more useful to us, the surviving warriors, than the King who can do nothing with it except weep. You are a dedicated disciple of Bhagavan Vyasa. You can see, undoubtedly, what we cannot see. Apart from that special power, you are personally here. That means something to us all. If it does not reach us in time, the life of the prince may be in danger. Tell us without fear.”

Sanjaya now divulges all! The three rush to the lake in hurry regretting loss of time.

On his return, Sanjaya observes the royal queens and other women of the harem on the battle-field, on the Kaurava camp, being taken to the palace in safety, in guarded vehicles. They were wailing loudly. Also old servants, beds, royal seats, furniture of variety were all on horsebacks and camel-backs. Followers of Duryodhana were rushing to the city in fear being captured. They knew the end.



CHAPTER 43

ON THE BANKS OF LAKE DWAIPAYANA

Kripa, Ashwatthama and Kritavarma reached the lake on quick horses.... Nothing was unusual apparently, as the waters were clear, undisturbed, with small ripples rising occasionally into circles and disappearing in the cool breeze. The lake never revealed its contents, as usual, true to its nature, as ever before! The Sun was getting reflected on it as 'many', like the world seen as 'many', as ununified, by the ignorant, and as One unified by the wise.

Ashwatthama alighted from his horse and tied it to a tree on the Northern side. The other two riders too did the same. They looked around to make sure that no one noticed them or what they were doing there. Then all three came near the lake. Water had receded by ten or twelve steps in that season, so they alighted those steps to approach the sheet of water. Then Ashwatthama put his mouth near it and spoke:

Ashwatthama : "Duryodhana, we are still alive and it is sad you are reduced to this plight! Are you hearing? We three are alive - myself, Kripa and Kritavarma! Can you hide like a coward here? All these days you lived head-high with pride, over

your adversaries, as all the world knew; but now they will laugh at you. Come out, We shall fight bravely and end the war one way or another.”

No reply from within, no reaction for a long time. The heroes exchanged glances frequently so as to doubt whether Duryodhana was there, and what to do now. Sanjaya's information was not to be doubted! But here was no reply! What could be the truth? They wished to believe that Duryodhana was alive, and should face the situation bravely and honourably. They did not also know in what manner the reply would come, what signs, what symbols; Duryodhana would certainly have heard their appeal through water, though slowly, they expected. They waited and again appealed... Now bubbles!.... and then the reply in broken sentences :

“Who.... are... you? Who... told... you... I... am... here?”

The trio felt happy with this response. Ashwatthama again spoke :

Ashwatthama : “I am your preceptor's son, your close friend, Ashwatthama. Kripa and Kritavarma are here too. Perhaps you do not know that we are alive. The war cannot be over as long as we are alive. Come up, and join us.”

Duryodhana : “Friend, it is my good fortune that you are alive and speak such words of affection and support. Tell Kripa and Kritavarma also the same. I am grateful to you for saying that the war is not over! ... But ... but.... today... I need rest... the sorrow of my heart is burning me... the death of all my brothers... all my trusted friends, elders...

the loss of my honour.... is what I cannot bear... there is a volcano in my mind which no one can quench ! Go and rest, you too, somewhere....sorrow is piercing into my intestines just now,I cannot come out... you and I will join tomorrow and finish this war and be victorious. The Pandavas too must have lost all their army by now, which means that war is equal until this minute. Those five will not equal us, three. But now.... let me alone... please ... and go.. come tomorrow.”

Ashwatthama : “Not so, friend... Listen... The Pandavas are tired too, and this is now our best opportunity for revenge; their evil tricks must be turned on them, and no time is better than now. Leave that to us. If I cannot bring victory to you, if I cannot kill the remaining among the Panchalas, let me not attain heavens! Let me not attain worlds due to those that have conducted holy sacrifices.”

Duryodhana : “My mind is wounded also like my body; bruised and battered all over. It needs comfort and rest; no ointments, no oils, no medicines, no treatment can restore me to myself, like rest. Peace of mind, and calmness from inner tormentation are what I need most.... So, come tomorrow at sunrise.”

The lake became calm; the sheet of water remained bubble-less; all sound ceased.

The heroes came out from there, on to the banks, slowly, with heavy hearts.

Their horses were not there!



The army was kept alert in the Pandava camp, with Bhima's announcement of huge and handsome amounts of money and other gifts for anyone who could bring information about Duryodhana; news had spread everywhere.

Now three hunters arrived at Bhima's camp from the same quarters as Dvaipayana lake!

They were carrying meat from the forests, in the evening, when they saw idle horses tied to trees, without riders, near the Lake sacred to Dvaipayana; they were surprised; laid down the loads to see what was amiss! They went up to the lake and saw three warriors speaking to someone inside, in a loud enough voice, for them to hear!! They understood what it all meant, in a flash!! They came up surreptitiously, rode the horses and came now to Bhima.

The hunters could distinctly identify the three heroes, and from what they heard, it was clear that Duryodhana was hiding within the waters of the Lake! What a place to hide in! They thought!!

The heroes heard neither sounds of horses' hoofs, nor footstep sounds of those that had come up to them to hear what they were saying, but when they came up to discover that their horses had disappeared, they missed a few beats of their hearts! Their intentions had been thus ruined by their own carelessness.

Here in the camp, Yudhishtira was engaged in a war-council meeting. Sri Krishna is thinking deeply with closed eyes. Arjuna is anxious with tension-torn face, that final victory is so near and yet so distant, with Duryodhana missing. The war is now neither on

nor over! No one had anticipated that Duryodhana would so escape as to dodge them clear and unequivocal victory! What to do now was a difficult thing to decide. What is Duryodhana's meaning? It was no heroic deed... this escape.

Bhima had not yet arrived to join the meeting. Nakula and Sahadeva stood at the camp-door expecting him to turn up any moment. Satyaki was taking stock of the remains in the army camp - valuables, jewels, cash, furniture, numbers of missing soldiers, and those alive. Whatever had been counted, checked and cross-checked was being shifted to the capital - Dhrishtadyumna has had a bath, to feel fresh; he is now well dressed, has a weapon in his hand, comes to the meeting and is surprised to see all there sitting, doing nothing, silent! He is worried that time is passing without a decisive result in their favour.

All hear Bhima's conch-blowing loudly, as if to announce some hot news just received. Sri Krishna opens his eyes and beams a bewitching smile on all the assembled, to relieve them of their tensions, as it were. That smile has several mysteries concealed in it - the mystery of Creation, of Sustenance and of Dissolution! Just one smile, which could function severally, motivating the world in several directions, by the Will of the mind behind it. It was by no means a human smile indicative of mere innocence, perplexity, contentedness or even indifference. These could be limitations after all, of the human predicament. But here was a smile of omniscience, omnipotence and supreme satisfaction of a mind, which certified that things were moving in their proper direction as intended. Yudhishtira

and Arjuna are carried away by that smile and forget everything. It envelops them completely as the embrace of a tired child by an overwhelming affectionate mother. Though it was evening time, they all feel as if it is morning in its freshness.

Nakula and Sahadeva notice Bhima approaching and report it to those waiting for him in the camp. Yudhishtira comes out to receive Bhima.



This was what had happened a few minutes before Bhima came here. He was waiting for his spies at his camp for some possible information on Duryodhana, in sheer desperation. His own earlier camp on the war-field had been shifted on the precious day to a place on the way to Hastinavati, expecting war to end soon. He knew Shalya would not hold for long and after him there was no General to lead or army to follow. Duryodhana might escape like a thief, a fox in a stealthy move, he had had a hunch. It was in keeping with his nature and character - denying the satisfaction of a formal end to the war, and throwing violence as a challenge even in defeat, or practicing sorcery to kill the Pandavas or some such thing. It required straightness of character to accept even defeat with dignity! Duryodhana had none such. Hence Bhima had proclaimed prizes for anyone getting information of him. Here was Yudhishtira holding a council and expecting Bhima.

There was one danger however. That was, that Yudhishtira could hastily announce the cessation of war, keeping Duryodhana's capture or death pending as a separate issue! As if it was not connected with this

war! The cause being kept away for a different consideration while the effect was being accepted as 'over'! What could it mean? It could mean anything among a range of wild possibilities - Duryodhana could be restored on the throne, 'generously', while the Pandavas would go on exile again, to please him and his father! Duryodhana could be 'written off' as untraceable, giving scope for his building another army, prepare for further plots, and equip himself for more evils, wars, humiliations; Dhritarashtra could continue as Emperor, and the Pandavas as subservient servants, after all these sacrifices ; Duryodhana could be granted a pardon and allowed to rule parallelly as before! All these were dangerous possibilities that could grip a fickle minded Yudhishtira!

Arjuna would oppose it tooth and nail, of course... Or would he? given his respect for and high esteem of his eldest brother? Bhima too would acquiesce, after all, in deference to the brother's wish, as all had mutely accepted Draupadi's being attempted to be disrobed, earlier, as a matter of '*Dharma*' for the defeated!! All this would mean that the problem was insoluble, suffering was endless, humiliation 'honourable' and evil accepted as overpowering and acknowledged as empowered to rule over Good - a negation of God's will, a negation of the auspicious direction of evolution, the retrogression of the spirit of Time, and its devaluation and all this calamity in the name of '*Dharma*' in the gloomy, misty, muddled eyes of a purblind Yudhishtira who would not see reason, circumstances, consequences or contexts for forgiveness or heroism.

What was there to discuss, in the absence of capturing Duryodhana? Bhima felt all this a futile exercise, now. Sri Krishna would not allow things to drift endlessly, he hoped. Bhima was extremely anxious to join this hasty council to stall precipitous decisions... On the other side he needed information about Duryodhana, urgently.

Miscellaneous information was pouring in :

- "Sir, women folk of the palace are on the move to the palace with honour and dignity in safety."

- "Remains of the enemy's army - horses, chariots, elephants, extra supplies of food material, weapons, medicines, have been estimated and are being shifted to the capital."

- "Some soldiers on the other side have surrendered and we have taken them prisoners for cross-questioning."

- "Some heroes wait for your interview at the door."

- "Gold, jewels, gems of the enemy have been weighed, counted and accredited to our treasury."

and so on.

Bhima came out to meet those 'heroes' waiting to be interviewed. They were trembling in fear, with discoloured faces. They fell at his feet, and stood with folded hands :

Bhima : "You will be allowed to live, and your loyalty will be put to test. If you conduct yourself well, you may regain service at the court. But meanwhile you will have to move about saying you are my servants. If there is violation of this word, you will die wherever you may be. Go."

Bhima sent them with due regards in mercy. They also dispersed.

“Where have our spies disappeared?” Bhima frowned. They had been ordered to be quick, careful and post-haste! Yet they were not to be seen even as late as now! Bhima even suspected foul play or betrayal; trapped by enemies; but where were the ‘enemies’? So no question of enemy plot. The other spies from all other quarters had no definite news. It was all disappointing... Bhima stuck to hope and waited for spies from one quarters.. near about Lake Dwaipayana.

Then came these hunters. They were no regular spies. But they had done it.

The guards at the entrance would not admit them at first. Their appearances, dresses and manners were uncouth so as to make them suspect. The guards opened their swords in readiness for action. Then a conversation followed between the leader among the hunters and the guards :

Leader : “Tell our sir, we have brought live flesh, flesh that breathes and lives and talks. We are in the service of the court; we bring fresh meat from the forests everyday. But today there is a special. It is not dead meat, but flesh that lives and is warm. Our lord loves it very much and perhaps expects us now, any moment.”

Guard : “What is this nonsense that you blurt about? How can you have brought live, breathing flesh? Why should it be dear to our lord? Who is that lord?”

Leader : "Please go and report this inside the camp and see whether this makes sense or no; and find out for yourself who that lord is. Do not waste time."

The head-guard, meanwhile, observed the three horses that the hunters rode, and his eyes brightened! The symbols of the highest honoured heroes of the Kaurava camp were to be seen on them - on the saddles, covers and decorations of those horses. For a moment a doubt passed as to whether these could be in the employ of the enemy, come to practice any foul play. The guard looked at others to decide as to what to do. Meanwhile Bhima overheard it all, came out and said to the chief among hunters : "Come in; get me that load of live meat; let me see how it smells or talks or how much warm it is."

The guards saluted and moved aside in reverence.

The hunters sat at the feet of Bhima and their chief narrated in one breath all that they had observed and heard to the minutest detail! He concluded :

"No doubt; your prey is hiding under the waters of the lake; hurry up before it escapes, as the owners of the horses we have brought here may become alert, and arrange an escape route."

Bhima : "How did you find these horses?"

Leader : "They were tied to a tree to the North of the lake-bank."

Bhima : "Who were they that-did so?"

Leader : "Ashwatthama, Kripa and Kritavarma lords."

Bhima : “Did you really see them or is this your guess work?”

Leader : “Yes sir, we saw them on the steps nearest to the water surface. They mentioned their own names one by one.”

Bhima : “Good. What were they saying?”

Leader : “They were persuading the prey to come out, join them and continue the unfinished war.”

Bhima : “ ‘Unfinished war!’ - well; What was the reply from within? Did you hear? Did they hear it? Make sure and answer me, well.”

Leader : “The prey replied it wanted rest till morrow. The rest was not audible. But from the flow of the direction of the conversation on this side, we could make out that the prey would not stir out till morning.”

Bhima got up, frowned and decided what to do in a flash. He ordered costly presents to the heralds and escort to them till they reached their places in royal guard. The horses they had brought were taken to the stables of Yudhishtira for examination, treatment and nourishment. He took another horse and rode quickly to the conference-tent and blew his conch in enthusiasm to indicate that ‘operation was successful.’ Bhima’s horse ran at such speed on the war-field that foxes, dogs and crows pecking into corpses ran away in wild terror. Yudhishtira received him with a warm embrace.



Bhima, now inside the camp, looked at Sri Krishna and Arjuna meaningfully with a peculiar twinkle in his sight, steadfastly for a minute and then broke into a loud, reverberating laughter for a long time, without containing the joy of having achieved his lifetime's purpose! It was dangerous if allowed its own time, as Bhima would have burst out of it. So Sri Krishna got up, embraced him, and comforted him trying to cool him down.

No, Bhima would not be cooled soon! His moustache-edges danced, as eyes emitted fire sparks though he was laughing; it was a supernatural, apocalyptic kind of laughter, only God Rudra would laugh at the end of life's cycle. The muscles on the chest also expanded and contracted as this volcano of a laughter effused uninterrupted for long. Yudhishtira understood its meaning, appreciated the fulfilling moments of Bhima's pent up feelings of all these thirteen and more years. Arjuna and the twins also joined him.

Sri Krishna tightened his embrace, this time, patted him on the back and said : "Do not explode now.. just a little more remains. Finish this and explode. Endure till then; you need your energies for that end in waiting."

Bhima stopped for a moment; just one moment; then he roared at the skies.

"Aye! You demons, goblins, imps of all sorts habiting jungles, skies, and wilderness; all subnormal devilish living things, ghosts nowhere to live or sustain upon! Come, come, come with me ... Whereto? To Lake Dwaipayana. There you will have a feast.... an unusual feast I say.. on 'living flesh', 'flesh that breathes and

talks', 'flesh that is warm' 'flesh that is fresh' - you would not have tasted anywhere in all the three worlds so far. This Bhima is extending to you, and to all nocturnal beings, a unique feast of royal flesh and blood of his own cousin! No one in the past or future will ever vouch you such, let me tell you. Do not miss it and regret later. Assemble ye all there before we come upon the scene. 'Flesh that breathes!' That's what our hunters told me! What a relishable phrase! Who taught them this language!! What fine idiom!!! 'Living flesh' 'Warm flesh.' "

Now the other Pandavas also understand Bhima's meaning and rejoiced !

Sri Krishna makes signs with eyes to them to get ready for further action. The brothers tie up their chest-shields; their chariots are brought in full readiness with fresh horses, and weapons loaded in them. The drum beaters, bugle blowers, and other sundry service - men are in waiting now. But Bhima would not cool down. He orders loudly : "Aye, begin beating your drums as loudly as possible for this final hunt! ... it is a stealthy fox!. no, no it is a blind dog!.. it is a cowardly jackal! it is a timid wolf, imagining itself to be a lion all these years, and fooling all animals in this jungle, we have been roaming about! All other foxes and wolves are dead... but this one wants to live... under waters! ... a jackal in deep waters! .. It knows not that this Bhima, son of Kunti, will hunt it to death in all the elements, in all the nether world and even in the mouth of Death! It is trapped! I have to direct it to its grave away from the waters into the earth. I shall pay obsequies to my

ancestors in the blood of this timid, stray, wolf. I shall prove the worth of a hero of my stature by fulfilling my last vow that yet remains so. The world is witness to all other vows of mine being fulfilled. Ye gods! Assemble there to be my unfailing witnesses! I shall perform a strange death-ceremony that no lore has prescribed, or none has heard of, or seen till today."

Bhima goes on and on, but Nakula and Sahadeva hustle him into his chariot, and accompany him, by force, while uttering mild words of comfort. All others get into their vehicles.

Sri Krishna, as usual, drives Arjuna's chariot and is in a reverie.. He remembers terrible scenes unavenged so far, finally, like the attempt to disrobe Draupadi, and the countless instances of humiliations in exile..

They reach Lake Dvaipayana. Sri Krishna tells Bhima : "Brother, all that you have been saying is true. This is the reckoning day. Let us equal the accounts first and then you will explode, burst and laugh your laughter as much as you want. Your 'life's mission' is to end up this 'living flesh.'"

Sri Krishna looks at Yudhishtira and says : "Yudhishtira, do not frown. This is Bhima's day. None of us will spoil this game by unwanted interferences. Let us give him a free, full hand and watch and celebrate."

Sri Krishna's face hardened with a decisive finality as he uttered these words of warning, very meaningfully. Yudhishtira understands a whole commentary in it on his movements and actions till now, and agrees with Sri Krishna's suggestion, by suitable gesture on his face.

The lake was still and revealed no signs of the cunning demon within! The drums begin to beat in a strange elaborate rhythm, to the deafening tunes of war instruments. The brothers approach the lake from the East and see prints of feet, human feet, suggesting that someone had just gone out of the lake. There were also foot prints of someone getting inside. The outward and inward impressions did not match in number, suggesting that someone was still inside. It left, no doubt, traces of foolery intended for them, to believe that 'all' had gone out! But 'one' was certainly in!!

For a while the drums stopped, allowing time for the brothers to observe the spot minutely, in absolute silence. Cuckoos now resumed singing; some swans were moving on the still waters. Chakravaka birds moved across the lake in air in opposite directions, chasing each other, and indulging in amorous movements.

It looked like the mythical royal court of Lakshmi Devi, the consort of Lord Narayana! The Cuckoos appeared like reciters of Vedas, and the honey bees like humming musicians. The rest of swans, water birds, all fitted into the rest of details of that Celebrated Court. Otherwise it was an aesthetically captivating scene!

Even Yudhishtira, the usually gentle and generous prince was overcome with emotion, so as to pronounce this comment : Krishna, should this devil choose such a holy, handsome and auspicious spot, to die in our hands? Would not some corner of the expansive, barbaric war-field have sufficed? How cruel he is even to nature, and even in his last moment?"

Sri Krishna : “This is no time for lyrical appreciation of idyllic spots in nature, Yudhishtira! This lake yields profound peace to anyone who comes here seeking it, irrespective of his background. But crows and dogs that steal some entrance into temples or sacrificial places need not appreciate the sanctity of their surroundings! Is it not so? So, there is a mean dog hiding here, not to purify itself, nor to do penance; but to save its skin from those that chase it! When nature gets defiled on such a large scale by villains, it certainly indicates the nearness of the end of a time cycle. It is like Duryodhana’s entering Vyasa’s heart, to disturb it! See the devastations on the Kurukshetra itself. Your great ancestor of that name conducted here hundreds or thousands of holy sacrifices and did enormous penance to bring it unparalleled sanctity among all pilgrim spots. Indra came here once and said to Emperor Kuru : ‘Great emperor! you need not conduct any more sacrifices here. I shall grant a special boon to those that conduct austerities here, charities here, and come to spend their last moments of life here, desirous of higher worlds - all those will attain their wishes; merits earned here shall yield thousand-fold fruits than those earned at other holy centres. Let there be no fear of hell for those that choose to live permanently here; let them attain heavens’.”

“Yudhishtira! This is now a matter of the past! See what is happening here - repetition of a war between gods and demons! It was here that bows and arrows appeared in the hands of Indra, for the victory of the

power of lights in the first ever such war in the infinite past! If a spot in space and time remembers its past history and wishes for a repeat of the same bloody incident, what can you and I do? How can we ensure its sanctity? Evil men can hide wherever they are safe even in temples, holy groves, hermitages, holy caves - like this villain in the waters of this lake holy, in the name of Dwaipayana. Our duty is to rid this place of this villain, and do him justice in law."

Now people have gathered around the lake in big numbers from nearby places to witness the last scene of the great war. Drums and kettles are sounding rhythmically so as to reach the skies in their appeal, inviting gods above to come and witness this unique episode. The hillock on the South is occupied by curious men, soldiers, commoners, villagers, wayfarers and all sorts of people. Even drummers, alive on the Kaurava side are there on special pay and invitation. The 'sides' don't matter now! Where is the other side, at all? What matters is life, comfort and professional honour for these innocents who had never consciously taken sides in the war. The other instrumentalists are also there on similar considerations. Big drums are stationed on top positions of trees and hill boulders, in secure conditions, so as that their sounds might have serious effects on the waters of the lake and the villain within it. All available war musical instruments are playing in unique consonance producing an effect of frenzy even on onlookers. Many are dancing now, unable to contain themselves; the occasion taught them the tune and the rhythm!

It was now Bhima's turn to dance to his heart's content, in the most weird manner. An eerie atmosphere

surrounded the lake now! Even leaves and twigs of trees were vibrating in the enveloping tune and dance.

Bhima is trying to induce Arjuna to join him now! "Brother, this is very unlike the dance you learnt from Chitrasena in the world of Indra, or taught to Virata's daughter in the city of Matsyas! This is not a tender one. This is what only god Rudra can teach at such moments of extraordinary heroism. We are witness to a heroic event marking the end of a saga, an age, and an epoch. I am only a symbol. It is God in this cosmic form that is enacting this scene. Come, Sri Krishna, even you would not have so danced on the hoods of Kaliya for want of space to change and adjust your feet. It was too small for you there. But see here, what a lot of space is there! Come and try."

Bhima threw jewels, gems and gold at the drum beaters, to enthuse them. They increased their tempo and played with redoubled vigour! It went on and on and on.

The villain inside was not merely disturbed! He heard all this clamour, and his bodily bruises pained him even more than when outside.. blood in him began to dance and flow to the abnormal tune and rhythm it heard and responded more readily than his mind would allow! This was a kind of 'surrender' too, which infuriated him all the more to realise that his own blood was too hot to be under his own control! His heart beatings too got adjusted to that eerie rhythm! Duryodhana felt enraged, humiliated and betrayed by his own body behaviour!

He could not concentrate on the 'manthra' that held him secure within those waters, and the fear of being thrown out, revealed to the enemies against his wishes, added too to that rhythm!

His head was about to burst, in uncontrollable pain that had not subsided all that while. But these vulnerable palpitations added to it and worsened it. He held his head in both hands, leaving breath-control to take care of itself. He moved from corner to corner, from depth and depth, from one spot to another to feel a comparatively more undisturbed spot, free from sound of drum beats!

But the drummers were close to the sheets of water, having shifted the drums from far off places to nearby spots on the instruction of Bhima.

Duryodhana cursed Ashwatthama! He cursed the Sun in the skies whose rays of light he could see from inside! It was a conspiracy of the universe against him - he thought!



CHAPTER 44

DURYODHANA COMES OUT !

Sri Krishna lifted up his hand signaling the instruments to stop sounding. All sound stops at once. All is standstill now. Silence issuing out of this tearing sound is felt as more terrible than the earlier ear-filling, mind-tearing, and nerve-cracking sound.

Sri Krishna, comes to the sheet of water, accompanied by the five brothers. Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi, sons of Draupadi, Yudhamanyu and others sit in suitable positions to near their mouths and ears near enough the surface, and tempt or persuade the 'prey' within to come out on its own in taunting words, piercing phrases, and hot narrations of past episodes in brief.

More people from the town have arrived and surrounded the place to see how the last flame of The Kaurava family gets extinguished! It was not a pleasant scene by any standards. But peace-loving people wanted to see '*Karma*' recoil unfailingly on the evil-doer, to assure themselves that Good does assert itself! They were desperate all these years over the continuous triumph of evil over the good, about to vanish away from the earth when the Pandavas were put to so much harassment with nobody to lift a finger against it - not

Bhishma the embodiment of all traditional wisdom, not Drona who embodied all militancy combined with learning and nobody to organise Goodness on a matching scale! It was a scene that would send a divine assurance and message to all impartially, in the presence of *Bhagavan* Sri Krishna, especially - an epochal message! This scene of peace and anxiety to see evil punished, and the moment of good triumphing over it, and a totally different set of people to witness it was a total contrast to the routine battle scenes of these preceding eighteen days. So many people and not a sound, unheard of in any battle-field so far! Unbelievable! Even leaves on trees stopped movements, held their breath as it were to listen to the conversation that ensued below.

Yudhishtira : “Krishna, see this illusive practice by a deceitful fellow, who never did one good thing to us so far! How many deceitful practices does this fellow know, only God can tell! Only *Yogins* or sorcerers know this hiding in waters for opposite ends. If the *Yogin* finds peace here, the demon seeks shelter from those whom he has harmed! Is this a straight practice? Shakuni is dead, no doubt, but his legacy is on this fiend. He expects that we cannot trace him if he is here; so he can elude and deny us the satisfaction of rightful victory in a straight war! Does he think he can evade death? I shall not forgive him this time, this arch-deceiver! Even if god Indra comes to his help, I shall not extend mercy to him.”

Sri Krishna : “Excellent, Yudhishtira! That is my view; and that is the conviction of your brothers

too. Your wife Draupadi also concurs on this. A deceitful fellow must be treated in his own ways to end him; that is Dharma as lores prescribe.¹ You will try to dry up the waters of this lake by resorting to magic or sorcery or send into it someone who can also practice the same trick of holding breath inside water. We have to drag him out at all costs. This is what Shukra teaches as policy. Did I not use this same on the occasion of earlier Deva-Asura wars, to defeat the deceitful demons? Did I not use it to suppress Bali into the nether - worlds? The noose that a demon uses, must be used by us to hang him! Hiranyaksha was eliminated by me under the same policy! The world is my outer body, and it belongs to me. It is my duty to protect it, as it means only self-protection. How can I tolerate anyone who usurps lordship over it against primordial laws? I have never spared evil doers and aggressors in the past; nor will I spare them now or hereafter. Here is one such who requires urgent elimination. I am using you all as my instruments. A King must always be active and vigilant over his kingdom to root out evil doers and protect the good subjects. He can use all means to carry this out, depending on the strengths and strategy of the evil-doers! Vritra, Ravana, Taraka, Vatapi and others were all eliminated under this policy of what is known as 'Kriya yoga'. I was afraid of your tendency to oversympathise with this fellow as your

¹ *Mayavina imam mayam mayaya jahi Bharatha |
Mayavi mayaya vadhyah satyametat Yudhishtira ||*

‘cousin.’ Now you have pleased me by assuring me clearly that you will not show mercy for him. Get him out now.”

Yudhishtira sighed a long sigh; came down to the lowest step of the lake, nearest enough to the water surface, and kneeled with one knee down, and sat on the step with the other thigh and said :

Yudhishtira : “Duryodhana, after being instrumental for the death of all your brothers, friends, dependents, army, elephant-brigade, cavalry and even elderly figures like Bhishma, Drona, Shalya, Bhurishravas and hosts of neutral heroes, you are hiding here like a stealthy fox! Are you not ashamed? Do you still want to live? Do you think we shall forgive you or spare you? Do you think you can still win? Or still breathe in freedom? Are not your delusions ended? You have wasted eighteen days and not learnt your lessons still! Do you still deserve to live? Who will rejoice? Should those tormented by you still show mercy to you? What for? Be reasonable at least in the moment of death! Come out, fight like a hero and die, and let the world see an end to your evils once and for all. I give you two choices now : either voluntarily come out and meet death; or we shall have you dragged out like a crocodile hiding here. We have no time to lose. The people of the city are tired of this war. We must comfort them with quick good news. The war must end today and today only. Let the world start a new *CHAPTER* from tomorrow.”

No reply for some time from within ! Again :

Yudhishtira : “You fellow of foul thinking! Where is your arrogance now? Where has your pride disappeared? What happened to your self-confidence in perpetrating endless humiliations upon us? Come, assert yourself, let me see, now. Are you afraid of Bhima now, all of a sudden? Have you resorted to sorcery after all that you learnt from Drona has left you?”

Again grand silence! The waters were still, like creatures used to live in it. Had the Pandavas had no certain information about Duryodhana’s hiding there, they could not suspect of anything in it; it was so natural and routine that there was not a trace of a human soul in it. Now Nakula speaks :

Nakula : “You claimed to be an extraordinary hero with a special mark on the war-field! Now you are locked up in sediments under the lake! Is this your mark? What happened to your self esteem? Did it also sink down along with you into this clay? Into mires? You have let down family - honour to the nether - world! Get up, come on.”

Sahadeva : “Fellow, you behaved as if you were beyond death. Now Death has come seeking you. Come and see.”

Arjuna : “It is your pride you have sunk in these waters now; you are now no more than fish, crabs, frogs and other reptiles finding shelter here! Do they not insult you for joining their company? Are you a man? Earlier, when you forced us to leave for the forests, you called us eunuchs; now tell me, after we have proved our mettle in war for our manliness,

who is the real eunuch? We have upheld the honour of our ancestors, while you have been hiding here like a thief! You have brought dishonour on all before you in your family! You fire burning within the family!! We will put you down wherever you are in a short while. At least die in honour. Come out!"

Yudhishtira : "I am losing my patience! Tell me what is your choice? Shall we capture you like a reptile? Or will you come out? I cannot prevent Bhima from his next course!"

Bhima : "Brother, Yudhishtira! The ghost does not speak. Your words or those of our other brothers cannot exorcise it! Only my words seem to have magical effects - so here I go in my own style, tackling this demon hidden here! Look, the oaths of this Bhima are getting fulfilled one by one! Did you not see how I drank your brother's blood, true to my word? All your brothers were killed by me alone, true to my oath; do you not stand witness to it? What remains is your bloody self. I am thirsty anyhow in all eighteen days , as never before in my life and I have to drink all these waters, to pick you up as a puppet of mischief and then burst you, throw up into the air, squeeze and squash you to satisfy the itch of my fists. You were nurtured with fat in an earthen bowl after all, by Veda Vyasa! I shall fit you back to where you grew from, in a short while from now. For my mother developed me, nurtured me, brought me up in the most natural way, unlike you and so I never had to shelter myself

in earthen pots or waters of a still lake, at birth or death, like you! Your brother's blood has made me all the more strong in these three days, just in three days. Should you not test or taste that new strength that God has endowed me with to perform this last feat about you? I shall drink your blood while you are alive, now! I swear on my parents' honour, on Sri Krishna and on my brothers. I cannot wait infinitely, as my patience is ending. Come on your own, by my orders, which you cannot now escape. You ought to have died on the battle-field; do you want this water to be your grave? The earth has not seen cowards like you! No physical element will act as your grave now, as all are ashamed of you. You will have to die a ghastly death, hit by my mace! There is no alternative for you. Come out, you devil."

Yudhishtira : (again, persuasively now) "Speak, Duryodhana. Are you afraid of death?"

Now bubbles issue out of the lake, and a voice behind it, feebly, is heard. Bhima roars with laughter.

Duryodhana : "Emperor Yudhishtira!....."

Yudhishtira : "Did you really call me emperor, brother ? How sweet of you to speak so affectionately! If you had done this years ago and accepted me as such, you would not have lost your brothers, your all, our common elders, or be in this pitiable plight, today. Better late than never, they say! Come out, speak your heart."

Duryodhana : “You have not caught my meaning! You are still in the habit of jumping to conclusions before others speak fully! I said you are emperor of an unpeopled empire! Does that mean I accept you? You said ‘fear.’ Have not all living things been born with them, fear of the unknown? Apart from it what do I have to fear for now? I am resting here, not hiding out of fear as all of you are shouting at me! You are all really afraid of me! Otherwise why should you all surround me, a lone soldier, on this side? See? I am sorry for the loss of all my friends and relations, and I am cooling my body of that sorrow, a fraction of which at least you should have had, for having caused the death of so many on both sides! See? I am full of compassion! You are the real butcher! I shall end you all even now, alone, if you can give me an honourable opportunity; can you promise?”

Yudhishthira : “Promise? Do you expect it? Deserve it now?”

Duryodhana : “What an honourable warrior expects of another, is all that I am asking for. This is not a favour, or petition for mercy! You caused the end of Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Saindhava and others by unfair means, and you should really repent if you have any remorse left in you. I do not want a repeat of your foul tricks this time, at the instance of that foul cowherd behind you in all this unwanted war.”

Bhima is enraged by this bargain, by this foul self-defence, this arrogance even at this hour! He roars :

Bhima : “You, son of a bitch! You talk of ‘fairness’ and ‘foulness’ to suit you! What honourable behaviour have you exhibited in all your life? At the dice? When you tried to dishonour our wife? When you attempted to burn us alive at Varanavata? When you insulted us in the forests repeatedly? Honour? You son of a devil? What honour did you and your foul friends show to Abhimanyu? Do you deserve it now? Why should we not kill you like a mad dog? Like a wild boar in fire? What I mete out to you now is *justice* - mind you, *justice*. It will do us honour, bring us satisfaction, and you what is due to you all these days, and what you have been avoiding! Accept it with what little grace you may have.”

Yudhishtira : “Do not mind brother Bhima’s taunts. I offer you an honourable fight - an one-to-one fight. If you win, even now you shall rule. If you die you will reach heavens honourably.”

Duryodhana : “I do not need to rule any more, obtaining a fresh lease from you, my sworn enemies. What for should I desire it? The earth is now like a widow, having lost its best warriors! I shall not be a widow’s husband! You really deserve to be one, with all your greed. The world knows what all crooked plots you resorted to, to snatch the land that rightfully belonged to me, as paternal inheritance. You are the sinners! I shall go to the forests and do penance like a hermit.”

Yudhishtira : “What did you say? You want to live

like a sage, a hermit, a saint now?² Did you say mother Earth is a widow? You foul tongued villain! This shows your low birth and vulgarity! You still want to live and expect us to give you permission for that? What vain hope? You once said that you would not get me so much as a pointed tip's space of a pin, on this earth! Now you are 'generous' to leave all this to me, and talk of renunciation, recluseship, and saintliness - ideas for which you had nothing but contempt all your life! You want us to believe you? You know that all this earth was mine, when I and my brothers conquered all the corners and quarters and when sages crowned me as Emperor, *Samrat*. Having stolen it in a foul gamble, you have lost it again in war. Now you want to pretend that you are offering it as gift to me! Remember history? Your father was never crowned because of his blind-bornness; it was my father who was really crowned, with no objections possible from your father. Bhishma crowned me as Prince-in-Waiting; you could not bear justice and truth, being jealous of facts, God-made, God-managed, and God-administered! So you tried foul methods to snatch away all that. Now that God has punished you, you are talking of 'recluse-ship' and 'charity to me'! How many still do you want to ruin in your new guise as 'sage' or 'saint'? You have nothing to give, and I have nothing to receive.

² *Na hi utsahamyaham bhoktum vidhavamiva yoshitam |*
Aham vanam gamishyami hi ajinaih prativasitah |
Vanameva gamishyami vasano mrigacharmana ||

(Shalya 31-45 & 50, 52)

Expect mercy at my hands? We all want you dead. That we shall have, even if you do not want to give us that! Prepare for that, so that the world at large shall know for certain who is the winner and who else the loser!"³

Duryodhana sweats in water, being unable to refute any of these facts or accept them with grace. The words of Yudhishtira had pierced him in his most private, sensitive parts of body. He sighed deeply and the bubbles proved it. He changed his places in the water, sending strong irregular ripples all around. Now he realised there was no other go than come out, fight and die. So he tried another trick :

Duryodhana : "Yudhishtira! Be fair to me... I am alone, whereas you are five fulsome; you are being ministered and monitored by Sri Krishna; I have no ministers, advisers, assistants, equipment or weapons. Besides, I am tired and you are all fresh. I am wounded all over the body with no rest or respite. You are all in health and rest. I am not pleading for mercy, but for fairness and equal opportunity. Otherwise, even if I die the world will blame you long after you are no more!"⁴

Yudhishtira : "How cunning of you to speak selfishly in the guise of justice and fairness! You did not remember this at least when Abhimanyu was killed

³ *Avayorjivato rajan mayi cha tvayi cha dhruvam |
Samshayas sarvabhutanam vijaye nau bhavishyati ||* (31-68)

⁴ *Dharmamula satam kirthih manushyanam naradhipa |
Dharmam chaiveha kirthim cha palayan prabravimyaham |*
(32-16)

unfairly! It is good that, at last, you are prepared to fight and die, as there is no other way before you. I shall still be generous to you and shall make this gentleman's offer : You shall choose one of us to fight with, with a weapon of your choice. The others shall all be mute spectators, as you wish. I am not bound to fulfill your wish or condition now. Yet on my own I am offering you this concession. How do you like it? Take this further boon also from me : if you succeed in killing even one of us, your choice, I shall concede full victory to you over all of us; and you will get back the right to live and rule, as the others amongst us will retire to the forests. Are you satisfied? What more can I give you?"

Duryodhana : "No, no. you choose the one to go.. to fight with me. Of the weapons let me have a mace. That will do for me. One more condition. He who chooses to fight with me must also stand on the earth like me."

Yudhishtira : "Your wishes are granted. Come, fight with me. First learn some manliness. Then die. Even God will not save you today."

Duryodhana was enraged at these taunts of an otherwise usually mild Yudhishtira, on one side; while Sri Krishna was enraged on other side! Bhima and Arjuna too look at each others, with these dangerous concessions offered by Yudhishtira to this remnant of a cunning enemy, at this dangerous point of time when war was drawing to a dragged end, after all. Sri Krishna takes Yudhishtira to task :

Sri Krishna : “What is this, brother you are at? Do you want to start another gamble with life stakes of all of you, again?⁵ Do you not want this war to end, and start it all over again ?”

Yudhishtira : (Confused) “Gamble? What do you mean? I have not been invited by anybody?”

Sri Krishna : “You have not been invited, true, luckily! But you have invited this devil to play the gamble with your own initiative again! You said to him - What did you say? - that if he kills one of you, you would concede victory to him, and all the rest would retire to the forests! What is this if not gamble? Your old habits die hard! Why should you allow him this choice? Do you want one of you to be killed? Is it for this gamble I have taken all this trouble to organise you, enthuse you, equip you with armies and drive the chariot of your brother? The adage is coming true that Kunti’s sons are born, not to rule, not for comforts or enjoyment, but for hardships in forests, and beggary!⁶ How am I to set right your foolish step? Do you know what this villain has been doing all these preceding thirteen years? Fighting with figures of Bhima, made of steel, to acquire expertise in killing the real Bhima at one stroke, when that opportunity comes, as and when it does!⁷ Suppose he chooses you, what will happen?”

⁵ *Tadidam dyutam arabdham punareva yatha pura? |*

⁶ *Noonam na rajyabhogaya Pandoh Kunt yascha santatih |
Aryanta vanavasaya srishta, bhaikshyaya va punah ||* (33.16)

⁷ *Etena hi krita yogya varshaniha trayodasha |
Ayase purusham kritva Bhimsena jighamsaya ||* (33-5)

Yudhishtira : “Am I not a hero of valour in my own right?”

Sri Krishna : “I am not questioning that or insulting you! I am questioning your overestimate of yourself in winning over this fellow in mace-fight, in trickery, cunningness and preparedness, in addition to his expertise acquired from my brother! Can you leave him a choice other than fight with Bhima?”

Yudhishtira is stunned; but does not want to own the faulty step placed! He bows down his head in shame, now slowly realising the meaning of what he had said and done.

Arjuna was red in rage, staring at him. Sri Krishna was very furious. But to give a new direction to this deadlock he looked at Bhima and said :

Sri Krishna : “Bhima dear! Now the war is entirely dependent on you. Victory or defeat are both in your hands. But that, again, depends on whether this villain chooses you or avoids you. Or else your story will end today for all my efforts, otherwise, to save you. You have to crush the thighs of this fellow today to fulfill your vow. Do not forget it.”

Satyaki now comes forward and embraces Bhima. Shikhandi and Dhrishtadyumna too do the same to enthuse Bhima and shower honour.

Bhima : “Brother Yudhishtira, I shall right all your wrongs for once today and draw him to a fight with me, somehow. Do not worry. He cannot choose whom to fight with. That honourable choice is now closed for him. See what I do.”

Bhima now turns to the figure hidden in waters and roars like this :

“You sinful devil! Remember all the evil plots you and your blind father hatched to eliminate us. You will reap a rich reward for all that through this mace in my hands now. You have got Bhishma and Drona also killed, for your faults. Should you not be ‘rewarded’ suitably for this and many more acts of sin? I shall first kill you, then your door keeper cum messenger through whom you sent for my wife, Draupadi. That will end my vow. I have already despatched your brother Dusshasana to the other world in your own presence, to give you a foretaste of what is in store for you.”

Duryodhana : (from within) “Enough of bragging. Let us first fight, and then you can speak.”

Bhima : “First come out and appear like a man. You traitor to your family!”

Bubbles issue densely out of the waters and behind them a human shape, with a mace on the shoulders! Waters trickle in drops from his wet body, and the fellow excites the humour of the crowd assembled around. Nobody had seen him in this humiliating situation, before - no clothes of his own to wear, no choice of rest or shelter, being dragged out like big fish, mercilessly!

The Panchala heroes and the Pandavas clap their hands to extend a welcome of ridicule, and many roar with laughter, derisively. War drums begin beating, and Duryodhana is irritated all the more, as he does not expect such a big crowd to witness this end-scene. He

curses them : “You will reap the fruits of this unmanly act.” The drums do not stop! He cannot bear them but cannot order them to stop, as there is none to obey. He realises that he has no followers, no power, no empire, and not even well-wishers or friends.

He notices that all the Pandava princes are ready to fight! He looks at Sri Krishna as if to ask : “What is this you have arranged? I said I was ready for fight with one?” Sri Krishna is grim in face and does not answer that implied question. So he asks vocally : “Only one of you must fight with me, as I told you.” He shifts the mace to the other shoulder : “Come one by one if you dare.”

Bhima was ready with proper equipment. Duryodhana accepted this challenge. That solved a problem created by Yudhishtira! They all now move on to the West bank of the lake where there was equal, even space for all to view the fight. The crowd moved backward, left enough space and adjusted around. Loose sandy earth there was, a god-given facility, as it were, and the palace-guards levelled some more space adjacent to what was already levelled at the centre of the open space, drew up lines and circles in lime powder to mark necessary boundaries for movements to and fro. It now became an arena to decide the results of this drawn war once for all.

Drums on the hillocks to the South of the lake now began sounding in a slow but firm and dreaded rhythm as if to welcome the god of Death to come and personally supervise this combat. Other instruments on the Northern bank also sounded and merged into this

rhythm, giving a tempo, and making the blood of the viewers also pulsate in the same rhythm.

Duryodhana was still dripping, wet with the waters of the lake, and had not even a towel to wipe with. Yudhishtira arranged for proper clothes, generously. Duryodhana had to accept them, as he had no alternative, though he felt the shame of it. The crowd rebuked him with peals of laughter and clapped adding to the sense of humiliation, which the villain was already feeling.

Duryodhana was really in a pitiable situation. His eyes were sunken, with its sockets prominently visible. The brows were hanging thick in a bushy mess. They almost enclosed his eyes. He tried to push them back above. Water was dripping still from his wet long hair. All over his body were bruises and scars, wounds wide open with no proper treatment yet. For two days he had had neither rest nor medical treatment, and in water, those wounds had swollen. Here were the crowds ridiculing him, in all this helplessness. He remembered a similar situation some thirteen years ago, where too he fell into a pond in the famous Mansion built by Maya, mistaking the glossy sheet of water for crystal, and Bhima had to offer him clothes then and there to retrieve him out of shame. It was then that Draupadi and other palace guards were laughing at him whereas now it was the crowd around, representing the wide world around, and doing the same. There was no Karna or Shakuni now to relieve this pain or share with.

Yudhishtira's eyes become wet with tears at this sight. "A King in this plight" - he says to himself, impersonally. Duryodhana minus royal dignity!

Unimaginable! Duryodhana isolated! Unbelievable! Duryodhana as helplessness-incarnated, inexplicable! - but all brought about by Fate, the mysterious, *Karma*-recoiled and God's assertive justice.

Duryodhana walked in new clothes, slowly into the midst of the arena, like a sacrificial goat coming to the altar. The end was visible to all even before it came concretely.

Yudhishtira turned away his tear-filled face, unable to witness the scene any longer.

Sri Krishna notices it, moves towards him and warns him : "What is this misplaced feeling? Brother! Compassion is out of place here. Do not exhibit weakness here. We have had enough of it in the past. Remember, Arjuna's plight some eighteen days ago. I had to dispel his mind's darkness then, at length. Now there is no time. Leave no scope for calamities to repeat. This villain does not deserve anyone's pity for all his sin against mankind, which you represent."

Bhima : (to Duryodhana). "You fool! This is no mansion of Maya where once you got humiliated privately for your own fault. This is now an open field where you are exposed publicly, though again for your own faults. The crowd laughs! But we are not the instigators! It is no plot of ours! Laughter is a natural affair, then as now, and eternally. If you had also learnt to join the laughing crowds, you would have been a different man, now. But you never learnt it in all your life. Your jovial temper, if you had acquired one, would have saved

you and all your army, and all these heroes who have laid their lives in vain here. Life does not mean all war, hatred, deceit, plots and heart-burns : there is also room in it for softer, gentler civilised humane feelings, relations, unitive functions and much construction without which we cannot live collectively as one family. We have learnt these other things from our experiences in forests, in hermitages, in solitary meditations and in the companies of holy men and sages. How can you understand these, as you grew in your prison-like cells in your palace, in the company of evil men? Isolation has taught you nothing, having brought you to this tragic end. You knew only how to kill, plot, deceive and view all others, including your advisers, well wishers, as your enemies! you cannot now escape this end, which is now in my hands. But, let the world again regain peace through your death. Lift up your mace and be quick."

Duryodhana : "You arrogant idiot! you do not have to teach me values of life now. The moment will decide who is to live and who else to die. This combat will prove what I have learnt, as well as what you have. Let people laugh hereafter; not just now."



Dhritarashtra : "Sanjaya, Can I believe that Bhima still lived to lift up his mace against my son? Alas! How can I hear the next part of narration?"

Sanjaya : "Oh, King! It is your son who lifted the mace against Bhima! The cause cannot be distorted as the effect! Right from childhood it has always been

your son, lifting the mace, symbolically, against all the Pandavas! They have always been the defendants! Why do you now put the blame on Bhima? He is only an instrument of justice in the hands of God. You exclaim : 'how can I hear this part of narration?' Well, hear it with the same pair of ears, with which you heard all evil news of the victory of your son over the afflicted Pandavas, till now! If you were a little firm then, you could have avoided this sorry situation today. What was 'pleasant' then, alone, is yielding all this unpleasant news now ! How can you refrain, avoid or fix up another value for a natural course? Good effects cannot follow from bad causes! Can God give you different pairs of ears for hearing selective episodes, designs, and their interpretations, as you please? Why blame him?"

Dhritarashtra : "Is there no one who can show mercy to my son? no sympathiser? no well-wisher?"

Sanjaya : "Sir, What is the use of talking to you? I have already answered you, and your meaningful suggestions! Yudhishtira was kind even at this moment. If you had understood his soft sentiments long ago, and treated him honourably and rewarded his humane sentiments, you would not be in this situation! Did you show mercy to Draupadi in her distress? Did you prevent the barbaric behaviour of your sons then?"

Dhritarashtra : "What can happen now? What are the chances? Which way is this combat likely to end? Tell me ..."

Sanjaya : “All I can see, or say is this : Your son is extremely tired, with wounds all over the body. He is in terrible rage. That does not mean an enthusiastic combatant, in the first place. War requires steadiness of mind, peaceful planning, concentration of efforts and energies, as any other affair, like trade, administration, or expedition. He does not possess these qualities, obviously. Bhima has all these, without doubt. Additionally he has the blessings of *Bhagavan* Sri Krishna also. Bhima has his vow too waiting to be fulfilled. That by itself is a great urge. You have heard of it all these eighteen days. Is not the rest very obvious?”

Dhritarashtra : “Why can’t my heart burst?”

Sanjaya : “Death waits for its own time. It is not accidental as the ignorant imagine! Death is neither cruel nor illogical. It cannot purify the impure, nor glorify the impious. It is impartial. All expiation is in life only; not in death and beyond it. Even death distances itself from one who does not undergo due expiation for his own sins. It is such people who are described in our *Shastras* as ‘those with uncertain durations of life.’ ”

Dhritarashtra : “Why do you rattle through such important matters? I am not able to understand even a word of what you are saying! How can life be without specified duration for anyone? What do you mean by ‘death distancing?’ Tell me in detail.”

Sanjaya : (With a snarl and derision) “Sir, in normal times, in a normal course of life, it is the sons who perform the obsequies of the dead father. In abnormal

adharmic times a father may be required to perform death ceremonies of his own sons! This is also a kind of punishment, in a legal sense; or 'expiation' in a ritualistic moral sense! Life can be made long by God, if a man's sins go on growing and if he requires to pay for all of them in this very life. That is how death is denied to man as a solvent of his sorrows. Delayed death means elongated torture, strife pulled on, suffering endless."

Dhritarashtra : (Somewhat understanding) "Do you say that there is consolation in death?"

Sanjaya : "A man who does not find it in life should say so - they say. The denial of that consolation is a kind of punishment too! What can be more ghastly?"



Loud recital of Vedic hymns is heard in some distance and all turn to that quarter. A small Yadava army contingent, and in front of it the forest hermits doing that recitation, leading a great hero behind are in sight. A tall, robust figure in blue robes walks in stately dignity, with firm steps!



CHAPTER 45

DEATH OF DURYODHANA

The crowd recognises that figure as Balarama, just returning from his long pilgrimage, coinciding with the duration of the war, about to conclude.

The Pandava heroes turn to him, welcome him and offer him the usual tokens of affection and respect. Bhima turns back, touches the feet of his master and seeks his blessings in the ensuing combat. Balarama blesses him with success and long life.

Duryodhana too offers respects, but with subdued enthusiasm; marks of humiliation, restlessness, unhappiness with what had happened to bring him to this sordid end were abundant on the tragic hero, as Baladeva noticed, who could also understand the locus of the past war of the previous days, involving the loss of stalwarts on both sides. He regretted this with a significant click of the tongue, and put down his head in disapproval of the turn of events. Then he lifted up his head and stared at his brother Sri Krishna, in a meaningful look. Sri Krishna met it and answered it mutely as if to say : "it is good you were not here to see what should not have happened!"; and then he openly told him :

"Brother, your two pupils will now engage

themselves in a mace-combat. You will be witness to at least one important scene of battle, thus.”

Baladeva : “The ways of God are inscrutable ! I left for pilgrimage on a *Pushya* day; and am arriving on a *Shravana* day. In between I count that two *Tithis* ¹ have been lost. So altogether I have spent about forty days over my pilgrimage. But, should all this devastation take place in my absence. Should a race - of Kauravas – get almost emaciated in this deplorable way ? What cruelty of times !!”

Balabhadra exchanged hugs with the Pandava brothers and also with Sri Krishna. He stretched his open arms to Duryodhana; but he showed no warmth or enthusiasm for it. Baladeva made a significant statement :

“Duryodhana! If Bhishma and Drona had put their souls into the war on your side, would you find yourself in this situation? But you are responsible for that also in a way, as you did not conduct the state of affairs in a fair manner so as to do them honour, or use them honourably for a fairer goal in which both the warring parties could be happy and satisfied! Any way what can my analysis do to you now, when you have lost all?”

Duryodhana liked the first part of the proposition about Bhishma and Drona who were not fair to himself but the alternative, blaming him for that also, was not to his liking! He frowned, and showed impatience for the present stalemate to end soon, one way or another.

¹ a ‘tithi’ is a lunar day; in the calendar based on lunations - ‘Chandra’ - so to say - sometimes these *tithis* are ‘lost.’

Baladeva turned to Sri Krishna and cryptically said:

“Krishna, you were often saying that the Pandavas are your very breath!² And you have proved it, one-sidedly, to bring this pupil of mine to this desolation!”

Sri Krishna was stung to the quick and shot back:

Sri Krishna : “Brother! You are miscarried by emotions!

Is not Bhima also your own pupil? Why don't you own him and his hard-won victory? Are you not also on the side of Dharma? I said what you quoted, because the Pandavas stood for Dharma, as they stand now too! Tell me, on which side is your loyalty? You know well how this war originated, in detail. Having known how I tried to bring about a just and honourable settlement you still blame me, overcome by ignoble emotions! A defeated party deserves pity if it deserves it on honour. Here is a person who imposed his decision of war on the innocents, involving the whole world, after refusing timely words of advice by the greatest souls of the age - Vidura, Maithreya, Veda Vyasa, and myself. He could have parted with five villages or even one, to save himself and those for whose death he is instrumental! Why can't you speak about it? Do you think this is my partiality? Do you know what has just happened? After losing the war and his all, this pupil of yours was hiding in these waters of the lake, to deny a formal end to war, or to accredit the 'foes' with a decisive victory! Will you say this is fair for a 'hero'? Now we had to

² “*Mama prana hi Pandavah*” (said in the Royal court of Hastinapura during Sri Krishna's famous embassy.)

draw him out to yield a logical conclusion; even here he has been offered fair chances! He could fight only with one, with an instrument of his own choice. Yudhishtira went beyond all reasonable offer to concede total victory to this 'pupil' of yours, if he could kill even one of his brothers or himself! He has chosen Bhima! That is where you see him now before you! What is my role in all this?"

Baladeva : (Realising his error) "Brother, I am not blaming you! I only meant that this devastation should not have happened. You stood firmly by the Pandavas! Duryodhana was not so lucky as to have one like you on his side. But you are unfathomable in glory, in powers of strategy, and purpose, as well as achievements. Who can dive into the heart of destiny? If this was impossible for you to stop, who else could have stopped?"

Sri Krishna : "One man could have stopped it; it was entirely in his hands."

Baladeva : "Whom do you mean?"

Sri Krishna : "Your very pupil - he who stands here now. Even now he can surrender and stop the next avoidable steps."

Baladeva : "Oh! But he wanted this war!"

Sri Krishna : "That is what I have been saying. He could stop it, but did not want to stop this mad slaughter. There was no justice on his side.. He might justify it to suit his convenience. History is a fragile and subjective record. You can twist it,

if you are in power, and have a hundred or thousand followers to shout your view of it to the unborn next generations. Belief is comparatively cheaper than Truth, which latter does not depend on your commendation. An evil fellow in power can impose his evil decision on a million people, who will have to receive it and die, in obedience, accepting it as their unquestionable right to follow. You and I are now doing our own calculations, from other angles, whereas the dictator is not bound by any angles except his own at the moment. That is how Time acquires colours, momentum and devours the other possibilities that might have been open for other moments' possibilities that might have been open for other moments later on! Do you know how all this chain of undesirables started? It started with Bhishma's partition of the nation; that was illegal and immoral. After Pandu who had been crowned duly, only Yudhishtira inherited the empire, and Bhishma did no more than justice then. But after the wax - house - plot, and the return of the Pandavas from exile, Bhishma erred grievously, tried to appease Duryodhana, gave him a half, yet without crowning him even for the half, officially! How could an error be ratified? All partitions lead to wars, in this manner. Here was a man, devout, pious, learned, and well-versed in war, in politics and public administration - who could have avoided all this at the very beginning! He divided minds, the cousins and the possibility of peace and cooperation, by that one wrong step. Bhishma paid dearly. But people still worship him for his very

blunders! Did you expect me to bless your 'pupil' in all the precedent and antecedent steps?"

Baladeva : "I do not see things from that angle. Let us leave Bhishma out of this mess. The Nation was partitioned, for good or bad. Yudhishtira tried to expand it into a full-fledged empire! You backed him then. Was this necessary? Would it not strike fear in the hearts of his cousin? Was this not the genesis of this war, this expansionistic ambition of Yudhishtira? Had he been contented, on the other hand?"

Sri Krishna : (laughing) "This is an over simplification of a too-deeply tangled problem. Jealousy is jealousy. It does not tolerate an alternative centre of power, big or small. If the very existence of a man is what you cannot tolerate, what can his status do? People plot against rich cousins as well as poor, strong as well as weak. Greed has no limits. See the origin of war in this intolerance; not in the non-surrender of the opponent."

Baladeva : "No, no.. let me remind you of an event in our own past history. Yayati - our common ancestor - gave all his empire to Puru, and drove away Yadu - our forefather - mercilessly out of power! Did he go to war with Puru? Did he not accept the verdict?"

Sri Krishna : "In that case, why should Jarasandha attack us some seventeen times and be repelled by you and me? Why should he not have remained contented with his Magadhan empire?"

Baladeva : "I fail to see the connection ! You are talking irrelevantly ! How does that bear on our present context ?"

Sri Krishna : "Confusion lies in not seeing the real connection ! Roots of history do not all lie in one place, where you and I try to excavate "

Baladeva : "I still fail to understand!"

Sri Krishna : "The most graceful thing you can do, then, is not to talk about what you cannot understand."

Baladeva : "All right! I shall obey. But first tell me how Jarasandha is connected here."

Sri Krishna : "He wanted to be Emperor over all this earth, without a *Rajasuya*, but by strong-arm tactics; by kidnapping powerful opponents, by resorting to murder of those that did not fall in line with him, and by bribing Brahmins, to have justice and their blessings on his side, to fool the general public. It was 'might' that he relied on. Not 'right'."

Baladeva : "This is a far-fetched interpretation, I feel. If you had not killed Kamsa, our uncle, he would not have nourished or nurtured hatred for us or the Yadavas, and we would not have been forced to retreat into Dwaraka, from Mathura! There also you overstepped your duty."

Sri Krishna : "You mean I should not have killed Kamsa? Who would have freed our parents then? Or liberated the Yadavas from that dictator? You are not able to see the roots of a Jarasandha in a

Kamsa, a Shishupala and others who had formed his shadow-cabinet!"

Baladeva : (Trapped, and confused) "I am not saying that Kamsa should not have been an oppressor, nor should Jarasandha have been overambitious. A wrong is a wrong, whoever commits it."

Sri Krishna : (Drawn by this innocence of his brother) "Dearest brother! What you fail to understand is that evil is not of our making, or that it cannot be wished away. It is a stubborn fact of life, and we must face it sternly, wisely, coordinatedly, and with all sincerity and honesty. See, Yayati cursed us to be without an empire, or without unity. But did that ensure our isolation from surrounding evil? Surrounding facts? War machinations overpowering us, in one way or another? Yayati could not have blessed us with isolation? Could he? His curse would have failed and remained inoperative had it been against facts or laws of life! Jarasandha had to go. So also Paundraka, Shalva, Mura, Bana, Naraka, Kalayavana, and other evil centres. So a Yudhishtira had to emerge as an alternative, a rightful and just claimant for the post of Emperor. *Rajasuya* gave him that right. I stood by Dharma, and it just happened to be on the side of Yudhishtira! What else was there for me to do? Besides, you might ask me one more question."

Baladeva : (Tired) "no, no... this one I have asked you is enough. I can't digest all that you are telling me. I shall ask no more questions."

Sri Krishna : “Are you not interested in remembering why you and I are here on earth? Do we have a purpose or no?”

Baladeva : “You are again talking irrelevantly! What has this to do with our problem?”

Sri Krishna : “Well, what is that original problem?”

Baladeva : “Original problem? What do you mean? I do not understand at all!

Sri Krishna : “Why have you come before me as my elder brother? To bless me? assist me? Pull me down and ask irrelevant questions? To take sides with evil fellows? This present war is coming to an end to yield the only result you and I should rejoice in, and here you are not sharing my feelings! Is this why you have descended?”

Baladeva is drawn into a Vision, and lifted up, out of the present circumstances in time and space.... He sees a white ocean full of milk... He sees in it his brother Sri Krishna, reclining on a serpent coil... He can somehow feel that there is some relation between himself now and that thousand - hooded serpent, with Anantha (Infinity) as his name. Someone comes to that shore of milky ocean... a Cow!... Well? ... that is Mother Earth in her chosen form... She has tears in her eyes.... She prays... “I cannot bear this enormous weight of villains, Lord” - she cries. She weeps for long... The reclining figure, his present brother, assures her : “Go back assured... I am descending in a new Incarnation to relieve you of this weight. . Do not worry... just a little more time, you have to bear it.” The Cow returns

and disappears, along with hosts of gods following her. They must be Brahma, Rudra, Indra and others. The vision gradually fades and finally disappears, leaving Balabhadra staring at his brother Sri Krishna! Slowly the conversation picks up again from the broken thread.

Sri Krishna : “You got the original problem? Can you answer me?”

Baladeva : “You have come down to re-establish Dharma. That is the original problem, and I am with you here, in it too. I have not forgotten it. But.... I have a question....”

Sri Krishna : “Yes, please!”

Baladeva : “Could you not remove the deadly weight on this earth without causing this heavy loss of life in this ghastly war?”

Sri Krishna : “Good brother, if you agree that dead weight must be removed, how can you both keep it and remove it? What is this strange logic or expectation? Whom are you sympathising with ? Weight? or Weight - remover?”

Baladeva : “My question is, whether there was no alternative for war, as it has entailed sorrow for millions, destitutes, innocents, children, involving loss of life for animals, and loss to the treasuries of Rulers, whoever they may be, all over the world? Could not an *Avatar* avoid this tremendous loss, disruption, and devastation?”

Sri Krishna : “Delusions are difficult to remove, when one loves them and clings to them with undeserving affection! War was not my choice. It was chosen

collectively by those who constituted that 'weight.' The goal of *Avatar* is as you know, the preservation of the Good from the Evil, and the eradication of that Evil, if it threatens the very flow of life and its direction towards a grand auspicious goal. Setting right the rhythm of life is impossible without shaking off what tends to break that rhythm! You are worried about the loss of 'weight' in another form!"

Baladeva : "But why should good people suffer in all this operation?"

Sri Krishna : "Who are those people whom you call good, and who ought to have been spared , as you want?"

Baladeva : "Wives and children of the killed soldiers, for example. Farmers on the field for example. Merchants and sundry servants. The non-warrior class of assistants like charioteers, arms - bearers, suppliers, doctors, carpenters, blacksmiths, horses and elephants and so on! Should they also die for someone else's faults? Is it not innocence punished? Should an *Avatar* be indifferent to these consequences?"

Sri Krishna : "There are several strands to this answer. It is too complicated an issue to be resolved on a battle-field, without your granting some basic assumptions, unquestionable in all life."

Baladeva : "Like?"

Sri Krishna : "It is complex, I said. But you insist on a quick answer. Well. One strand is this - that

in a flow all must move, willingly or unwillingly, in the current. When a river overflows, not only do waters move, but also all the tall trees and small shrubbery carried away on the banks, by the sheer force, and their proximity to the flow. Even the earth is carried off. This is inevitable and unpreventable. A mad flow may carry away men, cattle, their shelters and valuable belongings also, reducing them to destitutes, shelterless and paupers. Whom would you blame for this mad course?"

Baladeva : "Is an *avatar* a 'mad flow'?"

Sri Krishna : "I said war is a mad-flow! The man who imposes it on mankind is a mad fellow! The people who will it jointly cannot call themselves innocent now, being parties to it even in their inaction, in their muteness, and silent acquiescence! People like Drona and Bhishma. They could have avoided this war, had they had a united voice against it, if they had threatened abstinence like Vidura; like yourself. The first step of an evil fellow is to build up a gang in his support, and then the momentum gathers as others jump into the fray, and the force becomes mad, and goes out of control. This leads to a polarisation of Good and Evil forces, and then the inevitable happens. Your attempt to isolate the 'innocent' fails totally. Once involved, all will have a motive, examination of which now becomes difficult, superfluous, wasteful and even subjective, beyond all fairness."

Baladeva : "What does an Avatar do in all this? Encourage the foolishness? Endow enlightenment? Prevent madness? Or go with the flow?"

Sri Krishna : “None of these in isolation. He tries to save all that can be saved for the future. The *Avatar* is a Saviour! Elimination of Evil is also part of that programme! When polarisation happens, he is on the side of the Good, he organises them, motivates them, upholds them, exposes the hypocrites, forces the potential evil forces also into the fore-front. Call this what you like. It all depends on your partiality or integrity of vision. Evil people involved will blame it on the *Avatar* and expect abnormalities to happen, without realising that it is they who have created those abnormal tangles. The *Avatar* is not an interference in life. Nor is it a bolt from the blue. You cannot control it in your chosen way or for your chosen purpose. He will use some as his instruments, and others as his targets of elimination, in his own light and choice.”

Baladeva : “I now understand the plan, somewhat. Can I have some explanation, in this long-standing context, if you please?”

Sri Krishna : “By all means. Yudhishtira came into my hand as a handy, clean, polished and ready instrument. Narada gave him the idea of *Rajasuya*! I used Narada also as my agent. Yudhishtira sought my advice politically. I explained the implications and the imperatives, as well as priorities. The first obstacle was Jarasandha! Do not call him ‘innocent’ or ‘outside’ this purview. He was a direct threat to Dharma. Of course, if he had handed over this earth to him on a platter, this war could have been postponed; but he would have killed whoever

was a suspect in the opposite camp! Destruction would have taken a different shape or course. So to avoid that I went on cutting his roots one by one - Kamsa, Kalayavana and others; later on Shishupala also. But then Duryodhana became the rallying point in his place, later! That was not my choice! It was a power-centre, usurped by ambitious blind forces abetted and encouraged by malevolent forces like Dhritarashtra! I said he was not my creation; but he was expected to fill the void created by the elimination of Jarasandha. That was why I was preparing Yudhishtira to take over world-leadership, and stood by them (The Pandavas) firmly. Had I failed, Duryodhana would have imposed a pattern of his own choice on the course of world-events to crown evil and exile the Good, against my will. Should an *Avatar* have allowed this to happen? Empires come and go. Most of them are structures built on vanity and selfishness. Rarely does one stand on Dharma, as life-trend requires, as natural. It was amazing that Duryodhana could become a nucleus of evil so quickly and so successfully and so efficiently, drawing the mighty and low to himself! Bhishma hardly noticed this phenomenon from my angle; he clung to the good-for-nothing dead-and-gone 'word' he gave his father to remain himself the keeper of the throne of Hastinavati! That was an angle that Time's flow had no use for now! See how the *Dharmic* Empire built by Yudhishtira was hijacked in a mere gamble! Did Bhishma understand it that way? Life with freedom, dignity, opportunity for pursuits of

Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha, and keeping to Cosmic Laws, inviolable - this was not to the liking of Duryodhana and party. Otherwise he would not be in this situation here, now! You and I might have ignored him if he were at least harmless in his personal ambition. No! It was an all-consuming desire to destroy *Dharma*! How many more Draupadis (who knows), might then have been molested? How many political murders would have taken place? Would not people curse God then? What alternative did the *Avatar* have, but to remove him and uproot the evil system he was planning to clamp on the socio-political life?"

Baladeva : "What are the other strands of answer?"

Sri Krishna : "Absolute Good and absolute Evil are abstractions, perhaps. What we really have are gradations, variations, and approximations, and alignments in varying shades. In all this it is the people who make their choices and join sides. What does your misplaced pity do? Whom do you really pity? Shalya? Kritavarma? Soldiers who join services only to be killed? Do they not know this in advance? Pity, of course, animals, and women folk at home!"

Baladeva : "That is my point! What is your angle?"

Sri Krishna : "Suffering is inevitable. That forms a large part of life. In a collective life, somethings cannot be avoided totally. *Karma* is collective too in a sense."

Baladeva : "Brother, why say more? You are clever

and talkative! You can justify anything! I am not satisfied. I search for answers in my heart; not in my brain! Let this fight be over, and we shall pick up threads of our discussion again. Let them not exceed combat rules. Let Dharma win."

Sri Krishna : "What is this 'head-versus heart'? My detailed analysis has not impressed you, and that is my bad luck! Do not equate cleverness with diplomacy in favour of Truth! Endless argumentation takes us nowhere. We must know what we want to learn or prove. You say that Dharma shall prevail! As if Dharma has prevailed all these three decades! You forget how Dharma has been attacked and butchered at every stage of this war and even in circumstances leading to it! What is the use of a partisan view and this last accusation? Against whom? What do you want? Defeat of Bhima?"

Balarama : "I am not supporting either, I am neutral."

Sri Krishna : "Neutrality between Good and Evil is impossible! It will lead you to hypocrisy! Be outspoken!

Baladeva : "Why quarrel between ourselves?"

Sri Krishna : "Because you and I are drawn between Good and Evil, which vindicates what I am saying. You are away all these days and you are not in touch with all that has happened and how it all had happened!"

Baladeva : "Shall we not discuss it more leisurely?"

Sri Krishna : "In that case you should not rush to judgments in advance! Have patience."

Baladeva : “Let me then hear. Tell me some important details.”

Sri Krishna : “We must build from what you already know.”

Baladeva : “Attempts to finish off the Pandavas, by someone not crowned, but aspiring to capture power by the back-door in plot after plot! ‘Would you call it Dharma?’ Is it not that Sir, you want to tell me? That is an old story, I know. I know also how your noble attempts for a peaceful rapprochement failed. Then whatever happened to bring the cousins to this end?”

Sri Krishna : “Old stories have their lessons. They can be causes for future effects, without fail, if unremedied. Attempts to disrobe Draupadi, or kill the brothers, and vows by the wronged party for revenge are not ‘old stories’ in a forgettable sense. The seeds of future are often in such past brutalities! Dharma is not merely an oral profession or commitment to Truth and Justice. There is a practical side of character demonstrable in action to back up. When that does not happen, Dharma begins to kill! When it does not become a faith, it ceases to be a way of life. An uncrowned ruffian exercises political power, as you say. Elders turn a blind eye! Is that Dharma? Bhishma killed it. Drona built a tomb over it. Karna adorned it with garlands and offered perfume. Dusshasana fed it with flesh and blood. Then the devils like Shakuni danced before it for entertainment. Kripa and Ashwatthama are still alive to revive the ghosts

dancing on the war-field. What should have been buried is Adharma, here, your pupil.”(Points to Duryodhana)

Baladeva : “This is instigation, again! We shall draw our inferences from the past, but leave judgments to the future! Proceed”

Sri Krishna : “There will be nothing to proceed on, or for, if you refuse to come out of the past! The judgment is awaited, but it has to be in keeping with past events, if it must have consistency of logic or justice. In fact you have a difficult wishful judgment otherwise, which logic will falsify.”

Baladeva : “Logic or consistency apart, I am deeply sad!”

Sri Krishna : “This way of reading history takes us nowhere! Can we worship Adharma and crown it?”

Baladeva : “I never said so. I only said let Dharma prevail!”

Sri Krishna : “*Dharma* will prevail even without your saying! Only, you must get ready to receive it as such, and not brand it as Adharma out of prejudice.”

Baladeva : “That means, you prefer something to happen! You have something definite in mind!”

Sri Krishna : “Not something ... but the only thing that is logical and consistent, waiting to unravel itself.”

Baladeva becomes deeply absorbed in the implications of Sri Krishna’s words. He now looks at Duryodhana, who did not utter a single word during

this lengthy conversation between the brothers; he was resting, refreshing himself in the cool air, and getting ready for the combat, doing small exercises. He now smeared loose earth all over his bruised body and signalled that he was ready.

All are seated around, except Sri Krishna, Baladeva, and the other Pandavas, expecting the fight to start.

Baladeva comes forward, lifts up his right arm and signals by saying : "Let Dharma win."



The combat is now on! Duryodhana, though tired, yet showed signs of amazing strength and presence of mind. He lifted up his heavy mace and suddenly flashed it on Bhima's head, which would have been definitely crushed, had not Bhima jerked in time to escape its fury, and returned an unexpected counter-blow on the head of his adversary! Duryodhana was hit hard and fell! The crowd cried ovations of joy, wishing Bhima well!

Duryodhana got up, however, as if in spring-action and waved his mace round Bhima's head in an anticlockwise direction. Bhima stopped it in the middle and pressed it back with tremendous force, but Duryodhana too pressed his mace with equal force so that the two held against each other for long without yielding. The muscles on the arms of both that so held those maces, began to show prominently in a dancing rhythm, as an index of that show of strength. Duryodhana suddenly withdrew his mace in a stealthy backward move of quickness, and tried to rush its pointed edge into the chest of Bhima. Bhima sensed it and flashed

his mace on that very pointed edge, so that fire sparks arose making a tremendous steel sound... The combat dragged on this way without result or much entertainment for the onlookers. It was equal in a way. The twain were roaring, hissing, hitting hard, looking for weak movements, wrong steps in the other, and it turned out to be a barren turn-around movement. Quick movements were answered by the other in equally swift and deft movements. People held their breath and watched for results or their signs... Bhima now received injuries on his shoulders, and once on his chest too. Duryodhana received a fatal hit on his head once, and lay down in a heap as if that was the end. Different codified movements and hits of prescribed nature like - Matsyodgati, Vivalitanga, Varahamatha, Paristava, Gadaparirambha, Vikshepa, Lahari, Udancha, Navadravina, Laghuvinyasta, and others - were exchanged, bringing life into the fight, relieving the crowds of boredom and tension. Both were tired and bruised, in a long drawn combat. Duryodhana was now seen bleeding, which was not unusual for a body already in bad shape, and already wounded. But Bhima had blue spots over his muscles, wherever his opponent had hit him hard, though not tired as much as his opponent. Bhima moved liked a whirlwind on a pair of legs, unmindful of his uneasiness, and seemed to throw Duryodhana into the air with his mace, as if he was a lifeless ball of flesh. His fury was matchless. His mace sounded like a furious wind in its sweeps, and its various movements. The spectators were deaf for sometime with similar sounds from the other side also.

Gradually both became economical in their

movements and ejaculations. The crowd noticed Duryodhana's anxiety to end this combat even by violations of codes, in some instances, in calculated wrong moves, grimness of gestures and cunning but unconvincing hits, unexpected by the adversary! It was betrayal of chivalry, and escapist in helplessness on the part of one who was a past-master in deceptions. His opportunistic moves were as deceptive as those of a courtesan to catch the unsuspecting prey! Bhima on the other hand kept to the rules, entertainment by skill, power, prowess, and cunning that was within the rules of the game, expecting to show the surprising element often, without the enemy's realising it and his hard hits producing lightnings, sounds of thunder and other shocking effects, to please the crowds and causing miscalculation on the part of the adversary.

Now after a long time Duryodhana proved better by piercing the edge of his mace into the chest of Bhima, and breaking his chest-shield and shooting into the flesh behind. Bhima fell unconscious, blood oozing from the heart. Duryodhana, being pleased sprang to the skies and brought down his mace in the quickest move possible, so as to kill Bhima in one stroke! What swiftness! What force! What deft handling! But Bhima got up in a lightning quickness, recovering miraculously from the swoon and the fall, and bounced up and lifted up his mace and swirled it so swiftly that it hit the temple of Duryodhana and broke some of his teeth causing bleeding. Duryodhana never minded it. He wiped the blood with his left hand, clenched his jaws in anger and again flourished the mace in a sweep. It did not hit the adversary; and on the other hand, he

himself lost balance and fell. But soon he got up, with the mace in his right hand; he waited for a second, watched Bhima in his unexpected and unguarded moment, and hit him hard on the back. This time Bhima fell with a thud. No sign of life for some moments!

Satyaki looked at Sri Krishna's face; Arjuna was indeed anxious. Yudhishtira too looked at Sri Krishna! But Duryodhana stood looking triumphant, and took the opportunity to throw a glance at Baladeva, as if to ask : "Did you expect this of me?"

In that anxious moment Bhima sprang with a terrific roar saying : "This time even Yama, god of Death will not save you!" He flew his mace on Duryodhana, which took off his mace over a distance and rendered him weaponless!

Bhima waited generously, until Duryodhana went there to pick up his mace, and returned ready to resume the combat.



Arjuna : (to Sri Krishna) "Friend, you too are known as Gadadhara. May I know the relative strength or weakness of each?"

Sri Krishna : "Both learnt under the same teacher; that teacher was so very unlike Drona, in that, he taught even the special esoteric skills of the use of mace, equally to both, unthoughtful of the consequences. Baladeva had no partiality at that level. But Bhima's strength is what Duryodhana can never equal. This is a gift of God to Bhima. On the other hand

Duryodhana is skilful and his continuous practice, efforts to refine this art and acquire mastery over it, have made him unique and come up to Bhima in another way. Strength and skill are both needed in this style of war; and the two are made up in different ways. Bhima's hits are sure, fast, strong, conventional and firm. But they lack the polished style of Duryodhana who is unconventional and eternally novel in experimentation. He can violate norms to suit his needs without seeming so, and beyond the fear of detection. A true umpire has to be extraordinarily cautious in finding faults with him. He is so quick and cunning! Bhima is quite firm and bound to the rules. But this time he has a vulnerable vow to keep! Hitting to crush the thighs of the adversary, not permitted by the rules!! It is to be seen how he will achieve it. Duryodhana is sure to violate the rules to gain advantage. But we have to see who violates faster, with greater success! Without resorting to vily tricks Bhima cannot win this foxy trickster. Dharma has been thrown to the winds in this war, right from day-one, when Drona and Bhishma joined the other side! I had to find out ways to trick them into their own fall! In this combat, I cannot interfere, and there is no scope for negotiation or diplomacy. Bhima is likely to forget his own vow, once absorbed in the game! We can only remind him of it by gestures, indirectly. Yet, how he can justify his vow is left to him, and he has to decide the moment and the manner. A deceitful fellow has to

be eliminated with deceit only.³ Times for fair play are past and to be forgotten. Indra was once imprisoned by Virochana⁴ by resorting to evil means cloaked in decency and natural look! But Indra used similar means; trick the trickster into his own tricks, by reversing the art! That was how Indra also overthrew the mighty Vritra! In the wars of today and tomorrow what we need is strategy more than fair-play. Some call it 'foul' when it does not suit them! This in itself is '*adharma*', but if more people shout more vociferously for long time, the gullible can be fooled that '*adharma*' is real *Dharma*, and *vice versa*! That is what is happening now! It is Yudhishtira who has brought us all to this situation through his confusions and convictions in his judgments! See, if this is still not a gamble, this offer made to the villain, after all the attempts to kill you all, so shamelessly! If Bhima dies or is defeated, you will have to revert to forest life in permanent exile! What moral cowardice, posing as *Dharma*! What fatigue of mind masquerading as generosity! The fellow, before coming out of waters, expressed his wish to retire to the forests. You should have, outright rejected his right to live, and killed him as a mad dog, instead of offering him this choice of combat. Your brother is your real liability! Let me repeat : Duryodhana's end depends on Bhima's vow. He must break the villain's thighs - no other way."

³ *Mayavinam tu rajanam mayayaiva nikrintatu*" (58-8)

⁴ son of Prahlada

Arjuna caught the clue and made a splendid use of an opportunity to give an ovation to Bhima, at a crucial point of mace-negotiation and exclaimed :

“Well done, brother; *Vahawa!* Repeat!” and his hands loudly patted both his thighs, as if in innocent gesture of appreciation of that feat. Bhima turned for a moment, caught the meaning, and a new glow flashed in his eyes, with a fury unspent yet, on the adversary.



Bhima's noticing of the gesture by Arjuna coincided with Duryodhana's return after the picking up of the fallen mace! The villain was quick to understand it but had no grounds for objection, as it concerned a 'third party', and the 'action' as such had not yet happened. He knew too that when the 'action' happened, it would be useless to appeal, as he would be dead. He did not therefore know what to do, except continue the combat for its uncertain result.

In the next moment, Duryodhana tried his 'a-adharmic' and cunning expertise to circumvent the rules of the game in a seemingly innocent play of skill, by aiming his mace at Bhima's navel, but trying to jam his thighs with a crushing blow.⁵

This was a unique display of cunningness, cleverness and mastery of the art to kill somehow! If only Bhima had not jumped by a few inches, in trying to escape or defend himself, Duryodhana's mace would have hit his thighs. If he had ignored it and had stood on ground,

⁵ So described in Kannada Kumaravyasa Bharatha! (7-35)

thinking of a counter move, then also it would have had the same effect, as the mace itself would have come down by those very few inches, to hit the same target. The villain could have defended himself then, by saying, it was unintentional, and after all his aim was the navel!

But Bhima sprang to the air by a tremendous height; and by the time, he bounced back on to the ground, to duck himself yet under the mace's sweep, his helmet, arm, and head were severely hit by that mace, and Bhima had yet escaped that fatal blow!

Baladeva had not a word of condemnation for his dear 'pupil', as Bhima was yet alive and away from that danger, and Duryodhana was ready with an answer, even if some objection had been raised!

Sri Krishna : (to Arjuna) "Did you see? How correct is my assessment of him? The villain must have heard my comment, understood it, and so has volunteered to be the first to practice it on Bhima! What a clever move! Misleading 'aim', but firm in intention to achieve the target! Bhima would never resort to this on his own. But he has got your gesture right. Let us see how he will use it. Duryodhana does not deserve niceties any more. Only a direct hit will kill him."

Bhima, now sprang to his feet with the glow of a lightning stabilized as it were, in his stare of the villain! It was like conveying to him : "Fellow, I get it; I shall return it to you in as neat a way as you did it, but without failing as you did!

Bhima's stare was like that of a lion, eying the prey

steadily, with sure instincts to go for the kill in a surprise spring action. A scornful smile emerged on the lips, slowly, with the cheeks swelling in a freeze of muscles, and a determination to end the war in the next moment. Now the mouth opens, and Bhima roars!

The spectators gets frightened and scatter in different directions for a moment; but they stand glued to the spots where they stand, yet to see the end of this game, and not miss their life's opportunity.

Bhima : "Panchali! I am paying your debt hereby! Come and see if you can, wherever you are!"

In the next moment, Bhima was up in the air, turned a full circle around himself and swirling his mace in a full quick round movement, brought it on Duryodhana, with an expectation of a similar action by the adversary!

That unfortunate 'adversary' fell into the trap set by Bhima; himself sprang into the air in a similar imitated movement; but by the time he sought to hit Bhima, himself was hit in the thighs fatally by an inescapable blow of Bhima, and fell on the ground, a lump of flesh. Both were in the air when this happened, well beyond the nicety of interpretations of rules, for or against the victim! Rules applied only on grounds!

Duryodhana's thighs were in a mass, flesh issuing out, blood oozing on all sides, and the genitals going out of shape between the thighs, for any recognition or treatment. The bones had been crushed, powdered, rendering him totally invalid for the rest of his few hours that he could still breathe in pain, shame, impotent revenge, and without redressal. That was practically the end!

Duryodhana cried in pain and uttered words to the effect of.... "Mother, oh mother!" His mace lay away from him at a distance.

The sun was now setting slowly; and his crimson rays made Duryodhana's blood spilt on the earth, look more red than real blood. The field, till that day, a sacred spot in the name of Veda Vyasa, had now become a gory battle-field, sucking the blood of a villain, and so defiled for the first time, but to lasting shame. The tyrant lay in dust, bringing to extinction Dhritarashtra's progeny, and thus extinguishing the last ray of hope of evil forces to rally round him. There was no one to repent ! It was justice fulfilled!

Baladeva is extremely angry and shouts at Bhima :
"This is improper Bhima, hitting below the belt! You have flouted all rules and thrown decency to winds in my own presence. I have never seen such violation of rules elsewhere. I declare, Duryodhana is not defeated! You are the one defeated really! Duryodhana is equal to me in all respects. His fall is my fall. I shall continue this combat! Bhima, fight with me, and finish this game in fairness."

Baladeva took up his plough on the shoulders in a challenge. Bhima had nothing to repent for. He stared at Baladeva, as if to accept the challenge then and there. There was a shade of a smile at the edge of his lips as if to show he was satisfied with what he had achieved by 'fair' means.

The gods poured coloured flowers in a shower. Bhima was decorated in these celestial flowers, and bedecked befittingly for his heroic act, as it were!

"There would be no more war!" - a relieving smile now adorned his lips.

Some flowers fell on the dying Duryodhana too! Bhima, unmindful of Baladeva's strictures, was encouraged by this gracious act of the gods above; he went to Duryodhana, with redoubled rage and kicked him with all the force of the foot! The force dragged the body elsewhere, causing bleeding in the mouth and the nose as well. Bhima poured heartfelt curses on the dying villain :

"You villain, sinner of the worst kind, trickster and wickedness incarnated! You have destroyed all that were on your side. You have brought permanent shame on the Kaurava clan! There is no one left to perform your last rites also. You will have it now only at my mercy! I can deny it to you, leave you to wolves and jackals, vultures and kites! If I had not kicked your head, some would have thought that the flower shower was for your sake! Let the world understand that gods have rewarded me. Oh gods! Is this not your meaning? Even if I do not need any support from any god above, yet I have done what is but right! My vow is fulfilled."

Yudhishthira : "No! you have not done the right. You should not have kicked a dying man in his helplessness!"

Bhima : "You have seen how much right he has done to you, to me, to our queen when he was well, 'helpful', after all! Should you sympathise with this fellow, at this hour?"

Baladeva : “I totally approve of what Yudhishtira has said! Some grace might have been shown to this man at least at the end! You have killed him unfairly as well as insulted him. I dislike it.”

Bhima : “Master Sir, Keep your dislike for yourself! Who cares now? You were not here to see how these villains butchered Abhimanyu! You should have commented there ! Not here. Brother Yudhishtira, this should have happened thirteen years ago. You are the cause of delayed justice! Go and dispute with whomsoever you like, the niceties of Dharma and Adharma!”



CHAPTER 46

ARJUNA'S DIVINE CHARIOT REDUCED TO ASHES !

Yudhishtira behaved strangely but on expected lines : he went to Duryodhana, knelt beside his body lying on the earth, and went to comfort him with philosophical words. But the villain was only further enraged with this act, as a mock - exercise, filled with irony ! Yudhishtira was unmindful of his reaction.

Yudhishtira : “Duryodhana ! Do not be angry ! What had to happen has just happened. You have enjoyed rulership all these years, rightly or wrongly because of merit earned in past lives. The sins that had accrued at the same time have given you this fruit also, of being defeated and thrown into the dust with no one on your side now. My brother should not have kicked you in your helplessness. But his pent up sorrow and anger of all these years did not allow him to consider the propriety or otherwise of his action. All the same I apologise for it.”

Bhima : (angrily) “Brother ! Apologise to this dog ? What for ? I have not wronged him ! I have done him no more than justice for all the humiliations heaped on us so far. Have I deceived him ? I have

given him public punishment ! I have brought him to his deserved death-bed by the powers of my muscles, in a just combat, after all, to which all of you are witnesses. Why should I feel sorry ? In fact, if any shame is left in him, he should apologise for all his evil acts, to have a clean breast before death... this villain.....”

Yudhishtira : “A cultured man must needs show mercy even to an adversary. That is Dharma. Bhima, give up this anger. Don't you think we share our blood with this fellow ? It is all my fault. I should not have performed Rajasuya after all ! That was the origin of all this jealousy and holocaust. Veda Vyasa had already warned me then, that I would be instrumental for a devastating war, which would devour all ! That is what has happened! Brother Duryodhana, you are destined to Heaven; we all descend into Hell. In fact we are already in the hell of sorrow, and of remorse !”¹

Bhima again protested against this verdict of Yudhishtira and looked at him in angry gaze.

Baladeva : “I do not want to get into your wrangle, between the brothers. Impotent rage at this too late a stage is of no use. But I must tell you one thing, Bhima ! You have killed your adversary in wrong steps not permitted by the rules of combat. I do not approve of it.”

¹ *Tvamekah susthito rajan swarge te nilayo dhruvah |
Vayam narakasanjnam vai dhukham prapsyava darunam ||*
(Shalya 59-29)

Bhima : “This is an unwarranted stricture, Sir ! Realise all the wrong steps of this villain all through our lives ! The combat started many years ago, to conclude only now. You have not studied all the records impartially. I am not bound by your ruling.”

Sri Krishna : “Brother, you said that we should not interfere in the wrangle of the cousins. That is a wise comment. Let us stick to it. You too know the principles of right rulership. I have to submit one thing necessitated by the present circumstances. Listen with patience. A ruler is permitted to consider his prosperity in six ways:

- a) his own growth in terms of his forces, strength, treasury and economic situation,
- b) the growth of similar aspects in his ally's camp,
- c) the waste and ruin of his enemy's forces, strength and economic resources,
- d) the waste of similar things on the part of his allies,
- e) the adversary's difficulties, with his enemies, and
- f) his ally's improvement of relations with his own allies.

These are the factors that can give us peace of mind!”

Baladeva : “Your citation is all right. But tell me who should gain strength or comfort out of it, me, you, Bhima or this Duryodhana ? You and I need not gain that comfort ! Yudhishtira is calm. Bhima

does not seem to be yet satisfied. Duryodhana will *not* be comforted ! So what use are your words? For whom ?”

Sri Krishna : “It is enough if at least you find some comfort.”

Baladeva : “I am disturbed only by the wrong steps of Bhima; I am not worried about the results of the combat.”

Sri Krishna : “Then tell me how you are related with these Pandavas !”

Baladeva : “Do you think I have forgotten it ? All assembled here know it. Why ask about the obvious? Have you any meanings to suggest that they have escaped my attention or treatment ?”

Sri Krishna : “No, no ! I want you to remember it always; especially now ! Kunthi is our aunt. Arjuna's wife is our sister. The welfare of these brothers is too well locked up in our good wishes to be forgotten or lost at this hour when they would need it most. Bless them, instead of finding fault with them. Besides, these are our friends, and faultless in character. Bhima's discipleship is a later, additional factor, which too requires attention. A good judge is not expected to show sympathy to the victim of law and his own judgement. It is a lost case.”

Baladeva : “True ! But to a flagrant violation of rule in my own presence, should I be a silent spectator?”

Sri Krishna : “Where were you when this fallen disciple of yours, violated the same law when he

attempted to kill Bhima in an unlawful stroke ? It happened in your own presence ! Why don't you comment on that ? Bhima's action is consequent upon a vow took some thirteen years ago. Should not a warrior fulfill his vow ?"

Baladeva : "I did observe Duryodhana violating the rule to kill Bhima. But it was not carried out !"

Sri Krishna : "What strange logic, brother ? 'Attempted murder, if carried out is a crime, but the same, if it fails is no crime ?' Leave this also aside ! When these villains sought to disrobe Draupadi, why did you not challenge Duryodhana, with your plough? When our nephew, Abhimanyu, was attacked from behind, by six greatest 'heroes' of the age, to violate the codes, and killed him, what were you doing ?"

Baladeva : "I do not know about this incident !"

Sri Krishna : "Those that do not know the full story, must not comment selectively ! Everything is connected and continuous here ! Bhima had to fulfill his vow at any cost. That one consideration is enough to absolve him of your charges."

Baladeva : "What do you want me to do ?"

Sri Krishna : "When Bhima flashed his mace, and Duryodhana was hit fatally to lie here for ever, both were in the air. That meant problems created on the earth could be solved in the air ! Now we who are still on the earth, - why should we worry ? It is a problem between the cousins, now solved, at long last."

Baladeva : "This is a clever denouement ! Let it be!
But what shall we do now ?"

Sri Krishna : "Just go home to Dwaraka, forget all this, and enjoy ourselves in innocent activities and pleasures for the rest of our lives !"

Baladeva : "So simple, is it ?" (Baladeva laughs)

Sri Krishna : "Unless you complicate it further by unwanted comments and taking sides."

Baladeva : "My conviction is this : Well-practised Dharma is harnessed and reined by two considerations, without letting that Dharma go to extremes.² There are economic interests of a greedy or miserly person, violative of Dharmic goals and codes. There are also overwhelming, consuming desires of an absolutely dissatisfied person. These *Artha* and *Kama* considerations will kill a man and a nation if Dharma is mute or helpless between them. Dharma, to survive, must control these extreme human temperaments and assert itself. In other words Dharma must confine to pious practice, avoiding these undesirable extremes. Neither should Dharma violate legitimate economic needs and other natural fulfilments of genuine desires, nor should they fight among themselves to gain an upper hand or suppress Dharma. Situations will decide the proper combination or mutual subordination or mutual priority. We must all submit to them."

² *Dharmah sucharitam sadbhiv sa cha dvabhyam niyacchati |
Arthasch atyarthalubdhasya Kamaschati prasanginah ||*
(Shalya 60-22)

Sri Krishna : “Beautifully summed up ! What a general statement for all times, Brother ! But what is the intended application or implication, now ?”

Baladeva : “If it is not clear, let me explain my mind. The war was naturally heading for an end by its own logic. But this Bhima used that ‘end’ to settle old scores ! This is a case of *Dharma* violated by *Kama* ! Revenge overtaking forgiveness ! Death is not the only end of life, and killing is not the only way of solving problems ! No *Artha* or *Dharma* is realised by this act ! It is a blot on the Pandavas. Say whatever you like, this is how I view it.”

Sri Krishna sighs deeply, on realising that he could not have Baladeva to see reason, overcome by anguish and remorse. He thinks for a while and then replies :

Sri Krishna : “Brother, you are elderly, but innocent. You know the science of political wisdom but not its application or practice. Your general faith in the principle is unquestionably just. But see who went to those extremes of *Kama* and *Artha*, which you wish rightly to be avoided ? It is Duryodhana, and his evil council including his father ! Throughout, this is the point of this tangle and long drawn confusion ! You are blaming the wronged party for the excesses. The mere disposal of Duryodhana is not the issue ! Bhima is settling scores for all humanity, for once, against Duryodhana’s encroachments on morality and law. To view it as a purely personal vendetta does no good to you, or to him or to anybody else. God chose Bhima as his instrument. That is all. Nuances of modalities

of justice are irrelevant at this point. If Duryodhana had died of suffocation in the waters of the lake or committed suicide, that would have been an ignoble death violative of Dharma, Artha and Kama! Bhima has done him no more than justice by offering him a heroic death within the precincts of Karmic laws. Bhima and Yudhishtira have been extremely generous to this enemy of mankind ! Why don't you compliment them ? A problem has to be viewed in its entirety and not only from the angle of the end, the solution ! If you go on pitying all dead villains, what purpose would it serve ? How much would it demoralise the future, if you write the history of the past, from the angles of those villains who lick the dust after all their evil deeds ? Is that the use for history, your interpretation of it, or for your profuse tears ? Should you not reserve some of those tears for the wronged people also ? You cannot cultivate a pleasure garden on a place with a volcano beneath it ! Nor does whitewashing the spot help you ! You have to allow it to erupt, be away until it cools off, and keep safe distances even after. The wrongs of history cannot be silently condemned into a few pages of a cold academic study. They have sprouting capabilities. In fact the seeds of the present lie in the past. Only by a right imagination of the future and right action, can you control that past, and alter your present. Wrongs are wrongs, and will yield dreaded fruits even after thousands of years. We must be wise in our interpretation of even immediate history. They say - docile people ! - that history should not be

attempted to be rewritten ! Why not ? If you do not, wrongs will write their own futures and confuse you ! Great wrongs, violations on Dharma, have to be remedied. Avatars are meant for them, you and I too ! There is no such thing as 'a mere future' without a base in the present or roots in the past ! Domes cannot be built in the air; some digging is necessary for a proper foundation laying!.... Are you listening ? I am tired of talking. It is an idealist who shapes life; not a magician! A hero and not a coward ! The more you run from history, the more it runs behind you to catch you in its hold. Because of one Duryodhana how many millions died ? Pity them, not this villain."

Baladeva : "Brother, while you speak, and as long as I hear, I see new light, new hope, and clarity and get new enthusiasm. But once you stop, a darkness envelops my mind ! What shall I do ? Doubt, dismay, disillusionment, and despair wrap me up once you stop talking. On second thoughts my mind refuses to acknowledge truth in what you expound! How can I resolve this dilemma ?"

Sri Krishna : "That will mean that I should stay permanently in your mind, occupying it against any other kind of thoughts ! Is this possible ? Yes ! It may be possible *if you want to remember me* ! This is what I have already told Arjuna once. But if you love alternative ways of confused, harmful thinking I cannot help ! You have your freedom! I have my principles. For a heart that loves self-deception there will be no light, in any number

of lives, until love of truth dawns there. This takes you directly to Vedanta, which is no luxury, but an aid to understanding the past, the present and the future. This is what you are trying to resist ! When people try to understand life in selfish, narrow, perverted ways, their minds become clouded and ages and epochs lose their purpose and meaning, and so time brings about a change. It is then that Avatars manifest. In another thirty-six years this will happen, and what you see is but a foretaste of it, including your 'failing' or 'clouded' mind as you confess. It will usher in an age beyond repair."

Baladeva : "I do not understand a word of what you are saying. My submission is that Bhima should not have set this bad precedent for future heroes to dispose off their adversaries in similar evil ways. I just can't come out of this strong resentment."

Sri Krishna : "Then this means that Kaliyuga has just started here and now. Go and carry on propaganda against me then, by arguing that I did wrong in killing Putana, who, after all approached me with good intentions of breast-feeding me, in a truly motherly-manner, I was crying in hunger ! Right? Each of my exploits, you can 'explain' in this 'nobler' way for the betterment of humanity, which will consist of Kamsas and Duryodhanas ! Is this why you came with me as a brother ?

Baladeva : "Do not confuse me again; you are an exception, and a totally different case ! You have vowed to destroy the enemies of mankind."

Sri Krishna : “Answer me then : Who is this Bhima? What for has he descended ? Who is this Duryodhana? Is he not Kalipurusha ?”

Baladeva : “If the viewer’s perception is not right, Kali can be treated as Krita, and Krita as Kali. Whose views are we to understand as right ?”

Sri Krishna : “Let your view be right, first . Let us not talk of hypothetical cases or abstract, irrelevant views. Leave history to its fate, if you cannot understand it or set it right.”

Baladeva was silenced, though he was left still unsatisfied. He left for Dwaraka along with his retinue. Yudhishtira follows to give him a formal send off.



It is sunset now. Servants have set up torches with firebrands in army quarters and various camps along routes of moving soldiers and vehicles. A band of such torch-bearing servants approaches where Yudhishtira stands, to await orders to provide light around Duryodhana’s dying body to guard him against wild animals, night prowlers. Sri Krishna still stands there with the sad thought that he could not bring his brother round to his own views of right and wrong. Yudhishtira and Bhima return from the lake after bathing in its cool waters. They are dressed in clean, spotless clothes. The twins too are unhappy with how Baladeva talked and refused to see reason, even with Sri Krishna’s lucid analysis.

The problem now seemed to be what to do with this dying body of Duryodhana : He would not survive

and so medical help would be of no avail. Secondly he *must not* come back to life, to repeat all this story of hatred and war over again. Humanity, normally expected in the case of a dying warrior, was one thing. Treatment to a prisoner of war was another thing. Confusion again, as Baladeva had said !

Yudhishtira : (to Sri Krishna) "Friend ! The inter-family feud is drawing to a close. The person who nurtured all this enormous hatred will be no more in a short while. Your grace has helped us in crossing over this tremendous ocean of sorrow. All mankind will be indebted to you forever. But this villain had better die earlier, rather than put the blame on us even in his dying moments ! This is gnawing into me, as even Baladeva blames us !"

Sri Krishna : "That is how the wicked die, creating problems even after death ! He will taunt you and mock at you in even future memories. He will occupy idle minds, easily gullible, and pose problems for infinite number of generations to come. You and I cannot prevent this. It is to be seen what Kritavarma will do, inheriting this legacy hereafter as his loyal friend ! What new Mahabharatha he will initiate or enact, is to be seen. The war-field itself may shift to another quarter. Very likely, he will take it with him into Dwaraka; or even individual hearts that have not witnessed these brutalities. Are you going to be responsible for all this too ?

Yudhishtira : "What shall we do next ?"

Sri Krishna : "We have to take possession of the

Kaurava camp; whatever remains - cash, jewellery, valuables, horses or elephants, chariots - must be shifted to the capital.. Then meeting the aged King and queen, comforting the women folk. Perhaps in a day or two conducting cremations for all the dead heroes, wherever bodies are identifiable, or mass cremations for others, whose bodies may be recovered partially, in limbs, trunks, heads or others. What else can we do for them ? Then obsequies.. and then your ceremonial entry of the city as the new king in the making. Finally crowning you and last my return journey to Dwaraka.....”

Yudhishthira : “This Duryodhana ? Should he live beyond all this still ? Or even into this ?”

Sri Krishna : “What did he do with other dead bodies? Of his own brothers ? Do the same ! After he is no more, cremate him too befittingly. Let him repent at least in his last moments, which may last for some more days. We cannot help leaving him then.”

Duryodhana : “You cunning cowherd ! What did you say ? ‘Repent ?’ Never ! It is you who ought to repent for your crimes and be ashamed of ! Are you not the cousin of the servants of Kamsa ? Do not forget that you have helped the mean fellows with your crooked counsels ! Were you not the one to instigate Bhima through Arjuna by gesture, that he should crush my thighs ? Do you think I did not notice it ? You caused a lie to be uttered by this Yudhishthira to eliminate Drona ! Have you

mercy or manners ? You are directly responsible for this war in which thousands died daily, for your false alignment with those who were ready to live in forests permanently, otherwise ! Do you think I could have been defeated in a straight, honest and rule-bound war ? Would I be lying here, unattended like this, but for you ?”

Sri Krishna : “Fellow. Do not deceive yourself when you ought to be self-searching. It was your own plots and evil machinations that have killed your brothers and relations, to land you in this condition, with no one to pity you ! Not even one ! Did I not foretell all this ? Do not blurt irresponsibly ! If you really have compassion for Drona or Bhishma, why did you bet them as pawns in this war ? What gamble is this in terms of lives ? Is this Brihaspatiniti or Shukraniti ? What lores have you studied ? When? Where ? What right have you now to comment on others ? You trusted that blasted fellow Kanika, for your deceitful plots, ploys, and plans! Reap the fruits of the same ! The wages of greed are grief. Do not die indecently in deception, or burn with jealousy on the funeral pyre, at least ! It will be an insult to fire. Or else the sins you have committed will follow you to the other world too. Die silently, suffering for your own crimes. Do not transfer them to others in this last moment.”

Duryodhana : “I have nothing to repent for. After all I have studied the Vedas, attained post-graduate status, conducted sacrifices, given charities....”

Sri Krishna : “To hell with your studies ! Do not utter

a word more about Vedas. You have lost all eligibility even to mention that sacred word. Where is it evident in your character that you are a student of the Vedas ?”

Duryodhana : “Bluster like a braggart ! Who can bridle your foul mouth ? See my achievements : I enjoyed rulership over this earth as an Emperor, till I achieved full satisfaction. I was a terror to my enemies, and stood my grounds against all their attempts to rob me of my dues and rights. Even in death, I go like a brave hero meeting his rightful end. I enjoyed godly pleasures while I lived and treated my enemies with all the contempt they still deserve. They could take away my royal powers not while I lived, but only after my death, as my left-outs ! Tell me who are the frustrated ones ? Me ? Or you and your wicked pack of Five ? Do you think they will rule peacefully without remembering my torments long after I am no more ? Alas ! They are not destined so. This Bhima kicked my head and stood on it ! I do not regret ! In the next few moments even vultures and crows will sit perched on my dead head ! Can I then drive them away ? This is an advance crow ! That is all ! Go, Go...”

Bhima lifted up his mace again, at this ! But Yudhishtira prevailed on him to avoid a lasting hit ! He looked at Sri Krishna, for the next steps. The torchbearers now arrived, fixed them around Duryodhana’s dying body at short distances from each other, so as to provide light till daybreak, and returned. The Pandavas and Sri Krishna too now left for their camps. On the

way the victorious forces shouted welcome and slogans of glory and best wishes to the triumphant heroes in voices of bravery. But that did not change the sad mood of these heroes, because of the false arguments they had just heard from the fallen villain. Duryodhana had denied them satisfaction even in victory at the last moment !



Nobody could snatch sleep in the Pandava Camp that night. Earlier Sri Krishna had got Arjuna's chariot ready for the last march back from the warfield into the pavilion, in the earlier hours. The heroes were unmindful of their tedium or tiresomeness, in the enthusiasm of success at last. It was very late in the night when the brothers entered their camps, after bath, exchanged of clothes and ornaments.

The women folk belonging to the Kaurava camp had already been escorted to the palace in safety. But valuables, cash, and other jewellery still waited to be shifted to the treasury. The treasurer took his time to count them and give a due account of them to Yudhishtira.

Yudhishtira : "Friend, sir ! I have to trouble you again and depend yet on you for guidance as well as fresh initiative in the next difficult steps to be placed. First comes the task of breaking open of our news of success to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari - which involves conveying to the king that Duryodhana is no more ! The old man cannot bear it; it will rattle his nerves and break his heart. But we cannot help it. Please undertake to comfort him and bring him

to senses. Next we shall appear here to offer our respects to him formally. He may not like it and some unpleasant scenes of disaster are likely on both sides. I do not know how to manage Bhima or the Blind King at that moment. Keshava, please helps us."

When Yudhishtira said so to Sri Krishna, he was still at the camp-door, and the other brothers were at a distance, descending from their chariots. They came to Arjuna's place and looked at Sri Krishna meaningfully to know why he was downcast in look and what Yudhishtira might have told him.

Sri Krishna was till ruminating over the hurtful words of Duryodhana and his misinterpretation of events throughout his life, in one-sided views of right and wrong. The next task entrusted to him by Yudhishtira too was difficult to carry out. It was more risky and unpredictable in consequence than conducting war itself. If there was a moment Yudhishtira had been anticipating and was afraid of, it was this - facing the Blind king after vanquishing his sons ! Gandhari could pronounce terrible curses and undo all this hard-won success. Dhritarashtra was difficult to comfort, with all his unreasonable expectations. It was possible that the Five Brothers could be reduced to ashes in these erratic flames of malice, and other human weaknesses.

Sri Krishna suspected too, a plot to destroy the Pandavas, as a last resort, in his palace, as a final masterstroke. No Shakuni needed to teach it now to the old king who had enough wickedness and crookedness in him still.

Sri Krishna found it extremely difficult to overcome the effects of the piercing suggestions of Balabhadra, and his partiality for Duryodhana, after all that had happened. So he still sat on his seat in Arjuna's chariot, with stretched legs, to ease his mind, in a carefree style. He half reclined on the back-support and closed his eyes. He yawned as never before, in a lazy mood, and was himself surprised by this involuntary act. Arjuna was looking at Yudhishtira's face, and Yudhishtira, unmindful of it, was expecting a definite quick answer of assurance from Sri Krishna, at that moment.

Yudhishtira : Krishna, friend ! Did you hear ? Who else can guide us or protect us now ?”

Sri Krishna : (folds up his legs, sits straight and answers). “Brother, eldest among the Pandavas ! This body and mind of your friend are always ready for your service. Have no doubt about it. I have also been thinking of the same problem that you posed, all through the night. It is a short while before daybreak. Let us steal some sleep before sunrise and answer this question. In the morning have a good bath, dress well and be ready in your camp. All of you also. Tentatively this is what I propose. Let me first enter the city, and announce the result by the blowing of my divine conch. That shall protect you. Next let me first meet the King and the queen myself, know their minds, allow them to vent their feelings, and try to cool them to the best of my capacity. That will prepare some ground for your reception. Then you will all enter. Will this do ? You can meet Vidura and your mother afterwards; and also Bhanumati and other women-

folk at the Palace, somewhat more leisurely. But before that I shall myself comfort them also. Are you relieved ?”

Yudhishtira weeps like a child and sobs, in utter gratefulness and melts in the grace of Sri Krishna ! He is still unable to believe he is successful in war, or that there is no more war, no more strife and no more hatred. He finds it difficult to adjust to this changed situation. He sees his obedient brothers ready to carry out his instructions; but his vision is blurred by tears. He is being carried away in the overflowing Grace of Sri Krishna and the current is too swift and comfortable for him to resist or think otherwise. He remembers his mother, and longs to meet his affectionate uncle, Vidura. He is anxious to meet the Blind King to offer apologies, and give him some comfort, assurances of his well-being in his last days, in the absence of his sons - but still dreads that moment of meeting.

He could neither rest, nor sleep, as the night rolled on. Arjuna was still in the chariot, waiting for Sri Krishna to get down first, and then stretch a hand of support to him to help him alight too, as usual ! While climbing on, it was Sri Krishna first, Arjuna next; while alighting it was the other way round, everyday, all these days. But today Keshava was still there in the chariot today. After seeing that Cosmic vision on the first day, Arjuna would often feel it irksome, unpleasant and uncomfortable to use Sri Krishna in that mean position of a mere charioteer ! But lethargy of ‘custom’ would come to his aid and eclipse that divine experience in the next moments gradually. “That is Maya !” - he would say to himself.

Arjuna : "Keshava, wouldn't you alight today ?"

Sri Krishna : "Today the procedure is reversed. You will please get down first."

Arjuna : "Why ? Have you forgotten the custom ? the Protocol ?"

Sri Krishna : "I am aware of what I am saying. Just obey."

Arjuna : "Pray, why ?"

Sri Krishna : "I shall tell you; but first get down. You will know it yourself."

Arjuna thought that there must be some mystery behind this command and so obeyed. Sri Krishna untied the horses and freed them. Then he waved to the Hero on the flag, to Hanuman, as if to tell him : "You are free hereafter. I appreciate your services." Hanuman folded his hands and bent down his head in reverence; he flew away to the Himalayas. The horses too disappeared !

Arjuna turned back and saw Keshava alighting the chariot ! Then in a flash, the chariot went into a blaze, with the flames reaching to the skies, and was reduced into ashes.."

All other Pandavas too turn at it and see the wonder in petrified presences, without understanding the significance.

Sri Krishna : "Friends, this was a chariot gifted by god Agni, during the Khandava episode; you remember ? It is proper that it is returned to its source once the use is over. Do we have a right

to keep it beyond its use ? It was in form and good shape only because I was present in it; otherwise, the great weapons and missiles used against it by Drona, Bhishma, Karna, Kripa and Ashwatthama would have burnt it long long ago ! The chariot withstood all that because of the Divinity endowed with it.”

Arjuna : “I would say it was your Divinity that kept its life.”

Sri Krishna : “You can say it, if you so please. But add : The greatness of the hero in the flag too added to it. Did you not see how many times Bhishma and others had to change their chariots ? That is the fate of mortal frames ! Yours was the only exception. Remember that your bow, Gandiva, too is a gift of Fire. Nobody could touch it, cut it or put it to disuse; even the chord was in tact. There is still some work for it. So let it remain with you till then.”

The Pandavas and the Panchala heroes entered their camps with lightened hearts, assured that God was with them and Divinity alone had protected them all this long, without a doubt. They could now sleep with some comfort.

Unfortunately the Panchala heroes could not realise that it was their last night or that a tragedy awaited them !

Even the guards slept as never before, never to wake up again !



CHAPTER 47

THE MURDER OF THE PANCHALA PRINCES IN COLD BLOOD !

A few days before the war ended in victory on the Pandava side, news reached Kampilya that Shalya had been crowned as General of the Kaurava army ! That was a sign that the end was near. So Draupadi drove to Kurukshetra to be ready to share victory with her husbands and be with them in their most glorious moment of life. From Dwaraka too Subhadra started similarly. The queens were received with due honours and respects at the camp. They went to rest immediately, after tiresome journeys.

The Pandavas and Panchala princes received this news with eagerness and comfort. It was timely and proper, as the war had ended, just then.

Sri Krishna was away at his camp to plan for the next day's programme as Yudhishtira had wanted, and began thinking of various steps to avert the dangers that lurked in the blind King's palace.

All were fast asleep in the camps, including the guards at the camp entrance; they expected no more war,

no ambush, no danger and were totally relaxed, with weapons away, too, 'sleeping' in corners.

Then happened a terrifying tragic event ! Ashwatthama, who had known of Duryodhana's fall, came into this camp of the Pandavas and Panchalas, stealthily, with a naked sword, killed the guards without a shriek from their throats and looked for his preys ! In the inadequate light that lamps threw, he mistook the sons of Draupadi - five of them, resembling their fathers - for the real Pandavas, cut off their heads, and made a bunch of them with their hair tied together for a handle ! In the Panchala camp, he killed Dhrishtadyumna, Shikhandi and others without a trace of remorse and left them there; held the dangling heads of the *Upa-pandavas* in the other hand, and left for where Duryodhana was lying restlessly in the border stage between life and death, anxiously for him !

What had preceded was this :

Soon after the Pandavas and Panchalas had left the banks of Lake Dwaipayana, leaving Duryodhana surrounded by torchlights, Kritavarma, Kripa and Ashwatthama woke up from rest under a banyan tree, in alarm, trepidation and anxiety, at a considerable distance in a lonely spot ! They had presumed that no one would disturb Duryodhana that very evening, though the missing horses, soon after their return from the lake had caused some fear. Still they thought that wandering thieves on the war-field might have stolen them, and dismissed fears of the Pandavas' detection of the whereabouts of Duryodhana. When they went there again after second thoughts a ghastly sight awaited

them ! Wolves, jackals and other wild animals were eating into and tearing the flesh of his thighs, and pulling them in different directions. The once powerful and proud prince was hardly able to prevent them or drive them away now, as the most he could do was to shout ! It was a horrible cry for help, when no help was assured in the situation ! Ashwatthama killed those wolves and jackals; kneeled beside his past friend, wept and sighed. Duryodhana too responded in grateful tears; his face was distorted beyond recognition in the blows of Bhima, and there was no remedy, no medical help. Teeth had been blown off, and the jaws had swollen, pressing the eyes into the skull, so that they could barely open. The thighs still were held on to the loins and wounds opened up everywhere. The bones of thighs had been powdered - so strong were the hits of Bhima. Now even the loosely hanging thighs had been dragged helter-skelter by wild wolves ! The pain was indescribable and beyond enduring even for a Duryodhana. The only consolation was now the realisation and reassurance that there were still friends to shed tears for him like this Ashwatthama. The tears stopped and an impression of satisfaction flashed on that distorted face.

Some inspiration had come to Ashwatthama, anew, just before reaching there to join Duryodhana. He and Kritavarma along with Kripa were resting under a banyan tree. On top of it some crows had built their nests, laid eggs and lived peacefully. They were asleep at that moment. Suddenly he heard sounds of disturbance from the nests, and the hero climbed up to see what now happened ! An owl had silently got in there and was engaged in killing the crows and hedgelings in a planned way, without weapons or aid from other owls!

This was too, a way of eliminating the undesirable enemies ! He - Ashwatthama - why could he not resort to the same method of killing the Pandavas and the Panchala princes, to avenge his father's murder, and also to bring some satisfaction to Duryodhana ? He broached it to Kripa for approval. Kripa dissuaded him on the grounds of immorality and cowardice not due to a war-hero of his stature. Kripa suggested that Vidura could be consulted ! What madness ! Vidura, of all people! Would he ever permit this ? Ashwatthama felt frustrated by this funny advice !

Ashwatthama : "uncle ! This night is most propitious for vengeance ! Tomorrow is an epoch away ! The opportunity may not come again, if we allow it to slip."

Kripa : "Young man, instead, we shall continue the war tomorrow."

Ashwatthama : "Are you mad ? War to continue ? Where is the army ? Who is the commander ? What purpose does it serve ? Who will take us seriously?"

Kripa : "You and I are long-lived, and so no risk of death lies on us. Kritavarma has still a small army. We shall do our duty, whatever the consequences may be !"

Ashwatthama : "And then ?"

Kripa : "And then, if we too are defeated, we shall formally concede victory to the victorious. That will be a dignified end for the war. You, I, and Kritavarma are in a way neutral, and have no actual stakes in the war. We have no personal obligations to anyone."

Ashwatthama : “The murder of my father ? Insult to him in death ? Do I not have reasons for vengeance?

Kripa : “That may be a personal account, not connected with the cause of this war ! Besides, it is a closed affair ! Why rake up this, as vengeance is no good for Brahmins ?”

Ashwatthama : “I am surprised uncle ! How can it be a closed matter ? Did father forget Drupada’s insults ? Should I forget Dhrishtadyumna’s insult?”

Kripa : “Then fight him in a straight war and not in this manner of a coward or thief ! Did your father fight like this ? or die like this ?”

Ashwatthama : “Circumstances have altered !”

Kripa : “That is what I am also saying. War is over. Do not start back-biting.”

Ashwatthama had no answer. After some minutes he replied : “Lets us go and meet Duryodhana. If he is alive and responds to my idea positively, we shall proceed, or else stop.”

Kripa : “Not ‘We.’ We shall not accompany you beyond where Duryodhana lies. If he is dead, we should close the matter there.”

Ashwatthama : “Everything must be over tonight, one way or another.

This was what had happened before the three came to see Duryodhana. His hard breathing sound was audible. Ashwatthama went to him, kneeled beside him and said :

Ashwatthama : “Friend, a hero like you ought not to have come to this end ! How cruel on the part of Fate ! Should you die with no one to mourn you now ? Does justice still prevail in life ?”

Duryodhana : (faintly) “Friend, those that should have mourned me, are all dead, without being mourned! Why expect miracles now ? At least you are here - three of you ! That is enough. All must die one day, as per the law of life. After all, like a true warrior I am dying on the war-field, and not in a rat’s hole like a coward. God is graceful to me for this much at least. See, today, the star is Shravana! A good one to die. The next five, beginning Dhanishta, are inauspicious, they say. That is luck. But hear my satisfaction : they killed me and all on my side by foul means, and not in a straight war ! They dared not win me in a just war. Trusted Generals also betrayed me - all of them, god knows, under what compulsions ! It is Sri Krishna who did that all - treachery throughout ! You should have heard Baladeva, my preceptor, arguing my cause powerfully here, just before Bhima hit me on the thighs, against combat rules ! What great solace ! At least one person from their side, saw the truth and dared to speak straight in the face of the Pandavas and Sri Krishna. Secondly, you three fought without reservation on my side, unlike others who fought under self-imposed constraints. How can I repay you ?”

Ashwatthama : “I have come to repay you now !”

Duryodhana : “What do you mean ? Repaying me ? Now ? When all is lost ?”

Ashwatthama : “Yes. My accounts are still not closed!”

Duryodhana : “I do not understand. Please explain.”

Ashwatthama : “See, my father had no place to stay, or support for his life, at one time. You provided him with food, shelter, job, honour and respect. I and my father owe our everything to your grace and charity. That is why we stood on your side in this war - not because of so much hostility to your sworn enemies ! See how that rascal, Dhrishtadyumna insulted my father at the end, as he sat in *yoga* ! A teacher, a Brahmin, in *yoga* to be dragged by hair and butchered like a sheep ! Can I remain without avenging this ? No one was there on your side then to kill that villain, Dhrishtadyumna ! Yudhishtira tricked my father into the belief that I was dead ! You want me, do you, to allow this liar still to live ? Tell me what shall I do with these Pandavas and the Panchalas? Should they be allowed to live to celebrate this victory tomorrow ?”

Duryodhana : (Derisively attempting to smile) “Who cares for your question now when the war itself is over ?”

Ashwatthama : “How can the war be over, with three of us still living ? Even if others are neutral, I am positive on your side. War can still be continued.”

Duryodhana : “That is an illusion !”

Ashwatthama : “Do you remember, you once wanted to offer me Generalship ?”

Duryodhana : “What of that now, when all is over ?”

Ashwatthama : “Give it to me now, and I shall show you that the war is still on, and shall bend the events in your favour even at this late hour !”

Duryodhana : “This does not make sense, now. Give up this false hope. I thank you for enthusiasm, still!”

Ashwatthama : “You don’t believe me ? You think I am crazy ?”

Duryodhana : (Suddenly realising something) “Oh ! You mean.... ? Well ... ? I have crowned you as my next General. Go ahead and do what you intend.”

Ashwatthama goes to the lake, brings waters in a handful bowl, makes Duryodhana touch it, sprinkles it on his own head to have a semblance of a ritual and says :

Ashwatthama : “I am now crowned, army or no army behind me. Let the king command me.”

Duryodhana : “Bring me then, the heads of the Pandavas and the Panchalas, without fail. I shall live and hold breath until you come with fulfilment of my last wishes.”

Here was a ‘King’ with crazy orders, and the crazy ‘General’ had executed those orders ! A disappointed Duryodhana now said :

“Ashwatthama, the heads of Panchala heroes are right. But you have failed in the more important command of bringing me the heads of the Pandavas !

These that you have brought are those of their sons by Draupadi.”

Ashwatthama was stunned ! He looked at those heads. Duryodhana had said the truth. Ashwatthama regretted his haste and having missed the heads of the Pandavas ! But nothing could be done now ! Still Duryodhana was happy.

Duryodhana : “ Hear, my friend ! Neither Bhishma nor your father who fought for so long as fourteen days, together, ever did me so much service as you have done now, to please me. At least one lineage of my enemies is no more. My love to you. Let me bid you farewell. We shall meet in the other world... Ah.... remember ... let us...” Duryodhana breathed his last !



Hardly had Ashwatthama run away like a thief from the Pandava camp, when there arose an unusual commotion there at sunrise. The guards were dead too; and others who observed it reported the same to the Pandava heroes. The heroes came to see the ghastly scene and felt that their hard-earned victory had been stealthily snatched away by a coward. Bhima and Arjuna guessed it must be Ashwatthama ! Subhadra and Draupadi were inconsolable ! The queen felt the irony of her having arrived just to see her sons, so murdered in cold blood !

Sri Krishna too arrived urgently, concurred with Bhima and Arjuna, and ordered that the villain, Ashwatthama be brought prisoner, dead or alive. Nakula now drove Bhima's chariot to kill the prey.

Yudhishtira relapsed into another bout of 'renunciation' and a harangue on it.



When Bhima left, nobody had any doubt about his capturing of Ashwatthama. But everyone doubted whether Ashwatthama could stoop down to this level of cowardly act ! No one could understand what he had achieved by this. Here was Yudhishtira cursing himself for this war and all these consequences. He objected to Sri Krishna's orders to bring Ashwatthama, also captive! Sri Krishna had to speak for long to convince him of the rightness of his decision :

Sri Krishna : "Yudhishtira, come to senses proper !

I know your boundless grief is preventing you from correct assessments, presence of mind, and action appropriate for the moment. You will say what is the use of punishing this villain ! That raises the more elaborate questions of law, retribution and a king's duties, in the larger perspective of the rule of the right. Can you let go criminals? Will you ask every time 'What is the use of punishment' ? Have you no duty to uphold the rule of law, which means deterrent punishments ? Listen to the history of this villain and then judge for yourself."

Yudhishtira : "I am not questioning you, Sri Krishna!

You can never be wrong, nor can I be beyond correction. Your expertise in all lores, your grasp of the right action, and your efficacy in eliminating evil and love of the cosmic order are all praiseworthy, as the entire world knows. I can never equal you or understand you. What all has happened is a

challenge to my understanding of Good and Evil! It is beyond my grasp or analysis. You have tried to avoid this war, to the best of your capacity - no one can blame you. But still events leave me in a profound state of sadness. How can I overcome this over-powering sorrow or confusion ? Show me a way out."

Sri Krishna : "This is an age of confusion, all right! Greater people than you fell into much mightier traps of confusion. Bhishma, Drona, Bhurishravas, Gandhari and may be some 'sages' too. That is yet to unfold in the immediate future. Arjuna was terribly confused on the very first day ! Karna never gained clarity of mind right from the beginning. This will continue for some more years, until greater calamities befall humanity ! You must know why. Let me explain in greater detail : Dharma is not static and cannot be so in a perpetually dynamic life, bound by space and time. Time too is a flow. Space is a mere concept, providing a base for changing contexts of life. Hence Dharma, though beyond deformity in its ideal nature, is actually capable of acquiring shades of assertive meanings in life to bring it unity, purpose, form and concretion. That means when contexts change, Dharma sheds outworn meanings and acquires novel meanings, newer relevance, altered importance, changed priorities, and overall new looks, and discards written and frozen meanings of bygone ages. Its purpose is to direct us to achieve the same goals of steadiness, steadfastness and reverence to age-old values. While values remain the same, means

of their achievement will vary according to altered situations. Dharma is constant as value, but a variable in means of realising it. People confuse between the two ! The changing needs of times are ignored by even great men of intelligence ! Before you wake up from childhood to youth, from youth to middle age, from middle age to old age, contexts will have altered inevitably ! You have to keep pace with time and life's flow, and catch up with ideals and values, which alone will save you and bestow immortality on you. The most important thing is to discard what is out of date. Shall I illustrate ? Bhishma and Drona are elders, and so shall not be hurt or insulted in any way - this is a general rule, normal practice. The ideal behind is that what is pious, holy shall be revered. But Bhishma and Drona join the party of Evil against Good ! Now the general rule breaks. They are no longer holy or pious. They have changed the contexts of their own accord ! Now they fool you in old forms and norms. What is your duty ? See through the veil, the mask they wear, and tear it open ! What do you see ? Evil masquerading as Good. You still see the old form; I tell you that this is an illusion ! Reverence must give place to elimination of evil. This transition is difficult for one who has the mental habit of remaining in the past and cannot see the change. The same is the case with this Ashwatthama too ! Again, check it from the opposite angle. Should Bhishma lift his bow against you? He appears in the pose of enemy of your cause, your Dharma; still you see him in his old relation as grandfather, which is anachronistic,

grotesque, preposterous and against the very cause of Dharma which you embody and expound ! Your sensibility is stagnant, petrified, and becomes a monument of absurdity ! Even if I alert you, warn you, wake you up to your duty, your tired, fixed, dying mind clings to the old habit - that is what I call confusion ! If elders must be respected, as you wish, you should expect those older people also to extend love to you, and not stand with weapons against you ! Or is this also a form of love ? Dharma is multipolar, multishaded and to try to reduce it to one fixed dimension is in itself Adharma ! The great changes were wrought by Duryodhana and company, unalterably, unilaterally ! Only Bhima and Draupadi were quick to notice the change of meaning of Dharma ! You are still wallowing in the mire of dead meanings ! See ! A number of such changes took place - not just one or two, in your own presence, around you, involving you all inextricably. Was it Dharma to pawn your queen in that shameful gamble ? Shakuni tricked you, no doubt ! But where was your better discrimination ? Your choice ? Then she was harassed, humiliated and you thought it was your Dharma to be a silent spectator to it ! This spate has continued until now, and you are unable to wake up ! Why should Shalya join the Adharmic side ? Why should you pity him ? Why should you pity when Duryodhana falls prey to his own Karma ? Does Karma operate or no ? Is it above you and all others or no ? Do not Karma and Dharma make a formidable combination of forces to face in life or no ? Take this new example :

If you are interested in health, as you ought to be, how will you treat diseases ? By medicine or surgery you will get rid of impeding parts and not pity them, just because they have organic relations with you. So also on an agricultural field. Sanity requires you to weed out the nonessential growth, grass, thorns and other parasitical growths. To keep them would be against your main interest of good crops, and the fruit of your toil all through. You are just weeding out the old stubs, for creating a better order, of which God has chosen you as His instrument."

Yudhishtira : "Very pleasant to listen to ! But what happens to humane feelings ? The nicer elements of human nature ? Is there nothing finally irretrievable in all the floating life ? How do we know God's mind or who His agents are, or are not ? Our judgement may be someone else's errors. In relative life what is constant ?"

Sri Krishna : "It is difficult to convince one who does not want to change. I can understand one who entertains questions of his own heart and seeks answers from outside to support promptings within. I cannot answer this other one who imagines questions of all others, all sorts of people with in sincere doubts, doubts that are no doubts at all, eternal doubts flaunted for the sake of show, over the answers that are obvious even for the naked eye. Yet I shall answer you this once finally. I am not sure if it will convince you. I shall try :The 'nicer humane feelings' that you talk of, are part of civilization inheritance for all, and no abnormal

manifestation. They ought to be evident even in crime-perpetrators that you are now sympathising with unilaterally, and out of context. What is finally retrievable or not, is not one man's burden, but should be a product of collective efforts by all those interested in the survival of human culture. You are assuming that you are the sole responsible repository of all virtue; that you are the saviour, the sole arbiter of justice and presume that you can extricate yourself from the collective madness of mankind responsible for barbarities like war ! God's mind is reflected only in a calm, clear, eager, open mind of innocence, and not in an agitated, confused, dismayed mind overweighing with sorrow, out of its bounds, prejudiced and closed against freethinking on contextual questions like what have been agitating you and me. Are your answered ? Now listen to an episode from the life of the villain whom you are sympathising with, out of context. I doubt whether anyone of you know it. Drona once taught a missile called Brahma Shiras - its use and withdrawal - to Arjuna. Somehow, Ashwatthama came to know of it, quarrelled with his father for this partiality for the disciple, and insisted that he be taught it too ! Arjuna had got it without his requesting for it ! It was an act of Drona's overflowing affection, spontaneous, as he was impressed with Arjuna's politeness, good behaviour, steadfastness in truth, and control of senses. Ashwatthama had none, and the Father knew it well; and he admonished his son in unmistakable words. He knew the unsteady nature of that son, who by temperament had predilections towards evil

temptations.¹ So Drona imposed this restriction while teaching it under duress: ²

“Even when you are caught in the worst of dangers in war, in tantalising situations, in crises unimaginable, you should never use this missile, especially on human beings.”

“Drona never taught him how to restrain the missile. This devil then approached me, seemingly on a tour of pilgrimage, with an ulterior motive ! He wanted to exchange this unusable missile with my Sudarshana Disc ! As if, I did not know that missile earlier ! Could anybody dare make such a proposition to me ? This devil did ! But I put him off with a trick. I said to him - it is not difficult for me to give him anything, any among my weapons, but he should be strong enough to lift it, wield it for successful use. He tried, failed and bade good-bye to me ! He wanted to be a counter Vasudeva, like Paundraka ! Can you know his propensities now ? In the past, Ravana also did penance and had Shiva before him ! What for ? Do you know ? He asked for Parvati to be gifted to him as wife ! Ashwatthama belongs to this category of ‘devotees’ with impure, uncontrollable, ambitious, evil minds. On the contrary, our Arjuna who fought with the same Rudra as Hunter, did not ask for anything. The pleased god granted him Pashupatha missile on his own. Even my son Pradyumna did not ask for this

¹ *Viditam chapalam hyasit atmajasya duratmanah |*
(Sowptika 2-7)

² *Paramapadgatenapi na sma tata tvaya rane |*
Idamastram prayoktavyam manusheshu visheshatah ||
(Ibid - 8)

Sudarshana chakra. Still further, hear; before parting I asked Ashwatthama, why he wanted my Discuss. Do you know his reply ? He said : 'I shall then fight with you, defeat you and become immortal !'

Yudhishtira was stunned ! He did not know the depth of this fellow's crooked mind. He began to appreciate the arguments of Sri Krishna better now, that the contextual meanings of Dharma are subject to variations in life and time. But it was not easy to extricate himself from the shell of his confusions. For the time being, he was silenced and rendered argumentless. Sri Krishna proceeded :

"Tell me, what we should do with this devil, who has that Brahma Shiras - missile with him. Are you going to be lenient to him because he is a Brahmin? Or see him as a demon ?"

Yudhishtira could still find no answer ! But he was tormented with new possibilities, with this missile in the possession of the villain.

Sri Krishna moved towards his golden chariot to mount it. Arjuna and Yudhishtira too climbed on to that Divine chariot which was equipped with all the weapons that were the favourite ones of the Divine Avatar.

The chariot was driven by Daruka, who had been ordered to find out the whereabouts of Bhima quickly. It was now obvious to the Pandava pair, why Sri Krishna was chasing Bhima with such haste - it was for his safety from Ashwatthama's deadly missile.



Ashwatthama was now seen running for life on the banks of Ganga, with Bhima behind him in reachable distance. Perhaps the villain was never before in such fright ! Bhima followed him in the speed of Garuda, with the earth trembling under his feet.

Bhagavan Veda Vyasa, by chance, sat there deeply immersed in meditation, when Ashwatthama ran to sit at the feet of the sage. This was a ploy perhaps - seeking safety under divine shelter, and escaping Bhima's fury, presuming that Bhima would better behave there, swallowing his anger.

But Bhima, and behind him Arjuna and Sri Krishna - all arrived there in a flash, as it were.

Ashwatthama now looked like a monkey, with his lustre of face lost, and a sense of guilt and shame covering him, and the fear of exposure and punishment! Veda Vyasa had not yet opened his eyes, and so the villain had not been able to seek his shelter or protection. He was certain that Bhima would kill him. Bhima's arrow was fixed at him for firm aim. The fellow loved life yet and wanted to save himself somehow. Bhima was abusing him :

"You son of a bitch, if you are still a man, fight with me ! You coward ! Killing those asleep is for impotent ones ! You vile Brahmin ! Fie unto you, you who run away in fear of punishment, after a murder that you are obviously ashamed of ! Like your father, you are also defiled by the food received at the hands of that dead villain, Duryodhana, and so your mind is perverted ! You are a veritable devil ! No sin shall

accrue to me, even if I kill you ! You murderer ! This is Yama now punishing you.....”

The curse on his father roused up Ashwatthama even in that helpless situation. Now he became a veritable demon, with a diabolic blaze of lustre flashing on his face ! He had now no weapons for self-protection or attack on Bhima for the fulfilment of his enraged appetite ! He had thrown away the blood-soaked sword in the camp of the Panchalas, after those murders ! He had not brought his bow or arrows either ! He looked around, picked up a straw and ignited it into that dreaded and forbidden Brahma Shiras, by the appropriate use of the formula ! He threw away the word he had given to his father ! He did not think that this was an insult, too, to his father’s memory, which he sought to avenge through those inhuman murders ! Sense had completely left him.

The moment he threw it at Bhima, Veda Vyasa opened his eyes, and seized his wrist, and tried to prevent the disaster for humanity. But it was rather late, as the missile had just left for the target.

Ashwatthama said : “Let no Pandava live hereafter” as the goal for the missile to achieve.

The missile blazed like cataclysmic fire and went after Bhima and Arjuna.

What Sri Krishna was afraid *would* happen, *did* happen at last ! He said to Arjuna :

“Partha, yoke the Brahmastra in your bow and direct it against this villain’s missile ! Quick, be quick.”

Arjuna had not used this equally dreaded missile even once in all those eighteen days ! He was so self-controlled. Bhishma and Drona did not submit themselves, even to this discipline.

Sri Krishna roared : "Quick, or else all of you will die this very moment."

Arjuna obeyed, getting down the chariot, and was quick. But he remembered Drona for the last time in gratitude. Arjuna bowed down to Ashwatthama also, as the son of his teacher even in that moment, which would have caused confusion to any other hero. He said : "Let the world be protected." He bowed to the gods above, to Shiva, the supreme War-god.

The two missiles hit each other like meteors in the outer space, and clashed like flying mountains and stabilized lightnings, both growing in power mutually, and not losing a bit of their potencies or lustre ! The sound they produced was like planets crashing, oceans in convulsions, or eruptions of volcanoes. The sound deafened all creatures possessed of ears; and vegetations on either side of Ganga got reduced into ashes in matters of seconds ! Even creatures in the oceans died of the terrific sound. The earth trembled.

Narada, Brahmarshis and gods appeared in the skies. Veda Vyasa got up and eyed Ashwatthama, as if to burn him with the power of his eyes !

Ashwatthama stood with his head bent in shame. The Rishis told him swiftly :

"You, unworthy son of a worthy father, what have you done ? You have done what no sane man ought

to do, let alone a Brahmin ! How low you have stooped ! For whose benefit have you done the ignoble act ? When your father is no more, when your master - that villain - is no more, and after this wasteful war is decisively over in favour of those whom justice and divinity have blessed, and you have practically no cause to fight, should you experiment on this dreaded weapon which your father had also avoided using all these days, diligently ? Will this not be a bad precedent for future rogues ? Recall the missile and diffuse it immediately. Quickly."

Ashwatthama : "I do not know how to withdraw it or diffuse it ! Father did not teach it to me. I had to use it in self-protection against Bhima, who nearly killed me. But I am sorry."

He wept in real repentance ! The Rishis now looked at him.

Arjuna : "Great masters ! I can, no doubt, withdraw my missile; but as soon as I do it, this other one exercised by the villain will destroy all of us the Pandavas ! Do you wish it to happen ? I can tell you that I know how to recall that deadly weapon too had I been its propeller. No, but I am on the defensive. The rule is that he who first uses it alone has to recall it; not I. That is the compulsion it has. But you know that this rogue does not know how to withdraw it ! If someone can do that as soon as I recall mine, it will do well for all of us ! Or else we shall revert to evil days again ! Rest assured of one thing. Eventually my Brahmastra will destroy his Brahma Shiras. But it will take

time, and most of the world would be in ashes by then ! Let me also tell you what Drona, my teacher had told me : a fellow, not observing codes of Brahmacharya (celibacy, fasting, learning and dedicating all energies to God-attainment), will himself get destroyed ultimately by the improper use of that missile ! Even if he knows how to withdraw it, will not help him there ! Only someone who has observed Brahmacharya without blame or blemish can stop it or render it effectual. Tell me what I can do ?”

Veda Vyasa : “There is another aspect to it too : a region of this earth where Brahma Shiras is neutralised by Brahmastra will suffer famine for twelve years. Perhaps a whole nation will also be destroyed ! Arjuna is blessed in knowing this, and is not using it voluntarily, for that reason. Ashwatthama, who used it after well knowing this evil effect is the enemy of mankind and is a blot on the Brahmin community. Arjuna, you will withdraw your missile. Let this villain cut off from his head a crest jewel born with him and offer it to the Pandavas; let them consider it as his self-surrender, without resorting to the removal of his head, as he is a Brahmin. Let this token end the punishment given to him. Let him be then forgiven.”

Ashwatthama : “You fools ! I shall not surrender that jewel, that gem, of my hair-tuft, on my own. Not all the wealth of all the worlds put together will equal the value of my crest gem ! It is this that has protected me from the weapons of my enemies till

now, and has kept me free of evils like disease, hunger, fear and physical debility. I shall never part with it, or allow it to be taken away by force also. On the other hand, my missile also shall not be infructuous. I do not know how to withdraw it too. Only one thing can be done : I can spare the Pandavas and direct its fury and restrict it to the embryo in Uttara, wife of Abhimanyu. Then it will cool off on its own. That is all I can do."

Veda Vyasa : "You blasted fellow, do that at least, and spare the Pandavas at least."



By now Draupadi, Subhadra and Uttara followed by all women folk of the royal palace were there on the banks of Ganga to see what ill effects had followed upon the Pandavas by the excesses of Ashwatthama ! They all listened to what Sri Krishna was saying :

Sri Krishna : "Do you think, you cursed Brahmin, I do not understand your meaning ? Do you think I shall allow this seed of Pandava family to perish, this embryo to be so easily destroyed by your evil design? There is a forecast, an anecdote. It happened in Upaplavya, when Abhimanyu and Uttara lived together, and she conceived. A virtuous sage predicted : 'Great lady ! When all the Kurus are no more, this child in your womb is going to be still-born. Someone will bring it back to life by his great merciful glances. The child will thereafter be known as Parikshita for this reason. The forecast cannot become false; nor will I allow that to happen.'"

Ashwatthama : “You crafty, schemy, clever cowherd! Your cunning plans will not succeed against my missile ! It shall kill its target, of course ! No one can save this embryo now ! Let me see how you will be able to protect it !”

Sri Krishna : “You will see how I shall protect it ! But you will rank with Pootana as the killer of children, in a notoriety that will cling to you in all your future births, and remain permanent in history. This will be death for you in life, worse than real death. This embryo will be brought back to life by me, as you will see to your dismay and frustration.”

Sri Krishna signals to Arjuna with a glance to proceed. Arjuna closes his eyes in meditation, and in devotion to his preceptor, utters the formula to withdraw his missile ! So ! The missile becomes cool and disappears. Ashwatthama’s missile blazes ever more fiercely and enters Uttara’s personality. It envelops her in a splendorous conflagration, at which all close their eyes; and then the missile cools off and disappears without a trace. Arjuna looks at her in utter helplessness. The sorrow of the Five Brothers shakes even Narada and Veda Vyasa for a while !

Next moment Uttara swoons and falls down. She is burnt, bruised in all flesh and bones. Women folk around offer whatever aid they could. She delivers the babe untimely. (It was just six months old.) But it has no human shape or any other shape whatever ! It is a splinter-like something, now ash-covered, still smoking!

Ashwatthama beams a diabolical smile in the (false) satisfaction that Sri Krishna could do nothing about it, and the child is dead, so that his own word to Duryodhana is fulfilled at last ! He remembers the dead Duryodhana and weeps for his tragic end.

Sri Krishna views now this devilish Brahmin with utmost contempt, but calmly and with confident comfort, is about to perform a miracle. He says to Yudhishtira:

Sri Krishna : “Yudhishtira ! Be you all witness now to a miracle unheard of, or unseen before : I shall bring back this babe to life, though it is reduced to ashes by the fire of the missile. This will be no challenge to my austerity or penance.”

He looks at the sky and swears : ³

“If I am a spotless bachelor (one who lives in and for God), if Truth stays in me as its abode, and if my over-lordship of the universe remains unchallenged, then let this babe come back to life.”

Uttara’s face blossomed, even in her then condition of being fatally affected by the missile’s fire. Gods above showered flowers... The Fire Brand turned into a handsome baby !

Ashwatthama’s face faded with disappointment. His devilish glee subsided. Sri Krishna now cursed him :

“You evil soul ! Listen : You shall die a living death for three thousand years, wandering in all sorts of places, incognito, mostly in deserted or desolate places, in helpless condition, with all imaginable or unimaginable

³ *Yadi me brahmachayam syat, mayi satyam cha tishtati |
Avyahatam mama aishwaryam tena jivatu balakaha ||*

diseases eating into your vitals, causing unbearable pain, and making you stink in the worst possible odours; you shall be haunted by fears, anxiety, and unrest throughout. Peace shall evade you, and make you a living ghost. This babe whom you wanted to kill shall live a long and full life and rule this empire for sixty years, after attaining all wisdom of lores from elders like Kripa, and as successor to Yudhishtira. Now the lasting punishment awaits you. Bhima shall cut off from your hair-tuft that precious jewel or gem, which you refused to surrender voluntarily, and hand it over to Yudhishtira. This shall be treated as 'killing' you, ritualistically, as per my orders. Bhima, go to him, cut off that gem along with that tuft and bring it here."

Draupadi now takes pity on this rogue ! She says in intervention :

"After all he is our preceptor's son. Leave him alone. I shall silently suffer for my past karma."

She bows down to him, even in her suffering, - to that villain ! Ashwatthama acquires a notorious form of a demon, and his body begins to stink. He runs away screaming, unable to endure bodily suffering.

Draupadi wishes that crest jewel to be worn by Yudhishtira as a mark of final victory in war.

Sri Krishna comforts Draupadi, Uttara and Subhadra. All climp up chariots to return to the camp.

Sri Krishna had protected the Pandavas, after all, in that unique way.



CHAPTER 48

BHIMA PROTECTED !

It was the nineteenth day of war noontime. The Pandavas were not only victorious finally, but also had escaped the death - trap of Ashwatthama, due to Sri Krishna's grace. They were now planning the future, the first step being how to meet Dhritarashtra, and escape his possible fury or censure. Sri Krishna was with them. Finally, after a lot of discussion of various steps to take, Sri Krishna said :

Sri Krishna : "We are now the victors. Let us send word to the blind old king that we are entering the capital in the evening at the auspicious moment of dusk - called *Godhulilagnam*. It is your duty, Yudhishtira, to comfort the broken man. It is no less a duty of mine too. As a prelude, let our publicity-boys announce this in the streets of the city with alarm drums and other instruments to draw public attention. That will make the public ready for your reception in a befitting royal way. Meantime, we have to inform the grand old sire, Bhishma, lying on the battle-field, of our having deservedly won the war, and take his blessings. You require that now foremost. That will save you from many a future danger. Come, let us go."

The Palace assistants first took Uttara to the palace, safely. Draupadi and Subhadra stayed still with the Pandavas. The Pandavas removed their war-dresses, shields and weapons; had good baths; put on clean civil attires; they strode on horsebacks to where Bhishma lay. Draupadi and Subhadra went by a separate chariot to the same destination. Sri Krishna led this party in front, on a white horse !



Bhishma now lay there beyond anybody's recognition ! Eyes sunken into sockets; cheeks were hollow, barely exposing the jaws. The only prominent features of that face were a prominent nose and high brows, and a bulging, protruding forehead ! The long white beard had now turned yellowish, and was divided into two undisciplined streamlets around his neck on either side, almost surrounding that unfortunate neck, like the embracing arms of a mother, who had no better comfort to offer. He had some servant-guards around him, no doubt. But more loyal than they or anybody else stood the arrows, upholding his body, although piercing into his body, deep into where once some flesh stood ! They never betrayed him even on deathbed. (They were to burn with him later !) On the head-side, there flowed Ganga in a spring, with a delighting, comforting sound, which was Bhishma's only music now ! The guards protected that body against attacks from wild animals plentifully roaming about the war-field. Burning torches fixed all around that body were not merely useful, but unintentionally looked like some royal respect offered to a soldier of that rank and age. Servants were feeding the dry and thirsty mouth

of Bhishma with sweet Ganga waters, every now and then. To relieve Bhishma of the foul smell of his own rotting body, and of the carcasses all around, Yudhishthira had arranged for perfumes and smoke emitting sweet odours all through day and night. But Bhishma had no use for them, as his mind was concentrated on Sri Krishna and his elevating Holy Names - "Keshava, Vasudeva, Mukunda, Govinda-" and so on, and was muttering those dear names inaudibly in that breathless state, with feeble lip-movements to those effects. His mind was constantly going over his rights and wrongs, critically, to make his last confessions, to his dear God. He was keenly listening also to the day-to-day reports of war, since the day he fell, in between. He was keeping a careful count of his days, awaiting the dawning of the brighter half of the year. The latest he had just heard of was about Ashwatthama's crime against innocence in sleep ! Bhishma tried to weep; tears had dried up!

It was then that he heard some announcements from close servants, followed by sounds of horse hoofs, confirming the arrival of the Pandavas to pay their respects to him.

The princes alighted their horses and neared him now. They touched his feet, said respectful words of custom, and sat very near him. Draupadi and Subhadra too came near, followed by Sri Krishna, last, and all paid respects and got seated near the old man.

Bhishma's searching eyes surveyed all in satisfaction, and got fixed on Yudhishthira, in a steadfast gaze. Then they viewed Sri Krishna in a kindly, supplicating, loving attitude. The eyes closed now, as if tired. The old sire

tried to open his parched mouth, and extricate his stuck up tongue as if to expect some service; he looked at Arjuna, meaningfully, and his helplessness found expression in tears now.

Arjuna understands it, and brings Ganga water in a bowl of closed hands, feeds his mouth, little by little and drenches the soiled face of the old man in wet hands, in some comfort. Now the other brothers also come closer. Bhishma again views Sri Krishna meaningfully, and Sri Krishna exudes grace in his blessing glances. The conversation begins :-

Bhishma : “Dharma... has won at last ! God bless you... with long life justified fame. But go... comfort the .. blind man ... The kingdom... must not... long... remain... leaderless. You... Yudhishtira.... get crowned... soon ... I ... am... unlucky... to... witness this.... scene... I ... too... have contributed... to your.. misery... Lord Sri Krishna... forgive.” (The old man closes his eyes in exhaustion.)

Yudhishtira : “Grand father. It is your blessing that has brought us to this victorious end. But bloodshed has happened on both sides in plenty. We are just leaving for the palace to comfort the old king. But, Sir, what meaning has this crowning now, without your presence or participation ? If all wisdom dies with you, how will I benefit from it ? Do not blame yourself any more. It is we who should ask your forgiveness for felling you in this way.” (Weeps and sobs.)

Bhishma : “Child... I ... have plentifully.. blundered politically. These eight days... I have — reviewed

.... all ... in ... detail.. Now it is ... all ... no... use..
 Sri Krishna .. is always with you for guidance..
 Vidura ... too. .. is .. there... to help you... First...
 get ... crowned... Then ... in the brighter half .. of
 .. the year... if .. Sri Krishna... gives me... strength..
 I shall teach.. you.. political wisdom ... all.. sastras..
 It is not you.. that killed me.. Arjuna !.. It is ...
 my own *adharma* ! ... I shall suffer... for my
 sins... Get going..."

The old man wept profusely, now. The Pandavas still stayed there for some more time. Now Bhishma eyed Draupadi with compassion and an appeal for her forgiveness and said :

Bhishma : "Your sacrifice is great !... very .. very... unimaginably, you are great !.. Subhadra !.. your sacrifice too.. What a brave son you have lost !... It is because of .. noble... mothers... and their contributions like yours.. that this ... land of Bharatha. ..has remained great ! It has escaped... many a cataclysm... because of ... great women like you..."

Draupadi : "Grand Sire ! Our strength lies in your blessings for all times. My sacrifices are little in comparison with those of brother Sri Krishna. Did he wish for any glory, any emperorship or any flattery or fame ? Did he place his own comforts above ours, at any time ? Did he not work untiringly for the welfare of all humanity ? Was he not equal to the feuding families in his sincere efforts to avoid this war ? Even when war became a certainty, did he not stand on the side of the

physically weak but dharmically strong party, to uphold the fallen dharma ? He took up our embassy, my husband's chariotship, and saved my husbands from a hundred odd missiles and mischiefs of the enemies - all without any expectations ! Should he not be praised, instead of me ? My mother-in-law Kunthi's sacrifices are no less in importance ! Womenfolk in this country take birth only to make great sacrifices ! But then ? Evil men, greedy men, men with insatiable lust like Duryodhana are also born in this same country ! That is the misfortune of this holy land."

Draupadi remembers some past episodes, is choked with sorrow, breaks down, and then proceeds :

"Grand sir, I have now nothing to gain by remembering some irrevocable past events; yet shall I ask you some questions, if you are not pained ?"

Bhishma : "Proceed... Child... you do not need ... that permission now... The past cannot ... comfort.. those who have neither ... the future nor a present to live in ! Nor can... discomfort ... matter now.. Accounts must be clear... before ... we depart.... Ask me... what weighs... on... your mind... still.. in all... my actions and utterances."

Draupadi : "When I asked you in that ill-assorted royal assembly, in my distressed situation, whether what my husband did was right or wrong, (after pawning and losing himself as a bet, if he *did* have a right, still to bet me), you said that it was a complicated matter and you had no answer in terms of 'Dharma' ! Do you still stick to that view, which in fact helped

the villains and brought about all this crisis, all this war, all this devastation ? Can you now at least see right from wrong ?”

Bhishma : (Shocked, and yet self-composed) “What use is it... my daughter..., after all this ? Do.. you.. still.. need an answer ?”

Draupadi : “But you said, just now that accounts must be cleared ? Do I have a future, after that deadly past ?”

Bhishma : “You are... already... in an unalterable future... out of that... nightmarish past... Besides ... I am .. in clear mind.. now that I .. have lost all that ... bad blood and flesh... fed by... the tainted food... of evil fellows... are you.. answered ?”

Draupadi : “Sir, do not sulk at me or my words, please.... you said ‘unalterable’ future. But it has no meaning or peace, comfort or joy for me. It was in your.. your own hands, once, once only.. in that ill-fated gamble house, to have cleared all this mess and disaster. If you had pulled up those ruffians that were molesting me or threatened to disown them, they would not have dared ! You failed me then and all womenkind ! Is it right to demand sacrifice from women only, and offer all enjoyment to men, at their cost ? What has come of all my sacrifice ? I have lost my father, brothers, and children ! And for whose fault ? I have been vouched only Saumangalya.¹ After this blasted war, tell me Sir, how much difference lies between a

¹ A woman blessed with long-lived husbands is a ‘Sumangali.’

widow and a non-widow, except a mark of 'Kumkum' on her forehead ? I regret that I have to ask only you, these questions, which you are in no position to answer ! I may pray that cursed women like Draupadi shall not be born again in this unfortunate country ! Tell me sir, if I am wrong?"

Even the Pandavas are stunned by these bold and piercing words of Draupadi ! They have no balm in their hands to apply for Draupadi's wounded mind beyond all human or divine comfort ! They also regret that Bhishma had to be the unfortunate or unalterable target of these sharp words ! They are anxious to hear Bhishma's reply.

It was only Sri Krishna who remained unperturbed, smiling at the turn of events, appreciating Draupadi's point-blank questions shot at the dying man, aimed at opening his mental eyes before the physical ones closed. Sri Krishna was deeply touched by the anguish vented out by this lady who was repressed all these years, after all. Here was Bhishma fumbling for an answer :

Bhishma : "Mother... Panchali !... I am glad... I have.. this .. open opportunity... to ... ask... of you... your forgiveness... I blundered.. I now... see. clearly.. I am to blame.. Forgive me.."

Draupadi : "Grand sire, I am sorry for wounding your feelings by my taunting questions. That was not my intention. I only wanted to know your mind... at least now."

Bhishma : "Your other question !... Here is what methinks me.. It concerns 'renunciation'...

'sacrifice'... yours could have been avoided... Dhritarashtra's is unavoidable. .. His was a hellish determination to sacrifice... all his children for a futile ambition. He has been punished... justifiably. You... have been punished.....needlessly.. for my fault and ... and evil desires of incurable fellows who are now licking the dust ! The ... two cannot be equated."

Yudhishtira : (attempting to end this drifting dialogue, causing distress to the old man) "Sir, why go over all this again, when all is over ? Who will benefit from this postmortem ? What use is this analysis?"

Bhishma : "This is ... for your... own .. benefit... Do you.. remember how ... Veda Vyasa had... predicted.. that all mankind, ... particularly the great ... Kuru-race would .. meet... a cataclysm... in your name,.... in a cause... implicating you... unavoidably... in it? You are... a mere excuse ! ... You are not much to blame... Do not worry... or self-torment... yourself.. over the ... events that have ... just ended!... The blame .. is entirely.. on Duryodhana... on Dhritarashtra... They have been sacrificed on the ... altar.. of the war - God ! Yours is a voluntary self-sacrifice... You have shown generosity.. Come off greater... nobler... through this suffering.... Your fame is ... for.. all times."

Yudhishtira : (Anxious to know what the old man meant by 'you are not much to blame') "Sir, tell me where I erred and by how much, and in what respects."

Bhishma : (Trying to smile in vain) "Shall... I ... tell

you ?.. Do not .. be hurt !..... You should not.. have come at all ... to the gamble hall.... You should not... have... accepted... that invitation... or challenge !... That was a ... death trap ! Gambling is an avoidable addiction... for a king !... Do you... not know this? ... Still... more heinous ... is the crime of gambling.. away your own wife !. It is *adharma*..."

Yudhishtira : "You should have said so then and there!"

Bhishma : "Did ... I.. not... say so ?.... Whether your.. pawning her, before or .. after ... you lost.. yourself.. is immaterial... This was ... an inextricable knot... Pawning itself... was wrong... I said that you are responsible for an answer... I did so."

Yudhishtira : "It is a different matter... my responsibility. You were there as a judge required to pronounce your sentence."

Bhishma : "No... no... no.... all complications... were ... made by you... My judgment was.. that you ... should clear.. the tangle... created by yourself. . You ... missed... that.. one..opportunity... to solve.. that crisis ! What could.. I say.. further... after holding you... responsible ?... You failed me... yourself and all."

Bhima : "Brother, grand sir. I do not relish further discussion of this confused tangle which will be lasting food for all future historians, and law analysts, and idle-speculators ! Sir, one thing you said is highly consequential : Paying *penalty* is one thing; making a *sacrifice* is another. We have made

sacrifices... Duryodhana and Party have paid penalties. Let me warn ! In future there would come a series of poets, pervert analysts, and political 'experts' who would extol Dhritarashtra, Karna, Shakuni, Duryodhana and other evil geniis for their 'sacrifices' and interpret them 'generously' at our cost ! For the age to come is Kali – 'retardation'. This differentiation you have just made is of over-reaching consequences. Criminals cannot make sacrifices ! They can only be penalised ! Innocents cannot be punished... The suffering inflicted on them by erring judges must come under the other account of sacrifice ! If all those that are hanged for crimes become 'liberators' what will happen to morality or ethics ? We should not allow pervert histories to be written."

Bhishma : "Good boy !... (trying to smile with extraordinary efforts) how. will you .. prevent... such historians ? Can you.. interpret your.. own history ? or write ?

Sri Krishna : "Why worry as we have heard that Veda Vyasa himself is going to record this history ?"

Yudhishtira : "There will be no problem if Vyasa can do it. He will give a factual account of the war, its causes and consequences. Now, grand sir, this is not our present problem : Our problem is a different one : How to meet Dhritarashtra and comfort him, after all this disaster; or how to face his fury and escape alive... in what words we can make him see reason."

Bhima : "Where is the need for us to comfort him ? It is we that need the comfort by him, for all the evils, inflicted on us by him ! Let him suffer his own fate silently. At the most we can give him some food and shelter out of our own mercy."

Bhishma gazes at Bhima for this rough reply, without a reaction.

Sri Krishna : "We have got to meet Dhritarashtra. That is a customary duty. The question is not who must comfort whom. The real question is to avert hot words of exchange in a routine meeting, which cannot be avoided. Let us give him a chance to react in a humane way. All the world knows who is guilty of imposing this ghastly war on the innocents. Let us see if he can own his blunders or repents. If he does not, it is his account that swells. He may not have the face or strength to accost us. But possibly some more danger may await us there. We have to exhaust all possibilities. The question of handing over power is also there. We can assume power directly, of course. But it is better, there is a smooth handing over. That requires grace and culture. Let us see if there is scope still for it."

Bhima, Arjuna, Yudhishtira and all others agree upon this. They pay their respects to Bhishma and depart.



The Pandavas, Sri Krishna, Draupadi, Subhadra and the palace guards leave in a procession, with the army before and behind them in a subdued atmosphere of celebration of war victory. Nobody, however, is in a

jubilant mood after those enormous losses of near and dear ones. It is Sri Krishna who drives the chariot, in which all the Pandavas are seated together. Draupadi and Subhadra are in another. War drums now play a different beat of rhythm appropriate for the occasion of peace and victory. The palace musicians sing and play on instruments, while dancers perform appropriate themes in the way. The march lacks the grandeur of a festival, yet maintains the dignity of the occasion of a deserved victory.

Sri Krishna's keen eyes search for possible underground evil agents of Duryodhana that may still lurk here and there in various guises, to harm the new prince and his establishment, yet to take roots. People in the city welcome the new ruler with whatever festivity was possible at quick notice, by decorating house fronts, streets, places of worship and public meeting - places and so on. Flags, festoons, flower-arches of welcome are arranged on the way of the march. Colourful structures of flour are drawn on the path in the traditional style. Old men, ladies, Brahmins, and well-wishers offer flowers and fruits to the new king on either side of the way as marks of their respect and affection.

Yudhishtira enjoys these scenes and signs of a new renaissance after being witness to deaths and killings, all those eighteen days on the war-field. The scenes are absolutely refreshing. The earlier frustrating question : "Rule for whose sake ?" is slowly being replaced in his mind, by the new assurance : "Here are people who require the rule of comfort and care."



Sanjaya : “King sir, I have sketched in detail till now how your sons lost their lives for Duryodhana’s fault of headstrongness, his obstinacy and steadfast-foolhardiness !... This is now a closed *CHAPTER* and you must forget it. Be prepared now, mentally, to receive Yudhishtira, who is victorious justifiably. You must learn to be in proper and altered moods, unlike in your earlier mind-set, which is totally out of place. I know the change is neither easy nor quick. But change you must, to prevent further calamities. For you have to live hereafter with the killers of your sons, the very people whom you worked against all these years, and the very people whom you have no reason to like after all that has happened. Bury hatred sir; develop some kindness.”

Dhritarashtra : “Why should the Pandavas see me ? What is their gain in meeting me ? Let him rule the country so forcibly taken over, as he wills; why should he seek my permission for it ? Why should he so humiliate me, more ? Is it not enough I have been deprived of my sons, and my right to rule over my empire ? Let me be left to myself. Why should I be sheltered under the Pandavas ? Will Bhima refrain from taunting me ? Who will control him ? Should I bless him that tasted of my son’s blood ? Should I hug him for killing my son by violating the rules of combat ? My mind is upset, and the change you prescribe is beyond me. Let me retire to the forests for a peaceful life. I refuse to meet anyone now.”

Vidura : “Brother ! Realise that you are no more a

king, and cannot have things of your own will. For that matter, even forests are not your own now ! You require the permission of the new king, even for your movements hereafter, as they involve your own safety and the security of the nation and the new government. Having been in power once, you cannot wish away all that past; and that past is the basis for the present and contains many potencies, good and bad for the future. You are a mere stub of Time now, and open for resprouting more mischief, at least hypothetically. Courtesy requires you to accept defeat graciously, and concede victory to the victors, which will assure them of your cooperation hereafter and not further contention or confrontation. This is a *must* for the new king, and who else can give this assurance ? Besides, even if you are free to retire to the forests, on your own, people must not be allowed scope to construe it as your being exiled to the forests, compulsorily by the new king. Evil-mongers will always be there! Your movements must do good to the new king, even in your freedom or constriction, whichever you choose to interpret it as. There will be times for forest life hereafter, not just now. One more factor to consider : you have a duty to comfort your nephews ! They are the really wronged party all these days and not you ! They may not expect it from you, knowing your nature all these days. But it will do you good and show you in better colours if you can do it. In fact, they will try to comfort you, for all the sufferings heaped by you on them. Should I teach you even these elementary principles

and duties ? If they assume power without your gracefully handing it over to them, will it do you any good ? Will you be comforted by that ?”

Dhritarashtra was dazed by this logic and silenced! He could not see facts in this light, but there was no other light ! His false self-comforts fell like a pack of cards and got wafted away like straws in the whirlwind of events that had taken place. He was now left with no alternative but to do what he had never learnt in life - take a liking for the killers of his sons and comfort them ! What a punishment by Time !

The next question was where to meet : Vidura suggested the open Court Hall of the Royal Palace. Sanjaya seconded it. Dhritarashtra who had considered the meeting itself a humiliation, now felt that this was like insulting him, or court-marshalling him in public! He protested. Vidura could not insist too much or persuade the old man. He agreed to a private meeting in the erstwhile palace of Duryodhana. The suggestion was the king's.



The Pandavas are now in Indraprastha, resting in their old quarters. Vidura has just arrived to invite them formally to the palace, along with the ex-king's messengers. Sri Krishna is now closeted with this minister of Dhritarashtra listening to his ideas and suggestions, on behalf of the Pandavas, and as their minister, in deep absorption, weighing all pros and cons, as a preliminary. They are working out all details. Sri Krishna is unhappy that the suggestion for this necessary meeting has not come from Dhritarashtra

himself, but had to be imposed on him by his Prime minister who knew better, and who followed no more than routine courtesy. Sri Krishna felt there could be something sinister in this unnatural reservation at this abnormal situation, from a king who had yet to shed his aberrations ! He was lost in thoughts for a few moments and this strangeness of a man who had so completely isolated himself from facts and friends, as not willing to learn even at this moment when he had lost his all! It was evening time; Sri Krishna was about to get up for his Sandhya worship. Bhima and Arjuna had already performed theirs and had set out to revisit their Rajasuya Sabha, after a long time. Duryodhana had not kept it well, all these thirteen years, as it had evoked his envy at first sight ! But that sublime structure still retained its beauty like an unravished maid in tattered and soiled clothes, or like a gem wrapped in dirty muslin. It was an embodiment of immortal aesthetic values, and cared little for the onlooker's reactions, with a scorn, as it were ! Now Sri Krishna woke up from his reverie and picked up a conversation with Vidura.

Vidura : "Lord, master ! The first duty of a king is to forget the expendable past, forgive those who are responsible for the irreversible turns of history, and who cannot be changed, and lay the foundations of a healthy and inevitable future. The old man has lost all his hundred children and is basking in the sorrow of repentance, his hard soul. However painful this meet might be, it is a necessary part of present history. Let both parties confine to the minimum words of courtesy that are a must and avoid undesirable clashes of words, feelings or

thoughts. Let the meeting be over quickly and let them say goodbye to sorrow, for once.”

Sri Krishna : “That is true Vidura. The assuming charge of rulership by Yudhishtira, however, has to take place publicly. And it has to be in the Rajasuya Sabha at Indraprastha, to symbolise the continuation of the rule of the Emperor, after this unhappy interlude brought about by that dammed gamble, and the evil machinations of the usurpers. The people must know this significance, to assure them that what continues is the rule of the Right. We shall not start this new chapter at Hastinavati, as it will tie up with a different chapter of history that ought to be forgotten. Yudhishtira shall not remember old associations with that ancient capital that are too painful even to mention. Bhima will certainly get provoked, if he is made to stay there, and it is not for the good of the people, the state or the old man who still lives anachronistically without adjusting his pace to the rhythms of new times. A provoked Bhima cannot comfort an old man who requires all the comforts of the life of a shattered soul. We have to arrange for a smooth meeting between Gandhari and Kunthi. Draupadi and Bhanumati, too, must meet each other. I too have to comfort the widow of Duryodhana. Now, heavy responsibilities lie upon your head, to arrange for these things without untoward happenings. Let it be today or tomorrow. Take your time and consider the moment appropriate. Now tell me where does the old man wish to receive Yudhishtira?”

Vidura : (Startled) “What ? Is the place so important?”

Sri Krishna : “Every small detail is equally important at this frustrated hour of the old vile man !”

Vidura : “It may be well you think so. On second thoughts I also feel alarmed.... well... it is in the old bed-room of Duryodhana.”

Sri Krishna : (Jolted) “I knew some such surprise was in store for us ! Say Vidura, are bed rooms good places to meet other than for husband and wife ? If it must be a bedroom at all, why not the old king’s bed room, after all ? There is the old waiting room or reception room for guests also ! Why not there ? What is special in this room ?..” (after some thought)... “or else.. let it be so... Why should we upset the old man in his wishes ? What sentiments he has in the matter of his son’s sad death, let him have the wish, his own way. But I must see that bedroom in privacy before this meeting takes place. No objection ? Let not the blind man know of it.”

Vidura : “No objection. I am here to see and supervise over all details to your satisfaction. Still, if you want personally to satisfy yourself. I shall arrange. Tell me where seats are to be placed, the order, and the persons to whom they are meant and so on, if these also matter. Come, let us go. That will lighten my burden too.”



As Sri Krishna entered the palace, thick memories of the previous visit, of that failed mission, of the dignitaries from outside the royal court like Parashurama,

Maithreya and other sages, and all their nectarine words of advice to the head-strong villain who inflicted the war after all, and the meaningless neutrality of the so called elders and their elusive rolls of 'advice' - all came on the mind's horizon, in a flash. Now he was no ambassador. No adjudicator either. All intervention was over. He was now a mere well-wisher of the family and no more. So he stood on no formalities of protocol. Neither did Dhritarashtra anticipate this visit, nor its timing.

Sri Krishna went straight to Duryodhana's bedroom. It was empty and wide open, with no servants or errand boys. Vidura had seen to it that no one was there at this time of 'inspection' by Sri Krishna !

Sri Krishna went to that royal bed. The cot resembled a swan's head, in gold wraps, with its beak part well polished; the bed itself was extremely soft with feathers of swans. No one could forget its grandeur or dignity, once a visit was paid. On either side, there were beds meant for the queens, also empty. Four different shaped chairs lay around. The corners were adorned by oil lamps on elevated stands made of gold and studded with costly gems. Along side of them, there were small tables with jars of various shapes full of drinks in them, of different kinds. There were also fans made of feathers of peacocks, decorated intricately with filigree works, to be used as and when they were needed, to be handled by damsels and denizens specially chosen for the purpose. There were halls and rooms meant for the queen's quarters, resting places - one could call it an expansive harem. They were elaborately

pillared with black stones, well polished, like mirrors. When the queens moved about, these pillars mirrored them so brightly that they created the illusions of more of their numbers than were actually there !

Where were all those queens, those maids, damsels or denizens, now ? Understandably, they were now with Gandhari, elsewhere, giving vent to their sorrow with no one to console them. They are considering the cause of immolation with Duryodhana's dead body as and when the new prince would decide on the event, and its timing. There were parrots and other pets, hung in decorated cages here and there, in the passages, making a chorus of sad sounds, mourning their master. Otherwise, it was a perfect royal harem, with nothing wanting, except divinity and a superhuman taste one could experience at Dwaraka. Wasted extravagance, luxury mixed with a rigid atmosphere of over-care by a prince who had no particular love for particular maidens, queens, or concubines, could nowhere come near to Sri Krishna's palace which was exuding love, particular care, and peace, comforting all the inmates who were assured of their identities and dignity. Here was perfection, natural and simple in contrast with Duryodhana's which was made up, showy, gaudy and artificial, striking awe and obedience to even the older inmates, let alone new entrants with no finality of numbers.

There was a third apartment : The place where Duryodhana did early morning exercises. It was quite expansive. All materials required for those exercises, dumb-bells and others, weapons like mace and sword,

chained thorny metal balls, towels to wrap or mop, water basins, different sized maces, in particular, with varieties of shapes of handles were lying there, now in utter waste.

Wait a minute and hold your breath ! What are these? Steel dummies, broken and thrown into corners! Sri Krishna went to them, kneeled and examined faces of some of them ! Seeing was believing ! They resembled Bhima's face ! All, without exception ! Some had broken arms, broken thighs, broken leg-shafts, splintered faces, and vandalized in a hundred ways. But why ? Sri Krishna understood in a flash that they were hit objects of the daily practice of the dead prince, in mace exercise, meant as preparation for a grand occasion! Which one ? The one that decided his fate on the banks of Lake Dwaipayana ! What a clever or cunning strategist this prince was, after all ! He had not missed a day's practice ever since he had sent the five brothers on a grand exile. He was sure they would not return to demand their kingdom again. But no chance was to be taken ! In case they came, encouraged by that 'crook', Sri Krishna, here was going to be a war, the decisive phase of which would be a single combat between himself - the prince, and his arch-enemy, Bhima; and this practice was to take care of that in his favour. Several dummy Bhimas lay there in hypothetical 'wars', in deplorable damaged conditions. There were still four or five more dummies in good shape or form with no one to try their furies on them.

Sri Krishna now understood the intention of the blind king ! No doubt was left. He said to Vidura :

Sri Krishna : “This shall be the venue of the meeting between the Pandavas and the old king, after all. On second thoughts, I see a valid point in this choice. If the old man wants to derive any satisfaction by treating his nephews as his own sons hereafter, that will solve a good number of problems between both; it will reduce our tensions also. This place shall make new history psychologically, thus, hereafter. Now listen to my further instructions.”

Vidura : “I do not understand why you have suddenly come round to agree to the blind king’s view. What is special ?”

Sri Krishna : “The speciality is that the king’s request or choice suits our convenience also.”

Vidura : “Our convenience ?”

Sri Krishna : “Safety is the greatest need of the hour. Listen : Let there be an elevated seat on a platform for the king. Then around him let there be a dozen lower seats in a semi-circular shape. Five for the princes, the others for me, you, Satyaki, Kripa, Kritavarma, Draupadi, Subhadra, Gandhari and Kunthi. The Pandavas, you and I shall be in the front row. Let the old queens and the younger ones and others take seats in the next row, as per protocol. No servants please. Let them be stationed outside for quick calls, and urgent services. Let there be good light, so all the windows shall be open. But the most important is this : let this unused dummy of Bhima be placed very near the old king. So near as to be shifted to his immediate presence, at quick notice... here.. here.... near the right shoulder of the king, when he takes his seat there.”

Vidura : "But why this elaboration and particularity ?"

Sri Krishna : "I am surprised Vidura that you still ask me reasons for what should be obvious to you, otherwise. We have to face a fresh fire ! Physical fire was enough to put the wax palace on fire. Now the Pandavas are to face the fire of malice ! The old man's heart is a furnace now burning with the sorrow of the loss of his sons. Rage is a form of fire and fury ! He may want to burn the Pandavas with that unextinguished fire ! He will not be satisfied with anything less than the murder of Bhima. He will very much wish to be innocent. I suspect attempts for Bhima's assassination in this chamber of his dearest son Duryodhana, by his strong embrace; it is a high possibility."

Vidura : "In that case this room is the real place to be avoided at all costs ! Why have you agreed to its choice, then ? Any extra reason in our favour?"

Sri Krishna : "This shall be the very place where the fire of malice shall be extinguished ! I shall not allow the old king's evil wish to be fulfilled."

Vidura : "So, you suspect the war, I mean the cold war, to continue ?"

Sri Krishna : "When will such wars really end ? I am merely taking precaution. Do you remember, when I came carrying Yudhishtira's message, in the royal assembly, you took care to check whether my seat was safe ! Why should you have done that if there was no possibility of mischief ? This is a different situation, perhaps more sinister and urgent, I thought,

struck by the fact that the blind king still has a 'choice' after all his mighty, devastating defeat and when he ought to be totally at the mercy of the new king ! If that choice can suit us for a counter strategy, why not ? But see that the king is alone during this meeting, with no assistants or servants to help him execute his evil plans or tricks. Let this chamber be sealed well in advance of the meeting time. Let the key be with you. All the exit points from this chamber should be guarded by your own trusted servants, right from now onwards, until the event and the risks are over."

Now Sri Krishna and Vidura, with the assistance of some servants of Vidura, shift one of those unbroken dummies of Bhima, near enough the podium on which Dhritarashtra was to be seated, and garland it with choice fragrant flower garlands. They anoint it with rare scents and perfumes; and similar garlands, perfumes and scents are taken by Sri Krishna, personally to Indraprastha, to decorate and dress the Pandavas with, so that the blind king can see no difference between the steel dummy and the real Pandavas when he smells them ! When Sri Krishna put those garlands round the necks of the Pandavas and sprayed them with those costly scents, Yudhishtira wondered !

Yudhishtira : "What is all this Sri Krishna ? I am in no mood for any romance at the moment ! How can I overcome the grief of loss and violence of war? What urgency is there for merriment or celebration?"

Sri Krishna : "This is purely a welcome with local

flowers, this time, back into your own city, and not to forests with wild or foreign flowers !”

Yudhishtira : “I do not understand !”

Sri Krishna : “You need not ! Patience is enough. Silence is recommended. Wait, and see some fun to relieve you of the tensions of war.”



The Pandava princes are assembled at the appointed place at the moment fixed for it. The others too are there.

The Blind king walks slowly towards that chamber. He has no crown on his head now. He wears no footwear either. The velvet carpets brought from Gandhara below his feet are taking care of those feet unwilling to move, and bear the weight of that enormous body. There are no other palace honours for him like the royal umbrella, or bards to praise and usher him. One of his arms rests on the back of Vidura and the other on that of Sanjaya, to assist him walk. He is dressed in plain clothes like a commoner and not like a king, his earlier self. He is assisted to his seat, on to which he climbs with difficulty and diffidence. He is followed by Gandhari, unconsolable and in tumult of feelings, out of her control. She is assisted too to her seat. The Pandavas stand up in honour, come to the king one by one, mention their names respectfully, and recede to their own seats.

Dhritarashtra : Krishna would not have come, I know; understandably, of course !”

Sri Krishna : “I am here, sir; no need for anxiety or misgiving. How can I absent myself from such an important moment of inevitable reconciliation ?”

Dhritarashtra : “I like the way you weigh your words before you speak ! How calculative and prophetic your words are ! You have justified by your just-concluded actions that the Pandavas are your own breath, as you often used to say ! (Tries to control sobbing...)... I would have liked you to spare at least one of my sons to perform my last rites...” (Breaks down.)

This scene breaks the barriers of Gandhari’s pent up sorrows, and she cries loudly. Kunthi consoles her.

Kunthi : “I am here, sister, your Kunthi. Control yourself. Fate is mightier than men. We all tried to fail it, and diffuse it. You know we did. But the inevitable did happen.”

Now Yudhishtira weeps and sobs; he says words of some comfort that do not appeal to the old man.

Yudhishtira : “Uncle ! Do not think I am a butcher. I tried to avoid this war to the best of my efforts and offered the least of my demands of a gift of a mere five villages, to avoid begging. That was in your hands to give, and stop this genocide. Your son was not prepared even for this compromise, ignoble as it was on my side. He brought about this catastrophe on all of us. Even now you can rule yourself if it pleases you. I fought as a matter of duty and honour. I am now in a position to give,

as your son was not, then, when his writ ran ! My brothers have fulfilled their oaths. Now I am here to follow your commands, whatever they may be.”

Sri Krishna looked at Bhima and Arjuna, struck and stung by this ‘gamble’ again! Bhima fumes with fury! Sri Krishna signed to him for patience and self-control.

Dhritarashtra : “After all, Truth and Justice have won.

What difference is there between my sons and those of my brother ? I am happy that at least you have survived - you five. Our royal progeny is saved at terrible cost, at last. It is my duty to congratulate the victors in this war. It is not you that have to console me - why should you ? After all, I have to suffer the fruits of my past deeds. It has been decreed and decided long long ago that I cannot rule, as I am blind. If I had eyes about me, I might have not allowed this feud to escalate into a full scale of war of the type that has just concluded! Alas ! That was God’s will. The question of heirdom took its heavy toll so far Who else is fit to rule but you, Yudhishtira, who have won the war justifiably and with great efforts ? Allow me to retire to the forests now. Let me first congratulate you one by one... Come near me. Let me embrace you and try to cool my burning heart.”

The moment of disaster as anticipated by Sri Krishna, arrived after all, with these innocent-looking, apparently innocuous words ! Sri Krishna exchanged glances with Vidura, in confirmation of fears, and the possible victory of the counter-plan to be

unfolded at the moment, and its appropriateness ! Vidura smiled in profound appreciation of Sri Krishna's fore-thought and the accurateness of his guess, and the extraordinary care he had taken even in minute matters like the venue of the meeting, and the exact location of the danger-spot and its moment !

Vidura announced : "Here is Yudhishtira, sir", and suddenly drew Bhima aside, from his next turn, and pushed the eldest of the Pandavas for that cruel hug; then he arranged to replace the actual Bhima with his dummy, shifted there, with difficulty and without disturbing sounds of alarm ! Yudhishtira suffered that mighty hug as an unavoidable ordeal, and returned to his seat, sweating.

Next Vidura announced : "Here is Bhima sir, the architect of victory of this war." Vidura pushed that steel dummy in his place, silently.

But the words pierced into the strong heart of the blind man : "Architect !" Indeed ! " The chief killer of all his sons without exception." That was the meaning of Vidura, as he understood, rightly or wrongly ! Rage welled up in him and instigated the crudest instincts of revenge, powers for which were still in him, vested as it were by demoniac forces still looking in the darkest recesses of his heart !

Bhima would not still understand ! He looked at Vidura and Sri Krishna, as if to ask them : "What is all this ? What rehearsal ? What for ?" But he assists Vidura in shifting his own huge dummy to the immediate presence of the old man. Sri Krishna gestured 'silence'

by holding his forefinger against his mouth, and invited him to witness the unfolding drama silently.

‘Dharmaputra’ was blessed by the old man in these words : “You are justifiably without enemies from your side. I cannot find fault with you. Those that blame you will surely go to hell. Your patience, love of peace, renunciation, wisdom and contentment are exemplary and extraordinary indeed. God has bestowed victory on you, for these very qualities, in their rare combination in you. He has punished my sons for not possessing these essential qualities, and their transgressions of law, and violence to human nature, against you.”

Now is Bhima’s turn. In the gap of those few moments that were needed to shift that image, the old man fulminates :

“Where is Bhima ? Why is he hesitating ? Is he repentant or unwilling ? I forgive him too and stretch my arms to embrace him in congratulations... Come, Bhima ! Comfort this old man.” Still a moment or two away !

The old man : “Bhima, do you still consider me as the father of your dead enemy ? Do you extend enmity beyond even death ? Won’t you forgive this fragile old man ? Forget and forgive my evil son’s barbaric acts !”

Bhima still stands at some distance and speaks :

“Uncle ! Of course, my rage has cooled, and my oaths are fulfilled. I am not angry with you, either. Nor do I feel indifferent to you after all this...”

Old Man : "Then come near !.. Come to me !.. You have tolerated the worst possible hardships all these thirteen years, away from near and dear ones.. I shall hug you and try to forget my losses, my sorrows."

Bhima : "Uncle ! I am not a fit receptacle for your generous sentiments, and this broad-mindedness ! I am ashamed of my deeds that have brought upon you sorrow of a dimension that no man can endure!"

Old man : "If you do not come, then let me come to you to embrace you. To me you are just like my dead son Duryodhana, an apt replacement."

The old man stands up, stretches his arms, and tries to climb down.. Sri Krishna assists him and guides : "Here, here.. Bhima is here sir... Bhima ! Do not disappoint the king.. Allow him to embrace you for his heart's peace and comfort. Do not remember the past, that is over."

So saying, Sri Krishna takes the blind king to that dummy of Bhima.

Then happens the incredible ! Dhritarashtra embraces the steel figure before him, mistaking it for the real Bhima, persuaded by the same fragrance of flowers and perfumes; the embrace is so tight and furious, and is in fact so 'containing' as to send it into a loud burst of splinters scattered all over !

The audience around is stunned, and cannot believe what they perceive ! But a sepulchral silence envelops

all, until Dhritarashtra himself speaks, recovering from the release of malice, anger, and murderous instincts and pent up cruelty :

Dhritarashtra : “What deafening noise is this that I hear ? I do not understand what has happened ! Did my embrace kill the innocent Bhima ? Was it he that was crushed in my fast, affectionate embrace ? Was it a death - clasp, after all, unwittingly? I am extremely sorry for what has happened ! Why don't you speak, all of you ? Anyone of you ? Tell me where Bhima is lying? Who will console Kunthi, and the other Pandavas? Sri Krishna ! At least, you speak; tell me whether Bhima is safe ! What was the sound all of you heard? Should this awful bloodshed take place, in the bedroom of Duryodhana, of all the places in the world ? Did my son wish for it in his dreams? I fail to understand what curse is behind this, that Bhima should die in my hands... God forbid..”

Gandhari also believes that Bhima is no more, especially after these outbursts of her husband. Kunthi sheds tears of joy. Arjuna takes out his sword for ready action, on the old man, on Sri Krishna's approval. The twins are trying their best to withhold those sword-held hands.

Yudhishtira is crest-fallen and so powerfully jolted from his utopian world that he cannot believe what he sees : He stares at Vidura with a blank face, with fright writ on it ! Vidura is very calm and gestures to him to the effect : “Wait and See the unfolding drama.”

Sri Krishna leads back the old man, quietly to his seat. Then again a spell of silence. The old man continues :

Dhritarashtra : "Krishna, how strange ? Why no one is mourning Bhima, though he is dead ?"

Sri Krishna : "No one is dead and there is no need for mourning."

Dhritarashtra : (Anxiety on his face) "What ? Bhima is still alive ? Then what was the sound I heard?"

Sri Krishna : "You old villainous crook ! Do you still want an answer ? Can you not guess the results of your well-planned murder, which I just now averted ? See : What you have blasted is just a steel dummy of Bhima, similar to those other hundreds that your son has destroyed and heaped up here, in this very bedroom ! You have broken one more in addition to those wasted-hundreds ! The war is even, still ! Bhima is very much safe, thanks to our attempts to save him, and in spite of your evil designs to kill him."

Dhritarashtra : "What is this canard ? Why do you call me crook, after all my losses, and in this pitiable condition ? Sri Krishna ! Tell me the truth and do not leave me in a riddle : Who is this Bhima who has been blasted, and who else is that real Bhima who killed all my sons ? I hope you are not making a fool of me !"

Sri Krishna : "I have neither fooled you, nor have I allowed myself to be fooled."

Dhritarashtra : "Why should I fool you ? What are you talking ?"

Sri Krishna : "Enough of this pretence of innocence, King ! You said that 'The Pandavas are my breath', quoting me, to ridicule me ! I have just proved it in your own presence, again."



CHAPTER 49

THE CURSE OF GANDHARI

Dhritarashtra is red in face, and in shame and rage that his plot failed and that he is exposed in the world's eye ! He half ejaculates, as if he spoke to himself : "Was my hug so tight ? I never meant to kill Bhima. How did it all happen ? Why this plot to humiliate me when fate has already punished me in plenty ? Who placed that figure here and why ?"

Sri Krishna : "King Sir, these words can now fool nobody ! You are known to possess a million elephants' strength of body and muscle power. Bhima is even more powerful, as gifted by God. Suppose you had hugged the real Bhima with this diabolic intention and if he had returned it to you with all his might, tell me who would have gone into pieces ? Would you still be here to blame him then ? It is to save you and expose you that God arranged for this substitute hug ! Poor statue ! It silently suffered your wrath and went into pieces with no one to shed tears except you, in a crocodile style ! I wanted Bhima to avoid getting a bad name by his act. For a hero that killed Jarasandha, you are just a fly ! Additionally, if this substitute were not made in time, your cunning intention would

have remained unexposed ! What I can understand is your sorrow at the loss of your sons; what no one can understand is your crooked mind even at this hour of total loss, which is of your own making. Try to love all the Pandavas at least now, for their fine qualities and human values they uphold, after all the travails and trials and traps you and your sons laid and heaped on them, set for them. God has willed them to live and rule against all human and evil machinations, vindicated their position as just and honourable ! It is your duty to honour them, speak kind words, and bless them, at least now. What other alternative is now open for you, King, when, after all, you have to live at their mercy hereafter ? Can you retire to the forests and live an independent life as recluse, without eyes? Be practical ! Do you remember my message to you that I sent as soon as I despatched the evil Kamsa to the world of death ? I was a mere lad of thirteen then ! You have not changed a bit between then and now ! Sir, why have you not grown with age in wisdom and values ? Why are you still childish ? Time is meant to make individuals grow and ripen into mature wisdom and contentment! That is to attain perfection ! I am too young to teach this lesson to you ! Do you want to drop like dust into the grave ? Without significance ? And in sin, still ? Without forgiving or being forgiven? Can you not repent at least at this last hour ? Who will care hereafter if you do not rise to this occasion now ?”

Gandhari, the queen, was sensitive to Sri Krishna's anguish, admonition and this deserved chastisement of her husband, even in her endless moment of sorrow. That was something from this 'evil' side, which had lost its base now ! But she herself was like a volcano about to burst, and unpredictable, in spite of her wisdom and balanced mind and studied stance of justice and evenness all through these evil years of the 'glory' of her sons and the misery of the Pandavas at their hands.

Gandhari : "Krishna. You are God the Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent. May I ask you a question ?"

Sri Krishna : "Yes, mother; proceed. Do you need my permission ?"

Gandhari : "You will not deny that I am closely related with the consequences of the war just concluded."

Sri Krishna : (Not being able to catch her meaning or the direction of her question) "Yes, mother ! We are all caught up in those consequences which I sincerely tried to avoid all these days !"

Gandhari : "I am not particular about others at this moment. I am talking as an individual from a personal angle of anguish. You will grant that we may think plentifully in general terms when it comes to theorising or philosophical analysis or taking an over-all view of history and facts leading to its vicissitudes. But when it comes to experiencing joy or sorrow, we have to account individually, personally and find reasons why there is suffering! Why do I have to suffer this sorrow and for what

sins of mine, and against whom ? How do I deserve this in the scheme of 'Karma' that you so eloquently expound impersonally ? Is there no comfort that God can offer me ? Is it out of scheme in God's plan of the world and running its affairs? Can you enlighten ?"

Sri Krishna : "In your present state of mind, I think, mother, you are not fit either to ask this question or obtain an answer even from God ! You say you do not want theory, philosophy, generality and impersonal considerations; yet you are asking a question emerging deeply from those very considerations ! Do you realise that you are asking a question that anybody else also might ask too ?"

Gandhari : "I am not concerned now with others, their questions, or sufferings. Am I not entitled to ask my own questions ? Can I not seek answers for my own problems ? Does God have a reply or no for insignificant people like me ?"

Sri Krishna : "This is strange, great lady ! Time there was, a month ago when you and your husband and sons ought to be concerned with the sufferings of others, their questions and the answers you now seek when you let that opportunity, go to avoid all this suffering now ! How can you be not concerned with others and be selectively selfish in isolation, now, after being responsible for the cause, out of which all this terrible effect has emerged ? See the tangle ? Life is both personal and communal. So is suffering or joy ! Own it up, and silently undergo the fruits thereof. That is what all of us must do now."

Gandhari : “I concede that my sons invited trouble by transgressing moral laws; by causing violence to their cousins, their honour, their life, and all that they owned and earned by their valour, prowess and hard work. But why should I suffer, I who never shared their guilt ? I never approved of their evil designs ! I was ready to disown my son Duryodhana! This husband of mine never listened to me. I was snubbed, ignored and suppressed. Should I be punished for my righteousness ? Is this justified ? Do I have an answer ?”

Sri Krishna : “Mother miserable ! There is also, what is called collective suffering ! Karma can be collective, accumulated. You are oversimplifying a highly complicated problem ! You forget that all life is interrelated. In a tree, for example if ants eat away its roots, branches lose their life, and the entire tree dies with its fruits, flowers, branches and twigs. Your husband, Karna, Shakuni and those others who supported this war against justice, people like Bhishma, Drona, Ashwatthama, Shalya, Bhurishravas, Saindhava and others have all contributed to your suffering ! Why should God answer a question which they should answer you, or you should answer yourself ?”

Gandhari : “This is cleverness ! I am not satisfied.”

Sri Krishna : “Nobody is going to benefit from such accusations... ‘Cleverness’, ‘Villainy’, ‘Cunningness’ are all words to which I am used! See; Vedanta is uniform in teaching. It cannot be one for those who ask or seek personal answers to collective

questions, and another for those who seek collective answers for personal problems, in escapist attempts to blame others ! Collective or personal - life is life, though dimensions may vary. We have to be dispassionate when we ask questions. Or else suffer passionately. Such people may want to fool themselves with false questions. But self-deception is a bubble that can be pricked with one Vedantic needle of truth ! You are unfortunately not mature enough to see the truth though in the very heart of suffering ! You want comfort, you say; do you not ? Well, do you want your children back ? Can I give them back to you ? Will you be happy with them after all that has happened ! Will they fit into the altered picture of life ? I have brought back my preceptor's son from the world of Death; and only yesterday, I brought back to life Uttara's child after Ashwatthama had killed it. Do you still want Duryodhana and brothers alive to make the world suffer because of them ?"

Gandhari is stunned, and is rendered speechless at this proposition ! She fails to understand the intention of Sri Krishna, and the import of his words, his challenge ! She turns her face with blind-folded eyes around as if seeking assistance from the assembled ones near about. She is confused. Dhritarashtra somewhat understands that Sri Krishna's is a rhetorical question, seeking no answer as it contained an answer within itself, being complete in its challenging tone. The Pandavas wonder if there is more to it, and if so what! But here is Sri Krishna to continue.

Sri Krishna : "It is easy to answer your questions, for me. You have called me Omniscient. I do not have to consult Books or Codes for it. I am only wondering how to make you understand, or to prepare grounds for that. Let me try. Let me first put a question or two to you. See if you can answer.

Gandhari : Krishna ! I am ignorant and do not deserve your cross-questioning. If I could answer you, would I have dared to question you ? Do not mock at me."

Sri Krishna : "I am not going to examine you on Vedanta : I shall ask you what humans can answer with minimum common sense. Now here is the first question: You are anguished at the sight of the widows of your sons. But you must understand that some eighteen divisions of soldiers on either side of the war have left behind them an equal number of widows, if not more, because of your son's choice of war over peace to settle the dispute. Do you weep for them also ? Why don't you ? Is their anguish less important than yours ? Is this a collective problem or personal one now ? Do you have the possession of mind to give them comforts or at least words of comfort ? Are you the *cause* of universal suffering or its *effect* ? Did the universe conspire to inflict it on you ? Or have you been its source ? If a fellow or a group of evil - doers is no more after their evil is uprooted at tremendous cost to humanity, should you grieve or be relieved? What is the human reaction expected of you ? Should you be deaf to the groanings of those

widows who have not sinned ? You are no ordinary woman ! An empress still ! Do you have a duty ? Is it all personal loss you have to mourn, still ? Do you have tears or no for all these sufferers who suffered because of your son ? Should you not ask God to give you enough tears ? When you learn to weep for others, self-pity dies; as it is an ignoble feeling. That is the solution for suffering, and it is in your own hands. What more can I give you than this freedom ? Tell me if you know your duty any more than your right to question God ?

Gandhari : “Are you telling me that I am insensitive to the sufferings of others ?”

Sri Krishna : “Knowledge of suffering is one thing. Sensitiveness is not mere awareness ! It is real if it is translated into co-suffering, sharing and sympathetic vibration. That requires crossing of the ego. When that happens, your tears will dry off automatically. Your questions will then get evaporated in the desert of that collective desolation ! Learn to cultivate impersonal suffering. That is a virtue; not this personal, egocentric suffering in isolation or selfishness, which is a weakness if not a sin. What greater comfort can I offer you than this piece of advice ?”

Gandhari : “You have not answered my question : I am a woman unlike you. Do you think I am hard-hearted to other’s sufferings, particularly of women?”

Sri Krishna : “If you refuse to understand my answer, how can I help ? If you had understood my words, would you still be asking this question ? You are

still selfish, and seek an answer in your own mould, with you at its centre ! Shift that stand and see.”

Gandhari : “How can I remove the sufferings of others? I have enough of my own; I am unable to relieve myself; how can I unburden the minds of others? Or their pain ?”

Sri Krishna : “That is what I called selfishness or egoism. I am not asking you to help others. I am only seeking space for those others in your heart, even in your suffering. That will help you as well as others - I said.”

Gandhari : “I do not understand !”

Sri Krishna : “Do you now see my point ? Even simple human problems are beyond your mind’s grasp ! How dare you put me Vedantic questions ? In all your thoughts and actions, see what effects it will have on others. Is this beyond your understanding or capacity to act ? When you weep, shed a tear or two for others also. Never forget them, I said. That is what I would call responsibility. Do you understand now at least ?”

Gandhari : “Still I do not understand the bearing of your suggestion on my question. Will you explain somewhat ?”

Sri Krishna : “Did you or did you not know in advance, that your daughters-in-law would become widows, when your son imposed war on the world ?”

Gandhari : “Who could read the future ? I did not want the war; so I told my son and husband also.”

Sri Krishna : “See this incongruity in your own view: First you call me God ! You describe me as Omnipotent. Then, when I stood on the side of the Pandavas, you still say, you did not see the future!! Your son’s fight against one whom you call God! Still you do not see that they were going to lick the dust leaving their wives widows ! I can only draw two conclusions : either your description of me as God is hollow, a mere oral profession with no deep roots of conviction; or else, your faith in the future of your son was so bright that you wished the future against God’s wish ! What side did you take then ? What position is yours now ?”

Gandhari : “Is it given to mortals to know the future? Is my faith in you a mere show after all my deeds and thoughts that you are witness to ?”

Sri Krishna : “There was Vyasa; there was Vidura, a Maithreya; even Bhishma and Drona; they were all sure of the future, and advised your husband, and son. These were mortals too, except Vyasa ! Why could you not see what they did ? It was your selfishness that wished the future to be otherwise! How do you square that with your faith in me as God ? You did advise your son against that misadventure, true. To that extent, the world will extol you as good, daring, balanced-minded and fair. But that did not prepare you for the ensuing sorrow, or face it without question, silently and privately. You are now making a public issue out of it !”

Gandhari : “What else could I have done ?”

Sri Krishna : “Do you expect me to tell you that also? Listen, two ways were shown even before the start of war : a Vidura-way; a Bhishma-way. These were cross roads open to all lovers of peace in sincerity. But see the difference. Vidura refused to endorse your son’s choice of war as the solution to the problem of succession to the throne. He went on a pilgrimage. That was a bold stance ! You could have accompanied him if you had the daring ! That would have shaken your son out of his wits. If he had still chosen war then, you would be reconciled to this loss, and be prepared for the sorrow that has now arrived; and would not be blaming me now as you still do. The other way was of Bhishma, to join the evil side, and yet pray for the good of the other side chosen to fight with. This was divided loyalty, confused duty, and weakness of heart, all of which helped only evil ! This was perhaps your way, more ineffectual than that of even Bhishma !”

Gandhari : “So you include me in the party of evil? Tell me what more there is in your mind !”

Sri Krishna : “I have not included you anywhere. I merely showed you where you stayed ! That was your own choice ! Not my instigation ! That choice would throw infinite opportunities to evil forces that were aligning together. Your son was attached to you more than to anyone else. Your quitting the capital with Vidura might have stopped the war; he, your son, could have killed himself and saved all of them; the world would have admired you for

your bold step. You wouldn't be here asking unnecessary questions to be answered by me. Your ego was, unconsciously on your part, preventing you from that extreme step that you missed. What was great about merely advising one that you knew would never listen to you ? Bhishma too did the same ! Drona did ! Kripa did; many others did. But none like Vidura. 'Advise and stay with the evil one' - is this a sound formula ? Policy ? Would this absolve you of your sin and responsibility for it ? How effective or otherwise were you ? Your son knew of all this, and did what he chose ! Meanwhile you never learnt how to weep for others. Is this not in your account of Karma ? Do you think God inflicted this suffering on you, without your part in it ? Shall I tell you more or stop ?"

Gandhari : "So, you include me in the evil camp! Tell me what else there is for me to listen."

Sri Krishna : "I view on all equally. People belong where they choose to. Not because of my inclusion, pressure or tricking them into, heartlessly. I merely recognise their roles, their choices. Tell me one thing : When you heard that Kunthi had given birth to Yudhishtira, why did you feel jealous, beat your breasts, and caused your womb's abortion ? Was Kunthi your competitor ? It all happened naturally. True, you conceived earlier. But delivery was not in your hands. Why did you protest against this act of God ?"

Gandhari : "You are raking up a matter that is old by

half a century of time ! Is this fair ? I was young, churlish and given to usual human weaknesses. Was it not natural at that age ? How is that related with what has come about now ? Is this the comfort you offer ? Trouble an already troubled mind ?”

Sri Krishna : “You are more unreasonable than ever before ! I offer you rationality as a matter of comfort, and you reject it as ‘raking’ the past ! You are talking against the wisdom of Vedanta, and mistaking it for a profound question ! I shall try again to open your eyes : an individual’s personality is a composite make up of the fruits of past and present and awaits its completion by the future choices. You are dismissing acts of half a century as ‘churlish’ and condone them as natural due to ‘human weakness.’ Karma is much older; and has no distinction between ‘churlish’ deeds and ‘responsible’ ones. All that goes into the formation of the individual’s personalities. The roots of Karma stretch far back into past lives also. Do not get frightened. What you call ‘churlish’ is nevertheless a matter of malice. And malice is no small motive force. That was what went into the minds of all your sons ! Abortion is no natural happening ! Connect it with malice and see how the temperaments of all your sons were made ! Born of incompleteness, and against the law of time, your sons sought short cuts to success, usurped on what did not belong to them, worked steadily against the law of life, and all principles that governed corporate life. How could the war not have happened, and your being not the seed of

strife? Had you corrected yourself in time, you might have abstained and escaped blame ! Here you are however, blaming God and everyone else !”

Gandhari : “Very strange analysis I never heard before!”

Sri Krishna : “Again, an irrelevant commentary! Strange or no, is it true or not ? Convincing or no ?”

Gandhari : “I can’t say.”

Sri Krishna : “Again you are escapist ! Face the truth and accept it !”

Gandhari : “I am dazed and cannot think ! My heart is about to break.”

Sri Krishna : “This is no answer to your question ! If you are dazed, you should be silent and repentant; not ask questions that you cannot understand. But you ask, and refuse to be answered ! How strange?”

Gandhari : “Is it, too, a sin to be dazed ?”

Sri Krishna : “It may be a form of refusal to understand and accept confusion as a better alternative ! You must yourself answer this. Who else can know your mind ? You wish to be viewed as beyond blame; as an object of perfect pity; as inheriting unmerited sin, and suffering; you feel you are not involved and so not responsible. So you blame God. Let me try again to answer you from another angle ! Do you have any sympathy for Draupadi ?”

Gandhari : “Do you question that also ?”

Sri Krishna : “Answer me straight, great lady !
Do not suspect all my words. I come to comfort,
and not apportion blame.”

Gandhari : “It goes without saying. She has suffered
too !”

Sri Krishna : “Not ‘too’ ! Tell me whose suffering is
greater ? The number of children lost, does not
matter. You were not humiliated like her in any
assembly by wicked people like your sons ! You
have not been exiled or subject to molestations,
deprivation, or even begging. You have not lost
your honour, lady.”

Gandhari : “Why do you tell me all these details that
all the world knows ?”

Sri Krishna : “Because she does not blame God,
whereas you blame ! You must ask why, and know
the answer.”

Gandhari : “She has greater power of endurance,
perhaps !”

Sri Krishna : “Not merely power of endurance but of
wisdom and responsibility.”

Gandhari : “People are not made in the same way !
What can we do ?”

Sri Krishna : “You can be silent and pray mutely for
wisdom to dawn upon one and all. People are not
made uneven by God, but by individual Karma.
Karma can be washed off, futures can be altered,
and the past, suffered silently for one’s betterment.
Can you not understand this positive message of

wisdom of elders, of sages and saints ? Let me tell you something more : suffering is real. Most of it is man-made; some are inflicted by others on us. But he who receives it does not become evil. The evildoer has inner tormentation, conflict. If you are not responsible for war, learn to suffer silently. If you are, learn to repent silently. Both are in your hands. Why do you blame God ?”

Gandhari understands. She feels giddy and swoons. A maid comes, offers some aid, and shifts her to a nearby bed. When she wakes up, she feels a sense of guilt and shame. Dhritarashtra tries, surprisingly to examine himself in the light of Sri Krishna's words. Shame envelops his mind. Yudhishtira feels comforted and elevated by this matchless analysis of Sri Krishna, and timely dialogue between him and Gandhari. Arjuna has a cathartic effect by these teachings of Sri Krishna, and tries to recollect the message of the Lord's teachings on the opening day of the battle ! Only Bhima is still highly disturbed; he has not still recovered from Dhritarashtra's attempt to kill him just a few minutes before. He is impatient as he is convinced of the uselessness of such teachings to people entrenched in evil. Draupadi has acquired a state of total dispassion and non-attachment, because of this nectarine teaching. Kunthi is reminded of all that is past, and all that has brought her to this present condition. Vidura is ashamed of Dhritarashtra's behaviour, still nurturing hatred for the Pandavas. A sense of dejection makes him inexpressibly sad. Only Sanjaya remembers Sri Krishna's Vishvarupa-episode of the Bhagavad Gita - that cosmic

Form - beaming an eternal message of all things living in God, and He inhabiting everything.

Gandhari has recovered meanwhile, but she is not peaceful or self-reconciled. She is even more disturbed than ever before. What she has heard has not quitted her, chastened her, or elevated her, as she is still 'attached' to her dead sons. She speaks slowly :

Gandhari : "Krishna, you speak well; I had not heard you before. There is a magic in your tone and meaning."

Sri Krishna : "Mother dear, now it is my turn to fail to understand your words ! I have not come here to receive praise, commendation or tributes. Without realising whether there is reason, logic, coherence, and deep thinking behind my words, if you praise me blankly in dubious words, it does not benefit you or me."

Gandhari : "My point is that all your clever words have not brought an iota of comfort to my troubled heart. I am indeed disappointed. Who can question your reason or logic ? What fault can I find in your arguments ? I have a load of suffering on my heart. If there is anything to unburden it, tell me. Alas, the fire in my heart consumes me; I am cooked in it; I have lost all my sons; not one remains to comfort me now. Bhima, this great Bhima... did not spare even one !... Come here Bhima... I want to ask you a question or two..."

Bhima wonders at this shift of focus, and nears her reluctantly, expecting another plot.

Gandhari : “I heard that you drank the blood of my son, Dusshyasana... your cousin ! Does this befit a prince of our family ? Is this humane ? Is this ethical or justified ?”

Bhima : “Mother ! My nature is that I cannot bear another’s suffering, even if that other is unknown to me, unconnected with me in any way. The world knows it. But if God wills it that I am to be the instrument of your son’s death at my hands, what can I do ? Whom do I blame ? You know the circumstances of my vow too well to be reminded at this moment. I do not care whether it is Dharma or Adharma that forced me into such a vow. Nobody blamed your ‘great’ son then on terms of *Dharma* or *Adharma* at that moment; or even now, you do not blame him ! If you had seen my wife’s helpless state, then you would not be asking me this question here, now; you are also a woman; understand me and my wife’s situation, which was forced upon her by your sons and all those others who were mute witnesses of that barbarity ! Those witnesses are all wiped out without exception ! If you were not the mother of that villain you too would have appreciated me, instead of blaming me.”

Gandhari : “I am not justifying my son’s villainy, nor blaming you for avenging that wrong, by your vow. But... the drinking of his blood, ... a cousin’s blood... is that justified ? Did you really do that inhuman act ?”

Bhima : “Mother !¹ Blood-drinking is forbidden in scriptures even of non-relatives ! What of one’s own cousin ? Do I ever exceed injunctions of sacred texts ? It is like my drinking of my own blood ! Believe me when I say that his blood never crossed the borders of my lips and teeth. It is true that I took bowl after bowl of that villain’s blood in my hands, took it up to my lips; it streamed down my mouth, wetting my body so as to produce the impression that people got, or reported to you. Only God is my witness. What more can I say ?”

Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, the other Pandavas and those others assembled are struck with wonder now ! They all look at Bhima so as to seek an explanation for the question whether his vow was fulfilled or unfulfilled ! Bhima continues :

Bhima : “You all wonder, as to what happened to my vow in that case. Listen : My vow’s is fulfilled in a way, the moment that rogue’s blood touched my lips. The ritual was over, theoretically. You have parallels in astronomical or astrological predictions. In the horoscope of someone, there is a forecast that he is likely to ride an elephant at a certain moment on a predicted day, we shall say. People expect from this, that the fellow is likely to ride an elephant in a royal procession, and fancy

¹ Anyasyapi na patavyam rudhiram kim punah svakam |
Yathaivatma tatha bhrata vishesho nasti kaschana ||
Rudhiram na vyatikramat danthoshtam me amba !

ma shuhah !

Vaivasvatastu tadveda hastau me rudhirokshitau ||

(Stri Parvam, 15-15, 16)

honours, ovation, glory and other background. But it may turn out to be another way of that fulfilment - say, the fellow may actually turn out to be a beggar sitting on an elephant's broken statue in a forlorn temple in a desert ! 'Riding an elephant' - fulfilled ? Or else, even honourably, he may get seated on a coloured mat with the figure of an elephant drawn or painted on it ! This is also 'fulfilment' in a way. Oaths can be fulfilled in many ways. The Sannyasins are required to observe a full-four months' stay in one place, during the rainy season, as per Shastras. But what do they do ? They treat a fortnight as equal to a month as per a Vedic code, and reduce the duration to a mere two months' length. I 'drank' the blood by touching my lips with that villain's blood. That fulfilled my vow. But I avoided sin by not letting it into my mouth beyond teeth. True, I said that his blood was more tasty than mother Kunthi's breast-milk. But in truth, I had no taste of that blood any more than the memory of my mother's breast-milk, tasted in babyhood ! It is also true that I shouted fiercely to frighten others into submission. You may even say I became a Rudra of sorts at the moment when I killed Dusshyasana. But that is all over now."

Sri Krishna was thoughtful for a moment : Was Bhima speaking the truth ? Or was he lying just to please Gandhari to assuage her hurt feelings ? Lying was no sin to save a soul about to burst unto death in the face of truth that was unbearable. Sri Krishna himself had said so at the moment when Drona was killed : "Sometimes untruth is of greater importance

than truth.” “Speaking an untruth to save a life is no sin, and is no untruth in fact.”² Gandhari would have certainly exploded if Bhima had confirmed his having drunk the blood of her son. He could also be speaking the truth as his explanation was rational and practical. His swearing on his honour left no doubt. Of course, no one else knew the real facts as all were at considerable distances, away. It could be grand ‘drama’ ! Sri Krishna appreciated Bhima’s courage then, and tact now.

Gandhari : “Bhima, I now see no fault in you or your other brothers. My sons brought death on them on the instigation of evil-minded fellows. But one more question still haunts me.”.. ..

Gandhari felt emotionally upset, again.

Bhima : “Speak, mother.”

Gandhari : “You are reported to have hit my first son Duryodhana below the navel, in that mace-fight ! True ? Is it allowed ?”

Bhima : “Don’t ask me about the propriety or impropriety of that act. I had to do what I did to save my life. Your own son had aimed so at me ! Ask the referee!³ When life is in danger this is allowed by rules.”

Gandhari had nothing to counter this now.

² *Satyat jyayo anritam vachah |* (Drona 190-47)
Anritam jivitasyarthe vadan na sprishate anritaih (Ibid)

³ *Adharmo yadi va dharmah trasat tatra maya kritah |*
Atmanam tratukamena tanme twam kshantumarhasi ||
 (Stri 15-2)

Sri Krishna continued the narration where Bhima left, and explained his reply to a similar objection by Baladeva. But she was not convinced; and feelings overtook rationality in that sorrow-obsessed mind; her senses were clouded now into the false 'conviction' that Sri Krishna used questionable methods to get her sons eliminated; that foul means were employed, after all; and that these explanations were a grand cook-up ! She was now like a volcano about to explode. All the Vedanta taught by Sri Krishna was vomited at the moment, in a curse of terrible consequence. Her breasts heaved up and she was breathless for some moments.

Here was Yudhishtira trying to comfort her now: "Mother, here am I, the real killer of your sons. I am a heartless brute; a villain condemned to Hell; I bow down to you for grand forgiveness."

Gandhari lifted him up as he touched her feet, and as tears rolled out of her eyes. She beamed a view of her eyesight from under the cloth binding on her eyes, and it fell on the fingernails of Yudhishtira, burning them into black, immediately ! The fingernails turned not merely black-burnt, but also got distorted in form!! Arjuna hid himself behind Sri Krishna expecting and fearing something similarly fateful on him. Her anguish was so cruel in effect ! Sri Krishna is angered :

Sri Krishna : "Queen ! My words of comfort have not changed you; and you have learnt no lessons still. That is not merely your bad luck, but also unfortunate for the rest of the world. Only time has to heal up the wounds of your mind and cool it from its boiling point."

Gandhari : "I have a final question to put to you. Answer me straight, this time at least."

Sri Krishna : "Your questions are never final; nor is my reply anything but straight. It is your mind that is not straight. It is like an uneven mirror where even handsome faces look crooked, distorted, abnormal and ugly. Still, speak out and let me see if I can be of comfort to you yet."

Gandhari : "You were all - powerful to stop this war. Yet you did not do so for some reason of your own. You could have even changed my son's mind for the better. Yet you allowed him his evil ways, without mending him. Why did you do so ? What have you achieved ?"

Sri Krishna collapses into a seat nearby.... and looks downcast for sometime... fumbles for words... then replies :

Sri Krishna : "If you wantonly persist in remaining in folly and ask stupid questions, I cannot help, even if you call me God ! See, I can't even change your mind into reconciliation ! I am helpless against your Karma ! How could I have changed your son's mind or his machinations ? His Karma must have been even more formidable ! All that I could do was to counter-balance his evil plans and deeds with what was in the interests of the world. God can do no more ! Do you know your son ? He is the Incarnation of Kali, the age of Retardation. He did what was expected of him in the Divine Scheme of bringing an Age to its End ! Your claiming of him as your son is an illusion; a myopic

view that has no more relevance now or hereafter. Should I have allowed him to become or function like the Age of Krita ?”

Gandhari is unmindful; she does not have patience to hear, or understand. She stares at where she heard Sri Krishna’s voice and finally pronounces this curse:

Gandhari : “Stop this jugglery of words ! You clever scoundrel. You are indeed Omnipotent. You are not disclaiming it, even now. I am not asking whose fault is it that materialised this war. Let my son be the culprit or cause. I am not disputing it. But my point is that you *could* have - you of all persons - *could* really have stopped this war. But you didn’t! You could have impelled all - even the warring parties - into wiser courses and saved all those that died; not merely my sons; that was my hope, which was belied. You too have to suffer, whether you are God or no God ! If my penance is efficacious, if I have served my husband faithfully with devotion and no transgression of any kind, let my curse bear fruits on you in the thirty-sixth year of this moment of my unbearable sorrow, let your children and grand children also kill each other in your own sight like orphans, and bring you the kind of sorrow I am now suffering from ! May your lineage come to an end miserably. May you wander in deserts and wastelands, uncared for, and die miserably with no one around you ! Let your wives weep then as my daughters-in-law weep now !”

The earth trembled and the Pandavas shuddered ! Only Sri Krishna laughed derisively, loudly in a bizarre

manner. Those around him felt as if they, and the palace and all the world was being wafted in those tremendous peals of laughter - as if the world was being washed in a deluge ! Gandhari faints in her chair and feels unburdened even in her foolish act and senseless pronouncement !

Dhritarashtra, surprisingly, repents for this act of haste and foolishness of his wife. He fumbles for words and at last says :

Dhritarashtra : “Forgive me Sri Krishna on behalf of this mad wife !. She does not know what she has done ! She has never before done this or such an act.”

Sri Krishna : (Stops the laughter and proceeds calmly) “King Sir, cataclysms happen without warnings, and but once. They do not repeat. Why should you feel repentant for something, which comes as a crown of all senseless evil all these years ? You too have never repented ! Disasters neither wait for repentance nor are mitigated by them. But from God’s point of view, everything is planned, meaningful and purposeful. This lady here says that I instigated her son for war ! In that case, you should say that I instigated her for this curse, also, on me and my family ! Listen : Curses do not act on God. They serve only as His instruments. No curse on anyone can function, for that matter, without my sanction or impersonal participation. This is Vedanta, which you are not born to understand ! She calls me Omnipotent, but fails to understand ! Tell me whether she is wise ! Has she

but wasted her powers of penance, or gained anything out of it ? If I am Omnipotent, can I not be the author of this curse also through her ? Does she realise this ? It may be my 'will' that nothing evil should remain at the end of this war, or in its aftereffect ! Does it not sound justified that your queen and yourself are all but my instruments ?... Mad Queen ! What curse can act on whom without my participation indirectly ? Am I not the authority to sanction fruits of Karma ? None can bless, or curse without involving me, invoking me. I had already willed the death of the Yadavas, and you have been my instrument of expression. There is nothing new you can invent, will or cause."

Kritavarma and Satyaki get excited and exchange unpleasant looks at each other. They think of this dialogue as inconsequential. But they take some thirty-six years to understand its force and significance. Satyaki belongs to the winning party still unable to enjoy that success, while Kritavarma belongs to the defeated party without being affected in any visible way! All this is now like a dream for both. Sri Krishna continues :

Sri Krishna : "Mother mindless, mother overcome with sorrow ! There are two ways in which everyone in this world subserves my purpose. One way is this : Consciously to cooperate with me by submitting their wills to mine and to act voluntarily as my active instruments. This is the way of the wise, of those who surrender themselves to me. The other way is to resist me, fight with me, become

frustrated and become my unwilling agents and instruments. These latter 'cooperate' unconsciously, at great costs to themselves and others. This was the way of your sons ! - Of all those that died in this ghastly war. You also belong somewhere here, in the party of those that fought against my will, actively or passively. Now when you are frustrated, you blame me. This is the proof of where you belong. You have shown the way for future fellows, who behave irresponsibly and then blame me for their faults. That also seems to be the path Time shows, progressively. Let me tell you something of this law : do you know why Kshatriya womenfolk bear children ? A Brahmin woman bears her child so that she may contribute to the world one who can perform penance, observe austerities, speak the truth, uphold it, to show the way to the rest of the world. A cow conceives that she may give birth to a male calf which can draw heavy weights in loaded carts; a she-horse gets pregnant to bear a he-horse that can run very fast; so also a woman of a servant class wants a good servant in her womb; a merchant womanfolk wants a good keeper of cattle, dairy farmer, cow-tender. Come to a Kshatriya woman ! What does she want, if she is a woman of excellence ? Only two things : a boy wedded to national protection involving killing of enemies or being killed by them !⁴ You are a

⁴ *Taporthiyam brahmani dhatta garbham gourvodharam,
dhavitaram turangi |*

*Shudra dasam pashupalam cha vaishya vadharthiyam
twadvidha rajaputri ||*

(Stri 16-5)

princess and a queen ! Think of it. What more could you have expected ? Unfortunately your children betrayed the nation and died miserably defending the indefensible, namely *adharma* ! That is all you have to lament, if you want to, their *adharma*; not the death itself; die, they ought to, protecting Dharma ! They did the reverse. You are defending what they did, their *adharma*, and mourning the cause of their death. Is this well of you ? You are cursing one whom you call God, on the one hand; and mourning *adharma*, which is dead ! ! Both are evil ! Are you mad or sensible ? Tell me what you have achieved by this double foolishness ?”

Sage Vedavyasa appears there at this point.



CHAPTER 50

THE KAURAVAS CREMATED

The Pandava princes, the Yadava heroes, Sanjaya and Vidura stand up along with Sri Krishna, offer their respects to the sage. The Blind 'couple' also followed, being assisted. Sage Vyasa is now seated in a befitting chair and begins his short discourse while all others listen with downcast faces :

Vyasa : "What is this you have done, Gandhari ? You may not be learned or lettered. That is no excuse. Real wisdom can be acquired in a hundred other ways by right company, reflection, listening to elders, and proper responses at proper moments in life. Life should have been your teacher. You had neither the instincts to absorb the best things of life nor the right education around you, as you were surrounded by villains. Real peace of mind can come only out of Divine Wisdom, which itself is available at high altitudes of experience. You never tried to acquire it. You have literally closed your eyes to the great beauties of life and what you may have observed otherwise. Can you be as foolish as your husband ? Such couples were not seen before; nor will they be, in future."

This general stricture with suitable ironic pointers falls

deaf on the ears of the Blind couple, while all others stare at them. Vyasa continues :

Vyasa : “Education that comes of experience, by mixing with people and living in their midst and sharing their pleasures and pains, is the most natural, lasting and fruitful. Gandhari ! Your sons had formal education at the hands of the best teachers of the age, but learnt no wisdom. You who ought to have carried natural, instinctive wisdom also failed yourself and your own children ! What difference is there now between them, those rascals, and yourself ?”

Dhritarashtra : “Gurudeva ! Father ! Is this the comfort you can offer in our crisis ? Having been born blind, what education was I eligible for ? What company could have been available for me ? Do you mean to say I have no experience or sharing of joys or sorrows at all ? What place did society offer me, other than isolation ? Whom should I curse other than Fate ? Am I my own cause for my blindness ? If I had eyes and come to power of my own right, and not due to the grace of others, would all these unfortunate things have happened ? Would my children have died ? Would I be so discredited with infamy ?”

Vyasa : “You have been trying to justify what you did all these days from your own selfish angle ! You have been avoiding the point I am trying to make. You will have to listen to stronger doses of instruction, perhaps, from me. You say you are born blind ! But not born-foolish ! You made up your

educational lapses by good listening. I myself taught you all that you have listened to, along with Sanjaya ! Do not blame me or others. I cannot see why Sanjaya became wise while you got confirmed only in foolishness and selfishness. What I taught you, you have turned into a waste ! That is my sorrow. Did you treat the sons of your brother on par with your own ? You developed malice right from the day they entered the capital. When you could not mix freely and with love, with your own kith and kin, whom else could you mix with, affectionately and for betterment ? Who was it that laid the plot to burn Kunthi and her sons alive at Varanavata ? Do you think I do not know it, being a recluse ? Was this your way of sharing joys and sorrows with others ? Society has a place too for crooked people ! It will never be an honoured one! You want it after all you have done to bring yourself to this miserable end ! When you don't get it, you blame God and curse His Incarnation! Fate is not blind like you. It is watchful, merciful, impartial and impersonal. You try to bend it too to your own ways ! What the unwise call fate, the wise call Karma. It operates from within man and is born of character and deeds leading to its formation ! It is blind like justice, which knows no favours or frowns. It is not beyond bending or mending by right conduct or character. What prevented you from seeing from your inner eye ? Was that blind too ? Let me ask you this question. When you were born blind, what made you aspire for the throne ? Why did you encourage your sons

with false hopes ? That is where the thorn lives - in an unreasonable ambition, unbecoming of you! If I try to remove it, you are arguing that I am not giving you 'comfort' ! Operating on a diseased part of the body is a kind of comfort-offering too! Can't you see that we - Sri Krishna and myself - are not your enemies ? Try to accept truth; that will prepare you to accept yourself. What you have earned is bad fame, sorrow, and self-tormentation! You must own them as 'hard earned' properties. You have achieved these at the cost of the lives of your sons, your honour, and the love of others. I once offered to give you eyesight before the start of war, and you said 'no.' Is this fate ? Gandhari, now I shall offer you the same privilege, even with your cloth-wrapped eyes. Can you see the dead heroes on the war-field ? Let your education start at least now, in your old age and helplessness."

Gandhari feels inquisitive ! She develops anxiety to view her dead sons, after all this advice, and all her anguish ! Vedavyasa observes it, and speaks again to Dhritarashtra :

Vyasa : "Listen. The people are always guided or misguided set by the role-models of the rulers. This is an all-time truth. If the head of the state follows *Dharma*, all will be well, as they follow that example. Your son set the worst example of evil, crookedness, selfishness, expediency and violence to others by transgressing all laws of ethics and morality. That destroyed all his brothers and all those that stood with him. Narada had forewarned

you; Maithreya too; Vidura was there, of course, as your own minister. You threw all their advice to the winds. When did you ever try to mend your ways ? I told in secret how all this would end, some thirteen years ago, to Yudhishtira ! He made an extraordinary gesture to prevent this war, by vowing that he would listen to you and all your sons, to avoid causes for a conflagration ! You never realised it ! You mistook him for docile ! You sent for him to come and gamble away his all, even his wife ! Was this your wisdom ? He put up with all your humiliations to avoid this war and save your sons ! Should all this goodness be mere encouragement to your endless cruel machination? Gandhari ! I wish you had not blindfolded yourself. You would then be a guiding force, a leading light to your husband ! Is this your own self-made fault? Or also a curse of fate ? You intended being true to your husband in thought, word and deed. But that intention was frustrated by your blindfolding yourself. Your Dharma - the way you observed it - has failed you, as you did not see its larger meaning, and wider connotation. Mechanical observation of even well-meaning ethical or moral principles, by dry ritualistic practice can never yield intended good results. All that remains for you is to repent for the rest of your life."

Vyasa disappears.



Gandhari sees all the dead heroes one by one as a result of Vyasa's boon. Sanjaya goes on adding a running commentary :

First she sees the decayed and dilapidated remains of Duryodhana on the banks of Vaishampayana lake; the contrast between the calm, serene and divine surroundings and the ghastly way of her son's death, the dead body lying there desecrated, uncared for, animals having devoured most of that flesh, was too much for her to bear ! She screams ! The palace maids comfort her and offer her support. Her cries are tearing the skies as it were :

“You said you were sure of victory ! Is this your real victory, my son ? Who is there as support for your father ? You who ought to have been a walking support, a stick of strength in his hands, are now reduced to a burnt firebrand ! Who is there to whom I can complain ? Who will offer me comfort ?”

She cries hysterically, uncontrollably, in bouts of sobs.

The scene changes now, and she witnesses the spot of Dusshasana's death. Sanjaya identifies it and explains how it all happened. The dead body had lost its arms; there was a hole where the stomach ought to be ! The rest of the flesh, all had been food for wolves and foxes. The torn, broken head lay elsewhere with no teeth in it, the mouth gaping and eyes wide open to the skies ! It was a parody of a handsome young man that he once was supposed to be. Gandhari laments :

“Child, villains must have advised you to lay hands on a chaste woman and molest her, that helpless Draupadi, whom you sought to disrobe ! It was my crooked brother Shakuni that egged you on to it, perhaps. There was Karna too to ruin you all.”

Gandhari visits most of the spots where dead bodies of her other sons lay strewn. She comes to where Abhimanyu was slaughtered in cold blood in merciless circumstances... Sanjaya narrates the treachery of Drona, Karna and others and Dussahasana's role in it too... Gandhari sighs and sobs... the spots of others' deaths, of Karna's, Drona's are all visible to her frightened eyes! Bhishma, Ghatotkacha, Shalya, Bhurishravas, Shakuni,... Sanjaya goes on narrating briefly how they all fell there. Millions of animals lay there, stinking with no one to clear them from the warfield... Gandhari begins to understand what it means to be 'detached', slowly, unable to bear the endlessness of these sorrowful scenes. She now understands what Vyasa meant by 'education' in life, in an informal sense.



On the banks of holy Ganga, you have another heart-rending scene, now. The Palace guards have piled up all dead bodies, identifiable, partly-identifiable, mere trunks of bodies, mere mutated limbs, mere heads, and other organs, remnants of dead horses - in lots, in bunches, in a linear order on pyres, on wooden platforms, on mounds and mounts, and arranged for mass-cremation. Yudhishtira stands grief-consumed at the head of a batch of ritual-performers, followed by his brothers. The officiating priests move about, making him touch the necessary materials to proceed with, like Kusha grass, soaked rice, water, firebrands to light the pyres and so on. The palace guards blow the bugles and beat the drums ceremoniously to mark the last rites, as a token of respect to the departed - lo, the pyres are lit up,

and in a few moments flames leap to the skies ! Women-folk in thousands, bereaved unfortunate women, weep, sob, and bemoan their losses to heavens in loud voices. Fragrant flowers, perfumes, costly jewels, and other presents are thrown on those pyres now. The Brahmins are reciting appropriate Vedic hymns in loud and faultless chants.

Ashwatthama being absent from the scene, it now falls on Arjuna to light the pyre of Drona, as his pupil dear. He is in deep grief at the sight of Drona's severed body, the head and the trunk being put together for the sake of Shastraic injunction at the time of cremation. It is also Arjuna's cruel duty to perform the obsequies of his own son Abhimanyu ! Kunthi breaks down when Karna's body is aflame on the pyre. Yudhishtira performs the last rites of the Panchala princes and Draupadi's sons. Only Draupadi views it with steadfast eyes with a stone's heart ! The worst is already over for her; what more is there for her to lose; honour ? self-respect ? lives of near and dear ones ? enemies to be avenged ? anguish to be quenched ? Achievements and losses meant the same for her now !

Dhritarashtra is seen setting fire to the dead bodies of his sons. He tries to fall into the fire, also, in unbearable anguish. Sanjaya prevents it. Gandhari swoons at this sight.

Something of significance happens when earlier Karna's body was lit. The Palace guards tried to light that pyre, after announcing what it was they were burning. Kunthi insists that Yudhishtira shall perform it, instead. Mystified, Yudhishtira wants to know, why.

Kunthi breaks down while announcing that Karna being her first son, it is proper that a brother by blood shall do that as a last duty !

The news produces a wave of shock among all the five brothers :

Yudhishtira : “Mother dear ! What nonsense are you talking ? How can this villain be your son ? Have you lost your brains ? Why resort to this trick to save him after his ignoble death ? Do you want an enemy to be celebrated at my hands ?”

Kunthi : “No, no... my son ! I must tell you a secret I hid in my cruel heart all these fateful years. He was my first son by the Sun-God ! That was when I was still a maid, unwed to your father Pandu. It was a childish sport that resulted in this tragedy for him and all of us. I just wanted to test whether the boon of Durvasa was really efficacious or no! This child was born, which I then could not own up in that condition of mine ! How could I? I waited and waited infinitely for a proper moment to own him up, and claim him to his rightful position. But the poor fellow slipped into evil company gradually, firmly, deeply, irretrievably, moving away from all of us once and for all ! I tried to use a moment of magnitude when Sri Krishna was on his peace mission. But by then he knew the secret. He was not surprised, naturally. He then blamed me abusively and yet was graceful in promising that he would not harm anyone other than Arjuna on this side. I wanted no favours, no concessions, but expressed a desire that he should return to his rightful place as my first son, so that

the war could be stopped and he be crowned as Emperor heading both the feuding camps. Was that not honourable for all, my dear son ? Could I have chosen a more propitious moment ? It would satisfy all, even that fool of an ass, Duryodhana ! What Sri Krishna could not achieve in his peace moves, I wanted to, by this wise compromise doing justice and honour for all. Do you know his reply ? He said, even then he would offer the crown to Duryodhana, and not 'betray' his trust in him ! Nobody wanted him to disown his foster parents either ! All would be happy in the end. I tried all my art, but failed, as this tragic end was in store for him. What could I do after that ?"

Yudhishtira : (Blood rushing to his face in rage)
"Cruel Mother ! Why did you not divulge this to me before ? Foolish woman of sin ! We could have prevented this war in time, had you so cooperated with us !"

Sri Krishna : "Don't say that Yudhishtira ! Nobody could have prevented this war, anyhow !"

Yudhishtira : "How can you say this ? After all, you were the one to initiate this peace move ! When you failed, you had no idea how this secret could stop it ?"

Sri Krishna : "I did have a knowledge of this secret of our aunt Kunthi. Don't ask me for the source of information. That is not important now. A royal messenger must have full knowledge of all aspects of the problem he is dealing with ! I myself told Karna of his true parentage."

Yudhishtira : “Did you ? And yet you failed in your mission ? Difficult to believe ! Who else could be more persuasive than you ? What was his reaction?”

Sri Krishna : “Hardened hearts will not react that easily or spontaneously to flexible moments of life, making or marring the destinies of millions ! He was so confirmed in evil that he rejected my proposal outright, without hearing me in full !”

Yudhishtira : “How could he be so impatient in a moment of terrible surprise ?”

Sri Krishna : “He was not surprised at all ! He said he knew it much earlier ! And so was fully prepared to counter our suggestions for peace. It was not my intention to divide his loyalty as many might think! Moreover, even if loyalty to evil was destroyed, the gain would be for all, even unto him, lastingly.”

Yudhishtira : “How could he not see reason and come round ?”

Sri Krishna : “Character acquired, habits of hate cultivated, strong positions taken in political affiliations, and human bents of mind in love - and hate - relations are not easy to alter or compromise, unless man makes extraordinary efforts to overcome all this cumulative force called Karma. Reason is weakest in its operations against Karma !”

Yudhishtira : “What did he say to your proposal ?”

Sri Krishna : “The same that he said to your mother later. He seems to have rehearsed it, anticipating our moves.”

Yudhishthira : “Krishna ! You have done me great injustice by hiding this secret from me. You should have told me earlier when Karna was alive.”

Sri Krishna : “So what would you have done ?”

Yudhishthira : “I would have unilaterally retired to the forests. I was anyhow not the proper heir, after that knowledge. Karna was the true heir, and it was upto him what he would do with what he had the right to rule over ! I was not concerned.”

Sri Krishna : “That is why I didn’t tell you !”

Yudhishthira : “What do you mean ? You wanted this war ?”

Sri Krishna : “I wanted you to rule, after all.”

Yudhishthira : “How could I do that after this heart-breaking knowledge ? How could I rule over what was not mine by right in God’s view ?”

Sri Krishna : “Look here, brother. We are trying to be wiser after the event. Altering the past is impossible, and calculating over finished events is no enlightenment for anyone. But still if there is a lesson in it for the future, we shall learn it. Your mother had forsaken Karna for good or bad, with chances of reclaiming him bleak. He had joined the evil gang beyond redemption, as events proved. What he said to me at the moment of my peace-proposal was proof enough. You had performed Rajasuya now, making others among your own brothers, cousins or other aspirants in the world, ineligible for that Emperorship, till your life-time. How could Karna have ruled over you, even if you had offered the empire to him ?”

Yudhishtira : “But you said you offered it to him, to avoid the war ?”

Sri Krishna : “I did ! That was a tactical move, tempting by any standards. If he had accepted I would have found a way out, so that you could rule ‘theoretically’ over him, leaving all practical administration to him, or some such solution. Did not Dhritarashtra rule from within the hands of Bhishma ? Or else, if he rejected, that would still be his own fault ! Do you think I got Jarasandha eliminated, Kamsa killed, Naraka overthrown, Shishupala executed and others despatched to death for the sake of Duryodhana or this Karna ? Could I forgive him for all his evil-promptings to his bosom-friend, including the suggestion to expose your wife naked in that infamous assembly ? Yudhishtira, think over coolly. History does not offer the same opportunities, twice to us, for good or evil choices ! It closes doors behind them firmly once for all. Time, in theory, is unmanifest in its impersonal nature. Its manifest form is what we call history ! The flow of time is from the unmanifest to the manifest, from the future you dream of, into the actuality you live in ! And then it is dead into the past, unalterably. No one can change this direction that God has given Time. You can only misunderstand it, mistake it, and stultify the purpose of your life, as most fools do ! But evil forces gather together to distort Time’s direction or purpose. God will have to incarnate Himself, to liberate the flow, make it smooth and steadfast in its direction. It is He who has relieved this earth of its dead

weight ! Your duty now is not simply to weep for the dead, lament over the past, or live in wishful thinking in ivory towers. Anybody can perform these obsequies now. That is not important. Time does not count upon our caste, community or religion, or hesitate in the performance of his duty - the only duty - of moving forward, and carry all with him, living or non-living objects. It is only an unnerved, or nerveless politician who looks at time from unbecoming selfish angle. Time does not brooch this indifference or transgression. Time chooses his instrument rightly from even among the mortals, depending on the suitability of his qualities, character and values he honours and practices. He discards him once his use is over. You are now his instrument; do not behave like a petty politician; behave like a statesman; Time has dethroned Karna; he may have been the Sun's son. But what did he beam except darkness around him, unlike his father? Was that his appointed task ? See, in the eyes of Time, gods and demons, mortals and immortals are equally useful instruments, impartially. That does not mean Good and Evil are the same ! The scales of values are opposite. But they serve his purpose, as nobody else's. Time's flow is from disorder to order, chaos into harmony, death to immortality and ugliness to beauty. Nobody can change it or distort it, much less frustrate it. He leaves behind, the lasting good of values of use, of the past events of persons, powers and collective and individual life and swallows up all else. The evil of wicked elements are held by him as

deterrents, so as to teach us lessons : they say that history is blind. Nothing is farther from truth. History is impartial, that is all. The story of Karna is over. You too have grieved for him. Forget him now and see how time will use you for its purposes. Kunthi's is a trifle of a flaw, or fault, born out of fear and weakness. Do not make much of her error. She too is Time's instrument. God has tormented her enough so far. Do not add to it. What you have to cremate is Karna's mortal remains. The immortal in him has been refunded to where it belongs. Karna is nobody for you or your brothers hereafter. Get up and light the pyre."

Yudhishtira : (Even after a patient hearing, still disturbed) Krishna, my mother should not have hidden this secret so long ! Her sin is endless and unforgivable ! She should not have forsaken Karna, come what may. Her waiting till the time of your peace-making is a blunder. Wicked mother ! You proved death to your own son ! ! What a heartless wretch ! Let no secrets remain in the hearts of women hereafter ! I curse the entire community."¹

Sri Krishna : "So today is a day of curses ! You fool, Yudhishtira, could you be so overcome with passion and ignorance ? You have cursed the innocents also, a whole community ! Will God forgive you ? Did you consider the circumstances of your mother then ? Who would have married her then ? Where would you and your brothers be

¹ *Ato manasi yad guhyam strinam that no bhavishyati* |
(Stri 27-29)

descending from then, if not from the womb of Kunthi ? Would you be related to me otherwise ? She is herself solely responsible for how she conducted herself at that moment of crisis ! What use is your curse now, of you who are born much later ? History is not a movement of curses and boons, forward or backward ! It does not listen to arguments, counter-arguments and human judgments. This artificial order does not happen even in one individual's life, let alone in a community or a nation ! One wrong deed - now yours - is no answer for another ! Ashwatthama killed all your children, and you cursed your own mother and a whole community of women ! Are you any better than that villain ?”

Yudhishtira, now, repents. He falls on the feet of his mother and asks for forgiveness of her. Still his mind is clouded by an unbecoming sense of forlornness and recluse mentality. He has no enthusiasm for the new responsibility that the results of the war have burdened him with. He somehow conducts Karna's last rites.



Those that were in human bodies, in high spirits of war, and hopes of a win just a few days, are now fumes and smoke flying in coils in the blue skies ! Thousands of pyres burned on the banks of Ganga as never before ! Unfortunate thousands wept, sighed and sobbed there at this sight, with mother Earth and father Sky as helpless witnesses. Those vehicles, carts and chariots that shifted those mutated bodies from Kurukshetra to Ganga banks, also stinked for long out

of bad odour ! What to speak of the war-field ? How many trees of the forest as firewood also got burnt for those that were dead or killed ! A whole forest perhaps!! It looked like a re-enactment of Khandava burning, without that sanctity or otherwise of that occasion !

Another thing also happened there and then. Perhaps an equal number of women folk got immolated with their dead husbands on the funeral pyres ! That was the tradition of those days, an alternative for which was self-exile unto forests. Some were awaiting such a day in the immediate future. The burning fire symbolised the raging fire of their hearts. The flames were praying to God for peace and comfort for those left below, bereaved for no fault of their own. Of course, here was a God descended in Sri Krishna to understand the feelings of those destitute women. Sanjaya and Vidura remained as two wise mortal witnesses that had tried their best in vain to prevent this senseless slaughter.



Except those that self-burnt themselves with their dead husbands, the others among the palace-folk, unfortunate aged mothers and other near relations are now departing to the palace with no one to comfort them, welcome them or even attempt to console them! Everyone had a story of loss, sorrow and bereavement. Who should comfort whom in this madness let-loose?

Here is Yudhishtira himself conducting Dhritarashtra and Gandhari back to the palace ! The twins and Bhima are moving towards their old capital Indraprastha. Arjuna awaits on the banks of Ganga the return of Sri Krishna from the river, after his bath and

ablution to the departed. Sri Krishna had told him that he would observe the evening Sandhya, in the river itself and then come directly to the palace, and that there was no need for Arjuna to wait. Still Arjuna waited, without desiring to leave Sri Krishna to himself in that moment of turbulence, what with Gandhari's curse, and now Yudhishtira's curse of all women-folk including his mother. Here were dead heroes still tormenting the living ones, even beyond their death ! Sri Krishna felt the cool waters of Ganga comforting and preferred solitariness at that hour. Sri Krishna sat on a step, closing his eyes. But concentration was not possible. He looked back at the burning pyres :

What fires ! God ! There were palace guards setting right, cinders, burning woodpiles, so that nothing whatsoever was left unconsumed by those fires ! They moved on from position to position, adding, fuel here and there, pouring ghee and oil, perfumes and inflammable substances like camphor with endless patience and devotion to the departed heroes, without knowing who was getting burnt where.

Sri Krishna took a bath in the cool waters of Ganga, and dipped again and again to comfort his body that would not cool off easily. Something still weighed on his mind. When he got up between the dips, with clothes wetting and dripping, his eyes caught sight of a middle-aged woman, not still past her happy youthful days of glory and beauty, gently getting on to the steps after her dip also in the same waters, not far away from where he was. She had wrapped a white towel around her hair to dry it up and tie it into a rough tuft, as if by habit,

and was wearing loose clothes to be set right and tight on the banks, where a royal palanquin awaited her. Her maids were all there, assembled, to allow her a free and lonely moment of dip here, and so none was around her. Sri Krishna had never before seen her, though he tried to recollect a memory of her, if one were possible. He could merely make a guess, and something immediately prompted him to meet her and say a few good words, if his guess was right. He went up the steps to see that lady who was unmindful of his movements in her royal gait, and impatient of anyone talking to her at that hour of her grief. Widowhood ill-befitted her majestic stature and perhaps her nature of mind also. As if by chance she threw a side-glance and caught sight of Sri Krishna, whom she did not know personally, and wondered why he was making efforts of slow movement towards her, as if to speak to her ! Her feet stopped moving from where she stood, bewitched at his personality, as it were, even before their eyes meet. She could equally make a guess as to who this figure was that wanted a moment of conversation with her. She stood silent, staring at him. She had only heard of him, his childhood-pranks, his youthful sports, and manly achievements in war and peace. His divinity was obvious even to her naked eyes. She wouldn't believe that such a handsome figure had so much political concern for national welfare, or could be a terror to many a demon-like warrior; even to her own husband! It was an impossible combination of beauty with strength of character, mercy with political guts and determination, wisdom and compassion, love and ability to weed out evil ! She wondered what there was for

him to talk about now, when all was over. Sri Krishna neared her and wondered too, why she stopped her movements : did she expect comforting words ? Did she stay to curse him too ? Did she need help to climb up the steps ahead ?

Sri Krishna : “You are Bhanumati,² lady, if my guess is right ?”

Bhanumati : “Yes sir ! May I know you ? I do not have any memory of having met you before !”

Sri Krishna : “I am Devaki’s son; and people call me Sri Krishna. There are many who think that I am the instigator of this war ! They blame me till date, curse me and abuse me. They may continue to do so in the future also, even when facts are otherwise and the blame must be laid elsewhere. Your mother-in-law cursed me and my family this morning. I am waiting to receive your curse also, if you stood for a moment here for that on seeing me. Go ahead, lady.”

Bhanumati : (Taken aback) “Lord ! Who does not know you ? I stood for a moment to have a full view of you to calm my mind, and not curse you. I had not seen you before ! I suffer the consequences of my Karma ! Why should I blame you ? What use is it cursing anyone else, now ? Everything is over. I also knew that you were the one person, if there was one, who tried his most to prevent this war.

² The original text of Mahabharatha nowhere identifies her with this name, but which is how all local translations and adaptations name her.

I know also that my mindless mother-in-law cursed you in a rash, thoughtless moment. I stood here to ask for your forgiveness. The others should not mistake my meeting you here.”

Sri Krishna : (Admiring her presence of mind, and unmindful of his tears of joy, without wiping them)
“I had not expected you, the wife of the chief architect of this war-mischief to be so wise, so practical-minded and so graceful, even at this dreadful moment of her greatest personal loss. Lady! It is my misfortune, I did not know you before hand. If I had conducted peace negotiations through your good offices, perhaps I could have brought your unfortunate husband to books; perhaps! I wonder !”

Bhanumati : (With tears in her eyes) “Lord supreme! I shall ask you a pertinent parallel question : through any such good offices of Tara and Mandodari, did Vali and Ravana change or escape their cruel fate ? Who cares for women ?”

Sri Krishna is captivated by her talking skill, her sense of history and straight - forwardness ! Tears roll down his eyes in extraordinary admiration. He goes over those past memories, and wonders whether this woman before him now was the same as that Tara or Mandodari of the past. Again:

Sri Krishna : “Lady, why did you not advise your husband ?”

Bhanumati : “Why would anyone presume I did not advise ? Sanjaya might not have narrated it all to

my father-in-law ! He had only his eyes on the war-field. Who would care for the grief of a mere woman in a corner of her room in the palace ? Even if it is described now, what is the use ?”

Sri Krishna : “You are indeed blessed my lady ! It is wise you avoided committing self-immolation along with your husband’s body. The world must take courage from your model.”

Bhanumati : “Sir, I did not share the path my husband which he chose while he was alive ! What is there for me to achieve by following him into the other world ? I am going to the forests in a day or two to live as a recluse. The ‘wisdom’ or ‘model’ or ‘lessons to be learnt’ for the future do not concern me now. It is all over. Who, after all, cares for the advice of a woman ?”

Sri Krishna : “Madam, I have admired each of your words, coming like gems to be preserved. I shall grant you a boon. Ask for what you want.”

Bhanumati : “I told you Lord, I am leaving for the forests. What can boons bring me when I am renouncing the world itself ? I take a day or two more to meet Draupadi, Subhadra, Kunthi, Uttara and other ladies, to ask for forgiveness on the part of my husband, and his ill deeds, and then leave. You have met me and offered me this consolation; this is enough of a boon. What more could I hope for ?”

Sri Krishna : “Nothing more ?”

Bhanumati : “Forgive my lapses. My husband never

listened to me or anyone else. Or shall I say you used even his evil designs for your greater task of relieving the earth of its dead-weight at the end of this Age of Dwapara. I have failed as a woman in a responsible position from a purely human angle. That is all. I was supposed to act as minister to my husband. But he had his own council of evil ministers, not requiring me. Let the future know my role or otherwise in this ghastly history. Forgive me."

Sri Krishna : (With satisfaction and admiration) "How I wish all women were like you !"

Bhanumati : "May I add sir, how I wish all men were like you, Purushothama ! Oh ! best among men ! You are the only one I have seen responding to the sorrows of women-folk in distress ! That is the luck of women-kind. Were you not the merciful lord giving noble status to the ruined women in Naraka's custody ? Were you also not the one, the unique God, Who blessed Draupadi with endless clothes in the hour of her worst humiliation ?"

Sri Krishna : "May I ask you a question, madam?"

Bhanumati : "Does the Overlord of all require my permission ?"

Sri Krishna : "When Draupadi was being disrobed then, why could you not appear on the scene, and castigate your husband by asking him, if he could put up with a similar situation on your part ? Why did you not accost your father-in-law ?"

Bhanumati : "Sir, believe me; I came to know of it

only after the event was over. I could not have done anything by then or thereafter. I had no clue to this wicked plot either, in advance ! You could have warned me in advance, on your own part, also ?”

Sri Krishna : “Let it be; did you chastise your husband afterwards at least ?”

Bhanumati : “Yes; I did; the only result was, he snubbed me and said : ‘Shut up your mouth.’ Women have been brought to this sad plight by their shutting their mouths for centuries, for millennia!”

Sri Krishna : “Well, you rejected my offer of a boon also ! See at least who it is to whom you are talking.”

Sri Krishna reveals to her his Cosmic Form in all His endless glories, and blesses her :

Sri Krishna : “The future of this country and a promise of its brightness is in the hands of women like you. I shall descend on this earth again and again for women like you, Kunthi, Subhadra, Uttara and Draupadi.”

Bhanumati : “But if people like my husband also ‘descend’ ?”

Sri Krishna : “Therein is a secret Divine, concerning the flow of Time. Your palanquin waits for you. Better leave.”



CHAPTER 51

YUDHISHTIRA CROWNED

“Leave me alone. I don’t want this crown. I am responsible for the death of my own brother Karna, let alone the Kauravas, our cousins ! Nothing will wash this sin of mine. Was it not lust for political power, on my part, that forced me into this sin, on such a scale? I should have followed the advice of uncle Dhritarashtra and gone abegging alms in the land of Sri Krishna, far away from this Hastinapura or Indraprastha. Do we find compassion, forgiveness, renunciation, contentment in this blasted life on earth? Like dogs fighting for a red piece of cloth mistaking it for flesh, we Kshatriya-dogs fight for illusory glories, and ephemeral vanities, leaving millions dead for our selfishness ! Were these heroes born for my sake, to be killed like this, pitilessly? I do not require anybody’s comforting me now. What is evident is my sin, which cannot be undone by a hundred explanations. Duryodhana is better and has escaped all blame, leaving it at my door ! I envy him! Arjuna, Bhima, you will look after the royal affairs hereafter. I shall retire to the forests.”

- So said Yudhishtira in a grief-choked voice after all the obsequies of the dead were over.

Arjuna : “Brother, Why do you speak like the ignorant,

again and again? There is what is called one's own duty - Svadharma - as the Shastras speak. Do not insult the role of the warrior in preserving order, law and protecting the weak and the destitute. Administration is no sin. Punishment of transgressors is part of the duty of the rulers. There is sin, undoubtedly, in life; but elsewhere; not at your door. Punishing the sinner is no sin in itself ! Who taught you this ignoble idea? The warrior's role is sacred, but difficult; its necessity is inherent in the order of human organisation, to prevent it from degeneration into jungle life. If all people resort to begging, should there not be others to offer it? Who will protect these householders from being reduced into beggars? Your logic leads to social confusion, disorder and total chaos ! Are you aware of this greater sin that you will be bringing about?"

Bhima : "Excesses are always bad; brother, be a man; conduct yourself becomingly. Think of what is expected of you by God, and the society around you. You want to fail in duty? Is that no sin? Remember the message of mother Kunthi, just before the war started, which she sent from Vidura's place to you in Upaplavya ! What you are doing amounts to cowardice and betrayal of the trust society has placed in you and us ! You said a moment ago that I and Arjuna should look after the royal affairs ! See this contradiction ! ! Who are you to advise us or order us so, when you yourself run away from duty? We have to deride ourselves, after all, for following you, a dull witted elder brother, all these years, without doing

self-thanking.¹ You always prefer forest life, as if a mere stay there assures you of a place in the higher world ! In that case, wild animals like wolves, lions, tigers should be the most eligible for salvation ! Even forest trees ! Also elephants and deer ! Do mountains and forest-rivers attain perfection? They follow the vow of 'give, but receiving nothing', which you call 'aprigraha' better than you and I ! You, muddled fool of a brother ! Salvation is through duty and not away from it."

Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva and again Bhima add by turns more and more appropriate arguments in support of this same view; but they do not have any effect on Yudhishtira's sagging mind. Now Draupadi chastises him :

Draupadi : "Lord, sir, an unmanly coward is not meant, designed or destined to rule over this earth. For he cannot retain or protect his own wife, property, wealth or even children. A fellow that cannot rule with weapons in hand is no 'Kshatriya', a warrior. How will you contain the transgressor of law without use of weapons? To be friend to one and all is the mental or moral attitude prescribed only for a Brahmin. You may not hate anybody. Sir, could you prevent those that deprived you of your all, some thirteen years ago, from hating you till they licked dust? Is a Kshatriya's attitude unilateral? Is it practical? Should you not keep an eye on state

¹ Vayamevatra garhya hi yadvayam mandachetasam |
Tvam rajan ! anugacchamo jyeshtho'nyam iti Bharatha ||

enemies? Where did Bhishma or Drona belong in Sri Krishna's eyes? Are you wiser than the All Lord? What you call your wisdom is a fund of ignorance. Shed it."

Arjuna : "Brother, you argue that a king must rule without use of force ! Is this not overshooting of the point? Do not over-interpret the doctrine of non-violence or Ahimsa ! Life subsists on life, and moves on in a flow, or chain, uninterrupted in the law that all is governed by the grand concept of 'yajnya', the doctrine of God's appropriation of everything, so that value emerges from chaos, preventable at every moment in life. We are neither creators of that law nor its misinterpretors ! We are only governed by it.² The way jungle animals consume one another, is crude. The civilized society observes it in a refined way; we all enter into each other by a grand cycle of relations. Non-relational absolutes are only abstract and impossible absurdities. You have fallen into that trap ! See, We all eat food. How is it produced except by agriculture? A farmer castrates his bullocks to command their obedient services ! How else will you tame them? Or else do you argue that agriculture itself is a sin? All professions involve encroachments on each other's freedom; there is none purely, exclusively non-violent. Even a Brahmin is covered by it."

² *Pranasyannam idam sarvam |*
Sattve sattva hi jivanti |
Jivo jivasya jivanam |

(and so on)

Yudhishtira rejects all this as jugglery of words!

Yudhishtira : “Do you mean to say that recluses who live on dried leaves and fruits are fools? Do ascetics deserve your condemnation? Are they not the ones that have conquered Hell?

Bhima argues that everything has a proper time in life.

“But if all people become recluses by birth, is it proper?”

Vyasa appears and advises :

Vyasa : “Yudhishtira, a king must rule with a code and arms. If there is no force, society cannot be organised or maintained. Rulership is a must for social welfare. If the world is ruined because of no rule, or misrule, that sin accrues to the credit of the king only ! Do not think of the warrior’s role in life as sinful or violent. It is as much God-ordained as agriculture, teaching or trade ! Time governs everything. Earning wealth or powers of position are not sinful by nature. Earning has a time, place and mode; spending too. You have lived in the forests for more duration than necessary and at ungodly periods of life ! Now your duty is to rule and protect the people. This is no time for escape.”

Yudhishtira : “I do not agree sir ! It is better to die than rule at such exorbitant costs of other people’s lives ! Sir, how can I forget the war incidents and immoral methods used by our own people? Shikhandi felled Bhishma, hiding behind Arjuna’s

back ! Drona was disarmed by me by resorting to a lie, which helped the army to kill him where he was in meditation at the last moment. Karna was killed by Arjuna in his helpless moment against all established moral codes. After all Karna was my own elder brother. I have been instrumental for all these unmanly murders. We have come to power not by right royal methods. How can I accept rulership when I am convinced all this is wrong?"

Vyasa : "Yudhishtira, you are a fool of the first order!

You are mixing up things and have a negative view of all life. In your view, there is no scope for values at all; you argue all life is sinful ! Do you know how many millions of creatures like fish, whales, crocodiles and others are being born, and die every moment in the sea ? But the sea is undisturbed, and does not overflow the shores ! Your sorrow must have a limit and meaning. It must be bound in contexts and not run amuck ! Do not make too much of the losses in wars. They have happened before. Nor will they end with you ! As long as life continues, there will be evil and so war, and so losses, suffering and grief. It is a pity I have to tell you the same things again and again. All this has happened at God's initiative. We are not the makers of that law; so we cannot break it also! Those that unite, must also get separated in the flow of time. God wanted a cause, or excuse. War, that bloody holocaust, happened to serve that purpose. It has happened. You tried your best to avoid it, in an earnest attempt for peace. That was beyond you because God wanted it. Give up this ego that you are its origin."

Sri Krishna who was silent all this while, picks up the thread of advice from where Vyasa had left it, and continues it. He quotes several historical anecdotes to prove the rightness of his vision. Narada too joins the session with nectarine teachings. Yudhishtira is unmoved. Vyasa again continues :

Vyasa : “That God is the All-Doer is one extreme view.

If that were so, then sin and merit must squarely be laid at his door only, and everyone else should be free. Who then must be affected by Karma? Only God ! The other extreme is that man is the all-Doer ! In that case, all wishes of all people should be fulfilled as they choose ! But that does not happen. It is not logical to say that we choose but someone else dispenses fruits thereof, within this view. If that someone else can be God, you have to strike a balance between human efforts, and God’s benevolence. That is the path of Vedanta. Man chooses, as he is the bearer of fruits of Karma, thus explaining variety and individuality. God supervises, is impartial, and impels each according to the fruits of previous Karma. It is upto man to succumb to Karma or overcome it by efforts for betterment. Impellership is a kind of Doership, and God is a Doer in this periphrastic sense only. Let me take an example. If a man cuts a tree with an axe, tell me, whether the fruits thereof, of cutting, belong to the man or the axe?³ Now you see that this war has happened in spite of your best efforts

³ *Yatha hi purushah chindyat vriksham parashuna vane |
Chettureva bhavet papam parashoh na kadachit ||*

to prevent it. That means it is God's design. You are His mere instrument; agent. Leave the fruit to him, and now rule as His agent. Why should you be accused with sin? Which text teaches so? The dawning of the Kali Age is indicated by your confusion and endless, senseless suffering. Give up worries. If you still want to have a lighter heart, you can perform a Horse-Sacrifice !”

Yudhishtira was somewhat calmed at this suggestion of a rite for expiation; all sighed in relief.



Indraprastha is decorated now as in the days of Rajasuya, like a bride. Hastinapura, the older capital of the cousin race is too decorated to receive Yudhishtira, forgetting its grief, as it were !

The same Hall of Fame where Yudhishtira was once crowned as Emperor of the whole world is dressed up, this time, for a longer-term coronation and consequent rule. Yudhishtira is seated on a high throne; Sri Krishna is to his left, Vidura to his right, brothers behind are surrounding him. Bhima holds the white royal umbrella over his head. Arjuna holds a 'Chamara' - a fan of the traditional type. Nakula and Sahadeva are his bodyguards, holding swords in their hands. Sanjaya is awaiting emergency orders of the new emperor. Draupadi is seated in the balcony, up the stairs, along with her maids, assistants and other royal womenfolk.

A servant arrives in a hurry with a golden casket, bringing in 'yellow rice grains' - *Akshata* - as a mark of blessings on the part of Bhishma. Dhoumya the

officiating priest of the occasion was to strew them on the heads of the five brothers and Draupadi. The king bows down to him and enters the city with his right foot in, for the first time. But there was now heard a loud voice of protest from somewhere, and all look at the direction of that sound !



“You, Yudhishtira, extolled falsely by the world of fools as Dharmaputra - ‘Son of Dharma’ - all your ‘dharma’ is no more than pretension ! It is for advertisement only, as show.”

That was the voice. It emanated from a person dressed as mendicant in the Tridandi⁴ tradition. He wore a sacred thread on his left shoulder, so as to get it under his right arm; sported a tuft on the back of his head, and wore wooden sandals on his feet. The dress revealed him as bound by tradition, leaving no scope for a doubt that this could be a spurious personality. He had a small following of Brahmin priests behind him too ! For a moment, none could doubt his authenticity.

By some sudden instinct Yudhishtira moved to Sri Krishna’s side ! Sri Krishna whispered to him in a low voice : “This is a demon dressed as a saint. His name is ‘Charvaka.’ He is an atheist in the guise of a devotee. He speaks well so as to draw people and trick them into anti-traditional views. Beware.”

Charvaka : “Yes. I belong to the Charvaka school

⁴ a recluse holding ‘three staves’ tied together and (held in hand) showing that his mind, thought and deeds were dedicated to God.

of thought. You call me a demon. That shows your mean mentality and narrowness of thought. You are all intolerant of original thinking. Let it be. I am a Brahmin, come to curse you for the war you have waged in the name of peace and killed millions. You are extolled as 'One born with no enemies' - Ajatashatru ! But you have killed your own cousins ! You cannot see this contradiction. Are you not ashamed? If you had abstained, would this war ever have taken place? You often pretended that you wanted no political power ! But what is this you have ultimately done? Killed people and attained power by false means, by crooked methods, foul strategies! I have my curse upon you."

The Brahmins surrounding Yudhishtira went into a disturbed pack of protesting noises. Yudhishtira was deeply perturbed and was about to relapse into his earlier mood of dejection, and viewed Sri Krishna, with meaning. After a few moments, he tried to offer a cooling word of explanation :

Yudhishtira : "Elderly sage ! Do not be angry. My respects to you. You are unaware, perhaps, of our history of sorrows, travails and humiliation, before we attained justified victory over evil forces. Your accusations are false and are born of ignorance. It unbecomes you and your position to talk in this tone without examining facts. My brothers will answer you separately. Do not stand here to obstruct proceedings that are auspicious for the state. We have no time for waste of words with you."

But the impostor stood there, without yielding to persuasion. Dhoumya came forward and said :

“King sir ! This is an old friend of Duryodhana! By birth, he is a Rakshasa. His real name itself is Charvaka - meaning ‘one who talks well’; He is neither Brahmin nor a true saint of any traditional order. Don’t you remember Ravana of bygone ages, also resorting to this dress, to trick Sita? Evil fellows can debauch any sacred institution by misusing their signs of dress and other prescriptions. This only means that supporters of Duryodhana are still alive, and will keep up their memories of rooted evil forever. This is a bad sign for the future ! There is Ashwatthama, on the other side to keep Duryodhana alive in public thought !”

The Brahmins jointly pronounced a distorted form of the sacred mono-syllabic ‘Pranava’⁵ as “Hum”. The demon got burnt into ashes then and there

Sri Krishna : “This is no more than breaking a coconut as an auspicious mark of a new beginning before we start. Do not worry. Did I not myself kill Shishupala, at the end of Rajasuya ? Both are of the same background.”

Yudhishtira : “Wherefrom did this devil descend ?”

Sri Krishna : He belongs to the Krita age in origin. He did penance to please Brahma, and wanted immortality while in body. Brahma did not like it. He however granted it on a condition. It was that he shall die only of the curse of Brahmins. That is how he has died.”

⁵ means ‘Om’, comprising A+U+M and containing all Vedas in a nutshell of significance in sound, form and meaning.

Yudhishtira : “So you mean to say that atheism prevailed even in the age of Krita?”

Sri Krishna : “Remember Hiranya Kashipu who claimed to be God? His brother HiranYaksha claimed all earth as his property ! Both lived in that very age. Do you think anyone today can match him in trying to bring that doctrine of ‘no God’ into vogue?”



Yudhishtira is now seated on an ivory throne along with Draupadi. Opposite him are seated Sri Krishna and Satyaki in golden seats. Bhima and Arjuna keep guard behind Yudhishtira. Kunthi is seated behind them with the twins. Vidura, Dhaumya, Dhritarashtra are also seated in appropriate positions. So also Yuyutsu, Sanjaya and Gandhari elsewhere.

Holy waters from various rivers and seas from all four quarters are assembled in golden vessels in the Royal Hall meant for coronation. Flowers, gems, jewels and other worship-materials await being used in profusion, while conches of large size are too ready.

Holy fire for worship is enkindled in the altar ready for the ceremony. Nearby is a seat called ‘Sarvatobhadra’⁶, ready for the king to be seated on it when ‘pouring’ of Holy waters on his head begins. Servants have examined it, spread a tiger’s skin on it, and a spotless white cloth on it further.

First Yudhishtira worships the Holy fire, offers oblations, in a routine manner of Aupasana.⁷ Then

⁶ meaning ‘secure on all sides’

⁷ daily worship of Fire

Dhaumya conducts 'Samkalpa'⁸ to the effect that the king is bound by duty to protect the people, their lives and properties, honour and vocations by upholding Dharma in all fields.

Yudhishtira is now escorted by Dhaumya to the seat called 'Sarvatobhadra' for consecration by Holy waters. His head is decorated with a silk-turban laced in gold, and then a tray of gold with a thousand holes in it is held on top of it, so that when water is poured; it trickles down a thousand-fold in slow, comforting and divinising drops.

But who shall offer those holy waters first ? It is an extraordinary privilege, for, someone who would really 'make the king.' Not the ordinary 'King-maker', in a wily sense, of opportunistic political vulgar sense!

This honour belonged to none but Sri Krishna, deservedly. He got up, held his conch Panchajanya in both hands and blew it to his heart's content. Then he dipped it in gold vessels containing those holy waters, took it out in full measures and poured it on the heads of Yudhishtira and Draupadi. Sri Krishna did it with all his four hands, as if he were granting all the four human ends called Purusharthas⁹ to the new Emperor and through him to the subjects. With this symbolic ceremony performed, a new CHAPTER in the history of the nation started, ending the misrule of the usurpers, who were no more. Sri Krishna shed tears of joy, and the assembled folk also joined him in that glory.

⁸ taking a vow.

⁹ Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. These are the four broad groupings, scales, in which all human aspirations are covered.

People shouted slogans of ovation to Sri Krishna. Veda Vyasa himself came there and praised him in divine verses: "Lord, who is there who cannot attain his goal by crossing all hurdles on his way, if your mercy descends on him? An unfortunate fellow who does not earn it, .. how can he rise high, or attain to auspiciousness? Yudhishtira, you are blessed. The Lord supreme considers you as His breath, and offers His all for your upliftment, betterment, and establishment. His heroic exploits are beyond human description or even grasp. Now you must deserve His grace. All your obstacles, hurdles have been removed by Him."

The Brahmins recite select hymns and verses of benediction from all the four Vedas to bless the Emperor. Even gods above assemble to see this glory and be blessed.

Yudhishtira honours all these holy men suitably, with the aid of palace officials and makes a short speech:

"Uncle Dhritarashtra is my God. I shall bring all government matters first unto his notice and then proceed in my judgment and action. To serve him in this present condition of his, is my first duty. He depends entirely on me, having lost all his sons. My dear brothers ! Forget the past and honour him as I do, hereafter. Bhima, you will be the Yuvaraja. You will be so crowned very soon. Vidura, you will carry out duties as our Prime minister; this is but a restoration to an older post where you were there in an earlier political order. None will interfere hereafter in your right royal duties. No one can sideline you, overstep

you, or disobey you. Sanjaya, you shall function hereafter as our finance minister, examining expenditure and state income, sanctioning expenditure, improvising the right means of revenue, income. Nakula, brother, you will be our Commander-in-Chief, maintaining the army, arranging for their salaries, and keeping them in a fit condition for all emergencies, state protection, from inner and outer enemies. Arjuna will look after external affairs - relations with our neighbours, our tributaries, and friends, as well as ambitious, rebellious chiefs within our empire. Traitors, transgressors, sub-rulers who exceed Dharma will have to be watched and brought to books. Sahadeva, you will be the chief of my bodyguards, as well as minister in emergency, doing any service essential, as occasion requires. Our preceptor Dhaumya will be our Chief advisor, in matters of justice, political counseling as well as spiritual practices of the royal court. My people, you will have no fear of punishment or royal displeasure, if you carry on your God-ordained duties without fear or favour. The government will not interfere in your vocation, or trouble you with untimely, unreasonable, excessive taxes for the merriment of a few in the courts of rich men favoured by despotic rulers as in the past. Have this assurance for once. We shall punish only those that transgress the laws. I shall neither resort to populism, nor exploit you in the name of Dharma or God."

Yudhishtira got down the pedestal, came to where Sri Krishna was seated and, sat near his feet. With tears in his eyes, he offered praises to him : Krishna, your exploits are too deep for mortals to catch significance of; but they are all always in the interests of the world

and have the good of all in mind.” He went on reciting a string of his holy names

Sri Krishna was staring with a blank look, drawn as it were by something else of an urgent nature, while not concentrating on Yudhishtira on what he was saying.

Yudhishtira : Krishna, what are you thinking of?”

Sri Krishna : (Silent for some moments, and then)..
“Bhishma, lying there on the bed of arrows, is in deep pain and remembers me, being unable to turn. He is a treasury of ancient lore, and political as well as spiritual wisdom. You have to inherit all that, before it is too late. He has just a few more days to go.”



Yudhishtira did so. It took several days of teaching political sagacity, rules not to violate, objects to keep in mind always, aspects of public welfare, jurisprudence, spiritual wisdom, means to attainment of perfection, social institutions as steps in a ladder leading to it; past anecdotes and precedents in galore in all these matters, lessons to be learnt from the examples of great men, and the individual as well as family duties to society, their inter relationship, duties of women folk, mendicants, householders, their roles in social cohesion, and the values of cooperative living - were all taught in exhaustive detail.

But in the beginning a touching episode took place : When Sri Krishna took the five brothers along with Draupadi to where Bhishma lay and recommended for the instruction to start, Bhishma flashed a smile of

despair, discomfort and desolation and said in slow staggering words, with sagging energy and enthusiasm: "Lord ! ... are you having some fun at the cost of ... this dying old man? Am I ... in a fit... condition? Why mock.... me? leave me... to.. my fate..."

Sri Krishna vouched on him a boon to the effect that he shall not feel tired, hungry or thirsty as long as he talked on what he had to teach. Then started the Grand Instruction - *Anushasana* - running into a whole Book of the present Mahabharatha text. Bhishma started with a hymn in praise of Sri Krishna called "Stavaraja", "King among of Hymns" and ended with a "Thousand Names" of the Lord in a garland, (*Vishnu SahasraNama*) consisting of codified concepts and percepts precepts of God as inherited from the most ancient past traditions of seers.

Draupadi : "Grand Sire, may I ask you a question?"¹⁰

Bhishma : "Oh ! you have come too ... young lady! ... go ahead... ask me.. what agitates you.. !!

Draupadi : "I have no desire of wounding an old saint of your stature on the death bed... but.."

Bhishma : "Skip... this...unnecessary... preamble... and go over ... to your point.. make it... briefly."

Draupadi : "When you started this bedside discourse, you said *Dharmaya mahate tasmai*.... meaning that

¹⁰ This incident is now not available in the present Mahabharatha text. It is said to be part of Jaiminiya Mahabharatha in Sanskrit, most of which is lost except for the Ashvamedhika Parva. Jaimini was a contemporary of Vaishampayana, whose version is what we now possess. Jaimini too was a disciple of Veda Vyasa.

you bowed down to that Grand Cosmic Law or Order of life governing all of us.. How come you forgot this Law at the moment of my humiliation, and violence to my honour, which you could not then save?.. Sorry..."

Bhishma : (tears rolling down his sunken eyes) :
 "Mother dear !... you are right...the blood that ran then in my viens was polluted because of the contaminated food I owed to Duryodhana ! Salt's debt they call it ! It clouded my mind. They say in the Upanishads that Food and Mind are subtly interconnected.¹¹ I made terrible mistakes, fumbled for the right vision, failed and so let you down. I have suffered enough on this bed of sharp arrows for it, as a course of expiation. Now all that stuff is gone through the pores that arrows have bored into my flesh. So.. I am.. somewhat more pure, and so... can speak... with an unclouded mind.. Moreover.. I have the blessings of Sri Krishna !"

Yudhishtira : "Sir, forgive my wife's impertinence.. This is an improper moment for an arrogant question concerning a past episode and involving dead people. The more urgent question is of mine... How can I rule without your presence in my court? For whose sake is all this glory now thrust on me? What am I to do without guidance or support in administration?"

¹¹ Vide : Chandogya Upanishad, Ch. 6. "*Ahara shuddhow sattva shuddhih, sattva shuddhow dhruva smritih, smriti lambhe granthinam vipramokshah*" - meaning that unless food was pure, bodily stuff could not attain a condition for the mind to concentrate on liberation.

Bhishma : “You.. can’t rule.. for the dead !.. Rule ... is for the living..... for the present and future... There are millions of families that live on the rightness of rule and the justness of your policies... and the Dharmic base of your vision. Live for them,.. rule for them.. not for me or the others dead. You cannot touch the dead... mend them.. they are no.. more than .. mere memories.. some.. not even good ones. Be dispassionate... Have impersonal goals.. of universal welfare ... Go.. God bless you.”



“Auntie, bless me and permit me to leave for Dwaraka. Work awaits me there plentifully !”

- So said Sri Krishna to a tearful Kunthi, after the ceremonies were over and after comforting the five brothers and Draupadi. The chariot decorated in gold and jewels shone like another sun on the earth, in the youthful rays of the morning sun. Garuda, the Divine Eagle on the flag was getting restless, anxious to start the journey, accompanying the master below him. It was Daruka’s turn now to drive the vehicle, and he was already on his seat.

Kunthi : “Keshava, when you said you are leaving, I felt as if my breath was leaving my body ! Do you require any permission formally to visit here or leave, at any time of your choice? You know my impossible desire that you should always be here with us. But that is also the desire of all your relations, friends, devotees and even acquaintances!”

Sri Krishna : “Aunty, your sons are now in positions proper for them, and where they really belong. No

anxiety is there hereafter. I merely sought your blessings, as my duty was over in a way. I suppose you are happy !”

Kunthi : “Your duty cannot be over so easily, whatever you may say. My sons are where they belong, purely because of your grace and special protective power and efforts. Your love for them is their real shield.”

Sri Krishna : “You have not answered my question?”

Kunthi : “I know any answer to that question can be wrong or unsatisfactory from one angle or another; who can please you? I shall try to answer you to the best of my ability of understanding and answering: My sons are beyond all dangers, all humiliations, and all hardships and are now free from those that troubled them. But power, position, wealth, and attachment are all bonds that can eclipse our true and natural relationship with you. They say this is your ‘maya’ - the immeasurable power of mystery that we cannot understand. We have realised by experience so far, that man can be happy without these acquirements or accomplishments. Our life in the forests have taught us this much in the final reckoning. The cause of this realisation is also your grace ! You are known as the best friend of those that are in trouble and possessing nothing but you as friend, philosopher and guide. Your tests are difficult to pass. You bestow pleasures on the bewildered and the unsteadfast souls in your love, to see if they can forget you in exchange for these ephemeral

possessions. But if one is deluded so, you remove these crutches, these eternal, perishing aids so that they resort to you as their imperishable Friend. No hardships are as hard as forgetting you, and no pleasures are those as remembering you constantly! This is what I have learnt in the school of life, with you as my teacher. May I always be blessed with hardships in life that remind me of your relation with us, as our best treasures. This is all my request or prayer. I am neither learned, nor wise. I have no education at the hands of any sage or seer. If this is a right prayer, grant it.”

Sri Krishna sheds tears of joy on hearing these words of an old woman that called herself ‘untutored, uneducated.’ How many ‘educated’ giants of the age like Bhishma or Drona, knew as much? He wondered. What a pure heart, unclouded by ego or narrow attachments ! What great price had this great lady paid to learn this precious secret of Veda or Vedanta ! Sri Krishna was silent for long and then turned his attention to Draupadi.

Sri Krishna : “Sister ! your vows are all now fulfilled.

God has removed all your sorrows and fulfilled all your prayers. Those that were happy at your distress, those that humiliated you and partook that sadistic pleasure are all in the dust today. Your husbands are secure , again, in their seats of power and honour. I have nothing more to do here in your service. Permit this brother to leave for Dwaraka.

Draupadi began shedding tears silently. The Pandavas were surprised at this, as they had expected her to beam

a smile of satisfaction at this farewell, as all her wishes had been fulfilled. What more was there now? They developed further anxiety about what further she might ask for. But Draupadi removed those fears in these wise and mature words !

Draupadi : “Krishna, brother ! No doubt, my vows are all fulfilled. Who else could achieve them for me other than you? I was selfish no doubt. But it was prompted by sufferings that I could not bear - no woman could have borne them - but even there you saw a way to comfort the world of sufferers in general and used my vows to fulfill your own urge to free this world of all its evil. You treated my vows as your own vows. But all sorrows will never end once for all in life. Some have gone, others, new ones, have come. I have no one alive on my father’s side ! Father is gone. But victorious brothers, and all my sons have been killed by Ashwatthama ! You know how valuable is a mother’s home for womenkind, in terms of sentiments. All may be well here at the husbands’ place. Secondly, I have lost my very motive force of my life: husbands, are world heroes, no doubt. But I have been betrayed by them once; and once is enough. Since all my sons are lost, for whose sake should I still live? After such experience of shame and sorrow? A blank haunts my mind, a hollow, a nihil, on all sides !”

Sri Krishna : “Wise sister, I am surprised that you too talk like ignorant folk. Do we not go on losing relations one by one as we near our destinations?

Are relations absolute? Don't you think birth - bondage is too, but a bondage?"

Draupadi : "True, Sri Krishna, but till we live here, are not these bondages our very shelters? How can we develop a 'beyond the death' attitude while still alive? Will it not get us into contradictions, agonies, incongruities and conflicts at every step? Do you recommend it as an admirable attitude to cultivate? What do terms mean, 'husband, wife, children, parents' in this view?"

Sri Krishna : "You will tell me, please, yourself, the meanings of the terms in the altered context of life! There is another instrument of measurement to tell what is bondage and what else is shelter. It is not that you do not know it?"

Draupadi : (Trying to smile even in pain) "Krishna, I am well aware that Rukmini and Satyabhama too have lost links in terms of parentage. *You* are all for them. You are their destiny. Here bondage and freedom have identical meanings. How does this apply to this unfortunate soul of Draupadi?"

Sri Krishna : "Stretch your vision, your logic beyond my two wives and you will see the eternal context for all. There is a parent's home beyond, a mother's bond, common for all - women as well as men ! That is our mother Earth. As long as it is there what else does anyone require as comfort?"

Draupadi : "Oh ! That's all ! But that is a vision hard to digest at this moment of total loss and bereavement. It is a grand burial ground, after all!

Vedanta may permit this view. But that will not be a ground for life, for living as we understand. Husbands are alive. But the illusion that they could be protectors is gone, forever ! Fourteen years ago, this faith has been uprooted. My disillusion is as old as that. Ashwatthama completed this final enactment. Whom shall I seek comfort under? Kunthi? Gandhari? They are refugees too ! They call me 'empress' now. But what does this designation offer me now? What new hopes? Tell me what is there to depend on for life's faith?

Sri Krishna : "A cemetery can become a beautiful pleasure garden also, at another time ! The views will change by the necessity of times ! As long as you persist in pain and its memory, the view will not alter. A crying mouth can also smile ! What its context will be is God's decision. We eat, also vomit ! Is it the same mouth? The view 'I live for myself' produces one view, while 'I live for others' produces the exactly opposite. Selfishness and detachment can produce opposite colours in our vision. See, if this makes sense? You will then get back all that you need. Your children also will be then available in another relation. Not only five... it could be five hundred millions ! Try to cultivate this impersonal attitude for living, for the sake of those that you do not see. Let this new vision fill your present vacuous mind."

Draupadi is now able to feel a new enthusiasm, a sense of resurrection, natural in life's cycles, a rejuvenation !

Sri Krishna : “You brothers; this is my common message to you all. Your people, subjects, are your children. Start a new life for their sake.”

Sri Krishna signals to Daruka, suggesting that he can now proceed.

The journey for Dwaraka starts. The brothers, Draupadi and Kunthi stand there for long, looking in the direction of Sri Krishna’s departure, until the chariot looks reduced to a mere speck on the horizon.

Kunthi : “Children, Keshava has endowed you with a new vision today. That is a new manifesto for life hereafter. Therein lies a new hope. It is not a mechanical *CHAPTER*-turning we are undergoing now. It is a new play, on a new stage, in a new town, with a new pack of spectators. The actors wear new roles, new costumes and enact new stories. The earlier history is behind us. A new mystery draws us towards a new future. Cling to it, and vow to make it a reality. I am also with you.”



CHAPTER 52

EPILOGUE - SANJAYA REVIEWS

“Dear Reader friend unknown, I have been narrating so far, what I saw on the war-field. I have now to speak on what I do not see... unknown generations of future readers of the text of Mahabharatha that my master Veda Vyasa has left for you all. This is also implicit in the command that my teacher has given me. Seeing the war with my eyes and not merely narrating it, but also interpreting its significance to a blind contemporary king is one thing. But since my ‘guru’ has implicated me, too, as one of the characters of the story, and has narrated the war-episodes, not in his own language, but using my very words (which he could have avoided, otherwise), I understand that my little service does not end with the limited role given to me in the context of the blind ruler. So this epilogue.

Is this story over? Well, yes in a way; no also in another way. It depends on how you relate the story with your own life and that around you. From this angle, realise that this war is a never-ending one, as it is between Good and Evil. All characters in it, including me, are immortal in that larger sense. As long as the

cause of the war is alive, how can we die? How can the narration be over? New persons with old names, new contexts shaped after older ones, when will they cease to mean the same significances to you?

The only difference is this. I was within the story all this while. Now I am outside it, to speak to millions of blind men, Kings or no Kings. This position suits me even better, as I can see the meanings even more dispassionately from an even greater distance. I am now able to see one thing better than anyone of you, and a thing I never saw before - the peaceful rule of Yudhishtira and the good it has brought to the people individually as well as collectively. I have actually lived to see it, a luck not given to even Bhishma or Drona! Not merely that ! I have understood its secret also. That weight, weight of wisdom (heavier than that of ignorance), is sought to be underlaid, lightened, and shared with you here, in this post-script.

The first thing I want to emphasise is that the future reader of the Mahabharatha should not be another Dhritarashtra. The older one of that name in the Epic did not benefit from my narration. My duty was to tell him what I saw, its meaning, for the blind man who could not be on the war-field. It was an idle narration on my part; a mere past time for a man who started the war machine, who did not want to stop it, and who did not understand its meaning. It was a strong heart! His name meant 'one who upholds the nation.' In actuality he upheld evil and let down the nation. He broke the nation, tore human hearts instead of uniting them; threw wisdom to winds, and became a dead

weight for the nation ! He remains a mere symbol for blindness, misrule, selfishness, despotism and all else that is implied in the term '*adharma*.'

How many times should he ask me questions of the same kind, same angle, same suggestion of rightful thinking, and same metaphysical points, and how many times should I answer them? I became a sort of artist, varying the form, mould and structure of my answers, keeping the same theme always at these very questions. He would not understand or want to understand ! He had loved untruth to a point where truth would have broken his heart ! But the crook had hardened his heart so much that even when truth happened to prevail, it did not break !

Lesson? It is obvious ! Whenever politicians become 'heavy' for their nations to bear, morally, ethically or in terms of life-building, life-bearing values, they become instrumental for new Mahabharatha-wars, because life-upholding values do not give in as easily as evil minds presume ! Values are invisible to the dull and selfish minds but they are the forces that keep life moving on.

But I am old and can confess that my heart cannot endure the repetition of a similar war, or narration to another Dhritarashtra. Life cannot move in perpetual circles of sorrow and folly to rob itself of uninterrupted movement, producing meaning in eternally new contexts. If space and time repeat in monotonous movements, the past will overtake the future and eat it away ! Time consuming time is against God's scheme. It is a trap

set by villains of society to perpetuate evil leadership for all times. They want to stop life as the fabulous 'Vritra' of the frightening Vedic fable signifies. Sri Krishna is Vishnu, Arjuna is Indra - the eternal pair of Vedic godheads that fought now, Vritra in the form of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and others. The centre of self-sacrifice, this time from Dadhicha to Kunthi, Draupadi, Subhadra and Uttara - saintly women of endless sufferings. There are no more 'rivers' to be stopped, only tears of blood await wiping now.

This country, its culture, its way of life have been shaped, nurtured and nourished by vision, examples and wisdom of Rishis, Rajarshis, Recluses and men of great renunciations- not merchants, war-mongers, villains of no scruple and opportunists. It is appropriately named as *Bharatha* meaning something of 'Greatness' and 'weight'.¹ Take these descriptions in a superphysical sense. It applies equally well to my guru's great Epic too. Unfortunately, it is always associated with the memories of the just finished war.

Do you want me to make a quick survey of the episodes and the personalities involved in the story of Vyasa?

Wars start usually over disputes involving land, women and money; to inherit political power, to make personal glory the supreme object of life and to use political power as a means to it. Wise men describe these goals as 'illusion' - *maya* - not in the sense that they do not exist at all, but as not lasting or not

¹ *Mahatvat bharavattvaccha mahabharatham uchyate* |

satisfactory goals of life, not worth attainment, as mere vanities that misuse our energies, and misdirect us away from the real goal or goals of life. But who cares for wisdom?

See this confusing, complicating question of inheritance in the beginning of the story itself you have read so far : The fate of Shantanu sowed seeds of this tragedy. Ganga, his wife, murdered all her sons by him, excepting Bhishma, and left him ! A wife saying good bye to a husband !! Bhishma (known as Devavrata for long) did not grow up with his father at all until the age of thirty-six. Shantanu's second wife, who had already borne a son - Veda Vyasa as he was to be known later on, but then known only as 'Sri Krishna of the Island' - and who was married to the king at Bhishma's insistence through his self-sacrifice, (hence his new name, meaning 'one with a terrible vow'), was a lady of exceptional qualities. The question of 'inheritance' was first solved by Bhishma by voluntary self-abdication in favour of Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, children of Satyawati by Shantanu, (Satyawati being the new name of Kali, Matsyagandhi, 'a woman whose body smelt of fish odour', as she was a fisher woman by birth). But Chitrangada was killed by the Gandharvas in a battle and Vichitravirya remained childless, though with two wives, Ambika and Ambalika ! Besides, he also died early, widowing not merely his wives, but also the royal seat of honour ! Again the question of 'inheritance' ! Satyawati absolved Bhishma of his oath to his father, of celibacy and giving up heirdom. Bhishma refused to go back to the past or revoke his vow. Vyasa got, by

'Niyoga'², one child each in the queens of Vichitravirya - a blind one by Ambika and a skin-white one by Ambalika. The first one was ineligible to rule; and the second one *could* rule. He *did* rule, and rule well; but it evoked envy in the first. Again the question of 'inheritance.' The third one by a maidservant, as a substitute for Ambika, in her dread of the sage, - by name Vidura - could not rule for reasons of his caste. He did not belong to the royal lineage by father or mother. He could only become a Prime Minister. And what a Prime Minister !

The question of 'inheritance' had been solved, in a way, when Pandu ascended the throne, though his blind brother was none too happy. But again, fate intervened, and Pandu left for the forests as a recluse with his wives, under a sage's curse and raised the same problem. Pandu was condemned to remain childless, as union with his wives would bring him death, by that curse !

Bhishma, this time, had no option but to seat the blind Dhritarashtra on the throne without crowning him! Actually he himself was ruling ! A mere ritual of coronation was away, because of an oath ! Dhritarashtra on the throne without coronation, and Bhishma not on the throne, without a formal coronation, made no difference to Fate, as the one was a theoretical ruler,

² a practice that prevailed in those days, that when a king had no children he could beget them through his wife, with the help of a holy Brahmin or someone of his choice; even gods could be invoked as in the case of Kunthi and Pandu.

and the other a practical ruler. Do oaths have meanings now? See how sacred institutions get debauched under the influence of 'Kali' !

Once again Fate operated and blessed Pandu with five children and made Yudhishtira the eldest of them, denying this seniority to any of the one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra by Gandhari !

What should Bhishma do now? He pretended as if he knew nothing of what happened to Pandu and his wives in the forests, and presumed that Duryodhana would replace Dhritarashtra when he came of age, seniority or juniority not mattering now, by divine intervention. He must have given this encouragement to the growing prince in the palace for quite sometime, when Fate hit again the royal family. Pandu died, and Madri immolated herself with him in the funeral fire, leaving her two children to Kunthi's care along with her own three. Does it look like a smooth end to a fateful story? See what happened next !

The Brahmins of the forest brought Kunthi and the five brothers to Hastinapura back from their exile, as they wisely decided, that it was the palace that ought to take care of them. What if Pandu had abdicated? His children had not ! So they were now entrusted to the care of an already worried Bhishma ! Bhishma thought, time alone would solve the question of inheritance and that human efforts were futile, as he had seen earlier. His temperamental procrastination cost the family too much this time ! By justice, he was duty-bound to crown Yudhishtira, because of two valid reasons - (1) that

he was the senior-most among all brothers and cousins, and (2) that he was the son of an already crowned Pandu. But this would have angered the other party. Duryodhana hoped that being the eldest son of the elder, Dhritarashtra, he was to inherit power ! What if his father was blind ? He himself was not blind ! Moreover his father had ruled on the throne, crowned or uncrowned, was called King and so accepted by the people. Why should a dead king's son rule now, while a living king actually held power, with a legitimate son ready to inherit power? Why skip the natural process? Why bring 'usurpers' from the forest? Were they the legitimate sons of Pandu?.... Endless tangle ! Fate again.

Bhishma, at long last, resolved the crisis, with Vidura's help and crowned Yudhishtira as Yuvaraja for the undivided empire, to take over from Dhritarashtra as and when fate willed.

This angered Duryodhana, and he plotted to burn all his rivals with their mother at Varanavata.

Fate saved the Five Brothers, who went into exile, by escaping the firetrap, begged their livelihood in movements incognito; got married to the Panchala Princess and reappeared in Hastinapura to lay claim to power and inheritance !

What should Bhishma do now? Divide the Nation to appease the discontented faction? This, after he himself had crowned Yudhishtira Prince, and emperor in waiting for the whole empire? Do you call this fate or bungling by a weak mind? Were there any precedents for dividing the nation so? Bhishma created a new crisis

instead of solving an existing one ! It reached its own logic in the genocidal war, not by understandable, sequential events, but through dubious means, gambling, attempts to molest a queen who had been coronated in the Rajasuya Sacrifice, and through undeserved travails for heroes who had conquered the world, just a few months before the shameful events took place !

Would you call this fate now? Human folly encouraged by evil, consented to by senile leadership? Those responsible pretended innocence ! Here was a prince who had united the several provinces culturally under Dharma and legitimate political power, by his own right, and the might of his brothers, by expanding the one-half of the state that had been bestowed on him by a beleaguered Bhishma ! And there were those others who robbed the righteous earnings by foul means !

Who could have prevented the war now? Or the undesirable polarisation of power centres, after someone had united all those centres into a Dharmic federality?

Perhaps this is a harbinger for abnormal polarisations in the future ! Of Rulers on one side, and the helpless subjects, the people on the other ! What was the meaning of Parashuramic conquests of the past from which nobody had learnt any lessons? Unnatural policies breed unnatural conflicts !

I see Draupadi now as a symbol in future war-contexts. She may represent a harassed community, a section of depressed humanity, a wronged caste or even a wronged nation in the international community ! If Dharma is misused, misinterpreted and used as a tool

for exploitation, any exploited section of humanity can acquire the dimensions of a Draupadi, to be defended by God as Sri Krishna, who can descend in any form of His choice ! Polarisation between *Dharma* and *adharma* in new forms can determine that divine form of intervention then.

Can people in ordinary vocations, in various fields of life come into streets for mutual fight, eternally to assert their rights to life and property ? Should this be allowed by responsible people of right thinking?

My teacher said in the Epic that all land, all power, all right to rule belonged only to Brahmins ! He did not mean by it a caste or community in any frozen sense. He was right in the sense that the wise must rule over the ignorant, strength coming only from wisdom ! How can strength be divorced from wisdom and reduced to the rule of might over right? When will man learn? Caste or Community does not matter, if it does not function within this larger framework !

How detailed is the instruction of my Guru Vyasa in the matter of caste-confusions ! All social institutions in a Dharmic framework are meant to help man emerge spiritually into perfection, from darkness into light, from death into immortality, and from chaos into order ! Any better alternatives for humanity? I can't see !

Human nature is mixed. The evil in it must be purged. That is the meaning of life as a flow. It is a river whose direction cannot be altered or whose flow cannot be arrested except for life-sustaining efforts. Civilization is not swimming against the fundamental

current of life or altering its direction for selfish purposes. The dullard builds bridges to 'cross' it over, while the wise uses it for agriculture. Waters are not meant to be perpetually skipped ! Drink we must, bathe we must, swim we must, and live by it, we must. But do villains care? They seek short cuts in life. Power without legitimacy, wisdom without efforts, comfort without consequences - these are the ways of shortsighted people seeking those short cuts. That leads to Kurukshetra wars !

Let me change the metaphor : Time rolls like a wheel. That is the principle of what they call 'Sudarshana.' There is creation in it; and when it exceeds the order, there is also destruction. These are polar forces too ! The unselfish can see this truth. What does not serve life is uprooted, and life-serving elements are planted and nurtured by that great Gardener - Time.

Time is Fate in the sense it is strict, impartial, is governed by its own laws, and operates as per its own schedules, and uses all of us as its instruments. Time is not cruel. Nor is it kind ! These categories of adjectives do not belong in the world of time. They are human inventions to please our vanities.

The story is immortal in its eternal meaning. Do not say or ask whether the war was worthy or unworthy, in your confused mind ! Again, this is a weak vision.

God uses even wars and villains for his purpose of life's evolution. Forget Him and you lose the meaning of life with all its contents.

So, read the Epic of my Guru with an impersonal involvement for its eternal message. While you read, read like me, as Sanjaya, and not a Dhritarashtra !

When will you begin this study? Any moment is auspicious, once the realisation of its importance dawns on you ! So fare forward; not farewell."



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 creature 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>Dakshinavartha</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

Jyotisastra	A missile that inundates the field with blinding light, dispelling the densest darkness
Kali	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>)
Karkotaka	name of a Naga chief
Karma	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.
Karma kshetra	A field of sacred activity, duty
Karma yoga	The path of dutiful action to salvation
Kartika	A lunar month in which the full moon happens to be in the star of Krittika
Kavacha	chest-shield used by soldiers
Krauncha	name of one of the famed seven mighty mountain ranges on this earth
Krodha	Anger, hatred, ill will, jealousy
Kshatriya	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
Kubera	Gandharva-god, lord of wealth
Kumkum	The red vermillion mark adorning the foreheads of women - folk as housewives, as an auspicious sign
Lila	'Sport'; a view that explains life processes as the divine sport of lord Vishnu
Lobha	Lust, greed
Mahakaali	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 or 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 Mahabharatha
<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>Pranjali</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>Suptatika</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 Dussahasana 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

- Nakula** First son of Madri (second wife of Pandu), sister of Shalya, prince of Madra; born of the grace of Ashvins
- Pandavas** The five sons of Pandu, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, called together as Pandavas
- Rukmi** Prince of Vidarbha, brother in law of Sri Krishna, whom neither the Pandavas nor the Kauravas entertained on their sides in the war
- Sahadeva (1)** Second son of madri (Second wife of Pandu), sister of Shalya, prince of Madra, born of the grace of Ashvins
- Sahadeva (2)** Son of Jarasandha; on the side of Pandavas
- Sage Veda Vyasa** known also as Krishna, Dvaipayana, Parasharya, father of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura by *Niyoga*; son of sage Parashara by Satyawati, known also as Kali, *Yojanagandhi*. Author of this narration of Mahabharatha as Epic, Sri Bhagavatha and other Puranas, *Brahmasutras* and some law books also.
- Saindhava** Jayadratha, prince of Sindhu, husband of Dushshala, the only daughter of Dhritarashtra
- Sanjaya** Charioteer of Dhritarashtra, disciple of Vyasa, and the narrator of War-events to the blind king
- Shakuni** Uncle of Duryodhana, brother of Gandhari, evil genius, advisor and co-sharer of all plots to eliminate the Pandavas
- Shalya** The Madra prince, brother of Madri, who sided with the Kauravas, and later became General for a day and half
- Shankha** Son of Virata by his first wife
- Shikhandi** Drupada's daughter; became man at the hands of Shthunakarna, 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 Dscnt 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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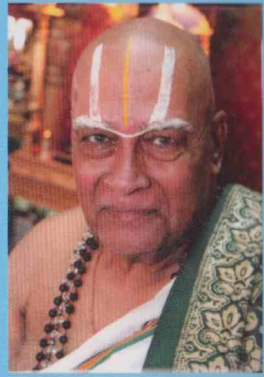
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For his services to Indian literature and spirituality through works, speech and discourses, the Karnataka State Open University, Mysore has awarded him recently (18th March, 2005) an Hon.D.Litt. degree.



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