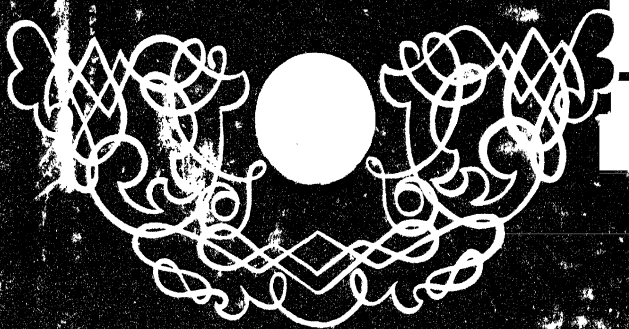




THE
MAHABHARATA



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THE MAHABHARATA

Dr. N. V. R. KRISHNAMACHARYA



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THE MAHABHARATA

by

Dr. Nanduri Ramakrishnamacharya, M.A., Ph.D.

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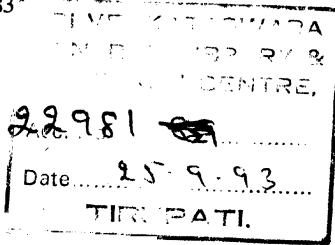
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FOREWORD

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the two renowned epics of India. The Mahabharata - as its name hints - tells the story of the noble descendants of King Bharata. Its reputed author was Vedavyasa.

The Mahabharata is known as Panchama Veda, the fifth Veda. It was specially written in order to make the sublime knowledge of the four Vedas available to the common folks. Few books have ever exerted such profound influence on the minds of men as the Mahabharata.

The immortal epic Mahabharata is unique in every way. It gives an account of persons with different qualities, maxims for right conduct and indicates the ways to realize God. With its hundred thousand slokas, it is a "full treatise on the science of society giving portraits, customs, heroic deeds of persons and contains a picture of universal movement, light and shades". In his own inimitable manner Vyasa has brought home to us the truth that sin and sinfulness are certain to be destroyed and even goodsouls, if they associate with these.

Philosophy seldom appeals to the mind. But in Mahabharata even the most abstruse philosophic truths are put across by means of stories and legends. This is the secret of its popularity among all classes of people.

We may find priceless teachings in the great Hindu poem of the Mahabharata. This is a book which must be placed in the hands of the young to awaken in them an awareness of our rich moral heritage and to lift them from the dropping faith in values.

Sanskrit, as a tool of cultural communication, holds a unique place among the languages of the world. Nowadays, there are very few youngsters who are familiar with Sanskrit to read through the book in the original. The only alternative is to read translations.

Dr. Nanduri Ramakrishnamacharya has rendered the epic into English. Nothing of importance in the ethical and the spiritual teaching of Mahabharata is left out. At places, it reads not as a summary, but the original. Reading the book is liberal and religious education.

A very noteworthy point about the book is its excellent readability. The book is a tribute to the scholarship and erudition of Dr. Acharya. We hope that this volume will be of considerable value for both spiritual men and laymen.

TIRUPATI,

January 21, 1983.

G.Kumaraswamy Reddy,

Executive Officer,

T. T. Devasthanams.

PREFACE

The Mahabharata is the largest literary work ever composed in the annals of the world. It comprises eighteen voluminous treatises, containing about one lakh verses of four lines each. In sheer size, it is six times bulkier than the Iliad and the Odyssey put together.

The Mahabharata is the most important landmark in the cultural evolution of mankind and the biggest heritage which ancient India has bequeathed to the succeeding generations.

However, this modest book,—the epitome of the great Indian Epic, the Mahabharata in a nutshell—is conceived as a compendious composition mirroring the monumental work in a small compass.

The Samskrit Mahabharata—to borrow the native idiom is a gigantic equatorial forest harbouring a dazzling variety of flora and fauna, girdling the globe. This little volume, is neither a translation nor a judicious abridgement of the original. To continue the metaphor, this is a mini-municipal park. However, sincere care has been taken to transplant all the botanical specimens from the mother forest into the miniature nursery.

The Mahabharata is essentially a literary masterpiece narrating the secular as well as the spiritual experiences connected with the Bharata Dynasty extending over several generations. Bhagavadgita, the Song Celestial is a part and parcel of this epic. The Mahabharata together with its innumerable parables and fables, episodes and anecdotes has propounded a theory of philosophical Relativity, harmonizing the secular and the spiritual into a synthesis and symphony wherein the parameters and paradoxes, contradictions and conflicts of life lose their static connotations to acquire a dynamic concord and concomitance.

Thus all the concepts including truth and non-violence, justice and fairplay, crime and punishment, good and evil, right and wrong *etc.* are viewed by the Mahabharata and evaluated vis-a-vis their geocentric longitude and latitude, different chronological axes, and diverse human aptitudes. It is maintained that no man can ever bathe in the same river twice; the water is not the same; the man as well is not the same. Change is the inexorable law of nature as well as the secret of the atoms. The Mahabharata has dealt with the world of relativity synthesizing secular dimensions

with spiritual dynamics. Thus no concept or ideal, according to the Mahabharata, has an absolute value or a circumscribed meaning. Sri Krishna, the practical philosopher par excellence, has been the author of this way of life distinct from the doctrinaire approach of didactic dogmatism.

The original Mahabharata in the Sanskrit is replete with many 'Majestic Maxims' – 'antithetical aphorisms' with their crisp cadences and metrical melodies. I have tried, – in my own humble way- to translate some of them into English and to incorporate them into this book. Thus this venture is not a prosaic paraphrase of the poetry and philosophy embedded in the Mahabharata. I have tried to add explanation as well as expansion, elucidation and elaboration wherever necessary. Here and there, there may be some sentences influenced by the Sanskrit syntax and Indian idiom. The native reader will of course experience no difficulty with them. Even the foreign student, I hope, will be pleased to enjoy the unfamiliar fragrance and flavour for a while. The English language is known for its catholicity and capacity for absorption and assimilation of international influences and is certainly richer benefitted by cross-fertilisation of cultures.

A glossary is appended for the benefit of the reader. I hope, the prospective citizens of the world, in the rising generations of all the countries, will find ample corroboration for their convictions in this book as the Mahabharata is not merely an Indian classic but a truly international epic. World literature is one, though written in different languages. Mankind is one though designated into different races. Mythology is the shell and man is the kernel of the Mahabharata. Unity in diversity is the soul of the whole story. The burden of the song of this sublime saga of humanity, is 'elasticity of the mind for the sake of enlightenment'.

In English there are very few books on the Mahabharata. They have viewed the epic from different angles. This book contains a connected account of the whole story, strictly following the Sanskrit original. I have appended a chapter, *The Mahabharata—A Chronological Study*, wherein I have incorporated all the theories enunciated so far by eminent scholars, Indian as well as foreign, who have done commendable research to determine the date of the Mahabharata war and the composition of the epic. Likewise I have appended another chapter, *Mahabharata—Myth and Reality*, analysing the latest views of eminent scholars as well

as historians and archaeologists. In another chapter, I have traced the historical evolution of the epic and discussed the problem of authorship and redactors exhaustively. In this sense, I think, this is the first comprehensive book, in a concise compass, on the Mahabharata in English.

In the concluding verses of the epic, the Suta in his convocation address of the Satrayaga where the Mahabharata was narrated to the ascetics of Naimisa forest, says,

“Anything elsewhere is an echo of what is here,
What is not here is nowhere.”

The earnest reader of the Mahabharata is twice blessed—because he can secure the best of both the worlds, the sceptre here and the salvation in the next.

Even a casual reader who comprehends a single sentence or a solitary syllable will find the Mahabharata to be a sublime, spiritual sanctuary to which one can return for refuge, securing comfort and consolation, confidence and candour.

Anybody, who masters the epic, will become a practical philosopher - who can rise above life's perplexities and puzzles, doubts and dilemmas and face all challenges with courage and conviction, scaling summits of prosperity and peace, success and self-realisation.

The claim made by Suta many centuries ago is more or less valid even today.

The Mahabharata, I hope as the author mentions, will illumine the mind of man as long as the sun and the moon shine and the stars twinkle, as it portrays the Eternal Drama of human existence, with all its ironies and intricacies, subtleties and susceptibilities, suffocations and satisfactions, mysteries and melodies, the psychological heights and emotional depths.

In conclusion, I thank the T. T. D. Tirupati for sponsoring the publication of this book. In particular, I offer my hearty congratulations to Shri P.V.R.K. Prasad, I.A.S., Former Executive Officer, T. T. D.

NANDURY RAMAKRISHNAMACHARYA

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At the outset, I offer my grateful thanks to the hon'ble Sri P.V. Narasimha Rao, the scholar-statesman of Modern India for the encouragement he has given for writing this book.

I offer my heartfelt thanks to Sri G. Kumaraswamy Reddy, I.A.S., Executive Officer, T. T. Devasthanams, for bringing out this publication.

I feel that it is my duty to pay special tribute to Sri M. Vijayakumar Reddy, the Manager of the T. T. D. Press and his young colleagues of the Photo Typesetting Dept., for bringing out this book, so elegantly, as this is their maiden venture of the new machine.

In conclusion, I thank the following friends who have rendered valuable service, preferring to remain behind the curtain. Sri Mahalingam has arranged my lectures on the Mahabharata at Jabalpur with the ethereal ardour of a missionary and the self-sacrificing zeal of a spiritual soul. He has typed the whole manuscript as a labour of love. Sri Raiji has gone through my manuscript and has offered valuable suggestions. Likewise, Col Sandhu's encouragement is memorable.

I thank the Public Relations Officer, T. T. D. Tirupati, Sri Ravula Suryanarayana Murthy, who has piloted this publication.

Last but not the least, I thank Sri M. Ramakrishna Sastry, M.A., M.Litt. and Controller of Publications, whose erudite experience has proved to be of immense value in bringing out this publication so elegantly.

N. V. R. K.

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**THE
MAHABHARATA
PART I
THE STORY OF THE EPIC**

THE MAHABHARATA

INTRODUCTION

The Himalaya mountain ranges of India present the spectacle of unparalleled geographical splendour of the earth.

The intellectual majesty of the *Mahabharata*, depicting the eternal drama of human existence, with all its ironies and intricacies, complexities and cadences, mysteries and melodies, subtleties and susceptibilities, psychological heights and emotional depths, is equally unrivalled in the entire range of world literature.

Bharat is the traditional name of India—in legend and literature from times immemorial. The Mahabharata is the National epic of India.

The Bharatas are mentioned as a race of brave warriors inhabiting the region lying between the Yamuna and the Ganges in Vedic Literature.¹

The ancient lore of India mentions Bharata, the son of King Dushyanta by Sakuntala as having performed the Asvamedha Yajna signifying the successful completion of *Digvijaya*—the ceremonial conquest of the four corners of the country.² Henceforward Bharat—that is India came to be known after the name of the great warrior emperor Bharata.

The word “Bharata”—according to Panini, the foremost grammarian of the Sanskrit language, means—War. Maha—means ‘great’. Hence the compound “Maha-Bharata” connotes the Great War.

“Bharata” figures as the name of the epic, in the Grihya Sutras written by Asvalayana.

Thus “Bharata” signifies (i) the country, (ii) the race (iii) the founder emperor of the ancient kingdom (iv) the great War and (v) the National epic.

(1) *Rig Veda*

(2) *Satapatha Brahmana* XIII-5-35 *Vishnuapurana* 19-198

The title of the epic "The Mahabharata" finds ample justification from all the above counts and connotations and has finally come to signify the Great National Epic of India.

The Mahabharata is the largest work ever written in any language in the world. It comprises of eighteen volumes - called the *Parvas* and contains about one lakh verses of four lines each. "In India—literature, like the face of nature, is on a gigantic scale"—says *M. Williams*.

The ancient literature of India begins with the *Vedas*, which are considered to be the earliest literary records of mankind. Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas, preserves the earliest poetry of humanity. Sanskrit belongs to the Aryan or Indo-European family of languages.

Sanskrit has preserved the ancient Aryan civilization and culture together with a greater number of ancient forms than any of these languages; hence Sanskrit can throw light on the comparative study of Philology, Civilizations and Cultures of the ancient world.

The Fifth Veda

The Mahabharata is hailed as the fifth Veda in Sanskrit literature. Vedas are termed as *Sruti*, meaning what has been heard. The Vedic compositions were called the hymns. The Vedas were never reduced to writing even after the Sanskrit alphabet and the script were systematised. The Hymns—the Vedic Riks were considered to be too holy to be recorded and the Vedas were communicated from generation to generation by word of the mouth.

All the four Vedas, the Rigveda - Yajurveda - Samaveda and Atharvaveda have original text the *Mantra* portions besides the commentary portions called *Brahmana* portions.

The Brahmanas mainly deal with the ritualistic element and also interpret the philosophical content of the original text. Those portions of the Brahmanas which interpret the philosophical content are called the *Upanishads*. The Upanishads are styled as *Vedanta* (Veda-Anta)—the end of the Veda—the consummation of knowledge i.e. pure philosophy.

The evolution of the vast Vedic literature—the Vedas—Brahmanas—Aranyakas—Upanishads—Vedangas—Pratisakhya together with the Sutra compositions extended over successive generations and covered many centuries. "In the more ancient parts of the Rig Veda Samhita, we find the Indian race settled on the northwestern borders of India, in the Punjab, and even beyond the Punjab on the Kubha or Kwapna in Kabul. The gradual spread of the race from these seats, towards the east beyond the river Saraswati and over Hindustan as far as the Ganges, can be traced in the later portions of the vedic writings almost step by step. The writings of the following period—that of the epic consist of accounts of internal conflicts among the conquerors of Hindustan themselves as for instance, the Mahabharata or of the further spread of Brahmanism towards the South as for instance the Ramayana."³

The soul of the Vedic literature is the attainment of *Dharma* the righteous course of conduct for the sake of self-realisation. In the evolution of the vast vedic literature with ramifications in different directions, the concept of Dharma became a complex postulate with conflicting connotations leading to differences in thought and divergencies in practice. The need for co-ordination and codification was felt. Dharma the singular end-all and be-all of early vedic times was supplemented with plural 'Purusharthas' of fullfledged life in later times⁴. 'Artha' Economics, 'Kama', Desire, 'Moksha' release from the bondage of terrestrial existence were postulated as potential forces of human life along with Dharma.

The great personality who undertook the historic responsibility of co-ordination and codification of the vedic literature was the *Krishna Dvaipayana*, the son of the Vedic Rishi *Parasara*.

He edited the four vedas into their present shape. Tradition anointed him with the title *Veda Vyasa* (Co-ordinator of the Vedic lore) and acclaimed him as the incarnation of god *Vishnu*. At the time of Veda Vyasa, the meaning of Vedic composition was already becoming obscure and was leading to controversies and contradictions. Veda Vyasa was the morning star of the first and foremost vedic renaissance in Indian history.

(3) A. Weber, *Indian Literature*

(4) Purusharthas of life - Four (i) Dharma (ii) Artha (iii) Kama (iv) Moksha.

Veda Vyasa—no more an individual, became an institution and a legend in his life time. Tradition credits him with the authorship of the eighteen *Puranas*.

Even so *Mahabharata* acclaimed as the FIFTH VEDA in Sanskrit literature was his *magnum opus*.

THE MAHABHARATA

THE STORY OF THE EPIC

ADI PARVA

1

Ancestors

The heroes of the Mahabharata belonged to the "Lunar Dynasty" of Kshatriyas, who traced their genealogy from the Moon. *Pururava*, a reputed king of the dynasty married *Urvasi*, the celestial nymph and was a close friend and collaborator of Indra, the king of Heaven.¹

The next king of importance of this royal line was *Yayati*. The kingdom of *Yayati* extended far beyond the Indus and it was contiguous with the kingdom of *Vrishaparva*, the king of the *Asuras*.²

2

The Distinguished Father and The Dear Daughter

Sukracharya was the preceptor of the Asura king *Vrishaparva* and *Devayani* was the daughter of *Sukracharya*. The filial affection bestowed upon *Devayani* by her illustrious father was proverbial. *Sukracharya* was held in great respect by one and all. In those days when incessant fighting was taking place between the *Suras*, the citizens of the Heaven and their enemies the *Asuras*, mortal casualties on both sides were heavy. *Sukra* alone possessed the great miraculous spell called *Mritasanjivani* by which the dead were brought back to life. So the enormous influence *Sukracharya* wielded with the Asura king *Vrishaparva* needed no special emphasis. If *Vrishaparva* ruled over the *Asuras*, in turn he was ruled by his preceptor *Sukracharya*. Paradoxically enough, the great *Sukra* was ruled by the daughter *Devayani*. In addition to his

(1) The episode is mentioned in the Rig Veda. Kalidasa has immortalised this romance in his drama - *Vikramorvasiyam* in Sanskrit.

(2) These *Asuras* have been identified with the Aryans of Iran by C.V. Vaidya, in his *Mahabharata-A Criticism*.

inordinate love for the daughter, Sukra was the greatest asset enjoyed by the Asuras as he could bring back to life the fallen soldiers of their army.

Obviously the Suras or the Devatas as they are more popularly known, were at an extreme disadvantage. They despatched an enterprising young man Kacha, the son of their preceptor Brihaspati, to Sukra as a student apprentice to learn the secret of *Mritasanjivani*. But it was not an easy mission. Sukra admitted Kacha into studentship in accordance with the custom of the times knowing full well that he was the son of his counterpart of the enemy camp. However Sukra was not expected to commit the blatant act of betrayal of his country and king by giving away the secret of *Mritasanjivani* to anybody—least of all to Kacha, who was asked to tend the cows and do sundry household jobs. It was clear to anybody who wished to be in the good looks of Sukra must first try to curry the favour of Devayani. But it proved to be a very easy task for Kacha with his natural advantage of youth and pedigree. Soon he could attract the admiration of Devayani; but evoked the antagonism of the Asuras, who quite naturally regarded him with great suspicion amounting to mortal fear, as his mission was transparently evident. Kacha was constantly harassed by the asuras and one day they killed him and cut the body into pieces. But the vigilant Devayani reported the matter to her father who brought back Kacha to life by 'the Power of *Mritasanjivani*'. Kacha narrated the atrocities perpetrated on him by the Asuras to Devayani and Sukra. On another occasion, Kacha went to fetch flowers for Devayani. The Asuras killed him and made a paste of his body and mixed it up in sea water. However he was brought back to life by Sukra at the persistent request of Devayani.

The Asuras, foiled in their attempts to put an end to the life of Kacha, formulated an ingenious plan. They killed him and burnt his body to ashes which were mixed up in wine. The wine was served to Sukracharya who was addicted to drink. Kacha did not return home. Devayani approached her father and said "It is long time since the sun has set in the western ocean." Sukra remained unmoved. The depressed Devayani repeated, "The kine have come all alone." The intoxicated preceptor of the asuras was not bothered to catch the implication of the statement. The agitated virgin, drawing the attention of her father exclaimed, "the fire

oblations for the evening have been offered and the time is fleeting: Kacha has not yet come and I am afraid that he might have been the victim of the evil designs of the Asuras, or beasts of prey or snakes in the forest." Sukracharya was compelled to reply to the persistent appeals of Devayani. The great preceptor grew philosophic and proclaimed, "Death is the inevitable destination for all. The Asuras have their own grievances against Kacha, whom I have revived to life many a time at your instance. There must be a limit for your solicitude for him. A sensible maiden like you must take it easy and it is unworthy of you to bemoan over his loss like this."

Devayani was not a girl to be deterred like that. She said, "Kacha is the grandson of the celebrated sage Angirasa and the son of Brihaspati your counterpart in the Heaven. Moreover he has been a pious pupil at your feet, and the handsome youth has kept up his vow of celibacy by his exemplary character and conduct. When he is murdered unjustly by the Asuras, I feel my concern for him is quite justified." So saying the determined Devayani began a fast unto death. The affectionate father knew what his determined daughter was up to and could no longer afford to be philosophic. He exercised the power of the *Mritasanjivani* mantra and revived Kacha once more to life, and ordered him to present himself before him at once.

But Kacha knew where he was and responded to the behest of his Guru with all the reverence he could muster with the words, "Most venerable sire, how can I carry out your command, you know where I am. I await further instructions." Sukra realised the predicament in which he was placed, and was stricken with remorse at his addiction to drink. As a distinguished law giver of his day he propounded the dictum—"Drinking is a heinous crime." The penitent preceptor declared that henceforward addiction to drink would be a sin.¹ But he had to solve the immediate problem. As a consequence of the conduct of the Asuras it became imperative for their preceptor to reveal the secret of the *Mritasanjivani* to his disciple Kacha. Sukra communicated the esoteric art of *Mritasanjivani* to his disciple. Kacha was instructed to break open the stomach of Sukra and then resuscitate

(1) Thus prohibition has come to be regarded as one of the cardinal principles of ancient Indian polity and state craft.

him to life. Kacha soon emerged out of the stomach of his Guru resplendent with the radiance of *Mritasanjivani* like the full moon emerging out of the mountains of the eastern horizon. Kacha immediately invoked the power of the *Mritasanjivani* to bring back his beloved preceptor to life. Consciousness came back to Sukracharya, the personified version of the vedic scriptures just like the correct connotation to the word properly pronounced by an expert with exact intonation. Kacha having fulfilled his mission prostrated himself at the feet of his preceptor and said, "As a teacher I always regarded you as my father; now verily you have become my mother too." After the completion of his studies, Kacha took leave of Sukracharya to go to the abode of the Gods. As he was about to depart, bidding farewell to Devayani, she revealed her mind to him, "You are an eligible bachelor; and I am a virgin. We are already married mentally. Let us now solemnise it. I loved you dearly and in spite of it I never disturbed you from your vow of celibate studentship. I hope you will be pleased to reciprocate my love and marry me." But Kacha said, "I know I owe my life to you. You are the daughter of my preceptor, and hence you are my sister, more over I am reborn out of the stomach of our revered father. It is not proper for me to think of marrying you—my own sister." Even then Devayani tried in vain to convince Kacha, "You are the son of Brihaspati and I am quite worthy of becoming his daughter-in-law. I have always loved you. I was ready to die for you." She became angry and recapitulated how she was responsible for saving him from death more than once. Kacha was quite composed and replied, "My dear Devayani, you are quite enchanting—verily your very anger is your bewildering beauty." Kacha departed to the abode of Gods leaving Devayani staring at her disappointment.

3

Marriage of Devayani

One day Devayani went into the forest along with the princess Sarmistha—the daughter of the king Vrishaparva for a picnic. As they were sporting in the woods they went to bathe in the cool waters of a sylvan pool, leaving their garments on the bank. An unexpected gale blew over, as they were taking their bath and garments were mixed up into a heap. After the bath it so happened

that princess Sarmistha clothed herself in the garments of Devayani quite accidentally. Devayani, as she came out, missed her clothing and pointed out the impropriety to the princess. The conversation which just started—half in jest and half in earnest, soon assumed the proportions of a fierce controversy. The princess proclaimed that her father was the supreme head of the state. Devayani was quite conscious of the importance of her father. The princess said that she belonged to the regal class, accustomed to bestow favours on everybody. She reiterated that the father of Devayani was at the receiving end, and that he lived on the bounty of the king. But Devayani quite adamantly maintained that her father was superior to the king who must bow to the feet of the preceptor. Eventually the Asura maidens threw Devayani into a dry well and went away leaving her to fate.

Devayani could not and would not come out of the well and remained there sad and sobbing. Just at that time emperor Yayati of the Puru race who entered the forest on hunting expedition, came to the same spot in search of water. When he peeped into the well he found a lovely maiden instead of water. The astonished emperor asked, "Who are you, O beautiful maiden? Who is your father? How did you fall into this well and why did you not come out?" Devayani replied in a dignified tone, "I am the daughter of Sukracharya who does not know that I have fallen into this well. I expect him to come in search of me." She was willing to come out and held out her hands. Yayati chivalrously seized her hand and pulled her out of the well. Devayani was quite determined by that time not to enter the capital of Vrishaparva, the father of Sarmistha. She told the emperor Yayati, "By a happy coincidence you have caught hold of my right hand. It tantamounts to marriage. You are in every respect quite worthy to be my husband." Yayati was taken aback at the initiative taken by Devayani and he replied, "You are the daughter of Sukracharya renowned throughout the whole world as a great teacher. How can a Brahmin girl think of marrying a Kshatriya like myself? Revered lady, you must first go to your venerable father," so saying Yayati went his way.

Devayani did not go home but preferred to sit under the shadow of a lonely tree. Sukracharya sent a woman in search of Devayani who was discovered there; Devayani

persisted in her determination not to enter the capital city of Vrishaparva. Sukra was much grieved to learn about the sad turn of events, came to Devayani and tried to console her enunciating his philosophy. Sukra says, "He who conquers himself conquers the whole world and puts up with the abuse of neighbours. As an able charioteer who holds the reins firmly in his hand and controls the horses and does not let them go whither they would, a worthy person should control his anger. He who sheds his anger just as a snake its slough, is a true hero. He who never gets angry is superior to the person who performs a hundred sacrifices ordained by the scriptures. He who is balanced and is not perturbed by the trials and tribulations which are common to human life will be a realised soul. Brothers and sisters, servants and friends, wife and children will forsake the man of irritable temperament. The wise will ignore childish pranks and prattle."¹ Devayani did not pay heed to the doctrinaire discourse but put a straight question to her father, "Is it true you are a minstrel extolling the glories of the king? Are you a parasite, existing on the benevolent grace of his majesty?" She told him how arrogant Sarmistha was and how she slapped her and threw her into a dirty ditch and Devayani wept bitterly. Sukra's reaction was sharp, and moved not only by his natural affection towards his daughter but also by wounded pride, he told Devayani, "My dear girl your father does not live on wages of flattery. You are the daughter of one who is respected by the whole world. And Vrishaparva himself knows the deep debt of gratitude he owes me. Indra the king of the gods knows this. No worthy man ever indulges in self-praise. I shall say no more of myself. Let me act and you will know the result." Devayani was very happy at the resolute attitude of her father and added in tender tones, "I am indeed a little girl and I should not arrogate to myself the right to advise you. The virtuous should not mix with those who have no sense of decency or decorum. My mind is ablaze with the arrogant taunts of Sarmistha. The wounds inflicted by weapons may heal in course of time. Scalds may heal gradually; but wounds inflicted by cruel words remain painful as long as one lives."

(1) Moral instruction very often gains precedence over the momentum of the main story - which sometimes comes to a standstill. As Sukra was a famous philosopher here is a convenient context. Mahabharata has resorted to several devices and deviations to propound the various didactic doctrines.

Sukracharya went straight to Vrishaparva and fixing his eyes gravely on him he said, "O King, I am sorry, I cannot serve you any longer. Your attendants murdered Kacha many a time. He was a pious pupil who served me with dedication and he was never guilty of any sin. He was a true Brahmachari. I put up with all the affronts very patiently. Now your daughter has insulted and humiliated my daughter slapping her and pushing her into a well. My daughter refuses to stay any longer in your kingdom. Without her I cannot live here either. I am going out of your kingdom." The unexpected declaration made by Sukra was a bolt from the blue and Vrishaparva protested his complete ignorance of the whole episode. The king said that he would immolate himself in fire if the preceptor chose to depart from his realm. But Sukra expressed his utter helplessness in the face of Devayani's resolute will and said that he had no objection if the king could pacify her.

So Vrishaparva with all his retinue went to the place where Devayani was sitting and implored her pardon throwing himself at her feet in utter supplication. The stubborn Devayani at last was willing to relent on one condition. She demanded that the arrogant Sarmistha should be made over to her as a slave maid for life and should attend on her in the house into which she would be given in marriage. Vrishaparva accepted her proposal and sent for Sarmistha.

Sarmistha arrived and accepted her fault. She said, "my father shall not lose the venerable preceptor due to my fault. I am willing to be the maid servant of Devayani for life." Devayani returned to the capital city of King Vrishaparva triumphantly. Devayani met Yayati once again when he came on a hunting expedition and repeated her proposal of marriage. She told him that her father, the renowned preceptor of the Asuras would bless them. Yayati followed Devayani and met Sukracharya who gave his consent to the marriage and Yayati married the dear daughter of the distinguished father.

Devayani and Yayati enjoyed a very happy married life for a long time. Sarmistha of course followed Devayani to the palace of her husband as her maid-in-waiting. On one occasion Sarmistha had an opportunity to meet Yayati in the solitude of the royal garden which reflected her vernal bloom. She was not a mere slave girl; blue blood was flowing in her veins, she revealed her royal

lineage to the emperor who had already heard about the exemplary sacrifice she made for the sake of her father and the state. Yayati was attracted not only by her charming external personality but also by the internal beauty of her character. She proved herself to be the great daughter of a little king in sharp contrast to Devayani, the little daughter of a great father. Sarmistha told Yayati that she too belonged to him as she was part and parcel of Devayani as her maid-companion. Yayati was pleased with her sweet logic and married her in secret without the knowledge of Devayani. Yayati had five sons, three by Devayani and two by Sarmistha. One day Devayani happened to see the two kids, who resembled Yayati in the company of their mother. They were taking liberties with their father. Devayani flew into sudden rage and lodged the complaint with her father Sukra who cursed Yayati with premature old age. Sensuality and over-indulgence invariably lead to premature debility and the curse is a reiteration of the fact. The curse on Yayati was not a boon to Devayani.

Devayani together with Yayati requested the sage to repeal the curse. Sukra said that Yayati could exchange his old age with anyone who was willing to give his youth to him. Yayati called his sons one by one and requested them for the exchange. The eldest son replied, "Old age is mocked at by women and servants." The contention of the second son was that old age not only destroyed strength but also sensibility. The third son said that an old man could not ride a horse or walk by himself. Yayati modified his stand and said that he would take back his old age after sometime and asked the fourth son to accept the liability purely as a temporary measure. He said that an old man required the help of others even to keep his body clean and did not accept the proposal of the father. The fifth son was especially dear to Yayati who begged him with all the earnestness at his command and said that he would bestow the kingdom on him while taking back his old age eventually. The fifth son moved by filial love accepted the proposal. Yayati regained his youthful vigour and he embraced his son, and spent many years in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. He was in the garden of *Kubera* for some time in the company of an *Apsara* maiden. At long last, Yayati realised that sensual desire was never quenched by indulgence any more than fire by pouring ghee over it. He came back to Puru and took back his old age. Puru regained his youth. Yayati retired to forest bestowing the

kingdom on Puru. The other sons of Yayati were disinherited. The Yadavas, Bhojas, Yavanas and Mlecchas were their descendants.²

4

Sakuntala: The Baby of the Birds

Dushyanta, a descendant of Puru, extended the boundaries of the kingdom and ruled over a vast empire. One day he went on a hunting expedition into the deep woods. Eventually the hunting party encamped near the hermitage of the reputed sage, Kanva.

The hermitages in ancient India called ashramas in Sanskrit were the colonies founded by ascetics. Apart from the royal capital cities of kings and the villages of the rustics, the ashramas were centres of learning and the ascetics who preferred to live in far off forest colonies "far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife", were held in great esteem by the kings and the commoners.

The ashramas were secluded forest universities of ancient India where the Vedas, Upanishads and other sacred literature were taught and produced. Even secular wisdom like polity and economics were taught there. "Besides the urban and rural life there was a highly cultured life, in the seclusion of forest recesses, centred round ascetic teachers. These ashramas kept alive the bright fires of learning and spiritual thought. Young men of noble birth eagerly sought education at these ashramas. World weary age went there for peace. These centres of culture were cherished by the rulers of the land and not the proudest of them dared to treat the members of the hermitages otherwise than with respect and consideration."¹ The chief of the ashram was called the Kulapati, meaning 'head of the colony'. An ideal Kulapati was expected to provide education to six thousand students with free boarding and lodging facilities.

The ashram symbolised simple living and high thinking; poets grew into ecstasy while describing the ashram life; the deer and the

(2) The Aryan languages belong to the Indo Aryan family of languages according to modern philology. It is significant to note that Yavanas and Mlecchas were blood brothers according to the Mahabharata which located them beyond the borders of India.

(1) *Mahabharata*, C. Rajagopalachari, Preface to 2nd Edn. p. 6

lion lived in the ancient Indian ashram in perfect harmony. In spite of the obvious exaggeration the ashram was a centre of peace and harmony, learning and light. The ashram was a cultural light house and it had a spiritual halo around it.

Emperor Dushyanta, having learnt that the ashram of the reputed sage Kanva was situated in the vicinity of his encampment, decided to go and pay his homage of reverence to the saint. He entered the ashram with all humility, walking on foot, taking off all the insignia of regal splendour. At that time the sage Kanva was away on a private mission, but Dushyanta was received as an honoured guest. The ashram etiquette ordains that any guest, even a perfect stranger, should be treated with due respect. The uninvited guest too enjoyed the status of a god himself.

Emperor Dushyanta was received by a maiden named "Sakuntala" with all the ashram hospitalities and the charming host was introduced to the emperor as the dear daughter of Kanva. It was an enigmatic proposition to the emperor as the Kulapati was known to be a life long celibate. So he asked for clarification. Sakuntala herself narrated the story of her birth to the emperor. Dushyanta listened, bestowing his rapt attention and flattering concern to every syllable spoken by Sakuntala.

The celebrated sage Visvamitra undertook the performance of penance with deep dedication causing great concern to the Lord of Heaven, Indra, who summoned the glamour girls of his court, famous for their artful and seductive blandishments. Visvamitra's reputation for easy irritation and fiery haughtiness struck terror into the hearts of the divine damsels, and nobody came forward to undertake the difficult mission fraught with the danger of a devastating curse. However Menaka known for her outstanding beauty and dynamism was entrusted with the delicate duty. When Menaka descended to the spot where Visvamitra was engrossed in deep meditation, the whole forest was in vernal bloom. Nature seemed to offer the fullest collaboration to the divine damsel. The cuckoo's voice was reverberating across the hills and dales. The placid waves of the river Malini were dancing to the tunes of the southern winds. Spring creepers showered their fragrant blossoms on the sage. He opened his eyes and perceived the heavenly maiden. Just at that moment gentle breeze blew disturbing her

upper garment unveiling her robust breast lines and the slender waist together with its three folds. In no time the penance of the sage gave way to passion. However he was overwhelmed with repentance as soon as Menaka gave birth to a baby and he retreated to resume his penance. Menaka returned to the kingdom of Indra leaving the child on the sands of Malini to the protecting care of the birds of the forest.

Fortunately, the baby was seen by the Kulapati Kanva when he went to the Malini to offer his morning oblations. He immediately picked up the tender baby into his arms. True, ancient sages in India conquered sensuality, but they never slaughtered their sensitivity. The child acquired the name of Sakuntala "the baby of the birds". Dushyanta was very happy to learn that Sakuntala was in fact the daughter of the Kshatriya sage Visvamitra by the celestial nymph Menaka. The emperor proposed to her to marry him and occupy the queen's palace which is worthy of her beauty. He added that the hermitage with its rustic surroundings was not at all a congenial place for her to live. Sakuntala inherited the bewitching beauty of her mother and the brilliant brains of her father. She replied that she was a virgin under the protective care of her foster father who should be approached by the emperor. Dushyanta interpreted her reply as semi-consent and proposed the *Gandharva* marriage then and there and said that the scriptures enjoined it as an acceptable form of marriage for the Kshatriyas. She stipulated a condition that the child born out of their union should succeed him to the throne. He gladly accepted her proposition as he fervently longed for the birth of the heir to his throne.

Dushyanta stayed in the ashram for some days and returned to his capital promising Sakuntala to send his ministerial retinue to escort the queen to the imperial capital. But all the while he was feeling guilty of the passionate indiscretion he committed in the privacy of the ashram precincts without the knowledge of the great sage Kanva. So no royal retinue was despatched to fetch the queen as promised. Meanwhile Sakuntala gave birth to a son. Kanva patiently awaited the arrival of the royal messengers to send Sakuntala and the child to Dushyanta. The boy gradually grew into a daring child and he acquired the name of Simhadamana² as

(2) One who could overpower the lions.

he fearlessly dragged the lion cubs from their mothers and played with them. Kanva took care to bring him up in the regal tradition and Simhadamana soon acquired princely aptitudes with instinctive precocity. The boy was the grandson of the ever dynamic royal sage Visvamitra who was the architect of a parallel universe, on the mother's side and the son of the renowned warrior Dushyanta respected as a companion and colleague of Indra, the ruler of heaven.

Kanva, having awaited too long decided to send the gallant prince to his father together with the mother Sakuntala who was obliged to lead a solitary life of shattered dreams in the ashram silently. Appropriate escort was provided and Sakuntala reached the royal city together with the child. Dushyanta disclaimed her in the open court, lest after the interval, the whole episode would be considered a promiscuous misadventure on the part of the emperor following a hunting excursion. It was an intriguing situation for Sakuntala too deep for tears. She was reduced to utter helplessness but she knew that truth was on her side. She appealed to the emperor giving a lengthy discourse on truth.³ "Truth" she said, "would outweigh the four Vedas. Truth was greater than a hundred Asvamedha yagas." Every syllable uttered by Sakuntala was replete with innocence, associated with the ashramite veracity. But what was the use of the holy harangue of Sakuntala at that juncture? Dushyanta also knew the Truth which he feared to acknowledge publicly. At last Sakuntala suggested a test. She wanted Dushyanta to embrace the boy: She said, "O King, the cool radiance of crystal pearls, mellifluous moon light, the floral fragrance, cool sandal paste or camphor are by no means equal to the exclusive exhilaration derived from the embrace of a son. Here is your son. Experience it and you shall know the Truth" and exhorted the boy to go to his father. As the boy, looking every inch a prince and a chip of the chivalrous block, jumped to his feet, *Akashvani*, the heavenly voice, pronounced to the delight of one and all, "Sakuntala has spoken the truth, Simhadamana is your son!" Simhadamana found himself in the filial embrace. The courtiers who were already convinced

(3) Here again is an instance in the Mahabharata of using the opportune context for expounding moral instruction with doctrinaire approach.

extended their hearty congratulations to the king and warm welcome to the heir-apparent.

Sakuntala and Dushyanta lived a happy life after their dramatic reunion. It is one of the most remarkable features of ancient Indian culture that great emperors in the height of their glory and achievement renounced their crowns to live as recluses in the forest in the evenings of their lives for the sake of spiritual self-realisation. Eventually, Dushyanta crowned the heir apparent as the emperor and departed to the deep woods followed by Sakuntala.⁴ Simhadamana, renamed Bharata, performed the Asvamedha Yaga and brought the whole country under a "single umbrella" the insignia of unrivalled royalty in those days. Ever since India, the country over which he ruled, came to be known as Bharata after his name.

5

Goddess Ganga in Human Form

After Bharata, Bharatavarsha or the country of Bharat was ruled by many kings who descended from him. Notable amongst them was *Hasti* who founded the city of Hastinapura and Kuru who conquered the region thereafter called Kurukshetra. His descendants were called Kauravas. Santanu, the son of Pratipa who ascended the throne of Hastinapura, was a remarkable king in many respects. One day as Santanu was taking a stroll outside the precincts of the fort of Hastinapura a lovely maiden of intoxicating beauty came across his way. The king asked "O graceful girl of superhuman loveliness, I do not know who you are. Why are you here?" The girl replied "Gracious king, you need not know who I am. I am here at my pleasure." The king said "Whoever you are, I do not mind, I want you to be my queen." The girl stipulated certain conditions saying, "Best of the Bharata race, if you want to marry me you should never try to probe who I am, whence I came; you should never stand in my way; I must be allowed to do whatever I wish to do. My freedom of action shall never be

(4) Kalidasa has dramatized the story of Sakuntala: of course he made certain changes in the theme for the sake of dramatic effect. There is a saying in Samskrit, "Of all the forms of literature, the Drama is the best, out of all the Dramas, Sakuntala is the best." 'Abhijnanasakuntala' is the title of the play and it is translated into English as, "The Lost Ring." Literary circles all over Europe are quite conversant with this drama, especially after this superlative praise bestowed on it by the great German poet Goethe.

curtailed. If you do otherwise I will leave you then and there; please think over the pros and cons and then only give your consent." The infatuated king accepted the stipulations imposed by the girl, captivated by her transcendental charms and took her as his wife. The couple lived together happily oblivious of the passage of seasons. She gave birth to many children. But as soon as each child was born she used to take it and throw it into the Ganges. Seven children were thus killed quite mercilessly. Santanu, bound by the promise made to her, controlled himself time and again, of course, with great difficulty. Often he wondered who that murderous witch was and whence she came. She was a perfectly normal house wife otherwise, very civil, very charming and very considerate. When the eighth child was born king Santanu decided to put an end to the massacre of the innocents and came to his wife and chided.

"O Brutal beauty, enough of it, the foolish promise made by me restrained me all these days. No more can I allow you to murder this child. Moreover I should like to put a pertinent question to you. Are you human or a devil incarnate?" The lady kissing the child in her arms replied smilingly, "True I am not human; neither am I the brutal beauty of your apprehension. Know me to be the Goddess Ganga adored by the heavenly beings as well as the humans at large. I had to accept this apparently cruel mission paradoxically on compassionate grounds." The bewildered king was eager to know the whole story. Goddess Ganga continued, "One day the eight *Vasus*, the divine noble men of heaven, came down to the earth with their wives to enjoy a holiday. They saw Nandini, the cow of the great sage Vasistha, grazing on the grounds of the ashram with her calf. It was really a sight for angels to see. All the ladies of the picnic party praised the cow and the calf and one of the ladies wanted to possess them. Her husband however said that the immortals needed not the milk of Nandini as they had Amrita to drink and asked his wife to change her mind. But the lady persisted in her demand. All the eight *Vasus* quite chivalrously seized the cow and the calf by force and made their way. When Vasistha returned to the ashram, he did not find the cow and calf. Having come to know of the high handed behaviour of the *Vasus* who were puffed up of their divine authority, Vasistha cursed that they should be born as mortals on the earth.

The *Vasus* came to know of the curse, went to the great Rishi repented and apologised to him with a request for pardon. The sage said that he could excuse all with the exception of Prabhasa who took the initiative. He modified the curse to the extent that all the seven could come back to heaven as soon as they were born on earth but Prabhasa would live long of course in great glory on earth before he could return to heaven. This is not a mere child. He is the veritable incarnation of the *Vasu*—Prabhasa. He is destined to great glory and will be the worthy son of worthy father. In fact in breaking your promise you have saved me from this mundane presence. Now I must depart; of course I am taking the child with me as a mother's duty, only to be returned to you in due time. But remember I have performed an unpleasant duty forced upon me by a conspiracy of circumstances and I am not a devil."

Goddess Ganga disappeared while the bewildered king, Santanu stood staring at the void. Santanu, having developed a sense of revulsion against sensual pleasures, ruled the kingdom with rare dedication for sometime. One day while going for a walk along the banks of the Ganges he saw a boy hero constructing a dam of arrows with his bow. The little child was braving the irresistible currents of the Ganges as if he was sporting with an indulgent mother. As Santanu stood stupefied, Goddess Ganga holding the boy in her hand came to him and said, "This is Devavrata, the boy I bore you. He is no more a child; he has learnt the Vedas at the feet of Vasistha who bestowed his compensatory kindness on him and archery from the great Parasurama at my special request and he is well versed in the doctrines of polity propounded by Sukracharya." Santanu was extremely happy to receive the boy into his custody and he installed Devavrata as Yuvaraja, the heir apparent after a few days at a colourful function.

6

The Fisher Girl of Fragrant Glamour

While King Santanu was going along the banks of the Yamuna, all of a sudden fragrant breezes blew over him. On enquiry he was astonished to learn that it emanated from the body of the fisher girl, Satyavati who was transporting the passengers by boat doing free service at the behest of her father, the chieftain of

the fisherman tribe. When he met the girl, Santanu was attracted by her extraordinary beauty and charming manners. Four years elapsed since Ganga deserted him. The king asked Satyawati to be his wife. She replied that she was a maiden under the custody of her father and at that the king might be pleased to approach him.

Santanu approached the chief of the fisherman and requested the hand of his daughter. Satyawati's father replied, "May it please your Majesty, my daughter has come of age and it is fine that I fix up a good match. It is our good fortune that you have asked for her hand. As her guardian I am expected to safeguard her interests. She will be your queen provided you are willing to make her son born of you the heir apparent to your throne. Santanu was dumb founded. Acceding to the request of the fisher-chief it would mean disinheriting Gangeya, the son of Goddess Ganga, a proposition which Santanu was not prepared to agree. The king returned home. The disappointment was evident in his face. Devavrata came to his father and made searching enquiries about his condition. He could not reveal that he fell in love with a fisher girl nor could he discuss the implication of the conditions imposed by the fisher-chief for giving his daughter in marriage to him. Instead he said, "My dear Devavrata, you are my sole surviving son, though your mother gave birth to seven earlier. Elders say that one son is no son at all. You are a hero and interested in warfare. I am interested in the continuation of our dynasty. I want to marry so that I may beget some more children." Gangeya could understand that the father was evading the question and made his own enquiries and met the fisher-chief directly. When the father of Satyawati reiterated his stand, Devavrata declared in the presence of the cheering crowd that he was renouncing his right to the throne in favour of the progeny of Satyawati. However the astute fisher-chief raised a counter objection, "O Devavrata, it is becoming of a great hero like you to sacrifice your claim to the throne for the sake of your father. But what is the guarantee that your sons who are bound to be heroes like yourself will not fight for the throne later." Gangeya saw the force of his argument and took a vow in the presence of one and all that he would not marry at all and would be a life long bachelor to clear the apprehensions of the fisher-chief. All the people present there praised him as the Bhishma one who had taken the terrible vow and the title given by the people in spontaneous applause stuck to him as his proper

name, thereafter. The marriage of Satyavati and king Santanu was performed with great pomp. King Santanu appreciated the great sacrifice made by Bhishma and conferred on him the boon of *Svacchandamarana* (i.e.) death at his will and pleasure.

Satyavati gave birth to two sons Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. After the death of Santanu, Chitrangada ascended the throne of Hastinapura. As he died in a battle with the Gandharvas and as he had no children Vichitravirya was crowned king. As he was a minor Bhishma governed the kingdom as a regent. However Bhishma took the greatest care to see that the image of Vichitravirya as the real ruler was not impaired.

7

Vichitravirya

When Vichitravirya came of age Bhishma was on the look out for a suitable bride for him. At that time the king of Kasi proclaimed the *Svayamvara*¹ of his daughters Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. As the princesses were credited with exceptional beauty and accomplishments princes from far and wide came for the function dressed in their best attires exhibiting the usual pomp and pageantry. When it was known that Bhishma of the Bharata dynasty came, several comments were heard. 'What about his vow of life long celibacy?' 'Why should this old man come?' 'Bhishma is an illustrious warrior of mettle,' and 'He may have some pious motives'—were some of the utterances that were heard.

The princesses ignored the presence of the old warrior. In the *Svayamvara* the choice of the princesses counted normally. However, according to the Kshatriya tradition prevalent in those days, an out-standing warrior of extraordinary valour may choose to carry away the prize, of course after an open challenge for trial of strength. It was called the *Rakshasa* type of marriage and the heroic way was accepted by the Kshatriyas. However it was a very rare occurrence as no warrior, however brave he might be, seldom dared to face singularly the combined wrath of all the princes

(1) *Svayamvara* was an important custom among the royal families of ancient India. The princess in the family was allowed to pick out the king of her choice as her partner from a royal assemblage. The father of the bride used to prescribe some rules and regulations which were accepted with chivalrousness by all the princes.

present. However Bhishma chose the extraordinary method and openly challenged the princes for a fight. Nobody dared to fight the veteran warrior and Bhishma placed the three princesses in his chariot but announced publicly that he was taking the brides to be married to his brother Vichitravirya.

While he was on his way Salva the king of Saubala who was attached to Amba attacked Bhishma. After a fierce fight Bhishma could overpower the king of Saubala but spared his life at the specific request of the princesses. When brisk preparations for the marriage function were on the way, princess Amba came to Bhishma and said, "O Best of the Bharata race, I fell in love with Salva. I would have fastened the floral garland around his neck the other day in the Svayamvara function but for your brave intervention. You are credited with the knowledge of Dharma and known for your nobility. I request that you may be pleased to choose the correct course of action."

Bhishma immediately sent Amba to king Salva with appropriate escort. Amba was very happy and narrated the whole episode to Salva when she met him. But Salva was not happy. He told her, "My dear Amba, I would have been the happiest man on earth if I were selected by you in the Svayamvara. But destiny willed it otherwise. Now I am not prepared to accept you as a philanthropic gift from the hands of Bhishma who has defeated me and disgraced me in the open fight. By sending you to me, the old man has added insult to injury. Better you go back to Bhishma who has won you by valour." Amba went back to Bhishma and expressed her willingness to marry Vichitravirya as per the original schedule.

Bhishma requested Vichitravirya to marry Amba but he refused begging pardon of his esteemed brother for his inability to take a girl who mentally married some one else as his wife. Bhishma conveyed his helpless pity to Amba who found herself in the most ridiculous situation. As the last resort she approached Bhishma and said, "worthiest warrior of Bharatavarsha as well as the Bharata race, you have won me by your valour so you have acquired the best claim on me. As a chivalrous Kshatriya it is your duty now to marry me. In fact there is no other course." Bhishma brushed aside the proposal quite contemptuously but suggested to Amba to go to Salva a second time and try her luck. Amba stayed at Hastinapura

for some time and in utter desperation went to Salva once again. But he reiterated his earlier stand and refused to marry her. Amba in spite of her beauty and accomplishments found her life ruined and thought that Bhishma was the root cause for all her misery. The deepest desire to wreak vengeance on Bhishma sprouted in her baffled mind and she approached warrior after warrior in Bharatavarsha to champion her cause. But nobody came forward to oppose Bhishma. Then she performed penance in adoration of Lord Subrahmanya who manifested himself before her and presented her with a garland, wearing which anybody would turn out to be an inveterate foe of Bhishma.

She went to King Drupada the traditional enemy of the Kauravas to offer the garland to him. But he refused it. Amba however deposited the garland at the gate of the royal fort and departed to the woods where she met some ascetics. They advised her to seek the aid of Parasurama. Amba approached him and narrated her sad story. Parasurama offered to ask Salva to marry her but she insisted that Bhishma must be punished. Impelled by pity for a girl who was the victim of a cruel fate and by a desire to score a victory over the greatest living Kshatriya warrior of the times, Parasurama at last accepted to champion the cause of Amba and an ultimatum was sent to Bhishma who was asked to marry the desolate princess or come to Kurukshetra for a fight. Bhishma accepted the challenge and the memorable fight began at the sacred *Syamantapanchaka*. More or less it was an exhibition match between the two veterans of proven mettle and heroes of the earth and angels of heaven gathered there to witness it. The great Astras hurled by the one were counteracted by the other as both were birds of the same feather being the preceptor and the disciple. Neither could score a decisive victory and naturally it ended in a draw. Bhishma's stubborn and successful resistance proved to be a source of personal satisfaction to Parasurama as it was a vindication of his own prowess—transmitted automatically from the preceptor to the pupil. In the end Parasurama told Amba, with his personal pride intact, "My dear girl, you see I have done my best. Being my own disciple, Bhishma turned out invincible."

But Amba still burning with revenge went to Himalayas where she performed penance and obtained the grace of Siva. Siva granted her the boon that she would kill Bhishma in her next birth.

But as she was eager for revenge she immolated herself over a pyre prepared by her and her soul was hovering over in search of rebirth for revenge.

Vichitravirya met with premature death owing to over-indulgence, leaving Ambika and Ambalika childless. Queen Satyavati married the old king Santanu with the fond hope that the children born to her would rule Bharatavarsha. But her children died while she was still alive reducing her to the position of a disappointed and debilitated widow. That was the irony of human hopes. As her dreams lay completely shattered on the ground before her own eyes, she summoned Bhishma and asked him to get married and beget children for the sake of keeping the royal genealogical tree alive. The same source which in the recent historic past so vehemently extracted the vow of life-long celibacy from him was now abjectly soliciting that he should get married for the sake of continuity of the family line. But Bhishma remained true to his celebrated epithet, reiterated to the queen mother Sayavati his resolve to stand by his firm vow for ever.

As a last resort Satyavati thought of Veda Vyasa, the first son born to her by the great sage Parasara when she was a virgin. She recollected very often how she, emitting fishy smell out of her body, was instantaneously transformed by the grace of Parasara into a girl of fragrant glamour permeating the atmosphere with perfume within the radius of eight miles. Now all that was past history. Veda Vyasa manifested himself before his mother Satyavati and he, the walking encyclopaedia of Vedic erudition, shining like a mountain made of blue diamonds with golden tresses of hair, bowed to her feet and awaited her command. The omniscient sage needed no briefing. Satyavati asked Vyasa to procreate progeny by Ambika who was asked to receive the saint in her nuptial chamber. But Ambika closed her eyes at the sight of the bearded mendicant; Vyasa announced to his mother that Ambika would beget a child—mighty in mind and body but blind. Next night Ambalika was commissioned by her mother-in-law with specific instructions not to close her eyes at the sight of the sage. She followed the instructions literally but received him with a pale face. Next day the anxious Satyavati was told that Ambalika would beget a brave child born pale. So Satyavati instructed Ambika to receive the sage once more in anticipation of the birth of a perfect

child. Ambika instead sent her maid well attired with queenly dress and she received the sage with all the respect and adoration she could command.

Thus Dhritarashtra was born blind, while Pandu was born pale. Vidura the nearest approximation to perfection in flesh and blood was born to the maid of the royal palace. Vidura was the incarnation of "Yama" the god of righteousness who was born on earth because of the curse of Rishi Mandavya, the sage transfixing on the spike. Mandavya a reputed sage who attained the equilibrium of the mind by means of the power of yoga was one day deeply immersed in meditation in the precincts of his ashram outside his hut of leaves. Robbers who plundered a royal treasury happened to pass by the hut hotly chased by the police, they thought that they could conceal themselves and the treasure under the holy cover of the ashram. However the police who reached the spot asked Mandavya about the thieves and the treasure. Eliciting no answer from the sage who was in very deep meditation the whole ashram was searched. The thieves were caught and the treasure was recovered. The matter was reported to the king by the police commissioner who charged the Sage Mandavya as the chief of the robber gang who donned the holy attire as a convenient camouflage. The sage was silent all the while and did not defend himself. Eventually he was convicted and transfixed on a spike. Because of the power of Yoga, Mandavya did not die, but bore the pain of crucifixion with equanimity. The sages of the forest having heard of his crucifixion came to him and gathered round the cross seeking elucidation on important philosophical points as he was considered an authority on several spiritual subjects. They were eager to elicit the information before he died. The king came to know of the accidental miscarriage of justice and hastened to the spot of transfixion and begged pardon for his grievous mistake. Of course Mandavya was immediately set at liberty. The sages said that the king was perfectly justified in acting according to his light and that the officers of the king did their duty in right earnest.

However Mandavya straight went to Yama, the Lord of Dharma and asked him how he deserved such a severe punishment. Yama replied, "Don't you, Rishi, know that all actions good or bad will have their corresponding repercussions? It is the

inexorable law of *Karma*. But the sage insisted, "What have I done to merit the punishment? I want a straight and specific answer to my question from you." Yama gravely pointed out, "You have tortured birds and insects when you were a child, taking cruel pleasure and you have paid for it by undergoing this transfixion." Mandavya declared, "Juvenile indiscretion should not be given severe punishment; you have erred in your judgement. Human life is a complex phenomenon and you must understand it in its correct perspective. You shall be born as a mortal on earth and acquire the necessary experience." In accordance with the curse of Mandavya Yama incarnated himself on earth as Vidura who was regarded as a Mahatma, a realised soul by his companions and as a great scholar in state craft and scriptures by his colleagues.

Bhisma became the regent for the second time as Dhritarashtra and Pandu, the sons of Ambika and Ambalika, respectively were infants. Bhisma brought them up with missionary zeal. Then when Dhritarashtra became a major, Bhisma secured the princess Gandhari, daughter of the king of Gandhara, as his consort. Vidura was appointed by Bhisma as counsellor. Gandhari in keeping with the ancient Indian tradition of womanhood, decided to blindfold her eyes to share the disability of her husband. The government of the kingdom was entrusted to the prince Pandu as Dhritarashtra was born blind.

Kunti Bhoja, a scion of the Yadava race, proclaimed "Svayamvara" for his foster daughter Kunti. Her original name was Pritha and she was the daughter of Sura. Kunti derived her name from her foster father Kunti and was known for her beauty, dynamism, intelligence and other virtues. King Pandu attended the Svayamvara along with many suitors who were rulers of different countries. Kunti placed the bridal garland around the neck of Pandu the bright jewel of the Bharata race. The marriage was duly performed and she accompanied her husband Pandu to the imperial capital, Hastinapura.

8

Son of the Sun God

Kunti was involved in a romantic adventure prior to her marriage when the sage Durvasa paid a visit to the court of Kunti

Bhoja. The sacred duty of service to the distinguished guest was entrusted to princess Kunti. The arrogance and anger of the sage were well known to the whole world and Kunti discharged her duties with commendable success. The sage was known for his fastidious outlook and instant irritation. But Kunti could please him. It was the greatest testimony to her tact and talents, sensitive resourcefulness, and sense of responsibility, that Durvasa taught her a divine Mantra. He said, "My dear girl, I have initiated you into a powerful Mantra, by means of which you can invoke any divine being who will come to you and you will be blessed with a son who will show his divine prowess. This is the greatest privilege for any mortal woman and you have it by my grace." The virgin girl, Kunti who could not understand the implications of the boon conferred on her by Durvasa was very eager to test it. The first and foremost divine being she could think of was the Sun, shining in the sky in all his resplendent glory. Out of juvenile curiosity she chanted the Mantra invoking the Sun god. Suddenly the sky became cloudy and the Sun god descended from the heavens in his golden chariot drawn by the seven horses straight into the seclusion of king Kunti Bhoja's palace where the princess was provided with separate reserved accommodation. Kunti, quite overwhelmed with the presence of the divine visitor, asked "O God, who art thou?" The Sun God, covering her with his ardent glances, replied "Dear princess, I have come at your invitation. By this time you must have realised that I am the Sun God." Kunti begged, "Have mercy on me, please depart at once." But the Sun god persisted "Charming girl, I have come overwhelmed by your mantra and I am now under your spell. You shall not turn away an honoured guest invited by you." Kunti was aghast and could not reply. However she collected all her wits and argued "I am an unmarried virgin. Foolishly I wanted to test the power of the Mantra. You must pardon my childish pranks." However the Sun God reassured her that she would regain her virginity after the child was born and that no blame would be attached to her by their union."

By the grace of God (Sun God) Kunti conceived and a child was born with natural armour and earrings. He became famous later as the greatest warrior Karna. The virgin mother could not bring up the baby publicly. So Kunti placed the baby in a comfortable floating box which was let loose into the Ganges in all

secrecy. The virgin mother heaved a heavy sigh as she gazed at the box floating to reach an unknown destination. The baby looked like a miniature Sun in mortal frame, but it was the unfortunate lot of the virgin mother to leave the first born baby to the mercy of the waves of the Ganges. However the box was picked up in tact by a Hastinapura charioteer who regarded the baby as a gift from god. Radha, the wife of the charioteer, was overjoyed at their unexpected luck. Thus the son of Kunti became Radheya, the son of Radha, by which name Karna was known to the world at large.

9

Pandu Cursed

Bhisma was not only a great warrior but was also a shrewd veteran of the state craft. It was he who was the architect of the marriage alliance of Gandhari and Dhritarashtra by which the two countries, the Kuru kingdom and its north west neighbour were brought together. Madra was also an important kingdom on the northern frontiers of the Kuru region. At the instance of Bhisma Pandu married Madri the princess from Madra kingdom. Salya the prince of Madra was a rising star amongst the versatile warriors of the times. Madri was an exceptionally beautiful and accomplished bride and Pandu developed very great attachment for her. One day Pandu went into the forest on a hunting excursion. Unfortunately a sage and his wife were enjoying romance in the guise of deer. The male deer was hit by an arrow released by Pandu and the dying sage cursed Pandu, "Indiscriminate hunter, you have committed the worst sin in shooting at a mating couple. You will meet with instantaneous death if you mate with your wife."

Pandu was perturbed mentally as he must deny himself the pleasures of conjugal bed on the pain of death. He retreated to the forest with his two wives on the ostensible pretext of overbearing love for hunting entrusting the government of the kingdom to Bhisma and Vidura. It was more or less a de facto abdication and Pandu was not bothered about it as he had no children at that time. In the forest Pandu was leading a life of asceticism along with his two wives. It was an incongruous situation. Pandu, quite hale and healthy, having two devoted accomplished young wives, was

compelled to kill his legitimate desires owing to a tragic conspiracy of circumstances.

10

Birth of Pandavas

One day Pandu exclaimed to Kunti, "How I wish you beget children; I feel criminally guilty whenever I see you. I have denied you the privilege of womanhood." Kunti confided to the tormented king that she was blessed with the boon to invoke any God of her choice, by the grace of Durvasa.

Pandu insisted that Kunti should use the divine spell to beget children. Kunti with the avowed intention of pleasing her husband invoked the God of righteousness, Yama, and Yudhishthira was thus born. Pandu, overjoyed at the birth of a son, encouraged his wife to try again. This time she invoked the God of Wind and Bhima of superlative strength was born. The baby was so strong that the stone on which he was inadvertently dropped by the mother broke into pieces. Pandu, immensely pleased, asked Kunti, to try the spell once again. Kunti invoked Indra, the lord of heaven, and Arjuna was born embodying in himself the prowess of immortal heroism. Pandu was then the proud father of three extraordinary children.

Still not satisfied he asked Kunti to use her spell once more. Kunti very judiciously suggested that propriety required that she should pass on the divine spell to Madri. Pandu then called his beloved wife Madri and asked her to get initiation of the divine Mantra from Kunti.

Madri who was given the Mantra by Kunti invoked the twin gods the Asvins, who were known for their handsome bearing and she gave birth to Nakula and Sahadeva who were born with transcendental smartness and spriteness. After the exit of Pandu, Dhritarashtra became the titular monarch of the Kuru kingdom assisted by Vidura. When Gandhari was in the family way, news from the forest reached Hastinapura that Kunti gave birth to a child named Yudhishthira. It was long since Gandhari conceived and the normal period of gestation was over. By a process more or less of forced delivery Gandhari gave birth to hundred sons and they were named Duryodhana, Duhsasana etc. and a daughter.

Pandu was leading a happy and contented life in the forest with his two wives enjoying the company of his children, the five Pandavas. He almost forgot the wretched curse. Moreover he was long rid of the botherations of kingship and he recouped his health and mental strength in the midst of sylvan serenity. He could enjoy the pristine pleasures provided by nature in different seasons unadulterated by urban devastation. With the advent of the spring, sometime after the birth of the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, Pandu was transported to exceptional heights of elevation and exhilaration. As Madri appeared before him adorned with the vernal bloom of floral splendour, Pandu quite unmindful of the apparently archaic curse invited his sweetheart to the conjugal bed in spite of her protestations and lost his life. Madri feeling guilty, preferred to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband leaving her two sons to the motherly care of Kunti, known for her sense of responsibility and rightcousness.

The hermits of the ashram who were friends of Pandu looked after the education and upbringing of the Pandavas for some years in the absence of their father. Eventually Kunti decided to go to Hastinapura, the right place for the princes to live. Choosing one auspicious day she came to Hastinapura along with some hermits who were the intimate friends of Pandu and presented the Pandava princes to Dhritarashtra and Bhishma in the imperial court.

The Pandava princes were received with mixed feelings by the members of the court. Varied comments were heard—"It was long ago Pandu retreated to the forest. When did he beget children? The death of Pandu was a pretty past event—no body mentioned anything about his children then." Kunti herself brought the princes to the royal court and the hermits attested conclusively that they were the children of Pandu. Nobody could raise any formal objection. Vidura welcomed them with open arms. Dhritarashtra was glad that his brother's children came to Hastinapura together with the dowager queen Kunti. Bhishma was very happy to see the promising princes with blooming faces and the pater familias or the "Pitamaha", as he was called since then with reverent affection, embraced all of them with instinctive eagerness. Ex-Queens Satyawati and Ambalika, though they were extremely sad to learn about the death of Pandu, welcomed Kunti,

kissing the Pandava princes. The citizens of Hastinapura came in a procession to see the sons of Pandu, the memory of whose exemplary rule, noted for its fair play and justice, was still green in their memories.

The unprecedented and spontaneous welcome which the people of Hastinapura extended to the Pandava princes filled the heart of Kunti with joy. As a gesture of good will Dhritarashtra anointed Yudhishthira as Yuvaraja, the heir apparent to the imperial throne.

However Satyawati and Ambalika felt very unhappy and bemoaned the death of Pandu. Satyawati summoned Veda Vyasa who came and offered his condolences to them. He consoled the sobbing Satyawati giving a discourse on the omnipotence of time. "Revered mother," the great sage said, "Time is the cradle of hope but the grave of ambition. Past is verily better than the future. The trials and tribulations of the past have been borne by us. The future may hold unbearable sorrows in store for us. Already our lives are time barred and there is no meaning in continuing fruitless existence. The dreams of yesterday shall be followed by the disappointments and delusions of today and tomorrow. It is high time for you to leave the royal palace. The good old earth has lost its vitality of youth. You must leave the golden cage to seek salvation." Inspired by the words of wisdom uttered by Veda Vyasa, Satyawati, followed by Ambika and Ambalika, went to dwell in the forest, seeking self-realisation. Eventually they found their undisturbed peace in heaven.

11

The Princes

Bhisma appointed Kripacharya as a teacher to the princes, sons of Dhritarashtra and Pandu. The sons of Dhritarashtra were known as Kauravas after the family name for the sake of distinction. The sons of Pandu were known as Pandavas though technically they were also Kauravas as they belonged to the same family. Kripacharya taught the princes the use of arms, especially the bow and the arrow. Yudhishthira was the eldest of them all; and

he was known for his sense of equilibrium and fair play. Bhima and Duryodhana were of the same age, born on the same day. Bhima was blessed with a strong physique. In sheer bodily strength nobody could surpass him amongst his contemporaries. His juvenile pranks struck terror into the hearts of the Kauravas. He was a good swimmer. When the Kauravas got into the Ganges for bathing Bhima would catch some of them, push them under his arms and swim speedily and almost choke them to near death. When they climbed up a tree for play, Bhima would come from an unexpected corner and shake the tree with such a force that they would fall on the ground like scattered fruit. Every day the sons of Dhritarashtra sustained bodily injuries as a result of Bhima's perverse jokes, and were humiliated. Duryodhana as the eldest used to challenge Bhima championing the cause of his younger brothers, but he was no match to Bhima. Thus the sons of Dhritarashtra nursed a deep hatred and envy towards Bhima from infancy. As the princes grew up Arjuna developed the aptitude for the bow. Because of his mellowed personality, exemplary character and conduct, Yudhisthira impressed all the people with the potentialities of an ideal king. He treated all his brothers affectionately and in the absence of their father all the younger brothers showed him respect due to the father. Though the Kauravas and Pandavas grew up together playing and learning together, in mirth and merriment, the division into two camps became evident from their childhood. Bhima though under the titular control of Yudhisthira was the de facto leader of the Pandava camp while Duryodhana was the acknowledged leader of the rival faction.

In the eyes of Duryodhana the Pandavas obviously were intruders and he was not able to understand why his father Dhritarashtra was so indulgent to them. Hitherto Duryodhana and his brothers were enjoying the affectionate patronage of Bhishma exclusively. The Pitamaha was not only showing equal consideration to the Pandavas but sometimes partial towards them. Gradually, Duryodhana developed a grouse against the Pandavas. The overbearing attitude of mighty Bhima was the immediate problem with which the prince Duryodhana was confronted with. So he conspired with his brothers who were the victims of Bhima's naughty behaviour day in and day out to put an end to him. One day while he was sleeping, the Kauravas tied him with wild

creepers and threw him into the river Ganges. Earlier, his food was poisoned. Duryodhana was quite sure that Bhima would die and the problem would be solved.

Yudhishthira enquired about the whereabouts of Bhima. Duryodhana was ready with the answer that Bhima went into the city. However Yudhishthira suspecting some foul play sent his brothers in search of Bhima. But the brothers came back quite disappointed after a door to door search. However Bhima returned home wearily. He was not drowned but was washed ashore by the river current. Kunti and Yudhishthira welcomed him and embraced him warmly with great joy. They could very easily identify who the culprits were in their heart of hearts. They discussed the matter with Vidura who counselled cautious approach. He said, "Open accusation against Duryodhana will serve no useful purpose. He will level counter charges against Bhima and mutual recriminations will start. Better be silent and take your own precautions. After all, you form the stronger side and very often incapacity and wickedness go together and this is now the case with the Kauravas." Yudhishthira warned all his brothers to be silent but was not complacent. Adversity thus cemented the mutual bonds of affection amongst the Pandava brothers. Duryodhana was surprised to see Bhima survive the ordeal and attend the usual avocations next day in the school quite silently and nonchalantly.

12

The Golden Ball

One day the Kauravas and the Pandavas went into the forest to play. The golden ball with which they were playing quite accidentally fell into a deep well. The water in the well was clear as crystal, and all the princes gathered round the well and were gazing at the golden ball which was shining in the transparent waters. As the eldest Yudhishthira was asked to try to get the golden ball out of the well but when he tried, his golden ring studded with diamonds fell into the well. However just at that time a Brahman carrying a quiver of arrows and a bow came to the spot followed by his wife and child. He accosted the princes with a smile and asked them why they were staring at the ball and the ring

so helplessly. He said, "Worthy princes of the Bharata dynasty, as Kshatriyas destined to rule over this great country, you should get the golden ball out of the well with your skill in archery. Don't you know the use of the bow and the arrow?" All the princes said tumultuously that they knew the art of archery but did not know that archery can be effectively used at that juncture.

The Brahman who was in rugged clothes drew out the arrows from his quiver and shot at the ball in quick succession, each arrow sticking to the back of its forerunner. Thus the apparently poor Brahman took out the golden ball from the well and handed it over to the princes. Then Yudhisthira wanted his ring to be taken out. The Brahman took a blade of grass from the ground and sent it into the well chanting the mantras and the diamond ring came jumping out of the well straight to the finger of Yudhisthira. The princes were immensely pleased and Yudhisthira said, "Revered Brahman, please come with us and I will arrange a good meal for all of you in the house of our teacher, Kripacharya." Drona followed the princes with profuse smiles as his destination was the same as proposed by Yudhisthira.

Kripi, sister of Kripacharya, was the wife of Drona. So there was no need for the offices of Yudhisthira for securing a good meal. However the innate nobility and hospitality of Yudhisthira impressed Drona who always had a special and soft corner for the princes. The princes were not willing to leave him and said, "Revered Sir, we salute you for your greatness. Who are you? We want to introduce you to Bhishma, our Pitamaha." The Brahman said, "Please go to him and ask who I am. It is not proper that I should speak about myself." The princes went to Bhishma and narrated the incredible feats of archery performed by the poor Brahman. Immediately Bhishma knew that it was none else than the renowned master of archery, Drona. At once the royal invitation was extended to Drona who was ushered into Bhishma's presence with the usual state honours, his fame having reached the destination earlier. Bhishma could visualise the personality of Drona in his mind's eye earlier and it exactly tallied with that image. Drona was neither stout nor slender, neither aged nor young. His hair over his head was neither grey nor black, his bearing neither self-complacent nor overcautious and his radiant eyes were beacons of illumination in spite of his impoverished

frame subjected to under-nourishment inspiring instantaneous respect. In short, he appeared to Bhishma as a living justification of the great reputation with which his name was surrounded. Bhishma offered the chair next to his seat and requested Drona to be the teacher of the princes of the Royal family. "Great Brahman," the Pitamaha said, "these princes were learning the use of arms and archery from the revered Kripacharya. We are in search of a teacher for further education. It is our good fortune that brought you here. My conception of education is 'Inspiration first and instruction next'. Fortunately all the princes have already been inspired by you. I formally request that you may be gracious enough to accept the assignment." Drona accepted the offer with thanks. Kripacharya was overjoyed that he was saved from the embarrassment of recommending his own brother-in-law to the coveted post.

Bhishma was happy that he could secure not only a great preceptor for the princes but also a worthy friend with whom he could exchange his ideals and experiences. Soon both became staunch associates who stood by each other through thick and thin, weal and woe, till their death. The princes, the Kauravas as well as the Pandavas accepted Drona as their preceptor, with all their hearts and souls and very soon the terms Acharya, Guru or preceptor became synonymous with the proper noun Drona, who was acclaimed as the ideal teacher of his times. He gave higher initiation to all, bestowing individual care. Arjuna excelled all others in archery and he became a favourite of Drona though he bestowed the same attention to every one.

The warm reception which Drona got at the worthy hands of Bhishma was in sharp contrast to the treatment meted out to him by Drupada earlier. Before coming to Hastinapura Drona had a chequered career. Drona and Drupada, the Panchala prince, were classmates and learnt the art of archery at the hermitage of Bharadvaja. Eventually Drupada became the king of Panchala while Drona continued to be a poor Brahman. Of course a true Brahman of those days was not expected to possess any private property. But Drona was married and begot a son named Asvatthama. When the sons of rich people were drinking milk, Asvatthama craved for milk and began to cry and Drona did not

possess the money to buy a cow. He expected that he could get any number of cows just for mere asking if he met king Drupada his friend and classmate of his boyhood days. So he went to Kampilya the capital of king Panchala. Drona tried to introduce himself to Drupada as his friend. But the proud king disclaimed any knowledge of the poor Brahman and Drona was asked to get out unceremoniously. The wounded pride of Drona was smarting under humiliation and longed for revenge. But the need of the hour was to look after Asvatthama. Drona badly needed money but he was reluctant to approach another king. He heard about Parasurama and his reputation for philanthropy. Drona approached Parasurama who said sweetly and very politely, "I have given away to Kasyapa all the land I have conquered and donated all my possessions to the needy Brahmans. Now all the wealth that has remained with me is the wealth of my learning and erudition in archery." Drona bowed to Parasurama for giving him the best lesson of his life and said, "Please teach me the esoteric archery and give me the great Astras." Parasurama imparted the knowledge of the great Astras in detail to Drona and blessed him.

Bhishma and Drona were both disciples of Parasurama and the common bond cemented their friendship. Drona wanted to wreak vengeance on Drupada who was the traditional enemy of the Kuru kingdom. So Drona imparted education to the Kuru-Pandava princes with a vested interest as well. Drona's fame as a great teacher spread far and wide like wild fire. The poor brahman, once unrecognised by the proud Panchala king Drupada, became the royal preceptor of the Bharata race and was able to bring up his son, Asvatthama as a prince. All the princes acquired commendable skill in the art of archery. Bhima and Duryodhana in spite of their pronounced predilection for mace, practised the art of archery and attained remarkable proficiency in wielding the bow as well. All the princes with varying degrees of proficiency were well versed in the art of archery. The bow became the fashion of the day and passion of the times because of the magical influence exercised by the great master Dronacharya. Among the princes Arjuna had an additional advantage, he possessed real aptitude for the bow. It was a labour of love for Arjuna and he practised the art outside the school hours as well. By persistent practice and patient perseverance Arjuna was able to send forth arrows using both the hands. So he was known as "Savyasachi," the ambidexter

of his times. One day as Arjuna was taking his meal the lights were off because of a sudden gale but he could continue eating in the darkness by sheer force of habit. Arjuna extended the analogy to archery and to the delight of his Acharya practised it in the nights as well. Eventually he acquired the capacity to hit the target blindfolded. Drona was very much pleased with Arjuna who was practising archery with diligence and dexterity and said to him privately, "I have great hopes in you and in you alone. I will make you the greatest archer of our times." Arjuna bowed to Drona prostrating himself at his feet and secured his renewed blessings.

13

Ekalavya: The Proverbial Pupil of the Prestigious Preceptor

Ekalavya belonged to a forest tribe of barbarians. The barbarian had the best aptitude for archery. Aptitude requires appropriate opportunities for self-realisation. Ekalavya heard about Drona the ideal teacher of archery and he longed to be a pupil of the great preceptor. Drona was the prestigious preceptor of the princes of the royal family. But how can he go to Hastinapura and join the Royal Academy of military sciences? So in his own humble way he erected a mud statue of Drona, installed it in a special hut of leaves and regarding him as his preceptor began the practice of archery with dedication and devotion. Every night he dreamed of his prestigious preceptor but worked hard every day to acquire proficiency in the art of archery. Ekalavya imagined that he acquired the great skill in the art of archery by the grace of Drona who instructed him in absentia. Ekalavya is the epic example of the classical theory that in education inspiration is the most important ingredient and instruction is only a subsidiary factor.

One day the Kaurava and the Pandava princes went on a hunting expedition into the forest where Ekalavya was living. A dog belonging to the royal party saw a wild boar and began to bark. Suddenly showers of strange arrows hit the dog in quick succession following the sound track from an invisible and incomprehensible source. The princes plucked out the arrow heads from the bleeding dog and encountered Ekalavya who came to the spot unostentatiously. The unerring precision with which Ekalavya could hit at

the unseen target was an unpleasant surprise to the princes. Arjuna asked him, "Who are you, any god or Gandharva, an aboriginal? Who is your preceptor?" Ekalavya replied, "Great prince, I am Ekalavya, a humble pupil of the great preceptor Dronacharya and a son of this soil."

The princes returned home but Arjuna could not forget Ekalavya. Next day the prince narrated their encounter with Ekalavya to their preceptor and praised his matchless skill in the art of the bow. Drona said, "Archery, a luxury of the princes, is a necessity of the barbarians, however their skill must be limited and rudimentary." But Arjuna attested to the superiority of Ekalavya and added, "Revered sir, you have promised me to make me the best bow man in the world. But I must affirm that the barbarian Ekalavya has potentialities for attaining supremacy in no time."

Drona went to the forest followed by the princes to meet Ekalavya who was extremely delighted to see the great master of his dreams. Ekalavya received Dronacharya with all the devotion at his command. He washed the lotus feet of his master and sprinkled the sacred waters over his head as an act of self-purification. After seating Drona on a cane throne Ekalavya offered him the purest honey and worshipped his feet with various varieties of flowers and offered sandal paste and bamboo pearls. The princes were amazed at the adoration with which a barbarian received Drona whom he regarded as his teacher. Ekalavya bowing reverentially at the feet of the master said, "I want to offer my humble *Gurudakshina* to you. Please specify your choice." Drona replied, "I do not know how I deserve your homage of 'Gurudakshina.' Even if it were true that you owe your art of archery to me, you are not a prince to derive any benefit out of it." But Ekalavya insisted, "True, I am not a prince to give you any precious present. But I can give you my very life. I want that sacred satisfaction which is really priceless." Drona coolly said, "Then please present me the thumb of your right hand." All the princes were shocked and stared at one another in stupefied silence. Ekalavya's compliance with the demand of Drona simply meant suicide of his career as an archer. The princes knew it. Ekalavya could comprehend it immediately. The animated suspense came to an end within a few seconds as Ekalavya drew his sword and cut the thumb out of his right hand and placed it at the

feet of the preceptor. It was a scene too deep for tears. Ekalavya derived the greatest spiritual satisfaction from his super human self-sacrifice. Ekalavya said to Drona, "Great Guru, you have graciously saved me from the sin of villainy and violence, the ingredients of the art of archery. I feel, I have no birth, I have lost my thumb but, I have gained emancipation from the terrestrial bondage here and now. You have come to my door and saved my soul." Drona returned to Hastinapura dumbfounded.

14

Public Examination of the Prowess of the Princes

Drona announced a public examination to test the prowess of the princes in arms and archery. Spectacular arrangements were made. A special stadium was erected. Separate seats of honour were provided for His Majesty Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari and to all the nobility headed by Bhishma. Women of the royal family like Kunti were seated in special enclosures. The function attracted unprecedented crowds. The arrival of their Majesties was announced with the blowing of conches and ceremonious chantings by the imperial heralds called Vandins and Magadhas who proclaimed the glories of the lunar race with special reference to the ruling sovereign. The arrival of Bhishma was also announced likewise and the crowd cheered him lustily as and when he took his seat. Bugles were blown and horns were sounded to the accompaniment of the traditional military orchestra of India comprising of "Dundubhi - Bheri - Pataha - Kansya etc. etc." when the princes entered the arena.

Drona entered the arena amidst tumultuous applause of the spectators and announced with sublime serenity: "Worthy princes of the hoary Bharata race, this historic day will be ever memorable in your lives. The king and the commoner alike are here to witness your performance. I fondly hope that you will justify the tremendous trust reposed in me by your worthy Pitamaha—the veteran warrior who vanquished Parasurama, the greatest hero of unparalleled history, the immortal son of the goddess Ganga known to the world at large as Bhishma by the exemplary vow of life long celibacy. Princes, my dear pupils, display your prowess to the delight of friends and despair of foes." The function started

with an exhibition match of mace battle, "Gada Yuddha" by Duryodhana and Bhima. It was a feast to the eyes of the spectators. Bhima was invincible with his superior strength. Duryodhana remained unbeaten with his superlative skill. As both the contestants were eager to turn it into an actual fight, Drona the preceptor-cum-umpire terminated the combat. There were many other items of display which delighted the crowd. However the most significant item on the agenda was the "Mechanical bird" placed on top of a tree. The mechanical bird was an automatic device. The contestant must be able to hit it down in three chances. The first to be invited was Yudhisthira. Drona, pointing his finger to the tree, the branches, the leaves and the mechanical bird, said clearly. "My dear prince, please tell me what you see." Prince Yudhisthira, who has cultivated his sense of propriety better than the art of archery, proclaimed, "Great Sir, I do not know whether I can see all that is described by you but I see my inability quite clearly." Drona offered his hearty congratulations to him on his truthful confession and proper perspective of his abilities.

Duryodhana was the next invitee. He entered the arena with dignified posture and bowed to the preceptor. Drona put the same question to him. Duryodhana said "Sir, everything is clearly visible to me." Drona repeatedly asked him, "Are you able to see the branches and leaves clearly?" "Yes, I am able to see the branches, and leaves clearly, together with the flowery creeper that has enveloped the tree. I am not suffering from defective sight," was the emphatic reply of Duryodhana. Drona said, "Prince, there is no need for you to try. You can go." Duryodhana made a triumphant exit with the dubious satisfaction of winning the prize without contest.

Next to be invited was Bhima who entered the arena without the bow and the quiver with the gait of an untamed elephant. Drona repeated the same question to him as well, and asked him why he came without the bow and the arrows. Bhima replied, "Revered Sir, frankly speaking I am not disposed to locate the bird. Wise people say that a true hero will never utilise his mighty power against a petty, mean little bird. But I quite see the huge, tall tree alright. If you are pleased to give me an opportunity I will pluck out the whole tree, root, stem and branch to the delight of

the spectators. Let me exhibit my might." Bhima provided the entertaining touch to the otherwise serious proceedings of the day and everybody had a hearty laugh. Then Drona directed Bhima to resume the seat saying that everybody knew his physical prowess.

The ultimate choice fell on Arjuna who came with his bow and quiver and prostrated himself at the feet of Drona who put the same question to him. Arjuna replied, "Revered Sir, I could see nothing you described excepting the bird." Drona repeatedly asked, "Why, don't you see the various branches and the innumerable leaves?" Arjuna's reply was quite crisp—"Nothing except the bird and I request instant orders to shoot." Drona immediately gave the order and Arjuna shot at the bird which came down crumbling instantaneously. The spectators spontaneously gave a standing ovation to Arjuna for his unique feat. Drona with all the pride of a privileged teacher proclaimed, "There is no hero in the three worlds who can equal Arjuna in his unparalleled prowess of archery." The crowd thundered its unanimous assent. Even before the unprecedented din of the tumultuous applause subsided an archer with a bow and arrows emerged out of the crowd and entered the arena with self-confident gait and imposing personality. Suddenly the crowd became silent and the intruder began to argue with the Acharya in a challenging tone. He said "Great Brahman, you are at perfect liberty to bestow exaggerated praise on your pupil privately and try to deserve to be true to your salt. Why do you bring in the three worlds into your picture of praise publicly? There are people here and now in Hastinapura who can excel your pupil." Drona, much annoyed at the audacity of an intruding stranger, said to him, "Boasting is the mother tongue of impostors. Tell me whether you can do likewise and bring down the mechanical bird." The stranger accepted the challenge unhesitatingly and stepped into the arena with his bow and a single arrow. While Drona was rearranging the mechanical device, conflicting comments were heard from the crowd. "The presumptuous intruder will be disillusioned soon", "No, no, look at his radiant face and resplendent ear ornaments, the divine halo about him cannot be altogether false." Meanwhile the mechanical bird was repositioned and Drona gave the signal to shoot. The stranger drew his bow and arrow and just at the first attempt the target was hit and the mechanical bird came down crashing to pieces.

As the crowd burst into applause, Duryodhana jumped to his feet and was the first to congratulate the hero, hugging him into his embrace. The honoured hero reciprocated the gesture of the prince by an equally warm embrace. Drona was astonished that the much advertised target, the mechanical bird, was hit by a stranger with reckless precision and that he became the hero of the day in the eyes of the excited crowd. The stranger at once challenged Arjuna for a duel fight. Arjuna said, "Uninvited intruder, I do not like your bragging; however I am ready to show your place to you."

Both were ready to begin the duel. Just at the moment, Kunti swooned and Drona stopped the duel and proceeded to enquire after the condition of Kunti. Arjuna too followed his preceptor. First aid was rendered to the queen mother, Kunti and as soon as she recovered consciousness Drona returned to the arena. There were deafening shouts—'Long live Karna', 'Victory to Karna'. Drona learnt that Karna was the name of the hero. Karna immediately challenged Arjuna to begin the fight. He said, "Presumptuous prince, I have every right to enter the arena uninvited as it is the common ground for all the contestants. Otherwise the praises bestowed upon you by your teacher will become quite meaningless." Arjuna conceding the contention of Karna was ready to commence the fight. But as the umpire of the field Drona stepped in and proclaimed, "As the custodian of the royal etiquette and custom I should like to point out that only a prince can challenge a prince for a duel. Karna, please tell me who you are." Karna could not muster any reply, but looked at the Sun shining in all his splendour in the sky and preferred to be silent hanging down his head. But Duryodhana at once sprang to his feet and came to the Acharya, "Revered Sir, the genetic secrets of great men are shrouded in mystery just like the sources of great rivers. Great soul, your birth itself is a glaring example of this truth. It is patently evident that Karna is the incarnation of an unrecognised divinity. Just at this auspicious moment I am bestowing the kingdom of Anga on this great hero who is fit enough to be the ruler of the three worlds. I have already discussed the matter with king Dhritarashtra and Pitamaha Bhishma who are convinced that it is our imperial duty to honour this hero living incognito in the capital city of Hastinapura." The crowd cheered Duryodhana and Karna was crowned king of Anga

with all the royal honours. Duryodhana placed the golden crown on the head of Karna holding the umbrella of white pearls, the insignia of royalty, with his own hands. He said, "King of Anga, please accept my hearty congratulations." Karna replied, "King of kings, my dear Duryodhana, please accept my grateful thanks." At that moment a charioteer, Adhiratha by name reached the spot running and embraced Karna wetting his crown with tears of joy overwhelmed with ecstasy at the unexpected stroke of good luck with which his son was blessed. Karna bowed to the feet of his father reverently. Bhima rushed to the spot and taunted Karna saying, "Son of a charioteer, Karna, why should you challenge Arjuna to a fight, you can apply for the post of a charioteer under him. I will present you with a lovely whip." Before Karna could reply Duryodhana intervened and said, "Bhima, these words do not quite fit into your mouth. It is an accepted principle of genetics that a tiger cannot be born of a deer. Search your own heart. What about your own lineage? You are birds of the same feather." By that time the sun set and the crowd melted away. The royal dignities and the nobility repaired to their homes with the help of flaming torches.

Duryodhana was happy that he could find a competent combatant against Arjuna. Adhiratha and Radha, the Suta couple who brought up Karna as their own child, were very happy that their son was crowned the king of Anga. But Kunti was unhappy. It was the greatest irony of her life that her own son, the first born had joined the enemy camp pitted against her other children. However she kept to herself the tragic secret which always corroded her heart. Though Karna had every reason to be elated over the sudden heights of affluence and popularity to which fortune has elevated him his joy was marred by many unhappy recollections of his earlier life. Even though he was not eligible for initiation into the art of archery as a member of the "Suta" caste, he went to Parasurama when he was on the verge of adolescence and told him that he belonged to the Brahman caste and got admitted into his tutelage of studentship. He learnt the intricacies of bowmanship and the Astras at his feet. One day the preceptor Parasurama fell asleep placing his head on the lap of Karna. God Indra had his own fears that Karna would become the potential enemy of his son Arjuna. So he took the form of a potter worm and began to make a dent in the thigh of Karna who put up with

the pain lest the preceptor would wake up. However Parasurama woke up and saw blood oozing out. Parasurama, presuming that a Brahman could not put up with such pain, asked Karna to speak out the truth. Karna told Parasurama that he was a Suta by caste and thus incurred the displeasure of his preceptor who cursed him that he would forget at the nick of the fateful moment the great Astras which he acquired by means of falsehood. However Karna ruled over Anga as a benevolent monarch. In fact he acquired the greatest reputation for his munificence and came to be known as the greatest donor ever born on the mortal globe. He built up a reputation that he never denied a request to anybody. No contemporary hero ever excelled him in glory and glamour, ironically enough, not even Duryodhana who was the prime architect of his elevation. As such he was the most exploited man of his times. Even Indra wanted to take advantage of his generosity and waited at his door in the guise of a Brahman. The Sun god detecting the ulterior motives of Indra took the human form, came to Karna and warned him of the impending danger from Indra standing at his door incognito. But Karna asked Indra when he approached him, "Pseudo-Brahman, I will give you whatever you desire though I know who you are, do not hesitate. Please ask." Indra was much surprised that he was detected but undaunted said—"Alright, if you want to remain true to your reputation give your natural armour and the ear ornaments." Karna drew his sword, cut his natural armour and the ear ornaments unhesitatingly and gave them to Indra without the least compunction. Indra, the ruler of the gods, was amazed and told Karna. "Your unparalleled generosity has made me to be ashamed of myself. Ask me any boon and I will confer it on you gladly." Karna replied, "I am thankful to you. If you want that I should take something from you, I shall certainly ask you. Then, you may be pleased to give me, *Sakti*, your unfailing weapon." Indra said, "You can take it, but please remember that the weapon will revert to me after you have used it once." Indra disappeared after giving *Sakti* to Karna.

15

Guru Dakshina

It was the custom in ancient India that the pupils after the completion of education sought to pay their homage to the

preceptor in cash or kind or in whatever form desired by him. It was the prerogative of the preceptor to choose and it was the privilege of the pupils to redeem it. It was called the "Guru Dakshina".

The Kaurava and Pandava princes, after the completion of their training, called on Drona and requested him to specify the "Guru Dakshina". Drona was very much pleased. He said, "I want any one of you to vanquish King Drupada and bring him to me as a captive." Bhishma blessed the princes as the mission was in keeping with the traditional enmity between the Kuru and Panchala kingdoms. Karna also joined the expedition. There was a bitter fight between the two armies; Arjuna, after a remarkable feat of daring and personal bravery, vanquished Drupada in single combat and took him captive. The captive king Drupada was presented to the preceptor Drona as Guru Dakshina by Arjuna.

It was a day of fulfilment for Drona who said to Drupada with biting sarcasm, "Your most exalted Majesty, king of Panchala, my hearty welcome. This is that poor brahman, Drona, son of Bharadvaja, once upon a time your boyhood friend. If it is your royal prerogative to forget me it is my humble privilege to remember you. However it is unbecoming of a brahman to nurse hatred or revenge. As my pupils have conquered your kingdom and placed it at my feet—as a homage for their preceptor I am now the king of Panchala. Hitherto as a poor brahman I was unfit to be your friend. Now I hope your Majesty's dignity will permit friendship between us. I now set you at liberty and confer the kingdom of Panchala on you." With these words Drona set Drupada at liberty and he was sent back with full royal honours.

However it was not the end of the story. It is a universal law that hatred invites revenge and revenge begets retaliation. Violence and counter-violence have never solved any confrontation. The mortal world may be full of miseries. But the most unbearable of all is the suffering caused by the pangs of humbled pride. Drupada the victim of wounded vanity, performed all the prescribed austerities to secure the favour of the Gods. Hating Drona ever since became the haunting passion of Drupada's life. He performed a sacrifice and the gratified gods blessed him with a

son and the son was Dhristadyumna destined to kill Drona. He prayed for a daughter to be wedded to Arjuna and Yajnyaseni alias Draupadi was born out of the sacrificial fire. He prayed for a son to kill Bhisma but paradoxically enough a daughter was born; the divine dispensation had its own connotation. The invincible Bhisma cannot be killed by any man and Amba who secured the boon from lord Siva was reborn as the daughter of Drupada to fulfil his request. That daughter came to be known as Sikhandini, who later became Sikhandi after the transformation of sex. Sikhandini when she grew up to be a girl saw the garland which Amba placed on the gate of the royal fort and put it around her own neck instinctively and went into a forest for performance of penance as her vowed destiny was incompatible with her womanhood. Eventually she could effect an exchange of her womanhood with a Yaksha and returned home triumphantly as man. King Drupada was eagerly looking forward for the destined hour to wreak his vengeance.

16

The Wax Palace

Yudhisthira apart from learning archery from Drona was regularly going to Vidura the reputed philosopher of the times to seek enlightenment on polity and social sciences. Yudhisthira was a source of inspiration and guidance to all his brothers. Bhisma and Drona had the highest regard for Yudhisthira who acquired wisdom worthy of advanced age in spite of his youth. The extraordinary love and affection bestowed by Yudhisthira and Kunti on Nakula and Sahadeva, who were doubly orphaned on account of the death of both of their parents, endeared Yudhisthira and Kunti to the citizens of Hastinapura as persons of extraordinary fair play and justice.

Yudhisthira, popular as a philosopher prince, Bhima known for his invincible physical prowess, Arjuna very famous for his dexterity in the art of archery; Nakula and Sahadeva with their unflinching co-operation to their brothers formed into a well-knit brotherhood known as the 'Pancha Pandavas' (Five sons of Pandu), their monolithic solidarity becoming proverbial.

The formidable combination had its natural repercussions and counter-reaction in the minds of Kauravas headed by Duryodhana.

Dhritarashtra of course was very much attached to his sons but never lagged behind in public demonstration of his love for his brother's sons, the Pandavas. The poor blind king did not know what to do when the two were divided into opposite camps. While he was on the horns of the dilemma Duryodhana approached him to plead his case. "Dear father," he said, "something must be done to solve this problem. All of our brothers feel orphaned while you are alive. Look at the public image the Pandavas built for themselves with relentless assiduity. They are instigating the people against you. Now the people are saying in open streets that it is high time that the doting blind king abdicates in favour of Yudhishthira. They have already given him the epithet of Dharmaraja, the righteous king, in anticipation of his early installation on the throne. You are elder to Pandu and it is your first mistake to have allowed him to rule as an independent sovereign. The second mistake you have committed is to proclaim Yudhishthira as the Yuvaraja—to be the heir apparent to the throne. Then what about us? Are we to live as second rate princes dependent entirely on the benevolence of the Pancha Pandavas? Owing to your so called goodness you have unwillingly betrayed the interests of your own children. We cannot expect Bhishma or Vidura or anybody else to champion our cause when we are betrayed by our own father. Yudhishthira will soon become the king. We will then have to be at the mercy of the Pandavas. Hell will be better than such a life."

Dhritarashtra argued with his son. "My dear Duryodhana, I quite see your point. As it is, Yudhishthira is the eldest of all the princes. His father was the ruler of the kingdom for pretty long time and he was held in high esteem by all the people as an able and just monarch. Most of the officers in the realm and in the army were people appointed by him and are bound by ties of loyalty to the sons of Pandu. As you yourself have said, the Pandavas are quite popular with the people who are sure to rise in rebellion if they are disinherited. Bhishma, Drona, Vidura and other nobles are on their side. After all Yudhishthira is a virtuous man, who I am sure, will treat you with affectionate regard. Anyway there is no other option for us."

But Duryodhana did not agree with his father and offered counter-arguments—"Dear father, Yudhishthira is a weakling and not a virtuous hero. He is good for nothing. The so called uprightness is a diplomatic superimposition to cover up the apparent imbecility. Even supposing that he is good, the real ruler of the realm will be Bhima who evinces nothing but contemptuous hatred towards us. So it is imperative to send away the Pandavas from Hastinapura to some other place, preferably Varanavata. Public memory is proverbially short and people will soon forget them. As for Bhishma he will never assert himself against the authority of the king in view of his vow. Asvatthama psychologically will be on our side in spite of his apparent neutrality and Drona cannot openly champion their cause in view of his extraordinary attachment to his son.

"Vidura is too much attached to you to defy you. The sermonizing chatter box is not a man of action. His irrelevant prattle is mistaken for philosophy by ignorant multitude. Anyway he is too cultured to engineer any open harm to anybody. On my side the ever dynamic Duhsasana, my brother, uncle Sakuni of unfailing intellect, are there. Last but not the least, Karna the unique hero in the universe has been most remarkable reinforcement to our side. We the four can act decisively."

Dhritarashtra gave a patient hearing to his son but could not make up his mind quickly. However the gang of four hatched a conspiracy with meticulous care. Varanavata was extolled indirectly in the presence of the Pandavas for its verdant fields and virtuous people, commendable climate and cultural atmosphere. A prearranged deputation of the people of Varanavata came to Hastinapura and extended an invitation to Pandavas to witness the annual festival to be celebrated there shortly in honour of God Siva. Kanika the minister of Sakuni was chosen for brain-washing Dhritarashtra. Kanika who was known as an astute politician went to Dhritarashtra ostensibly to discuss the principle of polity and state craft dinned into the ears of the blind king choosing appropriate opportunities that the interests of the sons must be safeguarded by the father. He said to Dhritarashtra finally—"The Pandavas may be good but their goodness will be a menace to your sons. They may be the sons of your own brother but authorities on polity declare that potentially fire is less dangerous than the kith and kin, who are as a rule deadlier if dearer. A small spark can

cause a devastating fire and wipe out the whole forest. A neglected thorn may be the cause for the festering wound. Strong enemies should be destroyed by secret stratagems for secrecy is the soul of state craft. Beware of the powerful Pandavas who will destroy your sons, if you show suicidal mercy to them. You must send them to Varanavata where they will be annihilated according to a specific secret schedule."

Duryodhana added his voice to the advice of Kanika, "O father, this is the time to act. Now or never. Send them to Varanavata. After we have consolidated our position here you may even get them back to this place, as then, they will have no supporters." All the while Dhritarashtra was listening to what he liked to believe and gave his assent to the plan. He asked the Pandavas to go and live at Varanavata for some time in the interests of political expediency as the people there have invited the princes to their place. The Pandavas were prepared to go to Varanavata in accordance with the directions of king Dhritarashtra and took leave of Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and others. Bhishma who desired that the Kauravas as well as the Pandavas should live in peace and harmony thought a temporary separation might ease the tension between the two groups and gave his blessings for their departure. Drona, who was quite apprehensive of the designs of the gang of four, thought Varanavata might be a safer place for the Pandavas than Hastinapura. However Vidura knew fully well that imminent danger awaited the arrival of the Pandavas there. Vidura proved to be a practical idealist instead of a philosopher of Duryodhana's miscalculation. On the departure of the Pandavas to Varanavata Vidura spoke to Yudhishthira in detail about the conspiracy hatched by Duryodhana in the Mleccha language. Vidura gave all the details of the plot. Purochana, the minister of the state, was sent to Varanavata already and he is constructing a palace of wax using the most combustible materials. On a suitable date after lulling everybody to complacency the palace of wax will be set fire to. All precautions were being taken to give it an appearance of a random accident. You must behave as if you know nothing taking all counter precautions. Of course I will try to help you in every way but I am confident of your resourcefulness." Pandavas followed by Kunti Devi went to Varanavata. But the exhilarating excursion they once contemplated turned out to be a dangerous journey into a dismal death trap. Yudhishthira apprised

his mother and all the brothers with all the details of the death trap and cautioned about Purochana. The Pandava princes recollected the philosophical discourses given by Vidura on the eve of their departure when they were taking leave of the elders, Bhishma, Drona etc. Vidura enunciated the philosophical truths pregnant with meaning. "The conflagration that consumes the whole forest cannot hurt a rat hiding securely in its hole or a porcupine which burrows the earth." The Pandava brothers decided to be extremely vigilant and escape from the death trap, so ingeniously laid for them. The citizens of Varanavata gave a rousing reception to the Pandava princes and temporary accommodation was provided to them till the palace under construction was ready for occupation. Purochana the minister sent in advance by Duryodhana met Yudhishthira and told him, "Your Excellency, I am asked to supervise the construction of the palace to be occupied by the princes. It is almost ready and final touches are being given." Yudhishthira thanked Purochana profusely and treated him, with exceptional cordiality and utilised his services to get all the sundry jobs done. Purochana never knew that the Pandavas were secretly supervising the work done by him.

17

The Escape

The wax palace was ready and Pandavas occupied it with apparent jubilation. Meanwhile an expert miner came to Varanavata at the instance of Vidura and met Yudhishthira to provide the passage of escape for the Pandavas. Yudhishthira was so careful that he feigned absolute ignorance of the plot, but after the miner revealed the contents of the conversation which Vidura had with him, on the eve of their departure, in the Mleccha tongue, Yudhishthira embraced the engineer who came to rescue them from the death trap. A subterranean tunnel was dug quite secretly by the miner with the help of the Pandavas working in the night time. Purochana did not have any inkling of it and he waited a full year so that people might regard the murderous fire as a pure accident. Pandavas used to go into the forest for the ostensible purpose of hunting but their intention was to scout the escape routes quite thoroughly. When everything was ready Yudhishthira decided to forestall Purochana's attempt. Choosing a dark midnight Bhima

set fire to the palace of wax as well as the quarters occupied by Purochana at the gate and the Pandavas escaped through the passage well prepared for the escape. The palace was soon engulfed in fire and together with Purochana's dwelling place was reduced to ashes. As it became evident that the palace was constructed of combustible materials like Jute, Ghee and Oil, the evil genius behind the construction could easily be guessed. The irony was the death of Purochana as a victim of his own wicked plot. There were loud lamentations all round at the supposed death of the pious Pandava princes and everybody cursed Duryodhana.

The news of the death of Pandavas reached Hastinapura. Dhritarashtra was loudest in the lamentations, a state mourning was announced. Dhritarashtra was like a deep water reservoir, cool at the bottom and warm at the surface and entertained secret joy at the bottom of his heart. The traditional funeral rites were performed. The most unhappy man was Bhishma who said to Vidura—"You are a philosopher and you are quite unperturbed at the tragic news. Look at my sad plight. Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, Pandu and Pandavas all died before my eyes. I am quite upset by the premature death of the promising princes under mortifying circumstances." Vidura confided to the Pitamaha—"Pandavas and Kunti Devi are alive. They crossed the frontiers of the Kuru territory in the boat secretly provided by me. The boatman has already conveyed the news to me. Hastinapura is not a safe place for them now. They are resourceful enough to protect themselves. Let us wait and see." Bhishma was very happy that the Pandavas were alive and were bound to come back to Hastinapura at the appropriate time. Vidura said to Bhishma in his usual philosophical vein. "Adversity is the best world as well as the greatest gymnasium. Fire purifies gold. Let the Pandavas emerge out of their own trials and tribulations as polished gems. A smooth sea seldom produces skilful sailors. The Pandavas providentially have gone into a wider world of ever expanding horizons. Rude contact with the hard realities of life only can add the fourth dimension to their personalities. I am sure Pandavas will return to Hastinapura as heroes with a difference. Princes in palaces and plants in the parks are doomed to stunted growth. The prince in the palace is the proverbial parrot in the golden cage and the power of the wings gets atrophied. The victim of vicious adversity

today will be the victorious favourite of fortune tomorrow. I am indeed delighted that destiny has provided this precious opportunity to the Pandavas to be graduated from the greatest university ever known to history, I mean—adversity.” Bhishma congratulated Vidura for providing him with proper philosophical perspective with which he could view the cataclysm with equanimity. The Pitamaha sent his teleblessings to the Pandavas wishing them god speed in their endeavours.

18

Hidimbi

The Pandavas after crossing the Ganges in the boat provided by the fore vision of Vidura marched on undergoing many hardships. Sometimes Bhima carried Kunti on his shoulders. Sometimes they felt miserably oppressed by the sufferings they had to bear, beyond their heroic endurance. Sometimes they paused and rested. Sometimes Bhima kept vigil while his mother and brothers fell asleep fully exhausted. One night when Bhima was awake, keeping vigil, a giant cannibal Hidimba by name attacked the Pandavas. A fight ensued between Bhima and Hidimba. Hidimbi, the sister of the Rakshasa Hidimba, who stood staring in amazement at the unusual strength of Bhima, fell in love with him. Hidimba was ultimately killed and Bhima married Hidimbi at the instance of his mother Kunti. As a result of the marriage, Ghatotkacha was born and afterwards he served his father and the Pandava-cause together with his rakshasa retinue. On the way the Pandavas met Bhagavan Vyasa in the forest. They bowed to the rishi who blessed them. Kunti narrated their sufferings to Veda Vyasa. The rishi just smiled and said, “Human existence is a tangled web of light and shade. Joys and sorrows are the warp and weft of life. There is so much based in the best of us, so much good in the worst of us; no absolute assessment is ever possible. The complete sinner is as rare as the pure saint. The same person is a sinner when compelled and a saint when inspired. The coexistence of good and evil everywhere in the world finds its reflex in each man. Each and every one has to bear the consequences of his action. The wise person is equidistant to grief and exultation. In this eternal drama of mortal life everybody has to play the various roles that fall to one’s lot according to one’s light

with detachment, keeping the mind as a water drop on the lotus leaf. Success is not an unmixed blessing and failure has its own recompense. Providence is a great surgeon. Adversity is the surgeon's knife which with its cruel kindness is most salutary. It is better for you to live as poor brahmins for sometime instead of princes of the royal family in the palaces." The words of wisdom uttered by Vyasa provided the Pandavas with consolation as well as inspiration. After crossing the forest the Pandavas reached the city of Ekachakra disguised as brahmins in accordance with the advice of Vyasa and settled there in the house of a brahmin.

19

Baka

The Pandavas as brahmins made their living by begging their food in the brahmin localities. The brahmins were enjoined by scriptures to live by "Madhukara" i.e., by begging for alms and collecting food from door to door without being a burden to anybody in particular, if they had no other means of livelihood, just as the bees take honey from various flowers without causing any damage to them. Kunti was tormented with the idea of the irony of fate that the heroic princes of the illustrious lunar race of Kshatriyas were reduced to the position of beggars in the streets of the city of Ekachakra. She was biding her time praying for better days. She used to pool all the food secured every time and divide it into two halves, giving one exclusively to Bhima. The other half was shared by Kunti and other children. The unsatiable appetite of Bhima had earned him another appellation, Vrikodara, meaning the one with the belly of a wolf. However Bhima made friends with a potter by fetching him earth and he was presented with a huge pot by the potter. Bhima used to entertain the children of the city with his huge pot.

The city of Ekachakra had a chequered history. Once upon a time a great Kshatriya dynasty ruled over it when the citizens lived in peace and plenty. Of late the city was in the grip of a rakshasa named Baka. The ruling prince escaped leaving the whole city to its fate. Baka used to enter the city at his pleasure mad with hunger and indiscriminately kill and eat men, women and children and go back to his cave nearby where he was living. The city

fathers came to an understanding with Baka to save the people from promiscuous slaughter. The citizens agreed that every week a cart load of food with delicious preparations made out of ghee, meat, rice, curds and wine would be supplied to the rakshasa. This practice was in vogue for the past thirteen years. Some gallant princes now and then wanted to save the city from the clutches of the rakshasa but some of them were vanquished and the others were killed by the rakshasa. The rakshasa was satisfied with eating the food, the bullocks and the human driver sent to him every week from the city. The various families in the city shared the weekly calamity in turns. One day loud lamentations were heard emanating from the brahmin house in which the Pandavas were living. All the brothers excepting Bhima heard the sobbing sounds. Kunti went inside to enquire into the matter as it was obvious that some calamity must have overtaken the whole family. The brahman asked his wife to stop weeping. "What is the use of sobbing and crying like a child? I am the head of the family. As the turn has come to us this week I will go to the rakshasa. It is your duty to prepare the food. The wife stopped her sobbing for a while and said, "If you go the two children will be orphaned. I cannot bring them up. When the husband dies the widow's plight will be miserable. She will be the wanton sport of wicked people. I will sacrifice myself. You are competent enough to bring up the children after my death."

But the husband did not accept her words. "I am the husband and I am expected to protect the wife. How can I offer you as food for the rakshasa? It is the worst sin and I am sure to go to hell." Then the daughter came forward and offered to sacrifice herself to the rakshasa. The father said, "We have not begotten you to offer you as a sacrifice to the rapacious appetite of the rakshasa and save ourselves. You must be wedded to a suitable young man. It is my elementary duty. I will go and I must go; please help your mother in preparing the food." Finally the boy came out holding an ignited stick in his hand and waving the stick around, he said, "Do not worry, I will go and kill the rakshasa." Parents could not help laughing at the childish prattle of the boy in the midst of the tragic gloom that prevailed. The father said, "My dear boy, you are born to perpetuate the family line and offer oblations to our souls after we are dead. We know that nobody can kill the persistent rakshasa." But the boy persisted, "If I die you can beget some

more children, let me go." The father said, "Let all of us go. Let the gluttonish fiend fully satisfy his hunger."

At that point Kunti intervened and said, "I am able to understand your plight to some extent. What is the matter? Is it so irredeemable? Anyway you have helped us and gave us shelter in the hour of need. Please allow us to share your trouble." The brahman replied "Madam, our trouble is far beyond your aid. The city is in the clutches of the demon Baka. There is no escape. The people of a country ruled by a weak king should not marry and beget children. Domestic life, happiness, education, culture, economic prosperity, or agricultural production—everything suffers when there is no law and order. Might is right here and unless a divine hero descends from heaven we cannot dream of any emancipation. Please go and I know we are beyond redemption. We have already lost all hopes."

Kunti understood the implications of the words uttered by the brahman and consulted Bhimasena who was ever ready to accept such a mission. Kunti returned to the brahman and said, "Pious brahmin, please listen to me. I have, as you know, five sons. I will send one and you can now be at perfect peace." The brahman was amazed and could not believe his own ears. He pulled himself up and said, "Great lady, you are moving guests. It is sheer selfishness to accept your sacrifice even if you have five sons." Kunti at once told him, "Noble brahmin, one may have hundred sons yet no parent will be willing to sacrifice even one bad fellow. My second son, Bhimasena has accepted to go. It is not a sacrifice on our part. He is confident that he will be able to put an end to this demon. It will then be not merely a help to you, but also to the whole city. However please make the preparations for cooking the food." The bewildered brahman and his wife began to prepare the food with baffled optimism. Yudhisthira returning home together with his brothers found Bhimasena in an exalted mood of extraordinary happiness. He could easily guess that Bhimasena was on the brink of an adventurous mission and asked Kunti to enlighten him. Kunti narrated her commitment to the brahman family. Yudhisthira said, "Mother, can we afford to risk the life of Bhima who is our present protection and future hope? He saved us from the wax palace. Dhartarastras could not put an end to his life; in the event of any mishap all blame will accrue to you." Kunti replied, "It is the duty of a Kshatriya prince to save the brahmin

family as well as the city from the ravages of the rakshasa. The brahman has helped us. We must repay his kindness at all costs." Bhimaseña intervened and assured his brothers that he was confident of rising to the occasion and that there was absolutely no cause for worry at all. The citizens came to the residence of the brahmin bringing with them their shares of curds, meat, rice and other preparations. The carriage with two bullocks was ready and the rice and other items of delicious preparations were placed on the cart. However the few people gathered there were surprised when they saw Bhima getting into the driver's seat as a substitute for the brahmin householder. The sacrifice which was unheard of in the annals of any family attracted the admiration of the people there. Soon a musical band was arranged to give a hero's farewell to Bhima. Children of the city also joined the procession to bid farewell to the popular uncle of the city though they could not comprehend the tragic implications of the situation. Bhima stopped the procession at the entrance to the cave and asked all the people to go back. They went away seeking safety. Bhima did not have a hearty meal for days and days past. He was very happy at the sumptuous food which was invitingly ready on the carriage. He could not wait till the anticipated fight was over as the food would be contaminated by the corpse. So he sat down and began to eat to his heart's contentment. Meanwhile the rakshasa, already sore at the delay, came out and saw Bhima giving finishing touches to his meal and was enraged at the open defiance of his authority. Soon the fierce fight started. They fought with stones and uprooted trees. Bhima was young and energetic. He came psychologically prepared for the inevitable fight. Baka was hungry and complacent that he was old and did not expect a dismal defiance. Bhimá many a time tossed up the rakshasa and threw him to the ground. Finally he placed his knee on his back and slew him with his feet, blood oozing out from the nostrils and mouth of Baka. The corpse was dragged to the gates of the city by Bhima who was accorded a hero's welcome by not only the children but also all the grateful citizens.

20

Draupadi's Svayamvara

Drupada who was dreaming of getting Arjuna as his son-in-law was very much disappointed when he heard the news

that Pandavas perished in the fire, when the wax palace was reduced to ashes. He could never forgive Drona nor forget the humiliation he suffered at his hands though he avoided open confrontation with him scrupulously. He was later comforted by a rumour about the escape of the Pandavas in secrecy. The death of Purochana the Kaurava minister under mysterious circumstances lent credence to the rumour. But the whereabouts of the Pandavas were not known. Drupada, his sons Dhristadyumna and Sikhandi and his ministers joined together in a conference to chalk out their future programme. They discussed all the points and came to the following conclusions. There is no point in waiting indefinitely for the Pandavas to come out of their self-imposed disguise. Draupadi has come up to the age of marriage. In fact the announcement of Draupadi's Svayamvara may be an opportunity for Arjuna to come out openly. Accordingly Svayamvara of Draupadi was proclaimed. However the Panchala king took all the necessary precautions so that none else than Arjuna could secure the hand of Draupadi. A mechanical device of mobile fish called "Matsya yantra" was arranged. A steel bow and fine steel arrows were provided. The candidate aspiring the hand of Draupadi must first string the bow and then shoot at the revolving disc which contains the mechanical fish, looking at the reflexion in the water pond constructed at the foot of the flag staff. Of course the Matsya yantra was poised at the upper end of the flag staff. For successful hitting at the target obviously superhuman skill and strength were required.

The news of Draupadi's Svayamvara spread far and wide. Brahmans from all over Bharatavarsha were thronging to Panchala as they were sure of being rewarded with the customary gifts. Preparations for the function were taking place on a grand scale. Brahmans from the city of Ekachakra have planned their journey to Panchala. Pandavas quite naturally wanted to go to the function. Kunti anticipated their feelings and said to them, "We have overstayed in this city. The alms doled out to us are bound to diminish gradually. You are young and you must go in search of new horizons. Let us therefore go to Drupada's kingdom Panchala which is reputed for its prosperity and fair play." The words of the sagacious mother in fact reflected the sentiments of her sons who were spared the awkwardness of proposing the journey for the sake of winning the bride.

The Pandavas who started from Ekachakra for Kampilya, the capital city of king Drupada, met Vyasa once again on their way. He exhorted them to go to Panchala and said that good luck awaited them there. He said, "I further advise you to select a suitable brahman well-versed in the Vedas and sacred scriptures as your family priest, who will be your life long well-wisher."

The Pandavas continued their journey in quick marches by day and night to reach their destination in time. One night they wanted to take their holy bath at the sacred spot of Somasrava in the Ganges and went there with the help of flaming torches. Already Angaraparna, a Gandharva and a friend of Kubera, came to the spot for a pleasure trip and he was bathing in the river with his ladies. He was annoyed at the untimely intrusion of the Pandavas, took his bow and sounded the string as a sign of his displeasure. He told the Pandavas, "You may be princes or peasants; you have no business to come to this place at the dead of night—a time reserved for the celestial creatures. This is a reserved forest, it is known as Angaraparnam and my name is Angaraparna. I am a Gandharva and I am a friend and colleague of Kubera, our king. Get out of this place immediately."

Arjuna was astonished at the perverted ego of Angaraparna and said, "The natural forests, rivers, hills, dales are the common property of all mankind and nobody can claim any exclusive right over them. The Ganga, the sacred river which flows through the three worlds has a universal charm and people all over the earth have a right for a dip in its holy waters. Anyway, your unilateral prohibition applies to weaklings and certainly not to men of mettle. We have decided to exercise our inherent right of bathing in this river." So saying Arjuna advanced to the brim of the Ganga.

Angaraparna, enraged at the affront, released showers of swift shafts on Arjuna. But, undaunted Arjuna hurled the 'Agneya Astra'. Instantaneously the chariot of Angaraparna was charred to ashes and he swooned.

Kumbhinas, his chief consort was stricken with grief and cried aloud for help. Dharmaputra rushed forward and asked

Arjuna to free Angaraparna, who meanwhile regained consciousness. Arjuna said to Angaraparna, "Great Gandharva, I am setting you free at the behest of my brother, Dharmaputra. I hope you will not forget the lesson you have learnt now."

Angaraparna replied, "Great hero, I am ashamed of my conduct. In fact, I have heard of you and your prowess. Men in the prime of their youth are prone to develop psychological peculiarities in the company of young women and become proud and transgress all canons of propriety. I am sincerely sorry for my conduct and I crave your pardon. I am impressed and inspired by your great talents. I will teach you the art called *Chakshushi*. It is television and you can see anything and everything in all the three worlds. I will give you each hundred celestial horses, please teach me the fire missile." Arjuna replied, "This fire missile is called Agneyastra and it was given by the god of fire to Brihaspati who gave it to Bhargava. Bhargava gave it to Drona who has given it to me. I will give it to you. I do not want anything in return as we have become friends. However I accept your horses as a friendly present." So saying Arjuna taught him the spell of the fire missile and said, "We will take your horses as and when we need them. Please keep them with you till then." Chitraratha thanked the Pandavas and offered a farewell suggestion. He advised, "Great heroes, you need a priest. You cannot look at yourself. The priest will serve you as a mirror and he will be able to show you your real personality. You cannot correct your angularities without the help of a 'Purohit', the priest who will act as your spiritual mirror." Dharmaputra requested Chitraratha to suggest a suitable personage to take the role of the purohit of the Pandavas. Chitraratha said, "On your way there is a holy place called 'Utkacha' and there is a great brahman called 'Dhaumya' who is learned in the sacred lore. He is the brother of the renowned rishi Devala and you can request him to be your family purohit."

The Pandavas thanked Chitraratha who became their fast friend. It is a very pleasant irony of life that people who begin their acquaintance as bitter enemies sometimes turn out to be bosom friends in the end. The Pandavas met Dhaumya at Utkacha and requested Dhaumya to be their family Purohit. Dhaumya accepted the offer with pleasure. Pandavas felt very happy and told him, "Your holiness, your acceptance to be our purhohit is, we feel, our

greatest asset and it is more valuable, we know, than the acquisition of a vast empire.”

Dhaumya showered his blessings on the Pandavas who proceeded on their journey, taking his leave with all the reverence at their command.

Elaborate arrangements were made by Drupada on an unprecedented scale for the Svayamvara which was proclaimed as a festival of fourteen days, with all the royal pomp and pageantry. Public entertainments, puppet shows and musical concerts were daily arranged. New guest houses of several rows were constructed incorporating the latest architectural designs to accommodate the royal suitors and guests. A gigantic marriage hall was constructed and the Matsya yantra with the steel bow and steel arrows together with the water pond at the foot was installed in the middle of the marriage hall. Many princes from all over Bharatavarsha arrived. Duryodhana and his brothers, Karna, Sisupala, Jarasandha, Salya and many other princes arrived. Sri Krishna,¹ Balarama and other Yadava princes arrived from Dvaraka as distinguished guests. Besides the royal suitors and guests with their retinues huge crowds from far and near gathered to witness the Svayamvara contest and the royal wedding. On the auspicious day fixed for the marriage and at the appointed moment Dhristadyumna came as a pilot on horseback and Draupadi arrived seated on an elephant. As she descended from the royal elephant the national anthem of the Panchala kingdom was played by the royal orchestra. She ascended the dais scanning the princes present with sidelong glances. Dressed in flowing silk, she was holding the bridal garland of vernal flowers in her hand.

Dhristadyumna standing beside his sister read out the royal proclamation: “Princes of noble birth, the steel bow and the five steel arrows are here. There is the target, the Matsya yantra. My

(1) Sri Krishna who plays such a vital role in the story is mentioned in the epic for the first time here quite abruptly without any formal introduction without giving any inkling into his past career at all. It is most significant that the author of the Mahabharata takes the familiarity of the readers with the early history of Sri Krishna for granted as if the new character though brought into the picture for the first time needs no introduction at all as a well known personality. The Krishna cult as the centre of vast literature must have grown along with *Jaya*—the original name of the Mahabharata.

sister will marry the hero who hits the target. Any hero of noble birth can try to win the hand of Princess Panchali, who is born out of the immortal sacrificial fires." Then he described in detail the pedigrees of the various princes present there to the bride.

Many valiant princes rose up and tried in vain to string the bow. There were hushed comments that it was an impossible test. Sisupala, Jarasandha, Salya and Duryodhana were among the unsuccessful candidates. When Karna rose from his seat there was spontaneous jubilation and applause. Many thought that he alone had the potential prowess to hit the Matsya yantra, the mechanical device with automatic mobility. But Draupadi said in crisp syllables, "I am not prepared to marry one who lacks pedigree." Karna resumed his seat with unostentatious calmness. Then there was some pause as no Kshatriya prince came forward to try his chance. There was almost pandemonium in the hall. But suddenly a youth advanced forward out of the brahmins. He stood up and asked in a gentle tone, "Can a brahmin try?" Dhristadyumna replied, "O best of brahmins, you can try if you belong to a noble family." Many comments were heard as he proceeded towards the bow. "The poor brahmin is rushing where angels fear to tread." "Physically and financially a brahmin may be weak but it is not simple brute strength that wins." "He is the last but not the least of the aspirants. He seems to be sure of himself. Let us wait and see."

Meanwhile Arjuna took hold of the bow, strung it with the precision due to a musical instrument and the spectators looked at him in spellbound silence. Then he took the five arrows and without pause or hesitation shot them in quick succession through the revolving disc right into the target which came crashing down. The crowd cheered him lustily. Draupadi descended the rostrum with the gait of a royal elephant and placed the garland around the neck of the brahmin youth gracefully while the royal orchestra played the national anthem of the Panchala kingdom. However there was great uproar amongst the princes who said that the Svayamvara was an exclusively Kshatriya custom, outside the fold of the Brahmin tradition and the brahmin youth should not be allowed to wed the princess. The brahmins who assembled there in large numbers shouted with joy waving aloft their deer skins. A fight seemed imminent. Sri Krishna and Balarama tried to pacify the princes as they could easily spot out the Pancha Pandavas

among the brahmins like embers of fire amidst the ashes. Draupadi simply followed Arjuna holding his deer skin silently.

The Kshatriyas insisted that Draupadi should immolate herself on a pyre rather than marry a poor brahman. The brahmins as a group supported Arjuna and challenged the Kshatriyas for a fight. The Kshatriya princes of those days were not prepared to kill brahmins. The expected fight fizzled out. However Arjuna was challenged by Karna and a lively exchange of arrows ensued; their display of the art of archery delighted the onlookers. Karna quickly appreciated his talented opponent and said to him, "I do not think you are a brahmin. I have come to test you. I am very much impressed with your extraordinary skill. Tell me who you are. Are you Indra, Parasurama, or Arjuna, nobody else can stand against me." The pseudo-brahmin replied, "I am not anyone of these mentioned by you, yet I am prepared to fight with you." Karna said, "Then I do not want to fight with brahmins. I wish you good luck" and went away. Meanwhile Bhimasena was standing by and when Salya came, he lifted him up bodily and threw him away on the ground. Salya went away.

Yudhisthira and the twins duly joined the party. They walked to the potter's house which was their temporary house where Kunti was waiting for their return. As per the picturesque portrayal of this scene by the author of the epic with his poetic perception princess Panchali passing along the path way to the potter's house in the company of the Pancha Pandavas appeared like a lovely river flowing in the midst of five majestic mountains. The princess followed the Pandavas to their residence without any reservations. She could see that all the brothers who looked handsome and heroic, dignified and dynamic, possessed the royal gait and imposing personalities though they posed themselves as brahmins. When the party reached the potter's house, Yudhisthira knocked at the door and said, "Mother, we have come with a precious prize." Kunti Devi, who was inside absorbed in domestic preoccupation, said in a loud voice without opening the door—"Hearty congratulations, then know ye all, the mother's command. All of you must share the precious prize equally." After she opened the door she found out that the precious prize was the Panchala princess Draupadi. The author of the epic says that the unwitting directive of Kunti Devi was in accordance with the destiny of Draupadi. As soon as Kunti opened the door, Draupadi

bowed to her feet as per the customary practice saying, "This is Panchali, daughter of Drupada, the king of Panchala, bowing to the lotus feet of her mother-in-law, the mother of superhuman heroes." The traditional blessing of the mother-in-law should be: "May you become the mother of many children." However the diligent Kunti Devi, without deviating from the tradition, blessed her daughter-in-law thus: "May you beget many children, but may you not repeat the same mistake committed by me; never beget heroes or humanists, scholars or saints, warriors or the virtuous. May you beget some lucky lads for I have realised that an ounce of luck is better than a ton of greatness or goodness, intelligence or integrity."

Sometime after the Pancha Pandavas reached the potter's residence with the lady bride, Sri Krishna paid a visit to them. He was extremely happy that the Pandavas who were his brothers-in-law and bosom friends were alive, and looking forward to their future with renewed vigour and refreshed enthusiasm. He told his aunt Kunti, the daughter of the Yadava scion Sura, the grandfather of Sri Krishna, "Mother of the mighty heroes, your trials and tribulations are over. The alliance with the king of Panchala will have its far reaching repercussions, and Kauravas hereafter will be doubly afraid of the Pandavas. You can now safely return to Hastinapura where you are bound to be received with open arms. Now the Kaurava court cannot afford to estrange the Pandavas completely and drive them into the fold of the Panchalas permanently. Public opinion as well will be against the Kauravas if they do not make proper amends for their evident lapses. Yudhishthira with four invincible heroes as brothers has potentialities to become one of the greatest emperors in the annals of Bharatavarsha." Kunti forgot all the sufferings they underwent at the healing touch of Sri Krishna's words of consolation and encouragement.

Dhristadyumna who was naturally anxious to know about the fate of his sister followed the party incognito and observed the behaviour of the family. When he returned to his equally anxious father, he reported, "At the outset I am happy to report that our Draupadi is in high spirits and from what I have gathered from a distance she has already become a favourite of her jovial mother-in-law. The family consists of five brothers and their mother. I feel they are the Pancha Pandavas and the elderly lady

with a glaring regal halo around her head must be Kunti Devi." However they wanted to be on the sure ground and thought over a simple test. The ingenious priest of the royal family was consulted. He went to the Pandavas with an invitation from the king of Panchala requesting the brothers to stay as honoured guests in the royal palace. He took many gifts which were in consonance with the customs of the brahmins as well as several other presents prescribed by the Kshatriya tradition. New clothes befitting the brahman styles as well as the Kshatriya costumes were sent. Pandavas as well as Kunti Devi adhered to the Kshatriya tradition. In fact it was quite clear to the royal priest that they were not quite conversant with the brahmin customs and practices. The Pandavas came to the Panchala palace fully attired as Kshatriya princes, seated in the royal chariots. Drupada, Dhristadyumna, Sikhandi and nobles of the court welcomed the Pandavas. Their attire and their familiarity with the royal etiquette and the transparent ease with which they descended from the chariots left no doubt in the minds of the spectators that they were Kshatriya princes.

At the very first encounter Yudhisthira confided to king Drupada that they were the Pancha Pandavas. Drupada's joy knew no bounds as well. The ingenuous care taken to install the Matsyayantra was at last vindicated, and ultimately he could secure Arjuna as his son-in-law according to his long cherished desire. The derogatory shame to which Drupada was subjected to by the Kshatriya kings that he had bestowed his daughter of exceptional beauty born out of the celestial fire of the holy sacrifice on a penniless brahmin of unknown origin instead of wedding her to the prince of his ambitious dreams, was suddenly transformed into the exhilarating ecstasy of exemplary achievement. When Drupada proposed formal marriage of Draupadi with Arjuna, Yudhisthira told him that they, the Pancha Pandavas, had decided to marry Draupadi as the common wife. Drupada exclaimed with surprise and concealed disgust, "This is against all canons of propriety and righteousness." Yudhisthira told him that the decision was forced upon them by destiny and added that it was their family tradition as well. Draupadi who was privately consulted did not oppose the proposal. The marriage was celebrated on a grand scale with usual pomp and pageantry.

21**Home Coming of the Pandavas**

The exciting news of the marriage of Draupadi with Pandavas reached Hastinapura. Vidura was extremely happy and went to Dhritarashtra to break the news to him, and told, "I am extremely happy to tell you that princess Panchali, the daughter of king Drupada had become the daughter-in-law of the Bharata dynasty." The wishful thinking of Dhritarashtra led to his conclusion that it was Duryodhana who obtained Draupadi at the Svayamvara successfully. The blind king said, "Then, please arrange a befitting welcome to Panchali. I am happy that the Kuru-Panchala alliance will forbode uninterrupted prosperity to peoples of both the kingdoms." Vidura hastened to clarify the position. He said, "The Pandavas are alive, it is Arjuna who hit the Matsya yantra successfully. The Pandavas have jointly married Draupadi. They are now enjoying the hospitality of the king of Panchala, Drupada." Dhritarashtra concealed his disappointment and said, "Vidura, most happy news. I am doubly happy. Pandavas are alive and Panchali is our daughter-in-law."

Duryodhana never expected that the Pandavas were alive. The gang of four met to take stock of the situation. Duhsasana said, "It was our fault to rely on the incompetent Purochana. The clever Pandavas killed him. It is now clear that they set fire to the wax house as well as the quarters of Purochana; but the blame is foisted on us. Look at the irony. They have fooled us and the whole world."

Sakuni said, "I hear from Vidura that the King Dhritarashtra is welcoming them to Hastinapura and a reception is being arranged in honour of princess Panchali. We must deal with Dhritarashtra, first and afterwards our course of action can be formulated." Duryodhana and Karna went to Dhritarashtra and asked him to clarify whether he endorsed Vidura's stand. Dhritarashtra said to Duryodhana, "What can I do? Can I openly proclaim my enmity towards the Pandavas. Any way I should not let Vidura know that I bear illwill against the Pandavas." Dhritarashtra was ever willing to wound but was always afraid to strike. Duryodhana categorically told his father, "I cannot live on amicable terms with the Pandavas who knew everything about our designs. I do not want to be a hypocrite. We are enemies pure and

simple. It is for you to choose between your sons and the sons of your brother, Pandu."

Karna proposed an immediate surprise attack on Panchala before Pandavas consolidate their position. He was smarting under the humiliation he sustained at the Svayamvara of Draupadi. He said, "Sri Krishna has met Kunti and the Pandavas. We must defeat Drupada, the main prop of the Pandavas now, before Sri Krishna joins them with his Yadava forces. The evil genius of Sri Krishna is too dangerous to be allowed any time. The fight is inevitable. Let us not postpone the evil days. We must start the invasion without delay." Dhritarashtra said that Bhishma and Drona must be consulted and persuaded to join the expedition. Duryodhana said that Bhishma could never be a friend of Drupada, the traditional enemy of the Kurus and Drona was the inveterate enemy of Drupada. Anyway Dhritarashtra was unrelenting in his insistence that Bhishma and Drona should be consulted. So they sent for Bhishma and Drona and Dhritarashtra extended the invitation to Vidura as well and all the three came.

Bhishma said, "To me, the Kauravas and the Pandavas are my two eyes. Now Drupada has become an ally of the Bharata race in view of the recent marriage alliance. So no enemy can ever dare to attack the Kuru kingdom. I have become old and I want to see the whole kingdom to enjoy peace and prosperity. The proper course is to welcome the Pandavas and give half the kingdom to them. Then there will be no room for any fight between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The fire accident in the wax house has been the cause of many comments from many quarters—all of them not complimentary to us. All blame will be baseless and all suspicions will be unfounded if Pandavas are welcomed and given the half share of the kingdom. This is my considered opinion." Next Dronacharya gave his opinion. "I entirely endorse the statesman-like advice given by Bhishma. I do not want to mix up my personal animosity against Drupada with the interests of the state. Anyway a Kshatriya need not forget or forgive but it is incumbent on a brahmin to forget as well as forgive. I harbour no ill will against Drupada any more."

Duryodhana did not expect Bhishma and Drona could forget their past animosity towards Drupada. Karna rose up and said, "Drona has received wealth and glory at the hands of the king Dhritarashtra and he is advocating the division of the kingdom and

supporting the allied enemies without any sense of shame." Drona was very much annoyed at the uncivil accusation made by Karna and he declared, "O wicked Karna, you are sent by destiny for the annihilation of the Bharata race." Dhritarashtra asked Karna to keep quiet and called on Vidura to speak out his mind. Vidura said, "It is a common talk among the people that we tried to kill the Pandavas and it is our prime responsibility to clear ourselves of the blame. The citizens know that Pandavas are alive and want them to come back. As it is Yudhishthira is the heir apparent as already proclaimed by the king himself openly. Bhishma, the living head of the family and the Bharata race, has said that only half of the promised whole may now be made over to the Pandavas to save our face gracefully. Karna's advice for the invasion of Panchala is foolish. We cannot be sure of success. Moreover the divine Sri Krishna will side with the Pandavas and the Panchalas. In fact Bhishma's exhortation is not merely an advice. It is a mandate."

Dhritarashtra gave his verdict. He said, "I have decided to give half of the kingdom to the Pandavas in the interests of fairplay, peace and prosperity. I request Vidura to go to the city of Drupada to fetch the Pandavas together with Panchali to Hastinapura with all royal honours.

Vidura with all the swiftness at his command started for the capital city of Panchala kingdom taking with him precious jewellery and presents. The Pandavas received Vidura with the respect due to their guardian saviour. Drupada welcomed him as the learned philosopher from the land of Bharata. Vidura offered the royal presents to Drupada on behalf of Dhritarashtra and after the customary ceremonials were completed, met Kunti Devi.

Kunti said to Vidura, "Son of Vichitravirya, my sons owe their lives to you. They were protected by your invincible hand and invincible intelligence everywhere. Therefore they are your children." Yudhishthira intervened to say, "Any thanksgiving to His Holiness Vidura, is quite superfluous. Let us not offer the vanity of empty vocables to him. The real homage we can pay at his lotus feet is to follow his dictates with implicit obedience and reverence." He bowed at his feet followed by the brothers. Vidura said, "I have come to take you to Hastinapura on behalf of king

Dhritarashtra. Princes have a duty to discharge to the people at large. Let us go to Hastinapura." Kunti expressed her misgivings to Vidura and said, "Mahatma, I have realised that contented beggars are better, happier and more peaceful than ambitious princes. What is a royal palace? It is a compendious synonym for criminal conspiracies, inhuman intrigues, murderous instincts and meaningless delusions." Vidura replied, "True, then today, the royal palaces need princes like Yudhisthira all the more, for the sake of their rehabilitation." The Pandavas, followed by Kunti, started for Hastinapura along with Vidura.

Hastinapura presented a festive look on the occasion of the home coming of the Pandavas. Houses were decorated with flags of rainbow colours. Floral arches were erected with sign boards of welcome. The dancers with the drums were in the streets. Orchestras became active. Conches were blown. The Pandavas together with Kunti Devi and Vidura were taken in procession from the gates of the city to the royal palace. All this automatic upsurge of spontaneous good will and affection overwhelmed the Pandavas. Yudhisthira acknowledged the greetings of the crowds with folded hands, standing on the chariot with profuse smiles. Fondness for the fascination of festive out-burst and the mellifluous mood of merriment is perhaps an instinctive ingredient enshrined in human nature.

The magnificent display of popular welcome and public reception usually tickles the vanity of the visiting dignitaries but most of the melodramatic exhibition, more often than not is the baffled adventure of artistic self-expression. However prince Yudhisthira as well as the philosopher Vidura enjoyed it as part of the game of life. Yudhisthira and the brothers bowed successively to Bhishma, Drona, Dhritarashtra and other elders. Panchali bowed to the feet of Gandhari who embraced her, offering her blessings. All the formalities were over. Dhritarashtra bestowed half the kingdom on Yudhisthira who was duly crowned king. However with a view to avoid friction between the two factions, Dhritarashtra asked Yudhisthira to make Khandavaprastha his new capital. At the convocation address of the coronation, Dhritarashtra gave the following advice to Yudhisthira, "My brother Pandu ruled the kingdom very justly and wisely. May you prove to be the worthy son of a worthy father. Our illustrious

ancestors Pururava, Nahusha and Yayati ruled the kingdom from the capital of Khandavaprastha. I hope you will revive our ancient glory and reestablish the supremacy of our race. I have made this arrangement to avoid any untoward strife between you and my sons as both are equal to me. I fondly hoped to see you as the crowned king of the undivided kingdom. However I hope that this arrangement will be acceptable to you."

Bhisma blessed Yudhisthira in the following words—"I dreamt of extending the kingdom of Bharat far and wide conquering the four quarters of the globe. But I did not ascend the throne at all and I was subjected to subsequent limitations following the predilections of the regular rulers. Chitrangada died quite young. Vichitravirya confined himself to the royal palace. Pandu abdicated the throne, of course, after consolidating the early gains. You are noted for justice and fair play and your four brothers are valiant. I expect the consummation of my dreams during your tenure. May you be the supreme sovereign of the whole of Bharatavarsha. It is not a difficult venture, the Kauravas are your cousins, the king of Panchala is your ally. Above all lord Krishna with superhuman potentialities is your friend, philosopher and guide. Nothing is impossible when the divine dispensation is in your favour. I wish you good luck and godspeed."

Drona reiterated the views of Bhisma and said, "Yudhisthira, you are fortunate. Wherever you choose to stand people like you. Your gentlemanliness and your unique charisma as 'Ajatasatru', one who is born without any enemy, will stand you in good stead for ever. Arjuna's success at the Matsya yantra, I felt proud, was an indirect testimonial to me as his preceptor. I wish you well wherever you are."

The Pandavas took leave of all the elders including Gandhari who blessed them and repeated her favourite saying, "Yato dharmas tato jayah"—verily success is there where there is righteousness. The Pandavas reached Khandavaprastha of historic fame, which was steeped in archaeological ruins, renovated it and renamed it as Indraprastha.

22

Arjuna's Pilgrimage

Pancha Pandavas' jointly-marrying Draupadi led to many speculations. The Kauravas fondly hoped that the five brothers would fall out one day on account of Draupadi. They even planned to welcome the dissident Pandava and set him up against his other brothers. However Karna discounted all such wishful thinking and maintained that the monolithic solidarity of the Pancha Pandavas would never be broken.

Anyway in spite of their mutual affection, the Pandava brothers were in need of a well regulated family. The great divine sage Narada, *Brahma-manasa-putra*, the intellectual offspring of Brahma, the creator of the universe, came to Indraprastha to congratulate the Pandavas. In ancient Indian literature the distinctive trait of Narada's personality was always to ignite quarrels with a vicarious pleasure. He was called Kalahabhajana, one who feasts on quarrels. He was described as a superb musician but his daily preoccupation was sowing seeds of discord and wherever he choose to stand and store, he could create fire out of water. But in the case of the Pandavas the archangel of conflict, Narada proved to be a prophet of concord. He framed the regulation that Draupadi should stay for an year with each Pandava in cyclic repetition. While Draupadi was in the company of one husband his other brothers were forbidden to enter their presence. The penalty for any transgression, proposed by Narada, was that the offender shall undertake a pilgrimage for twelve months as propitiation. Ever since, the stipulation was being observed by the Pandavas scrupulously.

One day Draupadi was in the company of Dharmaputra and they were in the 'Ayudhasala', where the weapons were kept. A brahmin came to Arjuna and said that his sacrificial cow was stolen by a thief and the calf was deprived of its mother's milk and he of his daily oblations. Arjuna went into the 'Ayudhasala' for equipping himself with his bow and quiver and gave a hot chase to the thief and killed him. The recovered cow was handed over to the brahmin. Dharmaputra congratulated Arjuna for going to the rescue of the brahmin and discharging the royal duty. Arjuna, however, said that he would go on a pilgrimage for twelve months to atone for the transgression. Dharmaputra dissuaded him as it was the result of a curious conspiracy of circumstances. However

Arjuna said, "As a prince of the ruling family I must set a good example at large. As is the prince so are the people."

Arjuna started on his pilgrimage of atonement taking with him learned brahmins for guidance and holy company. He went to Haridvar, the Himalayan threshold from which the Ganges enters the terrestrial plane from the locks of hair of lord Siva. He used to bathe in the holy waters of the Ganges everyday and listen to the sacred scriptures enunciated by the brahmins of his party. One day as the Pandava hero was taking his bath in the Ganges a beautiful serpent maiden named Uluchi fell in love with him and took him to the serpent kingdom by her magical spell. Arjuna asked her in mystified amazement, "Charming maiden, who are you? What is your name? In which world am I?" She gracefully replied, "I am Uluchi the serpent maiden, daughter of Kauravya. This is the serpent world, known as Nagaloka and you are now in my bridal chamber. I have heard many songs sung in your praise by the Naga maidens and it is my good luck that I could meet you, the hero of my dreams." Arjuna replied, "But I am committed to the vow of celibacy for twelve months and I am a pilgrim. How can I bind myself to this place. Uluchi sweetly replied, "I know everything about you and your commitments. The virtue which accrues from saving the life of a sensitive maiden is worth a hundred vows and a thousand commitments in any divine market. You get no sin if you break your vow for the sake of a sinless spinster."

Arjuna spent the night with Uluchi. As a result of their union, Iravan was born and Uluchi brought up her son bestowing on him the motherly care and affection. Arjuna returned to Haridvar the very next morning to the delight of the brahmins who were agitated all the while at his sudden disappearance. It was a pleasant surprise for the brahmins to learn about his amorous escapade which Arjuna related to them. From there Arjuna visited several holy places, the forest of Naimisa, the abode of god Narayana, the lord of the Universe, Mount Bhrigu and Hiranyabindu, confluence of the Ganges and the ocean, the valleys of the Godavari and the Kaveri and the Kalinga country. The brahmins who were following Arjuna returned home from Kalinga. Arjuna with a very small retinue went to Manipur where he met the ultra-dynamic princess Chitrangada who charmed him beyond measure and he wanted to marry her. The king of Manipur,

Chitravahana had no male issues. When he came to know about the infatuation of the great hero for his daughter, he stipulated to Arjuna that the son born to them should be given in adoption to him to succeed him to the throne of Manipur. Arjuna readily accepted the stipulation and married Chitrangada. Prince Babhravahana was born to Arjuna and Chitrangada.

23

Subhadra

From Manipur Arjuna proceeded to Prabhasa visiting many holy places on the way. Sri Krishna met Arjuna at Prabhasa and they both went to Dvaraka. Krishna asked Arjuna to stay at Mount Raivataka incognito for some days to avoid an embarrassing situation. He wanted his beautiful sister be wedded to Arjuna, while Balarama, his elder brother, was planning her alliance with Dhartarastras. Arjuna donned the saffron robes and took the guise of a rishi. Sri Krishna went to Dvaraka to make the necessary preparations for the annual festival to be celebrated at mount Raivataka on a grand scale. The usual proclamation was issued. The citizens of Dvaraka and the rural populace in the neighbourhood gathered at Mount Raivataka in large numbers. Courtesans danced to the accompaniment of orchestras consisting of many musical instruments. There was spontaneous outburst of hilarious revelry. The Yadavas were all in a merry mood enjoying wine and women. Sarana and Satyaki, Akrura and Aniruddha, Samba and Sankarshana together with a host of Yadava chieftains participated in the revelry. Rejoicing, Sri Krishna along with Rukmini and his other consorts joined the procession. Subhadra clad in colourful festive attire, took part in the festival, offering her confidential prayers to get herself wedded to the renowned hero of the times, Arjuna. Arjuna too as soon as he saw the princess Subhadra, the cynosure of the festival, fell in love with her. Sri Krishna who was silently watching the spectacle from a distance came to Arjuna and remarked with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, "Is it proper for a holy rishi in saffron robes to cast longing looks at innocent virgins?" Balarama and other Yadava princes came to the pseudo-rishi to pay their respects and heard from him a discourse on the holy places of pilgrimage in India. Arjuna spoke with authority on the subject on the strength of the first hand

experiences he gained recently. The talk was very much appreciated. Balarama said, "The detailed description of the holy places and their importance is informative and instructive, impressive and inspiring. I have decided to go on a pilgrimage, of course, choosing a suitable opportunity." And he requested the sage to spend the ensuing rainy season at Dvaraka, observing the customary vows pertaining to those four months. The youthful rishi felt very happy and accepted to stay in the virgin's quarters of the royal palace and princess Subhadra was entrusted with the sacred duty of attending on his holiness. Arjuna encashed the excellent opportunity quite skilfully. The dubious sanyasi one day took hold of her right hand and with the prophetic intuition which was accepted as the prerogative of pious personages, predicted that she would wed Partha, the middle Pandava prince. She confided to the rishi in disguise that she loved to marry him and put many questions about Arjuna disclosing her interest and admiration for the hero. Arjuna revealed his identity and convinced her that the only course open to them was to leave Dvaraka in secrecy as Balarama her elder brother was opposed to their marriage. She was encouraged indirectly by Rukmini her sister-in-law. At last she relented and his artificial holiness escaped from the palace, taking the princess Subhadra in his chariot choosing an auspicious moment when Balarama was away. The Yadava heroes chased the false sage but were very soon repulsed. When Balarama returned he understood the whole story reading between the lines. "Sri Krishna secretly connived at it, princess Subhadra was quite willing, Rukmini encouraged her from behind the scene. Vasudeva and Devaki knew about the whole affair even if they had not abetted it."—so mused Balarama and reconciled himself to what had happened.

Arjuna reached Indraprastha triumphantly with Subhadra who bowed to Kunti as well as Draupadi with all the humility at her command. Kunti blessed her and offered her customary greetings. Draupadi embraced her warmly and welcomed her and said, "Today you are the wife of a great hero. May you be the mother of a greater hero tomorrow."

Balarama chided Sri Krishna for the covert part he played in the episode but Sri Krishna replied, "Noble brother, I know your mind. I know the mind of Subhadra as well. What am I to do? She

has become the willing wife of Arjuna. Now our duty is simple. We must please our parents who would like to offer the customary presence to the couple." Balarama and Sri Krishna along with their parents, Devaki and Vasudeva, went to Indraprastha, taking the traditional presents for the couple with them. Yudhisthira gave a royal welcome to Balarama and the Yadava party. The reconciliation was easy and complete. Balarama blessed his sister and Arjuna and handed over all the presents to them personally. Yudhisthira rejoiced that the bond of friendship between the Pandavas and the Yadavas was cemented with this marital alliance. The bosom friends, Sri Krishna and Arjuna, brothers-in-law adored by millions of their countrymen as terrestrial manifestations of the transcendental Nara and Narayana—became affectionate brothers-in-law tied by spiritual as well as mundane bonds of blood relationship.

24

The Khandava Ordeal

Indraprastha, the new capital of the Pandavas, was surrounded by the forest of Khandava. Reclamation of the forest posed the greatest problem to the Pandavas. It was a vast jungle inhabited by innumerable varieties of wild beasts and snakes. There was a belief in those days that certain snakes had the capacity to don the human form and beget human children. One day while Arjuna was enjoying the company of Sri Krishna, the god of fire came to them in the guise of a brahmin. Revealing his identity he told them, "The great king Svetaki performed a great sacrifice 'Satrayaga' for twelve years, every day pouring ghee into the holy fire, and as a result I have contracted the incurable disease, indigestion combined with thirst and day by day I have lost radiance and former lustre. God Brahma told me that the chronic indisposition from which I am suffering would be cured if I consume the whole of the Khandava forest which contains all the medicinal herbs. I have tried seven times to consume the forest but every time my efforts were foiled by Indra. I request you to help me, and ever since I am waiting for your birth into this world."

Arjuna told the god of fire, "We are prepared to help you. But you know it is a very difficult task requiring superhuman

effort. We are in need of proper equipment." The god of fire using his good offices with god Varuna presented Arjuna with the divine bow, Gandiva, a divine chariot equipped with speedy horses together with the inexhaustible quiver. Sri Krishna was presented with the divine disc, Sudarsana and the divine mace, Kaumodaki. The god of fire requested that nothing should be allowed to escape from the forest which he would like to consume completely. Sri Krishna and Arjuna accepted the stipulation. Accordingly the Khandava forest caught fire and Indra came thundering with his host of clouds. He wanted to save Takshaka, the serpent chief who was living in that forest. Takshaka made good his escape in time well before the conflagration. Takshaka's wife and his son Asvasena undertook a dashing flight into the sky. Arjuna perceived Asvasena trying to escape, holding himself close to the tail of his mother. He shot an arrow at them. The mother's head was chopped and it fell into the fire. Asvasena who fell into the fire rose to fly and Arjuna once again shot at him but at once Indra by his power known as "Mohini" cast a spell of illusion on Arjuna and saved Asvasena. Maya, the architect was at that time entangled in the house of Takshaka and when he was about to be killed by Krishna he prayed to Arjuna for refuge. Arjuna saved him having heard of his great reputation as an unrivalled artist.

25

Mandapala

A Saranga bird, Jarita by name, was living on a tree in the Khandava forest with her four children. She was deserted by her male mate who was enjoying the company of another female bird, Lapita. As the fire was engulfing the whole forest consuming everything, bird or beast, plant or pelt, Jarita, the worried mother told the young ones, "The whole forest is ablaze and is bound to consume us. You are all hatched very recently and you have not developed your wings. What am I to do? My wings are not strong enough to carry you; your father has deserted you long ago." The young ones told the wailing mother, "Dear mother, don't weep for us. You have fed us all these days and we know what motherly affection means. True, we cannot fly but you have the capacity to fly. If you stay here you will also die along with us and the whole family will perish. Better you go, you can choose another mate and

beget children. When you have other children, time will teach you how to forget us." But the mother bird could not leave the children.

The male bird was a rishi named Mandapala in the previous birth. When Mandapala went to heaven the gates were closed as no admission could be given to a person having no children. Mandapala was born again as a bird to have children. When he observed the forest on fire, he remembered his children and told Lapita to look at the fire.

Lapita replied, "All the while you were telling me that you were a great rishi in your previous birth and that you obtained a boon from the god of fire, that your family would be free from any danger of fire. Now you want to go to them. This is only a pretext, you are a male bird, you have had enough of me and you want to go back to your dear Jarita. You can go but remember when once you go you shall not come back. Once you were denied admission in heaven you will be no more admitted into my heaven. Go." Anyway as the fire came very near Mandapala flew away.

When the fire reached the tree where Jarita and her children were engaged in discussion, the young ones insisted that the mother should fly away. The mother said that there was a rat hole underneath the tree and that the children should take shelter in it. She assured them that the rat was recently devoured by an eagle. But the children said, "Mother, there are many more rats there. We prefer to be consumed by fire rather than by the rats. Please go. If by any chance we are alive you can come back to us." The mother bird at last flew away as the fire enveloped the tree. The young ones of Jarita smilingly faced the fire and chanted the Vedic prayers to the God of fire as they were the children of the rishi Mandapala. "O great god of fire, Vedas have praised you as the supreme God. You are worshipped in all the sacrifices; you are the divine medium between the earth and heaven. O, primal one, save us. Now you are our father and mother. We are wingless and you are our sole refuge. Our obeisance to you can make us or mar us. We are your children."

The God of fire destroyed the whole forest but spared the children of Mandapala. The mother bird returned and found her

young ones alive and was extremely happy. Mandapala arrived just at that time and asked Jarita, "How are our children?" Jarita did not care to reply to Mandapala who repeatedly said, "I have come to see the children." Jarita said, "Please go back to Lapita; your heaven is elsewhere." Mandapala said that he lost three heavens in succession. He pronounced the philosophical dictum, "A woman will cease to care for her husband after she becomes a mother. The noblest of women, Arundhati ignored Vasistha; thus I am reconciled to my fate."

SABHA PARVA

26

Strength as well as Strategem

The ruined old city of Khandavaprastha, remodelled into the great and glamorous new city of Indraprastha, attracted men of talents and traders from all quarters to come and settle there. The Pandavas began to dream of reviving the imperial splendour of their dynasty to which belonged the great kings like Yayati and Nahusha, who were reputed to have ruled over extensive empires. The concept of "Ekarat" or the single emperor had a fascination of its own and the glamour of the single umbrella, the insignia of emperors, cast its irresistible spell on the Pandavas who were the rising stars of the heroic generation. People who were around Yudhishthira urged him to perform Rajasuya yaga and assume the title of "Emperor". The four brothers were particularly insistent. Draupadi, born and bred up in the martial traditions of Panchala, was the prime source of inspiration. The Pandava brothers knew and saw with their own eyes the regal splendour of king Drupada and the martial standards of the country of Panchala where the Matsyagantra was set up. The Pandavas never wanted to suffer from inferiority complex and they would like to cut a better figure in the eyes of Panchali compared with the prowess of her father and brothers. Kunti who had seen better days during the reign of her husband Pandu, who was a reputed warrior wanted her sons to excel their father. The brothers exhorted Yudhishthira that the great Pitamaha, Bhishma, obviously concurred with their opinion as his parting message, if carefully understood, contained the veiled suggestion.

Yudhishthira, noted for his balanced behaviour, cool and calculated in temperament, hesitated to accept the proposition to perform Rajasuya yaga and said, "My dear brothers, we have to embark on Digvijaya, the conquest of the four quarters of the country and secure the allegiance of all the Kings. It is a stupendous task, I know your valour and I know you are equal to the task. In a gigantic adventure like this strength is not enough. Strategem is equally important. Sometimes strategem can outwit strength. Caution is not cowardice. We must take the advice of Sri

Krishna, the Supreme master of successful strategem. It is imperative that Sri Krishna should bless us and give the green signal." Emissaries were sent to Dvaraka inviting Sri Krishna to Indraprastha.

Sri Krishna was planning to come to Indraprastha to congratulate the Pandavas and the invitation came handy. Sri Krishna was noted as an expert charioteer. He used to keep his vehicle and the horse always in a tidy condition, and he reached Indraprastha in a record time. After the customary hospitalities and greetings, the Pandava brothers placed the problem of Rajasuya before Sri Krishna. Yudhisthira said, "The concept of emperorship is mere vanity and vainglory. It is a stupendous adventure. For anything, one must first deserve and then desire. You are not a person to flatter us. You know the difficulties as well as the consequences. We seek your advice and guidance."

Bhimasena did not like the ultra-cautious approach of his brothers. He said, "Ambition is a virtue with a king. A miser has money but will not use it. We have strength and if we do not use it we are worse than misers. We are not mendicants to preach non-violence and we are not brahmin recluses contented to be beggars." Yudhisthira reminded Bhima, "We have invited Padmanabha¹ to give his opinion. You can air your views later."

Sri Krishna congratulated Bhima on his bold stand and said, "Lord of Indraprastha, you are ripe for Rajasuya yaga. This is the most opportune time. The Kauravas have not yet recovered from the shock of Draupadi Svayamvara. The blot of infamy they sustained on account of their unsuccessful attempt on your lives at Varanavata has not yet been completely obliterated from the public memory. More over the ostensible love and affection which Dhritarashtra proclaims towards you in season and out of season prevents them from opposing your Rajasuya openly at this juncture. Your valiant brothers can complete the conquest of the country in all the four directions. All the kings will acquiesce in your supremacy or they will be vanquished. But the biggest hurdle is Jarasandha, the king of Magadha. He has subdued many kings and imprisoned them in his fort and he wished to lay his hands on

(1) One of the names of Sri Krishna and a synonym of God Vishnu.

many more. It seems he has decided to sacrifice one everyday at the altar of his deity Bhairava. He will not accept defeat; the only alternative is to kill him. Death of Jarasandha means deliverance to hundred or more princes who are languishing as condemned prisoners in the death cells.

“In fact I tried to defeat him. We became natural enemies as I killed Kamsa my maternal uncle as you know and he was the son-in-law of Jarasandha. However we tried we could not defeat him and ultimately I was compelled to change my capital from Mathura to Dvaraka where we are living in peace. If you send Bhima and Arjuna with me I will see that he is killed as it is impossible to defeat him in open battle. However this is the opportune moment to defeat him as his compatriots at arms Hamsa and Dibhaka recently perished. Here strength is needed. Strategem is needed more.”

Yudhisthira replied with folded hands, “Achyuta,² frankly I cannot accept your advice. Can Bhima or Arjuna put your chestnuts out of the fire? Can they succeed where you failed? I do not want Rajasuya. I do not want the tempting title of Emperorship. I want my two brothers Bhima and Arjuna whom I consider my two arms to live with me safely.” Bhima flared up, “What is this pusillanimous attitude? I am willing to go with Madhusudana.³ I can myself slay Jarasandha. If Sri Krishna is with me I can slay a hundred Jarasandhas. I do not think Jarasandha is stronger than Hidimba or fiercer than Baka. I am confident that I can rise to the occasion. Arjuna can speak for himself but I know “Savyasachi”, with capacity to shoot the arrows with both the hands, will not shrink to follow us.” Arjuna rose up and said, “I am very eager to go with Krishna. The scriptures say that none but the brave deserves the success! When we become old we are prepared to don the saffron robes and go to the forest. It is the privilege of the mighty to rule the earth. As princes it is our prerogative to go in quest of conquest. Is it not unpardonable wickedness to keep so many kings in death cells? What is the ultimate aim of administration and government? Good government and administration any day is punishing the wicked and protecting the virtuous. As long as you sit on the

(2) Achyuta is another name for Krishna and a synonym of God Vishnu.

(3) Madhusudana is another name for Krishna—and means the slayer of the demon Madhu.

throne you have to punish the wicked. It is our bounden duty to put an end to the atrocious insolence of Jarasandha. If we do it we will get fame in this world and virtue in the next world."

Sri Krishna was very much pleased with the reaction of Bhima and Arjuna. He said, "Your majesty, Yudhishthira, you have to take the decision. How often powerful people fall through sheer indolence! People generally do not put all their potentialities to use. Failure in a vast majority of cases is due to ignorance of one's own strength. You must always catch the tide of fortune by the forelock. Now tell me what is your decision?" Bhima said, "All mortals are destined to die even if they sit at home. My vote is for Rajasuya."

Yudhishthira said, "Sri Krishna, we are your disciples. We are your devotees. Fortunately our duty is to follow your dictates with implicit obedience." Sri Krishna replied, "Noble Yudhishthira! You are a righteous man. Strength and strategem when reinforced by rectitude become invincible. Please bless us." Yudhishthira said, "I bless you now and let the imprisoned princes bless us all as and when they regain their freedom." The trio, Sri Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna started on their adventurous mission to the Kingdom of Magadha.

27

Jarasandha

Jarasandha was the son of king Brihadratha, a great warrior who married the twin daughters of the king of Kasi. He promised his wives that he would treat them with perfect equality throughout their lives. He was not blessed with children for a long time. He went to the forest with his two wives and dedicated himself to penance, while he was in the forest he met the celebrated sage Kausika belonging to Gautama Gotra. Kausika took pity on the king and gave a mango fruit as a token of his blessing. Brihadratha cut the fruit into two exact halves and gave one each to his queens. After some time the two queens conceived and gave birth to two lumps of flesh each possessing one eye, one ear, one hand and one leg. They could not comprehend that the two apparently revolting

lumps of flesh were complementary halves of a single body. They felt unhappy at the monstrous distortions that came out of their wombs and instructed the midwife to throw the two masses of flesh away. The servantmaid put those two lumps into two cloth bags and threw them into the dust bin. A rakshasi very happy at the sumptuous meal got, quite unexpectedly emptied the two bags and put the two pieces together. Quite accidentally the two pieces stuck together and formed a live child bubbling with animation. The rakshasi was moved with pity and could not eat the child. Instead she presented the baby to the king, taking the form of a beautiful lady, and said, "O, king this baby is your son. He will grow into a great warrior striking the hearts of his enemies." The king thanked her and gave the baby to his two queens who realised the mistake they had unwillingly committed. As a token of gratitude towards the lady Jara, who fused the two masses of flesh together into a single whole, the boy was named 'Jarasandha'. He grew into a great warrior of immense physical strength and bravery as predicted by Jara.

Members of the warrior caste of ancient India were not wicked votaries of vulgar violence. A magnanimous code of martial conduct marked the scrupulous behaviour of brave heroes reinforced very often by family pride and personal chivalry. Sri Krishna the incisive master of intricate human psychology, calculated that Jarasandha, proud of his prowess and bound by the customary code of honour, would not reject a challenge to a single combat. So direct fight with armies with all its risks and uncertainties was ruled out. The unarmed trio dressed as brahmans holding the holy darbha grass in their hands entered the capital city of king Jarasandha who was conducting religious rites to ward off the evil effects of bad omens and misfortune foreboded by the brahmans of the royal court. At that time Sri Krishna, Bhima and Arjuna entered the royal palace. Jarasandha taking them to be pious brahmans received them with respect and offered the customary hospitalities extending a warm welcome. Bhima and Arjuna did not reply to the words of welcome as they would be compelled to speak lies.

Jarasandha became suspicious but Sri Krishna retrieved the situation and he said, "Mighty king, these two are observing the vow of silence and so for the present they could not speak. Their

vow ends by midnight to day and your Majesty can talk to them then if it is not otherwise inconvenient." Great people were expected to abide by convenience of the guests and Jarasandha conveyed his willingness and allotted the sacrificial hall for their stay. However his suspicion still remained as he could clearly discern the marks of scars on their arms formed by carrying the bow and the arrows habitually. When he returned to call on them at midnight he put the straight question to them, "Gentlemen, quite obviously you are not brahmins as revealed by your bearing and strange behaviour. You must declare categorically whether you are friends or foes." Sri Krishna replied, "We are your foes; I am Krishna; He is Bhima and He is Arjuna." Jarasandha exclaimed, "It is strange you came unarmed." Sri Krishna replied, "That means we have complete confidence in your chivalry." Jarasandha asked, "Then what do you want?" Sri Krishna said, "We seek single combat with you. You can exhibit your heroism and personal prowess. You can choose any one of us."

Jarasandha had a hearty laugh and then said, "Krishna, you know I cannot choose you. It is derogatory to my dignity to choose the cowardly cowherd who was defeated by me already a number of times and who fled to far off Dvaraka deserting Mathura to its fate, seeking the safety of the engulfing sea. Then I cannot take unfair advantage and choose unarmed urchin Arjuna for the duel. Let me choose a near equal Bhima who is now a rising star on the heroic horizon. I am ready for an unarmed duel with the renowned Bhima." That was exactly what Sri Krishna anticipated and planned.

The fight started; it was not a walk over for Bhima as he fondly hoped. It was a long drawn match between the two greatest gladiators of the times fighting without arms. The combat continued without rest or refreshments for thirteen days. In the epic the fight is described in detail, the poet says, "They fought like two match cocks, two mighty elephants, two robust rhinos, two fierce tigers and two ferocious lions, each indefatigable in his own way." Arjuna was following the fight with deepest anxiety alternated with hope and despair. However Sri Krishna was calm and composed, confident of the ultimate outcome. On the fourteenth day Jarasandha betrayed signs of exhaustion while Bhima, youthful and energetic, remained undaunted. Sri Krishna

encouraged Bhima to seize the opportunity. Bhima lifted Jarasandha, physically tossed him up and dashed him to the ground. Still Jarasandha rose up and attacked Bhima.

Sri Krishna knew the secret of the so called steel frame of Jarasandha's body. In spite of its immense strength the two sundered halves of his body had a natural tendency to split if sufficient force was applied. Sri Krishna took a blade of grass and tore it vertically giving the required indication to Bhima who took the hint and caught hold of the right leg of Jarasandha and tore his body, exactly into pieces and threw them apart roaring like a lion. But wonderfully enough both halves came together and Jarasandha once again rose with full life and vigour to attack Bhima. Sri Krishna took out the two grass blades and threw them out in opposite directions. Bhima who was looking for the further hint with alertness easily understood its implication. Once again he tore the body of Jarasandha into two halves but threw them this time in opposite directions. The two halves of the body could not fuse though they came together. Thus Jarasandha met with his end as a result of the combined operation of Bhima's strength and Sri Krishna's stratagem. There was consternation in the capital of Magadha but Sri Krishna installed Sahadeva, the son of Jarasandha on the throne. The princes who were taken prisoners by Jarasandha were set at liberty. The incredible news of the death of mighty Jarasandha at the hands of Bhima spread throughout Bharatavarsha like wild fire. The newly crowned king of Magadha and all the princes who regained their kingdoms readily offered their allegiance to Yudhisthira. Sri Krishna's fame as the shrewd master of supreme statecraft reached far and wide and he was acclaimed by people at large as incarnation of Lord Vishnu, reborn on earth for the sake of redemption of the oppressed and revival of righteousness. The triumphant trio returned to Indraprastha setting the stage ready for Rajasuya.

28

The Digvijaya

As a prelude to the Rajasuya Yudhisthira sent his four brothers to the four directions for the Digvijaya to conquer the four quarters of the country.

Arjuna went to conquer the northern regions set out in the chariot presented by the god of fire, taking the Gandiva bow together with the inexhaustible quiver. The king of Pulinda was subdued as well as the king named Prativindhya. Many kings did not offer any resistance but expressed their willingness to pay tributes. But Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha together with many barbarian tribes gave the stiffest resistance to Arjuna. Fierce fight ensued and the battle raged for eight days. Eventually Bhagadatta was defeated and he told Arjuna, "Your father Indra is my friend, why should we fight? Tell me what you wish and I will do it." Arjuna said, "Dharmaputra, my eldest brother, is doing the Rajasuyayaga. You must accept his suzerainty and pay tribute to the great philanthropic emperor." Bhagadatta paid immense tribute in gold and diamonds and from there Arjuna advanced to northern direction. He defeated many kings including the ruler of Uluka, Brihanta by name and rulers of Vamadeva, Modapura, Sudama, Insankula, Malava, Paundra, Kashmira, Trigarta, Lohita, Sudhanva, Gandhara, Kambhoja, Kosala, Rishikulya and lake, Mansa. Finally he extracted tribute from the distant kingdoms of Uttarakuru, Gandhamadana and Meru where the celestial beings lived.

Bhimasena went to conquer the kingdoms lying in the eastern direction. He was welcomed by the king of Panchala and he conquered king Janaka of Mithila. The king of Dasarna accepted to be one of the commanders of the imperial armies of the Pandavas. Rochamanu, king of Asvamedha country, was killed by Bhima who then proceeded to the kingdom of Chedi. Sisupala, the king of Chedi, welcomed Bhima and paid rich homage consisting of precious stones, gold and jewellery. Bhima enjoyed the hospitality of Sisupala for some days and then proceeded in the eastern direction and conquered the rulers of Kumara, Kasi, Ayodhya, Kosala, Rajapat. He went to Magadha where he complimented Sahadeva and returned conquering countries bordering the Himalayas and Mount Indra, Karna Vatsa and Paundra.

Sahadeva started to conquer the countries of the south. He subdued Sumitra, Surasena and Dantavakra and was well received by Kuntibhoja. He conquered Jambhaka, the enemy of Krishna and extracted tribute. The rulers of Avanti, Vindanuvindas were subjugated. The king of Mahismati on the shores of

Narmada, Nila, gave a stiff fight to Sahadeva. Mahismati was famous for fire arms but Sahadeva propitiated the god of fire and subdued Mahismati taking heavy tribute from its ruler. Sahadeva proceeded still further south from Mahismati and conquered the rulers of Saurashtra, Bhismaka, Surparaka, Ramasaila, Kolasaila, Tamradvipa, Sanjayantipura, Talavana, Pandya, Kerala, Kalinga, Dravida, Yavana and Karahata. All the kings paid tribute to Yudhishthira accepting his overlordship. A messenger was sent to Lanka and Vibhishana duly sent costly presents of gold, diamonds and sandal wood to Yudhishthira.

Nakula undertook the western expedition. He took a vast army with him and when it was on the march it looked like a surging ocean. He subdued the rulers of Mahitaka, Dattaka, Dasarna, Puskara, Sarasvati, Sindhu valleys. When he marched to the city of Sakala, capital of the kingdom of Madra, Salya his maternal uncle received him affectionately and gave him gifts of gold and pearls. From there Nakula marched further west into the domains of the cruel barbarians and took thousands of camels by way of tribute and returned to Indraprastha.

As Arjuna and Bhima, Sahadeva and Nakula completed the conquest of all the kingdoms in all the four directions, Yudhishthira proclaimed that he would perform the historic Rajasuya yaga. Dhaumya the Pandava purohita was requested to begin the preliminary preparations and invite the learned ritviks from all over Bharatavarsha to conduct the Rajasuya yaga.

Sri Krishna arrived from Dvaraka well in advance. Yudhishthira received Sri Krishna with all the royal honours and said, "All the kings are subdued. The royal exchequers are overflowing with immense wealth. All this has to be distributed to the deserving, the learned and the needy illustrious kings, Virata, Drupada, Sisupala, Bhagadatta, Salva, Brihadbala, Chandrasena, Samudrasena, Kuntibhoja, Paundraka Vasudeva and Balarama are expected to attend the Rajasuya.

"Rulers of Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Kashmira, Kambhoja, Gauda, Andhra, Simhala, Kerala, Kuntala, Dravida, Maru, Yavana are invited. I have sent Nakula to fetch Bhisma. Drona,

Kripa, Vidura and Duryodhana and others from Hastinapura. I expect Somadatta, Karna, Bhurisravas, Salya, Sakuni, Saindhava and other kings to arrive shortly. I request you to guide me and be in charge of the over all supervision. I have requested Kripacharya to be in charge of the gifts to be given to the brahmins in the shape of gold, silver and diamonds etc. Vidura was requested to be in charge of expenditure. Duryodhana will supervise hospitality and Duhsasana will look after the boarding facilities. Paila and Dhaumya will be Hotris, Yajnyavalkya, the Adhvaryu, Dvaipayana, the Brahma, Susama the Udgata, and the rishis headed by Narada, Sadasyas—all pious and holy personalities well versed in the sacred scriptures. Above all you are the Yajna Bhokta—the almighty and omniscient being and I am your humble devotee.” So saying Dharmaputra rose for the holy bath.

29

The Rajasuya

After the successful ‘Digvijaya’, the conquest of the four quarters of the country, the auspicious day for the performance of Rajasuya was fixed. Invitations were extended to all the princes. Rajasuyayaga signified open declaration of overlordship and all the princes accepting the imperial suzerainty of Yudhisthira were expected to attend the function bringing their tributary presents. Friends and well-wishers acquiescing in the assumption of the supreme royal title ‘Emperor’ by Yudhisthira would come to offer their congratulations and customary gifts. So extensive arrangements on a magnificent scale were made for the reception of the royal guests and for their lodging and boarding. The reclaimed land made available by the historic conflagration of the Khandava forest was utilised for this purpose. In fact a new city of Rajasuya was constructed on the outskirts of Indraprastha utilising the services of Visvakarma, the greatest architect of the times with up-to-date lay out, wide roads, water facilities and drainage connections. Special parks were reared in record time and theatres were constructed for entertainment. Arrangements were made to provide free food to the visitors expected in several lakhs per day. A great assembly hall of giant proportions was constructed incorporating all the up-to-date architectural designs. However the greatest attraction was the “Maya Sabha”. The momentous

fires of the Khandava forest consumed everything mercilessly and nothing was allowed to escape from the conflagration by Arjuna and Sri Krishna excepting the bird family of Rishi Mandapala, Asvasena, the son of Takshaka and the Asura architect Maya. Sri Krishna later commissioned Maya for renovating Indraprastha. The great grateful architect constructed the celebrated Maya Sabha and presented it to the Pandavas as his special contribution for the Rajasuya.

“Maya Sabha” was the majestic manifestation of the ultra-imaginative infrastructure of a prefabricated fairy palace incorporating into it incredible inventions and incomprehensible intaglios, intangible incarnations and indiscernible identities, mystical mirages and magical monuments, automatic illumination and alternative darkness, artificial fountains and artistic hallucinations. It was a marvellous melodramatic comedy of illusions rendered into marble and mortar with all its sensational spells and suspenses, thrilling treats and tantalising twists; in short it was a dream land of frozen fantasy. There is a vivid description of the Maya Sabha in the epic and it is said that the Maya Sabha excelled the famous assembly hall of Indra, lord of heaven, in grandeur and glory, elegance and exquisiteness.

The Kaurava contingent for the Rajasuya came well in advance headed by Bhishma and consisted of Drona, Kripa, Vidura, Duryodhana and his brothers. Brahmins from far and wide came in countless numbers attracted by the farfamed munificence of Dharmaputra. Ritviks, the priests chosen for conducting the Rajasuya, came headed by Veda Vyasa and other rishis. Rajasuya was a rare occurrence performed at an interval of several generations. As no king in the living memory performed Rajasuya, spectators thronged to Indraprastha in animated curiosity. Several princes from various countries bounded by the Himalayas and the Cape Comorin, the eastern and the western horizons came to Indraprastha with all their retinues and presented Yudhisthira with immense treasures, elephants, horses, diamonds, pearls, gold and silver and many bands of courtesans and all brands of vehicles. The royal exchequer was filled to the brim with precious stones and jewellery presented by all the princes.

Sri Krishna presented Yudhisthira with fourteen thousand royal elephants decorated with diamonds and golden jewellery.

An exhaustive list of the presents was given in the epic and all the important movable possessions came to the coffers of Yudhisthira as presents or tribute. The vedic rites of Rajasuya were performed by Veda Vyasa and other rishis as ordained by the scriptures. Bhishma the grand old man of the Bharata race was extremely happy that the greatness and grandeur of the dynasty was enhanced by Yudhisthira. Duryodhana was given the portfolio of distribution of free gifts to the brahmins and the needy. He wanted to exhaust the royal exchequer and gave away very liberally everything and anything desired by the brahmins and the needy and Yudhisthira got the credit.

When the time for the convocation approached Bhishma in his capacity as the Pitamaha of the family suggested that all the guests who had graced the function with their presence should be honoured by the host emperor. Yudhisthira bowed to Bhishma and asked him to name the first guest of honour. All the dignitaries, princes and priests were seated in the assembly hall; there was hushed silence and animated suspense for a while. Bhishma known as the greatest warrior of his times and the oldest man of the assembly rose to speak, "He who is the creator of the primeval creator of the world, Brahma, He who is extolled in the sacred Vedas and scriptures, He who is the living incarnation of Vishnu, I mean lord Krishna, is here. When he is here in our midst donning the human form it is a foregone conclusion that he should be anointed and adored as the first guest of honour. If you choose anybody else you will be honouring an individual only. If lord Krishna is adored all the living creatures in the whole universe are at once honoured." The announcement was lustily cheered. Sahadeva was coming to the dais holding the plate of adoration containing the floral garlands, the sandal paste, betel leaves, fruits and new clothes of silk studded with gold and diamonds. Yudhisthira formally requested Sri Krishna to adorn the dais with his gracious presence.

30

Sisupala

As Krishna was taking his seat on the dais Sisupala rose from his seat and raised a point of order and loud protest—"Yudhisthira, you are credited to be an upright man. I am very

sorry for your hasty decision. There are many worthy kings gathered here. Distinguished scholars who deserve to be adored by one and all are here. There are many pious brahmans here. Without choosing any one of them you are bestowing the first honour on Krishna at the instance of Gangeya, who has obviously lost his senses due to senility. It is a pity that Bhishma has equated a petty chief of the principality of Dvaraka with the supreme lord of the Universe. Sheer lunacy!! He is not even a king in the strictest sense of the term. He is a Yadava, a cowherd, born and brought up as a cattle-keeper.

“Yudhisthira, with all your pretensions to the supreme royal title, Emperor, you have no strong convictions. Fools are guided by other people’s opinions. Gangeya has inherited the pitiable quality of his mother Ganga who has the natural propensity to go down always from the higher levels to lower and lower levels.

“Dear compatriots, this so called Dharmaputra, has insulted **all** of us by honouring a boor of a cowherd: after all the man who **was** bestowing the honour is not a legitimately born prince; the **man** who is to be honoured is not a born prince at all.”

Yudhisthira was dumbfounded as he did not expect such a reaction from the king of Chedi, Sisupala in the open assemsbly. Sahadeva said, “We have decided according to the open advice tendered by the oldest member of this august house and the head of our family. It is our unalienable prerogative to honour whomsoever we like and if there is anybody who protests any further I will trample on his head with my foot.” However, Bhishma asked him to resume his seat gently grasping his hand. Sahadeva sat down bewildered as he could not understand why the brave Bhishma was tolerating the childish prattle of Sisupala who was hurling open insults at him. The reaction of Sri Krishna, the actual victim of the vicious vituperation, was more enigmatic.

Sri Krishna ignored Sisupala and his face betrayed no emotional dislocation at all. All the while the face of Sri Krishna was wreathed in silent smiles. Yudhisthira thought that the crisis would blow over soon; but Sisupala mounted his attack with renewed vigour. He proceeded to the dais and took the floor and began to shout, “Dharmaputra, you have lost all credence. Now you want to trample on the heads of your honoured guests. Is this

your gentlemanliness? I stand here. I deserve the courtesy of an answer to my accusations. If you cannot reply, it means that you have accepted my allegations. Please answer me straight. What are your criteria for choosing the chief guest of honour? Is Krishna an acknowledged teacher? If you want to honour a teacher, Kripacharya is here. Dronacharya is here. If you want to select an aged personality, Vasudeva, the father of Krishna, is here. If you want to honour a ritvik well versed in the conduct of Yajna, here is no less a person than Veda Vyasa. For that matter you could have straight bestowed the first honour on Bhishma, dotard as he is, the head of your family. Is there anything great about Krishna who is just an intrigue mongerer; a cunning jackal who unjustly contrived the death of Jarasandha the great hero who defeated him thrice, exploiting his chivalry and generosity."

Bhishma rose to reply, "Sisupala, you are a child. Your tirade, to say the least, is unparliamentary, uncivil and unsuitable to the dignity of a royal assembly. However let me reply to you point by point. As for me I tendered the advice when the emperor asked me for my considered opinion. Then with regard to your arguments they hold no water; age is not the only criterion for the first honour. Grey hairs are not the only sign of age and wisdom. Nobody can be called a king by reason of his mere birth. One may be a child and may be a paragon of wisdom. One may be a child and if he is wise he is a brahman and he is worthy of adoration because of his wisdom. Valour makes the real king. By dint of wisdom and by dint of valour Krishna is doubly worthy of adoration, in spite of his age. In fact he is the only personality in the whole assembly who satisfies this double test. I am afraid, you are levelling these charges against us with ulterior motives, quite possibly to settle old scores with Sri Krishna. My advice to you as an elder is not to indulge any more in characterisation. You are the honoured guest. So Pandavas are obliged to tolerate your criminal indiscretion. If you keep quiet, Sri Krishna may excuse you, otherwise you will reap the consequences."

Sisupala proclaimed, "I am not satisfied with the apologetic explanation offered by Bhishma. I am staging a walkout in protest and I request my compatriots with any self-respect in them to follow me." Some princes followed him to the dismay of Ajatasatru, who ran after him and requested him to stay.

Sahadeva did not like Yudhishthira going after Sisupala with humility and supplication. He said to Bhishma, "Grand sire, it is amazing why you tolerate the impertinent Sisupala so long?" Bhishma explained, "My dear child, Sisupala is invincible, listen to his story. Sisupala was born with an extra eye and extra hands. The mother was worried and offered prayers to all gods. The divine voice from the sky told her, "Your son will ever be brave and invincible, daring and dynamic but will meet his end from the person in whose lap the extra eye and hands disappear." Sisupala's mother was the aunt of Sri Krishna. She placed her child in the lap of Sri Krishna who went to see her and at once the extra eye and hands of the child disappeared. The exasperated mother requested Sri Krishna to excuse any wanton indiscretion committed by her son, Sisupala. Sri Krishna assured her, "My dear aunt, I will tolerate a hundred affronts." Sri Krishna apparently is full of silent smiles but I am sure he is counting patiently and he will be indulgent till the foolish Sisupala transgresses the limit."

Meanwhile Sisupala did not pay any heed to the solicitations of Yudhishthira, collected his army and challenged Sri Krishna to a fight. He said, "Coward, come out. Yudhishthira may be foolish enough to offer you the first honour. There cannot be a greater mockery than desiring a place which you do not really deserve. Offering the first honour to you is like marrying a beautiful maiden to a eunuch or showing beautiful flowers to a blind man. Coward, you always want to shine in borrowed feathers. I will see how Bhishma or Bhima, Yudhishthira or Arjuna can protect you now?" The count was over. Sri Krishna quietly rose from his seat and threw his disc at Sisupala who tried to retaliate with his arrows. But Krishna's disc never missed its aim and it chopped off the head of Sisupala instantaneously.

The proceedings of Rajasuya were resumed after the exhilarating interruption. All the guests were honoured in quick succession and Dharmaputra was crowned emperor of Bharata-varsha.

31

Invitation to the Game of Dice

After the successful conclusion of the Rajasuya Sri Krishna departed for Dvaraka. He was given a warm send

off by the Pandavas. Bidding him farewell Yudhisthira said, "Destroyer of the demons, we could accomplish the Rajasuya entirely due to your kindness and sweet solicitude for us. You may be in distant Dvaraka but we know your invincible hand will be ever near us to protect us."

Duryodhana along with Sakuni stayed on for some more time to have an intimate look of the Maya Sabha from close quarters, at leisure, after the departure of the guests. One day Duryodhana entered the Maya Sabha alone and the excruciating experiences of his excursion haunted his memory for a long time. The walls were studded with rare gems and curtains of radiant pearls were hanging everywhere. The whole Sabha was air-conditioned. However when he wanted to enter a hall through a diamond studded doorway his head dashed against the sturdy wall as it was no opening at all; it was an optical illusion only. What he thought to be an actual lake proved to be an artificial concoction. When he was quite sure of his ground his royal attire was completely wetted by the still waters of a real reservoir. Draupadi who was passing from the balcony at that time burst into laughter along with the maids-in-waiting and Duryodhana regarded it as an indecent outburst of her affluent arrogance and took it as an unpardonable affront to his imperial dignity. Dharmaputra immediately sent him new clothes through Bhima who conducted him safely through the bewildering array of contrived apparitions and manipulated mirages. However Duryodhana's visit to the Maya Sabha ended as a funny fiasco.

After reaching Hastinapura Duryodhana was overwhelmed by a mood of dejection and despondency. He kept himself aloof and was reduced in weight and lost his radiance. Sakuni, his maternal uncle, asked him to reveal to him the real reason behind his secret worry. Duryodhana confided to Sakuni, "Dear uncle, you are more than a father to me. My father does not care for me or my brothers. Look at the Pandavas; till yesterday they were beggars of Ekachakrapura. Today they are "Ekachatradhipatis", emperors with the single sovereign umbrella. You have seen their splendour of supreme suzerainty with your own eyes when Yudhisthira was crowned emperor. Satyaki held the umbrella of

peerless pearls with his own hands; Bhima and Arjuna have waved the fans holding their golden handles studded with precious stones by their hands, Sri Krishna, Drupada and his son, Dhristadyumna were conducting the princes who waited in queues to pay their homage at the feet of Yudhisthira like Vaisyas. Even Chitraradha, the Gandharva prince came, prostrated himself at his feet and presented him with heavenly horses. The automatic bell installed by the venerable sage Narada which was expected to ring once when a lakh of people took their food was sounding incessantly. Draupadi personally supervised the arrangements made for serving food to the innumerable guests and she used to take food every day past midnight and her popularity was on par with her beauty. Yudhisthira's philanthropy knew no bounds and he distributed all the immense booty his brothers secured and the inexhaustive treasures he secured as tribute to the brahmins and the poor. We hear that Harischandra of yore performed the Rajasuyayaga and I feel Dharmaputra has excelled him.

“You must have seen the Maya Sabha. Undoubtedly it is the most up-to-date model and it excels all the historic counterparts in the possession of Indra, Varuna, Kubera or Brahma. Maya constructed it in the vast recesses of the Himalayan ranges and the prefabricated pieces were brought to Indraprastha by more than eight thousand Rakshsa servants. Apart from all this it is a sorry spectacle to see Sisupala the solitary specimen of **self-respect** and singular champion of regal sensibility, being massacred mercilessly at the altar of Rajasuya by Sri Krishna parading himself as the personification of the Almighty Vishnu. All the royal dignitaries dared not utter a single syllable in protest. My father did not listen to the advice tendered by your minister Kanika, and is partial towards the Pandavas and I feel death is **preferable** to me than this degradation.”

Sakuni consoled his nephew, “My dear Duryodhana, you need not worry. The Pandavas have become invincible now. The mighty Karna may propose a military-adventure but I can vanquish the Pandavas without shedding a single drop of blood and secure all their wealth to you. The only hurdle is Dhritarashtra. If you can just convince him I will do the rest for you. Let the Pandavas conquer the whole of Bharatavarsha by their superlative strength. I will vanquish them by simple strategy.” Duryodhana

was elated at the exhortation of his uncle and said, "Your words are too incredible. Please unfold your plan. I am not fond of war the outcome of which is quite uncertain. I know it is impossible to convince Bhishma, Drona and Kripa. I rule out any military solution at this juncture." Sakuni said, "While Bhima, Arjuna and other brothers were engaged in outdoor pursuits and archery, Yudhisthira developed the dire aptitude for the indoor game of dice. He is an amateur and not an adept at the game of dice. Let us first invite him for a friendly match to allay the misgivings in the minds of Bhishma or Drona. All vicious vices start at first as harmless pleasures but soon develop into disastrous sins. Let Yudhisthira come and begin the game, betting can be introduced quite surreptitiously. Duryodhana jumped at the idea.

Both went to Dhritarashtra who made anxious enquiries about the health of Duryodhana who revealed his mind to his father. Dhritarashtra immediately sent for a thousand architects and commissioned them to construct an up-to-date assembly hall equalling Maya Sabha. However Duryodhana insisted that Yudhisthira should be invited for the game of dice. Dhritarashtra said, "Our kingdom is dependent upon Bhishma's military might and Vidura's mental mettle. I must first consult Vidura." Duryodhana said, "Vidura is always pro-Pandava and he will never agree to the game of dice. If you do not accede to my proposal I will commit suicide by falling into fire." So saying he went away. However Dhritarashtra consulted Vidura privately. Vidura said to him, "Wishing to win a kingdom by the game of dice! What a preposterous plan! Evidently the ensuing Kaliyuga is casting its shadows too early and people are after easy money! Game of dice is fraught with catastrophic consequences. Moreover it will lead to division first, division will lead to disaster for the whole dynasty. Disaster for the royal dynasty forebodes destruction for the whole population. Therefore we must desist from the game of dice." But Dhritarashtra said, "I am here; you are here; Bhishma is here. There is no question of any untoward disaster. It is only a friendly match. I want to see the Pandavas. Please go to Indraprastha and invite Yudhisthira and his brothers on my behalf. Meanwhile our architects will complete the construction of the assembly hall. I want the Pandavas here for the inaugural ceremony."

32

The Game of Dice

Vidura went to Indraprastha with a very heavy heart to invite Yudhisthira. Meanwhile Dhritarashtra called Duryodhana to his side and said, "I want you and Pandavas to be friendly and develop affectionate bonds of mutual brotherhood. You can perform a sacrifice greater than Rajasuya. Our architects have constructed the most up-to-date assembly hall. Wealth procured by wrong means will not last long. I want you not to indulge in the vicious vice of gambling." Duryodhana replied, "The game of dice is the sacred sacrifice for me. I want to possess the matchless Maya Sabha by hook or crook. Game of dice is as old as creation and had been a vedic pastime. It is said in the Puranas that celestial beings achieve self-realisation through the game of dice. A prince is expected to conquer his enemies by all means. The end justifies the means. If the valiant enemy can be vanquished by peaceful and non-violent means without spilling sacred human blood, it is certainly a more desirable way. The king of the gods, Indra, killed Namuchi, certainly not by righteous means. Even slight indisposition, if neglected with indifference, may grow into a mortal disease. You have made the Pandavas unnecessarily great and I am reaping the consequences. We must nip them in the bud. Delay is dangerous." Dhritarashtra felt very unhappy at the disastrous determination of his son. He felt helpless at the inexorable march of destiny.

Dharmaputra received Vidura, equal in wisdom to Brihaspati the preceptor of Indra — the king of Gods — with respect and reverence. Vidura frankly explained the purpose of his visit to Yudhisthira and extended the invitation to the Pandavas, of course on behalf of **Dhritarashtra, to come, to Hastinapura**, adding by way of caution that he personally disliked the disastrous game of dice. Dharmaputra was placed on the horns of a dilemma — to go or not to go was the question. The Kauravas cooperated with the Pandavas in the performance of Rajasuya. An invitation from Dhritarashtra according to Yudhisthira was tantamount to a mandate. It was against the prevailing etiquette for a kshatriya to decline the invitation for a game of dice. So Yudhisthira accepted the invitation and went to Hastinapura, followed by his brothers, Draupadi and Dhaumya and bowed to Dhritarashtra and Gandhari and other elders. Gandhari surrounded by her daughters-in-

law, Bhanumati and others shone like the Rohini constellation. Next day the Pandavas were taken round the newly constructed assembly hall and Yudhisthira extolled its exquisite workmanship and elegance.

When everybody was seated happily in the new assembly hall constructed at the behest of Dhritarashtra Duryodhana proposed to Yudhisthira a friendly match of dice to while away the time. Dharmaputra said, "Game of dice is a sinful preoccupation and princes should never be addicted to it. Invariably it leads to immoral practices and any victory gained by immorality will lead to ultimate ruin." Dharmaputra with a sense of prophetic premonition quoted Devala who said that success achieved by fraudulent practices in war or dices was a great sin. But Sakuni contradicting Yudhisthira, said, "Everything is fair in war and dices. Game of dice is a hoary practice with the royal families. If you lack self-confidence, Dharmaputra, you need not play. As you have acquired reputation as an adept at the game of dice Duryodhana has invited you." Duryodhana intervened and said to Yudhisthira, "In fact the game is arranged in honour of your visit for your pleasure." Yudhisthira said, "Alright I shall play." Duryodhana said, "I do not know even the alphabet of the great game. But my uncle Sakuni who is a match to you will play on my behalf." At the outset the game of dice started as a friendly match and Yudhisthira won the first round. Bhisma, Drona, Kripa, Asvatthama and others were provided with special seats and they watched the proceedings with interest and exhilaration. When the next round was about to begin Sakuni said, "Let there be some bet, the game loses all pep without wager." Duryodhana intervened to say, "I will accept full responsibility for any bet which my uncle Sakuni makes. In fact he is my proxy and is playing only on my behalf."

Dharmaputra meekly accepted Sakuni's suggestion. However the inner struggle and mental reservations of Dharmaputra to sit at the game of dice was evident in his face. Still he was willing to play. Human psychology is very complex. Victims of vicious vices are not villains. They are wisest fools and very often are quite conscious of their guilt and do not defend themselves. Dharmaputra knowing full well the consequences of gambling accepted to take part in the game of dice impelled by his innate love for it. Sakuni is a shrewd psychologist and exploited the weakness of Dharmaputra to the fullest extent. He was a past master at the

game and knew all the tricks of the trade. He attained professional perfection in playing the game and no trace of sportsmanship was left in him. Dharmaputra knew full well Sakuni's consummate craft at casting the dice. The result was a foregone conclusion. But "hope" is the soul of gambling and Dharmaputra entertained his own dreams of success like any other gambler in the world in spite of his wisdom and rectitude.

The dice were in the hands of Sakuni and Dharmaputra's first bet was the precious jewellery on his person. The dice were cast and Dharmaputra lost the bet. Again he offered the royal exchequer, the heavenly horses presented by Chitraradha, the royal elephants he received as homage from the princes at the time of Rajasuya, and the five treasures preserved in underground cellars as contingent reserves, one after another, and lost them in quick succession to the crafty manipulations of Sakuni. Vidura who could visualise the logical conclusion to which the game was heading went to Dhritarashtra and told him in secrecy, "Dharmaputra is being duped by Duryodhana at the instance of Sakuni. Duryodhana is a deadly liability to the dynasty and will be the ultimate cause for its degeneration, decay and destruction. You must immediately disclaim his nefarious intrigues and disinherit him forthwith. Dharmaputra is being deceived and deprived of all his possessions. Your son is playing with fire and trampling on cobras. Delay is dangerous." The blind king paid a deaf ear to the pleadings of Vidura as he was in no mood to accept the drastic remedy proposed by him. Then Vidura went straight to Duryodhana and asked him to stop the disastrous game forthwith. Duryodhana chided him, "You are a traitor and untrue to your salt. You are a poisonous snake in the guise of a philosopher. You ought to know that it is presumptuous on your part to arrogate to your self the right to dole out unsolicited advice to us." Vidura was pricked with humiliation. Still he said, "Prince. I have to discharge my duty towards Dhritarashtra and his sons," and added philosophically, "Innumerable persons are there at every place to proclaim pleasing propositions; infinite number of people can be found everywhere ever ready to listen to them eagerly. But it is a pitiable paradox that the nourishing naked truth can find neither worthy propounder nor a single willing listener." With these words Vidura kept quiet. Meanwhile the game of dice proceeded in its inexorable course, Sakuni continuing his winning spree and

Dharmaputra hoping against hope. Dharmaputra lost all the immense wealth he gained at the time of Rajasuya as well as the mythological Maya Sabha to Sakuni's matchless machinations.

Sakuni joked, "Dharmaputra, possessions have gone but the brave persons still remain; will you continue the game." Undaunted Yudhisthira replied, "Prince Nakula, handsome son of Madri, the conqueror of the west, is my bet." Sakuni cast the dice forthwith and proclaimed, "Here you are, I have won." Yudhisthira still persisting said, "Then I offer Sahadeva, the conqueror of the south, as my wager." Again the bet was lost by Yudhisthira who looked bewildered and unnerved. Sakuni said, "Yudhisthira, I know you cannot afford to loose Bhima and Arjuna who are your two arms. Moreover you are answerable to Kunti Devi, your living mother." Dharmaputra did not like the implicit insinuation and at once said without any hesitation, "Now Arjuna, the worthy disciple of the worthy preceptor of the bow, as my wager." Once again he lost the bet. Immediately he said, "I offer Bhima the bravest of the brave, as my bet." History repeated itself. Sakuni said, "I hope you do not like to loose yourself." Dharmaputra said "You are wrong. I offer myself as the final bet." Sakuni exclaimed, "Dharmaputra, you are true to your reputation. Let me reciprocate your noble gesture. If you win this time let me concede you will gain all that you have lost in all the previous bets so far." The spectators awaited the result with animated suspense. Sakuni cast the dice with studied recklessness, characteristic of a veteran who attained the zenith of professional perfection and proclaimed aloud, "Here you see, again I have won." Yudhisthira hanged down his head in shame and humiliation. There was commotion in the hall. Sakuni said, "Dharmaputra, all is not lost. I think Panchali can be your wager. Don't you count her as your possession?" Yudhisthira said, "Draupadi, born of the sacrificial fire, the empress of Rajasuya, is my wager." Sakuni threw the dice and announced that Draupadi was won. Bhishma, Drona and Kripa were overwhelmed with sorrow. There was great jubilation in the Kaurava camp. Karna and Duhsasana jumped with joy.

33

The Disgrace

Duryodhana was the happiest man in the assembly and he ordered Vidura to go and fetch Draupadi for performing the

menial jobs along with the other slaves of the royal household. Vidura said, "I am sorry I cannot execute the dictates of a maniac; you do not know that you are playing with mortal fire. Deranged mentality first and miserable destruction next, that is how doom is ordained by destiny." Duryodhana replied to Vidura, "I know that you will come out in your true colours. Your partiality towards the Pandavas is proved to the hilt now. I do not want your platitudes." So saying he ordered his charioteer Pratikami to go and fetch Draupadi forthwith. Pratikami went to the inner apartment of the royal palace reserved for women and said to Draupadi, "Princess of Panchala, I am sent here by my lord Duryodhana to fetch you forthwith. Dharmaputra lost you to Duryodhana as a wager in the game of dice and now you are a slave of the Kauravas." Draupadi exclaimed! "This is incredible news. A gambler who has pledged his wife in the game of dice is unheard of in the annals of any age. The whole thing is intriguing and I smell a rat. Dharmaputra has immense wealth for purposes of wager." Pratikami told Draupadi that Dharmaputra had lost all his wealth and kingdom including his brothers, himself and the wife. Then Panchali raised a point of jurisprudence. "Pratikami, you go to Dharmaputra and ask him whether he first lost himself as the wager and then offered me as the bet afterwards or lost me as the wager and afterwards offered himself as the bet. Please bring me the reply. Then I shall come if necessary." Pratikami went back and put the question to Yudhisthira who did not reply overwhelmed with the humiliation of defeat. Duryodhana said, "Draupadi has raised a legal point which must be settled in the assembly. Ask her to come here first and elicit the clarification."

Pratikami again went to Draupadi and said that the members of the assembly wanted her presence to discuss the points raised by her. Draupadi followed Pratikami and was trying to go to the place where Gandhari and elders were seated. Duryodhana immediately said to Duhsasana, "Pratikami is afraid of Bhima. You go and get Panchali here." Duhsasana jumped with joy and immediately rushed after fleeing Draupadi. He caught hold of her locks of hair before she could take shelter under the shade of Gandhari and dragged her to the open assembly. She protested to Duhsasana that she was in menses and wearing the single apparel. Duhsasana replied tauntingly, "I am least bothered even if you have no

apparel at all, I will take you to the assembly." When Duhsasana was dragging Draupadi by force, catching her by the hair, purified by the holywaters of Rajasuya, her trembling frame looked like a fluttering flag tossed by a terrible cyclonic storm. She appealed to the assembly to give their judgment whether she was won righteously. She said, "In the immediate presence of the members of the august assembly this Duhsasana has the audacity to insult me like this. I do not know how you are all able to put up with this sacrilege on the fair name of the Bharata race committed by this shameless sinner, Duhsasana. How can you be all parties to this unfair game of dice foisted on an innocent man, the very personification of righteousness? Is there nobody here with any sense of compunction? How could Dharmaputra stake me when he was no longer a free man? All this is a transparent conspiracy." Then she stretched out her arms in anguish and cried aloud, "There must be some people here who hold the modesty of all womanhood sacred, who respect their mothers that gave them birth, who hold the honour of their sisters and daughters to be inviolable and who have faith in god and righteousness. If there is one, I appeal to him for justice in this hour of horror and humiliation, more terrifying and tragic than death."

Everybody was silent and Dharmaputra did not raise his head. Bhimasena could not keep quiet any longer and said to Dharmaputra, "You do not seem to realise even now what your foolishness has brought about. I can excuse you if you have lost us in the bets. You ought to have realised the guiles of Sakuni even at the last minute and desisted from offering Draupadi as the wager. The fingers of a foolish gambler like you must be scorched." Dharmaputra replied, "I deserve the punishment, please carry it out without any further delay." Arjuna argued with Bhima saying, "Beloved brother, you are unwittingly falling into the trap laid by our enemies. They want to sow dissensions among us. This is the time for self-control; certainly this is not the time for anger or desperate bravado. After all Dharmaputra has been a victim of vicious circumstances. How can any self-respecting Kshatriya refuse to accept an invitation for the game of dice? He has just observed the traditional royal etiquette and we have to blame our stars only." Bhima was pacified. However Draupadi stood sobbing in utter helplessness and deep anguish. Even Bhima and Drona kept quiet. Then Vikarna, one of the younger brothers of

Duryodhana rose up and said, "Draupadi has raised a pertinent question. I know I am quite young. But elders Dhritarashtra, Vidura, Bhishma and Drona are silent when righteousness is at stake and it is the duty of every member of this august house to reply to the points raised by Draupadi. I crave the indulgence of the audience for taking the floor. Let me analyse the points according to my light.

"Firstly, gambling and hunting, drinking and gluttony are the four most vicious vices and the actions of any person addicted to these vices must be considered illegal and unjust. Secondly, Draupadi is the common possession of all the brothers and Dharmaputra is not legally entitled to offer her as a wager. Thirdly, Dharmaputra was not a freeman when he staked Panchali. Therefore in my opinion Panchali has not been won righteously. Above all dragging the princess Panchali, daughter-in-law of the Bharata dynasty, is derogatory to the dignity of our community and is an unpardonable outrage on womanhood, our civilization and culture." There was thunderous applause from the audience.

Karna rose to reply to the arguments advanced by Vikarna and he said, "Firstly, Vikarna! you are a mere child and your verdict is childish and presumptuous. You should not have taken the floor at all when elders including the Pandavas are discretely silent. Secondly, when Dharmaputra staked himself and lost Panchali as part of himself was already won. So the ultralegal point raised by Draupadi is quite irrelevant. As Draupadi is a slave the etiquette of the royal womanhood does not apply to her any more. She along with her clothes is now the property of Duryodhana. He has every right to take away the apparel of all the Pandavas."

Duryodhana immediately ordered Duhsasana to take hold of the garments of the Pandavas and Draupadi. Dharmaputra voluntarily took out his upper garments and deposited them on the adjoining dais. His brothers followed his example. Draupadi was not having her upper garment. But Duhsasana in a fit of relentless frenzy attempted to seize her clothing by force. Draupadi in utter desolation and destitution, devoid of all earthly help, prayed to the Almighty God in complete supplication and surrender and offered no resistance. Nothing but a miracle could have saved Draupadi

then. Indeed as the epic poet described, the miracle did happen. Duhsasana miserably failed in his attempt. New clothing appeared taking the place of stripped robes which piled up into heaps of mountains. Duhsasana was exhausted completely, gave up his attempt and sat down. But Bhimasena rose up roaring like a lion and snorting like a snake. He vowed aloud, "The whole assembly, including the respected elders of the Bharata race, venerable preceptors and veteran warriors are the eyewitnesses to what Duhsasana has done to Draupadi. The day of reckoning is bound to dawn when I propose to wreak terrific vengeance. On that day in the open battle field, I swear, I will kill Duhsasana in the most gruesome fashion tearing him to pieces, limb by limb and taste the terrible blood, gushing out of his warm veins." There was great consternation in the assembly at the ferocious vow taken by Bhimasena. Vidura stood up and said, "I feel that it is our duty to answer the question which Draupadi has raised. I endorse the views of Vikarna who may be young in age but is old in wisdom. If the witnesses do not speak out the truth for whatever reason, half the sin will go to them." Draupadi emboldened by the vow of Bhima and the stand taken by Vikarna and Vidura demanded an answer from the assembly whether she was won righteously. Bhishma at long last opened his mouth, "Distinguished daughter-in-law of Bharata dynasty, you have raised an intricate point of law as well as righteousness. Frankly nobody in this assembly is competent enough to give you the correct answer excepting Dharmaputra. The concept of righteousness is the most complex postulate in this world which has perplexing connotations which Dharmaputra alone knows. Anyway if he does not prefer to speak out, the perpetrators of the crime, whosoever they may be, will reap the consequences. 'You will reap as you sow' is the inexorable law of action and reaction. Great lady, meanwhile better you bide your time." Radheya who was enjoying the fun all the while told Draupadi sarcastically, "One devoted husband who does not gamble away the wise at the game of dice is any day better than five!" Duryodhana, who was observing Draupadi tossing from pillar to post trying ineffectually to turn the tables against him by appealing to the scruples of conscience of the members of the royal assembly, invited Draupadi to come to his lap by means of silent gestures and mischievous twinkles of his eyes.

Bhimasena observed Duryodhana's actions from a distance and his wrath knew no bounds. He stood up hissing like a

thousand-hooded cobra, roared like a war drum and pronounced, "This Duryodhana intoxicated with the undeserved affluence he acquired quite unexpectedly by fraudulent practice has the cheek to invite Draupadi to come to his lap. One day I will pound his thighs to pieces with my mace on the brave battlefield." Unprecedented consternation, confusion and chaos and utter pandemonium prevailed in the hall. Bhima was searching for his weapons but Bhishma and Drona cautioned him to be patient. Dhritarashtra was agitated at the unexpected turn of events and Vidura apprised him with the vows pronounced publicly by Bhima. Meanwhile Queen Gandhari came to Dhritarashtra and counselled him to take timely action. Dhritarashtra acted with decision and determination. He summoned Draupadi to his side and offered her profuse apologies for what had happened and solicited her forgiveness. "My dear daughter-in-law, you are the light of the two dynasties — the Bharata and the Panchala. I am extremely sorry for the outrageous conduct of my sons. But I am determined to make sincere amends. I will give you any boon you ask, please ask and you shall have it for the mere asking." Draupadi coolly collected her wits and said, "Worthy inheritor of the illustrious tradition of the Bharata dynasty, I thank you for offering me a boon. All that I ask now is this only. You may be pleased to set Dharmaputra at liberty." Immediately Dhritarashtra did the same. "Yes, Yudhishthira is a free man now. My dear daughter-in-law, I want you to have one more boon. I am very much pleased with your sense of righteousness and nobility of character." Draupadi said, "Then I request that the remaining Pandavas may also be freed." Dhritarashtra said, "Your wish shall be fulfilled — all the Pandavas are now freemen." Again the blind king asked Draupadi to seek another boon. But Draupadi declined the offer with thanks saying, "A Kshatriya lady can ask twice, a Vaisya lady thrice and it is the prerogative of the Brahmin lady to ask a hundred boons. So I should like to stop now and I do not like to seek any more favours." Dhritarashtra was happy at the sense of propriety exhibited by Draupadi and summoned Yudhishthira to his side and said, "Dharmaputra, I know you are a generous man and richly deserve the title conferred upon you. I am very sorry and I am full of regrets. I am conferring all the kingdom and all the wealth you have lost in the game of dice on you once again. I

request you to forgive and forget all the indiscretions committed by Duryodhana for the sake of Gandhari. The real safe guards for any kingdom are not its warriors and the weaponry, ministers or diplomacy but righteousness only. Your righteousness will protect you for ever.”

34**Game of Dice—The Second Round**

Yudhisthira bowed to Dhritarashtra and proceeded to Indraprastha with his brothers, Draupadi and the retinue.

After the departure of the Pandavas, Duryodhana conferred with Duhsasana, Karna, Sakuni and Saindhava and met Dhritarashtra and told him, “Dear father, the spectacular success we achieved after meticulous planning has been converted by you into a dismal defeat by your foolish generosity or baseless fear. Vidura who is partial to Pandavas has poisoned your mind and injected cowardice into your veins. The Pandavas have accepted their defeat. Now all the Pandavas are wounded serpents and you have freed them. If you think that the Pandavas will be grateful you are mistaken. Even if Yudhisthira were to be good, Bhima, Arjuna and the twins will try to wreak vengeance on me. They have conquered all the kings in all quarters of the country and it is impossible to vanquish them on the field of battle. I must remind you of the vow pronounced by Bhimasena publicly. What is my fate and what is the fate of Duhsasana? Evidently you are prepared to sacrifice both of us at the altar of Bhimasena’s terrible retribution. This time we have chalked out a modified programme. Let us invite Yudhisthira again for the game of dice. This time we will send Pandavas to exile into the forests. If you do not accept my proposal, our annihilation at the hands of the Pandavas is a foregone conclusion.”

Dhritarashtra accepted the proposal put forward by Duryodhana and sent Pratikami to fetch Yudhisthira to play a second round of the game of dice. Pratikami went to Indraprastha and extended the invitation to Yudhisthira on behalf of Dhritarashtra. After the grim experience of gambling nobody in the Pandava camp expected Dharmaputra to accept the renewed

invitation. But he accepted the invitation. People speculated and tried to analyse the psychology of Dharmaputra in accepting the invitation fraught with blatant mischief and grave risk. Varied theories were advanced. Bhima was unhappy that the Pandava heroes were to live on the bounty of the kingdom secured by a woman as a boon from the blind king. He did not object to the second round of the game of dice. If they were to win it would be ample compensation for their former humiliation, if they lost it was most welcome, then they could regain it by their valour. So Bhimasena was in favour of the second round of dice though he was originally against to the first round of gambling. Arjuna always supported Dharmaputra. His stand was that a Kshatriya could not refuse such an invitation. The most remarkable trait in the character of Dharmaputra was his respect for elders and especially for Dhritarashtra and he always implicitly obeyed the dictates or directions given by Dhritarashtra. The question of prestige was there, whatever be the reasons. Dharmaputra, as the epic poet described, went to Hastinapura to play the second round of the game of dice propelled by the inscrutable influence of fate, taking along with him his brothers, Kunti, Draupadi, Dhaumya and the royal entourage. As usual arrangements were made for the game in the same hall. People who came to know about the second round of the game, so soon after the cataclysmic first round, were surprised and sorrowful. Most people were overwhelmed by the swiftness and secrecy with which the events moved. When the game was about to start, Sakuni the proxy of Duryodhana said, "It is not proper to play with old stakes. His majesty, Dhritarashtra has reprieved them all. Let us devise a new bet — the defeated party must live in voluntary exile in the forest for twelve years and then for one year incognito. If discovered the pledge shall be repeated and must again live in exile for twelve more years and then for one year incognito." Dharmaputra accepted the conditions and the game was resumed. History repeated itself. Once again Dharmaputra lost the game. Voluntary exile in forest implied observance of Brahmacharya and asceticism and the Pandavas changed their royal robes to those of ascetics and made all the preliminary preparations for their departure to the forest. The news spread like wild fire and people of Hastinapura gathered in the streets in large numbers to see Pandava brothers. Some of them climbed the house tops and got up the towers for vantage positions to view the departing princes.

The Pandavas took leave of Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Drona and Vidura and others. Vidura said to Yudhishthira, "Your mother Kunti will stay with me as she cannot be expected to put up with hardships of forest life for so long a period. You are an enlightened personage and your brotherhood is unique. Bhima is an unrivalled hero. Arjuna is an expert archer; Nakula is well-versed in economics and Sahadeva is the personification of propriety. Dhaumya is a saint of infinite spiritual wisdom. Princess Panchali is a worthy wife. You are disciplined by Vyasa and protected by Narada. You have surpassed the sages by your righteous conduct and the celestials by your bravery. The Goddess of wind, the Sun and the Moon and all divinities will be protecting you. However, be cautious. I hope to meet you again." Then Pandavas went to Kunti to take leave of her. She saw them hanging their heads in shame, devoid of all ornaments, dressed in the deer skin and jute robes and her sorrow knew no bounds. She said, "I am sorry to see heroes like you as victims of a vicious vice. Madri was fortunate. I ought to have immolated myself emulating her noble example. Unfortunately I am alive to see all this misery. It is a pity that you are duped in the presence of Gangeya, Drona and Kripa." Draupadi fell at the feet of her mother-in-law. Kunti embraced her and said, "You are fortunate in a way. You are going to the forest to serve your heroic husbands," and offered her blessings. The Pandavas departed to the forest followed by Draupadi and Dhaumya from Hastinapura. There was great commotion in the capital city. Some people could not control themselves at the sight of the heroic princes accustomed to ride in royal chariots trodding the pathways as pedestrians wearing the coarse clothing of ascetics. In the epic a detailed description of the departure of the Pandavas is given. The sky was clouded and there was a heavy shower of meteors during the day time; wild jackals hovered round the royal palace crying aloud. There was an untimely eclipse of the sun followed by frequent tremors of the earth, and a host of evil omens. Dhritarashtra was disturbed mentally and asked Vidura to give him full details of the exit of the Pandavas.

Vidura said to Dhritarashtra, "It is a sight which begs description. Everywhere people were cursing your sons for duping the innocent Pandavas. They were criticising you, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and other courtiers. Popular sympathy will always be with

the victims of aggrandisement and exploitation. Dharmaputra covered his face with a piece of white cloth, Bhima walked with raised hands. Arjuna was sprinkling particles of sand on the path. Nakula was covered with dust, Sahadeva proceeded with his head bent down, Draupadi went with unbraided locks of hair. Bhima vowed that he would one day dress the tresses of hair flowing from the head of Draupadi with his hands soaked in the blood of Duhsasana! Arjuna vowed that he would exterminate the Kauravas together with their allies in the war after the fulfilment of the pledge. The twins proclaimed that proper punishment would be meted out to Sakuni the past master in the art of subterfuges. Above all Dhaumya went reciting the psalms of death, cursing the Kauravas."

Dhritrashtra was very much pained to listen to the account narrated by Vidura. He said, "Vidura, I know that this enmity will lead to all round destruction and complete annihilation of the whole population. I am sorry and helpless." Sanjaya whom Dhritrashtra appointed as his confidential counsellor and charioteer came to him and said, "Great king, why are you now stricken with remorse; your sons are now the undisputed monarchs of the whole realm. Bhisma and Drona, Kripa and Vidura are rendered ineffective. Pandavas are exiles for the present. You are the victorious party. What is the use of fear or repentance when you have engineered all this knowing full well all the consequences. You must accept the full responsibility." Vidura intervened and told Dhritrashtra, "You recall the Pandavas, crown Dharmaputra and make him the king of the realm. Disinherit your unworthy son Duryodhana. Then you will be happy and the whole population will be prosperous." The blind king paid a deaf ear to Vidura.

After the exit of Pandavas, Duryodhana conferred with his brothers, Sakuni and Karna about the situation. They could visualise ultimate Kuru-Pandava conflict as inevitable. Bhisma in spite of his affection for the Pandavas was not expected to go publicly into the opposite camp as he was bound by ties of loyalty to Dhritrashtra while he was alive. The enmity between Drupada and Drona was a factor in favour of the Kauravas and he also was not expected to switch over to the Pandava camp. Anyway they decided not to take any chances. Duryodhana approached Drona

and requested, "Great Acharya, I know your attachment to king Dhritarashtra and the royal court of Hastinapura. I am also your student. Whatever be the differences with my cousins, the Pandavas, I have the greatest respect for you. I request you to continue to grace the imperial court of Hastinapura with your august presence and offer your moral and material support to me." Drona was pleased with the request of Duryodhana and said, "I am ever grateful to Bhishma and king Dhritarashtra for the courtesy and regard they always have shown me. I never met king Pandu at all. However Kauravas and Pandavas are equal to me and I promise to live here at the court of Hastinapura. But let me not mince words. I like the Pandavas; in fact I love them and I love you. I want you to make peace with them. I may not like Drupada with whom the Pandavas are allied. That is a different matter. I know the prowess of the Pandavas. They have divine origins and they are invincible. They will return after fulfilling the pledge, burning with wrath and revenge. I know from experience how pangs of revenge seek retribution. Before nemesis overtakes you in the fourteenth year, I feel that you must make proper amends for your past mistakes and seek the hand of friendship from Dharmaputra. It is simply foolish on your part to depend upon Sakuni or Karna. I am glad I have got this opportunity to unburden my heart. Bhishma may be on your side; I may be on your side. Please remember justice is on their side and God is on their side." Duryodhana was satisfied that Drona promised to be on his side and ignored his advice as irrelevant.

ARANYA PARVA

35

The Forest Exile

The Pandavas started for the forest followed by Draupadi, her sons, Subhadra and her son Abhimanyu. General Indrasena followed with fourteen thousand chariots. Citizens of the realm came to the Pandavas in thousands and told Yudhisthira, "It is quite unworthy of the Dhartarashtras to send you away to the forest by the subterfuge of dice. It is a pity that Gangeya as well as Acharya Kripa and Vidura have become helpless. We do not like to live in a realm dominated by the gang of four. Oil, water and cloth get the scent of their objects of association, so also man and people prosper in good company. Evil contact will lead to disastrous consequences. We want to be with you in the forest." Dharmaputra thanked the citizens for the affectionate sentiments expressed by the people and said to them, "It is very kind of you to have attributed to us so many good qualities which we do not really possess. Citizens living along with us in the forest — is not a practical proposition. I request you to return to your houses. God is great and we hope to return at the appropriate time. The citizens took leave of the Pandavas and returned to their places. Yudhisthira sent away Indrasena and the huge retinue to Indraprastha.

The party reached the holy place Varanavata on the banks of the Ganges. The Pandavas had the holy dip in the Ganges and stopped there for the night. Early in the morning a band of brahmins, all erudite scholars in Vedic knowledge, dedicated to ascetic conduct and rituals, came to the Pandavas, who received them with due honour and respect, and said, "We have come to live with you. However we will not be a burden on you. We will live on whatever we get in the forest — fruits, roots or leaves." Dharmaputra said to them, "The forest is infested with all kinds of wild beasts, the lions, the tigers, the boars and the reptiles. We request you not to share our hazards but go back to your houses." The brahmins replied, "Our fate is linked to your future. We must demonstrate that pious people are on your side whole heartedly. Our conscience will be satisfied and it may have a salutary effect

on Duryodhana." Dharmaputra asked them to stay but at heart he was very much worried as he was confronted with the problem of feeding so many regular guests every day. In addition brahmin scholars were flocking to him to offer their condolences on their present predicament and blessings for a bright future. The Vanaparava is the most voluminous in the Mahabharata. The story content is relatively meagre but the whole volume is filled with detailed discourses which Dharmaputra had with the visiting saints and scholars.

36

Janaka Gita

While Dharmaputra was overwhelmed with sorrow and mental depression that he had become too poor to provide proper hospitality to the visiting scholars, Saunaka, well-versed in the system of Philosophy propounded by Janaka, paid a visit to the Pandavas. The sage told Dharmaputra, "Affluence has its own snares. The wealthy man is always afraid of danger from the king, his kith and kin, thieves, water and fire. Every day his wealth is eaten away by all sorts of people just like meat in water by fish. Wealth is the root cause of all the disasters and delusions in this world. Beauty, youth, wealth, glory and a happy home are all transitory. Wealth leads to vanity, arrogance, meanness, fear and excitement. A wise man never desires wealth." Yuydhisthira replied, "Great soul, I never desired wealth for my private pleasures or personal glory. I desired it for providing hospitality to the guests of the four phases of human existence — Brahmacharya,¹ Garhastya,² Vanaprastha,³ and Sannyasa.⁴ Scriptures have sanctified the householdership as the best. The first and the foremost duty of a householder is to provide, according to his mite, proper hospitality to the guests and the needy, shelter to the weary, solace to the refugee, water to the thirsty, food for the hungry, assurance to the alarmed. Pleasant words of welcome, offering fresh water and courtesy cost nothing. Wanton cruelty towards the dumb animals, solo-eating, indifferent attitude towards scholars, kinsmen, preceptors, friends and womenfolk are considered to be sins. My helplessness is tormenting me." Saunaka replied, "Great souls have achieved emancipation from the

(1) Celibacy (2) Householdership (3) Life in the forest (4) Life of renunciation.

bondage of mundane existence by following the eight-fold path consisting of the following principles:

- i. Developing equanimity, devoid of predilection or prejudice, towards all beings from god above to grass down below.
- ii. Controlling the carnal senses.
- iii. Adoration of elders.
- iv. Regulation of diet.
- v. Acquisition of knowledge.
- vi. Observance of scriptural stipulations.
- vii. Renunciation.
- viii. Subjugation of the mind.

I advise you to perform penance by observing all the severe austerities and I am sure you will achieve success and self-realisation."

Dhaumya endorsed the exhortation of Saunaka and directed Dharmaputra to perform penance to obtain the grace of the Sun god. He said, "The Sun is the primeval god of food. All crops are reared by sunshine." Dharmaputra worshipped the Sun god standing in the Ganges, sustaining himself with fresh air only for many days controlling his senses completely. Eventually the Sun god manifested himself before Dharmaputra and presented him with *Akshaya Patra*, the inexhaustible bowl. He said, "You can put any wild fruit or root in this bowl and it will give you whatever you want for the day. You can feed any number of guests with this." Conferring the great boon the Sun god disappeared. Yudhisthira gave the *Akshaya Patra* to Draupadi and said, "You can just put anything into this bowl every morning and it will give you whatever you want for the day and you can serve food to any number of guests. Please wash it only after the last guest is fed." Draupadi was very happy and was serving food to innumerable guests every day. She used to take her food after all the people took their meals and then clean the bowl for the day. Saints and sages used to come to Dharmaputra, stay with the Pandavas for days together, along with their innumerable disciples and discuss intricate points of Dharma. Everyday Dharmaputra presided over philosophical seminars in which great saints and sages, reputed scholars and savants participated.

Dhritarashtra was suffering from the scruples of a guilty conscience and requested Vidura to analyse the political situation after the departure of the Pandavas. Vidura was frank as usual and told the blind king, "I have told you any number of times that the policy of confrontation with Pandavas is fraught with disastrous consequences. Dharmaputra is well known as 'Ajatasatru' and is the epitome of forgiveness. Send Duhsasana to him and let him apologise to him. Offer the crown to Yudhishthira and do not hesitate to disinherit Duryodhana if he is adamant. Otherwise all your sons will meet with premature death at the hands of Bhima." Dhritarashtra could not tolerate Vidura who was always praising the Pandavas and deriding the Kauravas. He said to Vidura, "The action proposed by you is too drastic. How can I banish my own son however cruel he may be. If you do not like to be with us you are free to go to the Pandavas or to any other place of your choice."

37

Vidura

Immediately Vidura started on a chariot to go to the Pandavas. The Pandavas at that time were living in the forest known as Kamyaka. Yudhishthira observed Vidura coming to him and said to Bhimasena, "Vidura is coming. This time we must be alert. Duryodhana is fully aware that our weapons are with us. Perhaps Vidura is sent to disarm us. I do not know how we can counteract Vidura this time." As they were discussing Vidura alighted the chariot and Dharmaputra received him with all the customary hospitality and asked him about the purpose of his visit. Vidura narrated to the Pandavas how the blind king accused him of partiality towards the Pandavas and asked him to quit. The Pandavas welcomed Vidura heartily and he lived with them for a few days. Meanwhile Dhritarashtra was stricken with remorse and sent Sanjaya to fetch Vidura back to Hastinapura. Sanjaya said to Vidura, "Dhritarashtra was born blind but you are the vision of his heart. With your exit he has become doubly blind. He requests you to come back to him. He is full of regrets for the words uttered by him in a fit of momentary excitement."

Sanjaya requested Dharmaputra to use his good offices with Vidura and send him back to Dhritarashtra. Dharmaputra told

Sanjaya, "All of us are bound by the mandate of Dhritarashtra." Vidura was willing to go back and he took leave of the Pandavas and departed to Hastinapura along with Sanjaya. Dhritarashtra embraced Vidura, washing his head with tears of repentance and said to him, "Beloved brother, you are the personification of rectitude. You must forgive your blind brother." Vidura who was moved by the words of Dhritarashtra replied, "I have come back to the post of my duty. I am conscious of your affection towards me. It is my duty to offer my counsel to you without fear or favour. It is for you to accept it or reject it." The warm embraces and the tears of mutual affection of course could not erase the basic differences between them but both were united without any reservations. It is one of the paradoxes of human psychology that affection as well as aversion can co-exist in the same heart forging an honourable truce in spite of their persistent antagonism. The temporary estrangement of Dhritarashtra and Vidura is a very minor episode in the Mahabharata but it is a point of major importance in diving into the depths of human nature. They agreed to differ and their association continued as usual.

The reconciliation between Dhritarashtra and Vidura led to serious misgivings in the minds of Duryodhana. He was worried that his father, on the advice of Vidura, might reinstate Dharmaputra on the throne. He consulted Sakuni and Karna. Sakuni said, "Dharmaputra will never come back without fulfilling the pledge even if Dhritarashtra extends the invitation. I think we can rest in peace." Karna said, "We need not be indifferent to the lurking danger which should be faced sooner or later, better we face it sooner than later. The confrontation is inevitable. So let us start on the invasion and exterminate the enemy immediately." Duryodhana made all the military arrangements briskly to start the invasion. Meanwhile Veda Vyasa came to Hastinapura and advised Duryodhana to desist from his foolish venture. He told him, "You better wait. There is no need for you to be in a hurry; you are enjoying the kingdom and the Pandavas are living in exile. Where is the need for you to take the initiative? The Pandavas are honest people and are redeeming the pledge." Krishna Dvaipayana asked Dhritarashtra, "I am not able to understand why all this has happened while yourself and Vidura, Bhishma and Drona are here. You have wronged the Pandavas and I advise you to make proper amends in the interests of fair play and justice,

peace and prosperity of the people at large." Dhritarashtra pleaded his inability to control his son and requested Veda Vyasa to try to convince Duryodhana. Veda Vyasa said that the sage Maitreya would come and speak to Duryodhana and went away.

38

Maitreya

After some time Maitreya arrived and the sage was welcomed by Dhritarashtra with the traditional hospitality. Maitreya said, "I am coming from the forest of Kamyaka where I met the Pandavas accidentally." Then Dhritarashtra enquired after the welfare of the Pandavas and the sage continued, "The Pandavas are leading a very happy and contented life in the forest. Everyday learned personages come to them and deliver discourses on righteousness and eternal verities of life. Dharmaputra has converted the Kamyaka forest into a sacred sacrificial forum of spiritual seminars." Dhritarashtra said to Maitreya, "I am extremely happy to learn about the welfare of the Pandavas; great sage, I should like to know whether they would abide by their pledge or thinking of violating it." Maitreya said, "You can take unilateral action in good faith and invite the Pandavas back to their kingdom. I am extremely grieved to see the princes who are the sons of your own brother as exiles in the forest." Duryodhana did not relish the unsolicited advice given by Maitreya. Dharmaputra established a great reputation for himself as the champion of the sacred spiritual heritage and so Duryodhana thought all the sages and saints were coming to Hastinapura for brainwashing Dhritarashtra. While Maitreya was speaking to the blind king, Duryodhana irreverently slapped his thighs and stood up to go away. Maitreya was enraged and pronounced the curse, "Duryodhana, you will reap the consequences of your arrogant behaviour. One day your thighs will be broken on the battlefield and you will die a miserable death at the hands of Bhima." Duryodhana brushed the curse aside as the pronouncement of a pro-Pandava mendicant indulging in ineffectual outburst of open wishful thinking and went away. However Dhritarashtra requested the sage to repeal the curse. Maitreya said, "I am putting my curse in abeyance; if Duryodhana makes peace with the Pandavas he will be safe. Otherwise he will

meet with his doom. Very recently Bhima killed Kimmira, the redoubtable Rakshasa of superhuman strength; I know Bhima is invincible."

Dhritarashtra asked Maitreya very eagerly to relate to him the episode of Kimmira. But Maitreya said, "Vidura very recently knew about it from the brahmins. He will tell you," so saying he abruptly walked away from the royal court indignantly. Dhritarashtra asked Vidura to enlighten him about the recent exploit of Bhima and how he killed Kimmira. Vidura narrated the incident to the blind king.

The Pandavas travelled continuously for three days to select a proper spot in the forest for their stay. Just before entering the Kamyaka forest they came across Kimmira at nightfall. Draupadi began to tremble at the sight of the ferocious giant who was trampling the huge trees and wild creepers under his feet and roared producing the sound of a thousand thunders. The brahmins were terror-stricken. Dhaumya recited the sacred hymns. However Yudhishthira asked him boldly, "May we know who you are. We are Pandavas — I am Yudhishthira. These are my brothers, all reputed heroes, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva." The Rakshasa replied jubilantly, "What a nice opportunity! I am on the look out for Bhima, I am the brother of the great Baka who met with his death when he was in a mood of reckless inadvertence. I must kill Bhima first and wreak my vengeance." Arjuna at once took out his Gandiva bow and the twins unsheathed their swords.

However Bhima came forward to fight the foe single-handed. A fierce fight ensued. At first they fought plucking the trees around. Afterwards the fight continued with boulders and big stones. Eventually Kimmira was overpowered and killed by Bhimasena. Dhaumya together with all the brahmins congratulated Bhima. Next day the aboriginals and other tribals inhabiting the Kamyaka forest came to the Pandavas, delighted at the death of Kimmira who struck terror into their hearts and welcomed them to stay there as long as they liked. The Pandavas constructed separate dwellings for themselves and suitable abodes for Dhaumya and other brahmins and stayed in the Kamyaka forest for some time.

39

Saumbhaka

As soon as Sri Krishna learnt that the Pandavas had lost their kingdom in the game of dice and were living in exile, he rushed to the Kamyaka forest to see them. Earlier he was engaged in a bitter fight and prolonged warfare with Salva, the brother of Sisupala for about ten months. No sooner Salva heard about the death of Sisupala at the hands of Sri Krishna than he invaded Dvaraka, mustering all his resources. By that time Sri Krishna did not reach Dvaraka from Indraprastha where he was still taking part in the convocation of Rajasuya yaga. Indraprastha to Dvaraka was a long journey and Salva could work havoc before Sri Krishna reached Dvaraka.

Salva developed supra military space-craft entitled 'Saumbhaka', an amphibious city on wheels and wings which carried tribious tanks and planes. A vivid description of Saumbhaka is given in the epic very much like the science fiction of modern times. Salva laid seize to the city of Dvaraka. The Yadava heroes in the absence of Sri Krishna made all the necessary preparations to defend the city.

Dvaraka was an impregnable water fort specially constructed to withstand the fiercest onslaught by the most powerful enemies. It was an island with the natural protection afforded by the sea. It was guarded by an ever vigilant garrison. Supply of food was ensured to the citizens as well as soldiers. Iron spikes were planted around the fortress in the moats. Bridges were demolished. The entry and exit of all traffic to and from the city were regulated by passes and watch-words. Foreign ships were forbidden to enter the harbour and prohibition was strictly enforced. Cannons were placed at vantage points and ammunition was stored in secret places. Latest weapons were supplied to the soldiers in sufficient numbers together with the traditional arms like swords, axes, discs, bows and arrows, maces, hooks, javelins and spears of various varieties. The Yadava warriors headed by Samba, Pradyumna and Charudheshna attacked the invading forces which were entrenched in the plains outside the city gates. Charudheshna killed Vegavanta, one of the generals of the enemy camp, and the attacking army began to flee helter-skelter. Salva entered the battlefield regrouping his armies and fierce fight ensued

between him and Pradyumna, son of Sri Krishna. Salva, by an extraordinary display of his technological innovations overpowered Pradyumna who swooned and fell motionless in his chariot. The charioteer skilfully drove the chariot away from the battlefield. When Pradyumna regained consciousness he found fault with the charioteer saying, "Death is preferable to defeat for a true warrior." The charioteer, the son of Daruka, the charioteer of Sri Krishna replied, "It is the duty of the warrior to protect his charioteer and the charioteer in turn must protect his warrior. I have done my duty. Now that you have gained first hand experience of the fight with the crafty Salva, I think you can face him again with redoubled vigour and valour." Pradyumna directed him to drive the chariot to the battle front.

Salva and Pradyumna reviewed the fight. Pradyumna lost no time. Salva threw the fire missile at Pradyumna who countered it with the water missile. Pradyumna hurled the invincible Brahmastra at Salva who fell unconscious in his chariot. Eventually Salva retreated from Dvaraka with the Saumbhaka.

When Sri Krishna returned from the Rajasuyayaga, he saw Dvaraka afflicted with the recent ravages of war and vowed, "I will not return to Dvaraka unless I kill Salva." The war drum was sounded and all the soldiers were summoned. The battalions were suitably equipped. Baladeva the elder brother of Sri Krishna was entrusted with the task of guarding Dvaraka. The brahmins blessed Sri Krishna who started on the chariot drawn by Sugriva, and driven by Daruka. The flag with the eagle-wing fluttered in the air. Sri Krishna blew his conch Panchajanya and the army marched passing by many mountains and lakes, cities and villages. Salva left his capital hotly pursued by Sri Krishna. At last Salva was spotted at the country known as Murtikavata on the seacoast.

The fight was fierce and protracted. Salva having realised that his forces were being humbled in the conventional warfare, resorted to ultra technological innovations. Salva could create artificial cyclone with blasts of hurricane, when not a ray of sunshine was visible for days together. Immediately the sky was littered with a hundred moons and suns. It was not possible to distinguish the night from the day. Sometimes artificial darkness was ushered in. However Sri Krishna countered all the fantastic feats of Salva relentlessly. Meanwhile a brahmin from Dvaraka

came to Sri Krishna and said, "What is the use of your fighting here? Your father, Vasudeva was taken prisoner at Dvaraka by Salva. Better you go back to Dvaraka." Just at that time Sri Krishna saw Vasudeva in the Saumbhaka being pestered by the soldiers of Salva. Sri Krishna involuntarily dropped his bow Sarnga from his hands. The Yadava forces seeing Sri Krishna in a fit of paralysis began to run helter-skelter. However Sri Krishna realised after sometime that it was an optical illusion engineered by Salva. Vasudeva was not to be found in the Saumbhaka any longer and the messenger from Dvaraka disappeared. Immediately Saumbhaka assumed the role of Pragjyotisha and Daruka advised Sri Krishna not to dally any further. Then Sri Krishna hurled his disc and the Saumbhaka came down to the earth crashing and Salva fell dead on the ground.

Sri Krishna narrated the whole story to Dharmaputra and told him, "I am sorry I am preoccupied with my fight with Salva. Just at the time you were playing with Sakuni, I was fighting with Salva and his sensational Saumbhaka. Otherwise I would have come uninvited to Hastinapura and stirred up the cumulative conscience of the Kaurava court against the duplicity of dice. Women, wine, hunting and gambling are the most vicious vices in this world and if I were with you, I would have stopped you from the disastrous game of dice." The soft-hearted Balarama was in tears when he looked at the Pandavas living as exiles in the forest. He said to Sri Krishna, "Noble Yudhisthira and his good brothers, valiant and just, are living in the forest as ascetics while the wily Sakuni, Duryodhana and his brothers are steeped in luxury and splendour. When virtue is thrown into the dustbin and vice exalted to the golden throne, no wonder, people lose all faith in God. Sacred scriptures which extol righteousness and good conduct appear as mere mockery when we look at the cruel realities of human existence. Can't we do anything to set right the situation?"

Satyaki was inspired by the words uttered by Balarama. He stood up and said, "The Panchala king Drupada and the princes will sail along with us. The Kekayas are our allies. We Yadavas, Vrshnis and Bhojas are here. There is absolutely no need for the Pandavas to waste their lives in the forest. Let us kill Duryodhana and reinstate Dharmaputra on the throne. If the Pandavas want to

keep the pledge, let us hand over the kingdom to Abhimanyu meanwhile.”

At that time the Panchala princes arrived and they joined the discussions after the customary welcome was extended to them. Dhristadyumna said, “I will kill Drona. Bhisma will fall at the hands of my brother Sikhandi. Bhima will annihilate all the Dhartarashtras and Arjuna will slay Karna, the son of the charioteer.”

Sri Krishna all the while was closely observing the feelings of Yudhisthira. He said, “My dear brother, Satyaki, you are counting the chicken before they are hatched. Dharmaputra obviously does not like to transgress the pledge. His brothers justly abide by his wishes. So, any bravado on our part is irrelevant. Yudhisthira will not swerve from the path of righteousness even if the sun were to rise in the west and oceans go dry. He is an idealist to the core. Before redeeming the pledge, Pandavas are cows, afterwards they will be tigers.” Yudhisthira thanked Satyaki profusely for the kind sentiments he expressed. He added, “Sri Krishna knows me fully well. I request the Yadava heroes to come to my rescue at the appropriate time.”

Draupadi was smarting under humiliation and burst in anguish with tears sparkling in her eyes and sobs quivering in her throat. She said to Sri Krishna, “The sons of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and Duhsasana who humiliated me so outrageously are still alive in spite of the bravado of Bhima. Dharmaputra’s righteousness or the great glamour of the Gandiva could not come to my rescue. I prayed to you in sincere supplication and I came out of the ordeal miraculously. I am perplexed persistently how the Pancha Pandavas, the great heroes of Rajasuya fame, could keep quiet in spite of the most perfidious provocation. Is the prowess of the Pandava brothers doomed to hibernation and atrophy in this pious forest? Krishna, you are my beloved brother and I request you to speak out.”

Sri Krishna was visibly moved and vowed aloud, “My dear sister, listen to me. The fate of the Dhartarashtras has been sealed already. The perpetrators of the most heinous crime, those who have humiliated you shall reap the consequences. Heavens may

fall, the seven oceans may go dry, the Himalayas may crumble to pieces, still I will see that the Pandavas regain their kingdom and are restored to greater glory. Nemesis shall overtake the Kauravas." So saying Sri Krishna wiped out her tears with his upper garment glittering with silken splendour and Draupadi derived supernatural consolation. Dhristadyumna said, "Dharmaputra, please permit me to take my nephews, the Upapandavas with me to Panchala. Their grandfather will be delighted to have them with him and they can enjoy forest life when they are old enough." Sri Krishna said that he may be permitted to take his sister Subhadra and Abhimanyu, his nephew, along with him to Dvaraka. Yudhishthira agreed. Sri Krishna returned to Dvaraka together with Subhadra, Abhimanyu and the Yadava party. Dhristadyumna went to Panchala taking with him, the sons of Draupadi.

The Pandavas then moved from the Kamyaka to the forest called Dvaitavana taking with them the brahmins, their chariots and weapons, followed by their retinue headed by Indradyumna.

40

The Domestic Debate

Dharmaputra was always preoccupied with discussions with the brahmins on ethics, philosophy and allied subjects. Occasionally Draupadi and Bhima used to provoke Dharmaputra to lively debates pertaining to political problems. Draupadi used to take a bold stand and criticise Dharmaputra. She pleaded with Yudhishthira, "The blind king has duped you. Old and greedy, he banished you from the kingdom. Your brothers, in spite of their bravery and prowess, are rendered ineffective like lion clubs trapped in a cage. It is unbecoming of Kshatriyas to live like lotus-eaters, immersed in spiritual discourses. There is a relevant story in our ancient lore which explains this point. Bali asked his grandfather Prahlada to clarify the relative importance of forgiveness and punishment in polity. Prahlada, we are told, replied that good government was an appropriate admixture of forgiveness as well as punishment exercised judiciously. The king who exercises his authority only relentlessly will be dubbed as a cruel villain. The king who is all forgiveness will be disobeyed even by his servants. If you are all honey, the ants will devour you. Might has always

the right to rule. Righteous indignation is the insignia of a real warrior. Protection to the just and punishment to the wicked are the two ingredients of good government. It is time you decide the issue; you must punish the wicked Dhartarashtas and rule the kingdom by right of conquest."

Bhima endorsed the view point of Draupadi and argued with Dharmaputra, "It is simply foolish on our part to live in the forests. The Kauravas have taken over our kingdom by fraudulent means and there is nothing wrong if we acquire it by exercising the right of conquest. Righteousness has become an obsession with you and you are not tired of repeating the same words like the ignorant brahmin who gets the Vedas by heart without knowing their meaning. A Kshatriya warrior is expected to conquer his enemies and rule the kingdom justly. All sins can be wiped out by performing sacrifices enjoined by the scriptures and giving donations to the deserving. You are wronging your brothers, wife and children on the one hand and betraying the citizens who want you as their king on the other hand by harping on the so-called pledge. I am afraid you are after the shadow leaving the substance. Even if we want to redeem our solemn pledge it is well nigh impossible. How can we live incognito? The Himalayas cannot be hidden by grass. The Dhartarashtas and their spies can easily spot us out in whatever disguise we may be. A filched pledge even according to the sacred scriptures is not binding on the victims. Non-violence is a virtue with the recluse and certainly not with the ruler. Non-violence of the weak is no virtue at all. Cowardice is worse than violence. Righteous courage any day is more worthy of a warrior than pusillanimous forbearance. Get up. We, your brothers and allies, are ever ready; give us the green signal. We can regain our kingdom in no time and you will be crowned king." Dharmaputra was no doubt agitated many a time when he was confronted by the impatience of Draupadi and Bhima. But he always stood firm and said, "I cannot accept your dicta. Might is not right even in polity. Ends can never justify the means. Honesty and truth are ever invincible. Hatred begets hatred and violence never solved any struggle since the beginnings of creation. You may quote the scriptures. There are certain fundamental values like honesty, truth and righteousness which are ends by themselves. Duty is a direction and not a destination. Let us abide by our promise made in the presence of elders and gentlemen of the

royal assembly. Apart from the trite maxims of polity or piety we should never underestimate the strength of the enemy camp. Duryodhana is supported by a dedicated brotherhood. Princes, whom we have vanquished at the time of Rajasuya, want to wreak vengeance on us and most of them will join the opposite party.

“The mighty Bhishma and the great preceptor Drona will fight for the Kauravas in spite of their affection and regard for us. Kripa and Asvatthama, Bhurisravas and Bhagadatta will be arrayed against us. Last but not the least to mention, Karna the born-hero blessed with the natural armour and earrings is their precious asset, and I am obliged to spend the night sleepless whenever I think of his superhuman prowess. Salya our own uncle is a darkhorse.

“The course of war is unpredictable and nobody can be sure of success. Even in war, the potentialities of right are greater than might for achieving success. The time is not ripe for war. The time comes inexorably and you can then vindicate your prowess. Success is a chemical compound of man with the correct minute. Please wait for the proper time.”

Intelligent Draupadi and brave Bhima, many a time advanced defiant arguments against the views of Dharmaputra very vehemently but in the end always accepted his moral superiority, mildly and obediently without any mental reservations and finally were quite determined to redeem the pledge scrupulously.

41

The Mystic Missiles

Yudhishthira knew that the war was inevitable. He had no illusions about the strength of the opponent. While he was pondering over the need to make advance preparations, Krishna Dvaipayana came to Dharmaputra and said, “I am happy that you are planning ahead. Let Arjuna acquire new weapons from Indra and lord Siva. In warfare victory more often than not is achieved by superior weapons rather than superlative valour since the dawn of creation. Virtuous valour was always doomed to heroic martyrdom in the face of superior weapons. It is simply suicidal to go to war without up-to-date arms and effective equipment. You

must concentrate on ultra-conventional weapons unknown to the opponents. One such is 'Pasupata' and let Arjuna get it from Siva by performing penance. I am initiating you into an esoteric discipline of the mind called *Pratismriti* by which Arjuna can acquire new weapons by the grace of Indra and Siva. Yudhishthira in turn initiated Arjuna into "Pratismriti" and asked him to go and perform penance to obtain the "Pasupata." Pasupata was the missile of universal destruction used by Siva at the time of *Pralaya*, the foreboded end of creation. Yudhishthira exhorted Arjuna, "Bhisma and Drona are endowed with the divine missiles. They are sure to be arrayed against us. We have set our hopes on you. It is imperative for you to acquire the divine missiles from Indra and the Pasupata from Siva. Make hay while the sun shines. The enforced leisure you are enjoying may be diverted for this purpose."

Arjuna started on his journey taking the Gandiva bow, the inexhaustible quiver, his sword etc. Dharmaputra blessed him. Draupadi bode him farewell with long lingering looks of love and admiration in anticipation of his success. Arjuna crossed the Himalayas and went beyond the Gandhamadana mountains alone and reached Mount Indrakila where he heard the words of caution, "Please stop, don't proceed further." When he looked around surprised, Arjuna saw an old brahmin sitting under the shadow of a tree. The brahmin, an emaciated figure with resplendent eyes, told Arjuna, "This is a prohibited area for mortals. Here ascetics dedicated to austerities and penance come for meditation and self-realisation. This is a place for peace, suprahuman tranquillity. Your bow and arrows are incompatible with this atmosphere. Please throw them away." Arjuna remained undaunted and said, "In fact I have come here to acquire divine missiles gratifying the gods with my penance. I do not like to leave my Gandiva bow." The brahmin was pleased with the stern determination and courageous outlook of Arjuna and manifested himself in his real shape as Indra, the god of thousand eyes. Indra said to Arjuna, "I will grant you any boon you ask, please mention your wish." Arjuna asked him to give him the divine missiles. Indra said, "I am giving them to you but why do you want these transitory and earthly benefits. I am prepared to confer on you the citizenship of heaven and immortality." Arjuna replied, "Divine father, I thank you. My brothers are rotting in the forest. I do not

want selfish benefits. We must conquer our enemies and regain our prestige." Indra blessed him with his missiles and said, "If you want to be invincible you must perform penance and please Siva and get the Pasupata missile." So saying he disappeared.

Arjuna went to the Himalayas and performed penance concentrating on Lord Siva. He was standing tiptoe for many days subsisting on air only. The heat generated by his penance formed into clouds of smoke and fire and enveloped the skies. The surprised sages reported to Siva, "Arjuna has surpassed us in penance and all living creatures are agitated." Siva smiled and said, "I am pleased with his penance and I will settle the matter presently. So saying, Lord Siva took the guise of a barbarian hunter, and his consort Parvati transformed herself into a huntress. The retinue of Siva formed into a hunting party. They reached the spot where Arjuna was engaged in tapas.

A demon named Muka at the behest of Siva took the form of a wild boar and came running towards Arjuna in an aggressive mood. Arjuna took the Gandiva into his hands and shot an arrow at the wild boar. Simultaneously another arrow shot by the hunter hit the boar, and it fell on the ground circling round and round and disappeared. A surprised Arjuna saw a barbarian hunter followed by his retinue on the spot. Arjuna asked the hunter, "Who are you? How dare you shoot at the game already hit by me?" The hunter replied, "This is my forest, you are an intruder into our solitude from tender civilization. Your weak limbs and emaciated frame is incongruous to these surroundings. You better apologise and get out without risking your life." Arjuna could not put up with the affront and challenged the hunter to fight. The hunter smiled contemptuously and Arjuna shot showers of arrows at him in quick succession. The hunter stood firm like a mountain facing the rain. However, within a short time, the Pandava prince found the inexhaustible quiver presented by the god of fire empty. Undaunted he hit the hunter with the butt of his bow and the bow disappeared. Next Arjuna drew out his sword and struck at the hunter. The sword split into two and fell on the ground. Arjuna unrelenting began to hit at the hunter. He could discern the third eye on the forehead, the crescent moon shining over his locks of hair, the elephant skin robes, the garlands of serpents, the triad spear and his black throat and realised that the hunter was no

other than Lord Siva. Immediately Arjuna fell at his feet begging pardon. Siva said, "I have come to you to test you, and I am glad you have come out of the test in flying colours. Unrivalled hero, you have pleased me in every way. In your past life you were Nara, the compatriot of Lord Narayana. You have donned this mortal frame to fulfil the divine dispensation. Seek any boons, I will give."

Arjuna was overjoyed and said, "Lord of the universe, I want the Pasupata missile. I learn that it equals billions of arrows, maces etc. of the conventional varieties of weapons in vogue, in hitting power and has infinite capacity for devastation and destruction." Siva gave the 'Pasupata' to Arjuna and initiated him into its intricacies and inner working, release and recall. He cautioned Arjuna, "Great hero, I have given the Pasupata to you. A supramortal missile in unworthy hands is like a sword in the possession of a baby. Beware, if used without justification and proper assessment, it will usher in universal destruction amounting to premature pralaya." Arjuna was happy that he could see Siva, the god with the third eye. With the possession of Pasupata, Arjuna acquired the invisible fourth dimension to his personality. His radiant face was encircled with an awe-inspiring halo. Eversince, anybody approaching him, a demon or a divine being, was struck with terror, let alone mortals. Indra and all the divine rulers of different directions came to Arjuna, congratulated him on the attainment of Pasupata and presented him with their missiles.

42

Arjuna at Amaravati

Indra invited Arjuna to Amaravati, the capital city of heavenly kingdom, and said, "We are returning. I will send my charioteer Matali to you presently with my chariot. Please come. Meanwhile I will arrange befitting welcome to you." The gods disappeared and Arjuna eagerly awaited the arrival of Matali. Matali arrived with the chariot and took Arjuna to the kingdom of the gods. He told Arjuna, "You are exceptionally fortunate. You are invited to come to heaven with your mortal body. The souls of saintly kings, brave warriors who died fighting on the battlefield,

pious brahmins who have performed sacrifices, sages who led virtuous lives controlling their senses and righteous people only come to Heaven, the abode of eternal bliss. This is a prohibited area for the heterodox, liars, cowards who flee from the battlefield and hypocrites." Arjuna was welcomed by Vayu, the air god, at the city gate bringing air with floral fragrance of all seasons. The citizens of heaven lined the route through which he passed in the heavenly chariot. The Apsarasas sang and danced to the accompaniment of the celestial orchestra. The sages of heaven welcomed him reciting the vedic hymns. Arjuna bowed to Indra who seated him on the throne along with him, an honour rarely conferred on any individual. He was lodged in a palace built with precious stones. The Gandharva bands provided him with musical entertainment. He was taken through in a procession on the 'Airavata', the white elephant of Indra through the main streets of Heaven and he spent some time in the renowned Nandana park, where the Kalpavriksha, the tree which fulfilled all desires, grew. He paid his respects to the celestial cow 'Kamadhenu' and took the holy bath in the Mandakini, the divine counterpart of the Ganges.

43

Blessing in Disguise

At sunset, Arjuna returned from the Nandana park to the palace of precious stones reserved for his stay. He stood on the balcony observing the rising moon, a sight which angels loved to see every day. The rays of the moon added additional grace and grandeur to the heavenly landscape, to the whirling waves of the Mandakini, the beautiful blossoms of the Mandara and chandana trees of Nandana park, the ivory skin of Airavata, the ruffling ripples of the milky ocean, silvery garments of the goddess of learning, Sarasvati, the jasmin robes of 'Jyotsna abhisarikas', the love lorn maidens who go out to meet their lovers at the pre-appointed places and mingled with the fragrant fame of the distinguished guest Arjuna, the middle Pandava hero, blessed with the Gandiva bow and the Pasupata missile. Urvasi, the celestial nymph who was created by saint Narayana endowing her with superlative beauty and superb grace to outshine and shame the divine damsels that were deputed to disturb his penance came to Arjuna as a Jyotsna abhisarika dressed in silvery satin and decked

with ultra fragrant flowers radiating the bloom of eternal spring all around. She arrived as the very embodiment of moon-light and stood at the threshold of the guest house as the personification of static lightning.

Arjuna quickly came to the doorway and received Urvasi with all the reverence at his command. He bowed to her and welcomed her in the traditional style saying, "This is humble Arjuna, paying respects to the revered Urvasi, the great-grandmother of the royal race of Bharata." Urvasi was taken aback at the way the renowned hero received her, recollected her wits and replied, "This is the land of eternal spring and grandmothers do not exist here. Here men are aged thirty and girls sixteen for ever. Attracted by your renowned valour I have come to you as a Jyostna abhisarika. I expect you to be a chivalrous sportsman." Arjuna said, "Mother, you were the wife of Pururava, the illustrious ancestor of our dynasty. I request you to bless me, your grandchild.

Urvasi said, "Here, you should not be contaminated by the mundane mentality which is incompatible with the practices in paradise. Terrestrial relationships are not relevant to transcendental bliss and beatitude. You are a hero. I am the celestial damsel." Arjuna replied, "A hero is not expected to be a slave of carnality. If this is your paradise, I should like to abide by earthly values. A mortal who conquers himself is greater than the hero who conquers the whole world." Urvasi, in utter humiliation and despair cursed Arjuna, "You will then live as a eunuch in the mortal world, devoid of your manliness, preoccupied with menial pursuits."

Indra came to know of the incident next day and he consoled Arjuna saying, "Take the curse of Urvasi as a blessing in disguise. You have to live for one year incognito. The curse will be effective for that period and you can escape detection by your enemies." Indra directed Chitrasena, the expert at dance and music to initiate Arjuna into the intricacies of the fine arts. Arjuna and Chitrasena became good friends. Arjuna acquired professional proficiency in the art of dance. When Arjuna was the guest of Indra, the sage Romasa visited the celestial court. Romasa was surprised to see a mortal seated on the celestial throne along with Indra and asked the king of gods who the stranger was. Indra said

to Romasa. "He is the middle Pandava prince, Arjuna. In his past life he was the sage Nara, the friend and colleague of Narayana. He is born on earth as the son of Kunti by my grace sharing my genius. Please go to the earth and meet Dharmaputra, the eldest Pandava prince who takes delight to welcome sages and saints like you. Please tell him that Arjuna is here with me and will return to earth after killing the demons of the under-world called Nivatakavachas. I know you will enjoy the company of Dharmaputra, the incarnation of righteousness on earth." Romasa took leave of Indra and started.

44

The Nivatakavachas

Indra trained Arjuna for four years in the use, upkeep and security of the superhuman missiles he gave to Arjuna and presented him with the celestial conch, which was named Devadatta, meaning a gift of the gods and a golden crown studded with precious gems. The king of the gods said to Arjuna, "Gods have their own peculiar problems. We are facing constant trouble at the hands of Nivatakavachas, who have built a submarine kingdom. Their population is about three crores and are invincible to the immortals. As gurudakshina I want you to conquer them."

Arjuna started on the chariot of Indra driven by Matali. It was drawn by the ten thousand horses of various hues — some having pure white swan skins and others with peacock colours. Arjuna reached the great ocean and blew the Devadatta at the submarine city gates. The Nivatakavacha hordes came in waves and attacked Arjuna. In the epic, a detailed description of the great battle is given. The demons hurled various missiles at Arjuna creating artificial cyclones, darkness etc. It was atmospheric warfare. Matali, the divine charioteer swooned and Arjuna himself piloted the chariot and fought with the Danava hordes simultaneously countering all their missiles. Eventually Arjuna destroyed the demons. Matali told Arjuna that two Asura women, Puloma and Kalaka obtained boons from Brahma by their austere penances so that their progeny, the Paulomis and Kalakeyas, should become invincible by the immortals, and that their city Hiranyapura was in the vicinity. They numbered sixty thousand. Arjuna asked Matali

to drive the chariot to Hiranyapuri. The demons who were awaiting Arjuna, attacked him with all their might. A fierce battle followed. Arjuna released the Pasupata missile and the surging hordes of Kalakeyas and Paulomis were reduced to ashes. Arjuna returned to Indra triumphantly.

45

Catharsis

One day Brihadhasva, a reputed sage well-versed in the ancient lore came to Yudhisthira to console him on the loss of his kingdom. Yudhisthira received Brihadhasva with great reverence and traditional respect due to a realised soul and said to him, "It is very kind of you to come to me when I am reduced to poverty and shame. I think I am the most unfortunate being ever born on this earth." Brihadhasva replied, "Adversity is nothing new. People in difficulties may imagine that they are the most miserable beings in the world. For instance, King Nala and Queen Damayanti suffered more privations and underwent greater misery." Dharmaputra's interest was roused and he requested the sage to narrate to him the story. Brihadhasva narrated the long story, detailing the heart-rending hardships which Nala and Damayanti underwent patiently and how in the end they regained their prosperity. In the epic, the story comprises of twentyeight chapters. It is one of the oldest stories of ancient Indian literature and is full of pathos. It is an epic inside an epic and can be cited as an example of literature leading to the catharsis of emotions. A short summary of the classical story is given below.

Nala was the ruler of the Nishadha. He was the commander of a vast army and conquered many countries and extended the frontiers of his kingdom from coast to coast. He was renowned as an able administrator and a just ruler.

One evening Nala went to the royal park for recreation and rest. He saw a number of swans descending into the park. He appreciated their white wings, graceful gait and pearly plumage. He rushed slowly to catch them and all the birds made their escape with the exception of one. Nala was delighted at the catch. However the bird spoke to Nala in human tones, "Great king, I

am glad I am caught; you might have noticed my dilatory demeanour. Very recently I have seen a princess, the most beautiful maiden in the three worlds and I was wondering whether any prince could be found to match her accomplishments. At long last I could spot the worthy prince in you. If you set me at liberty, I will go and tell the same thing to Damayanti, the daughter of the king of Vidarbha." Immediately Nala freed the bird and said, "I have already heard of the princess and her exceptional beauty. I am happy that fortune has come to me flying, you can fly back, but please forget me not." The swan flew away. However, Nala stood at the same spot silently staring at the horizon for a long time oblivious of the setting sun and the spreading darkness. Nala went to bed dreaming about the swan and recollecting her sweet sentiments.

The swan went to Vidarbha and repeated the performance. This time Damayanti and her maids caught hold of the swans one each. The swan caught by Damayanti told her in human tones, "I am coming from Nala, the most handsome prince I have ever seen in the three worlds. I am wondering whether any princess could be less found any where to match his attainments. At long last, I could spot out a worthy princess in you. You have to set me at liberty in your own interests."

Immediately Damayanti ordered her maids to free all the swans. She requested the swans to take their bath in the pellucid waters of the artificial lake provided in the royal park and feast on the lotus stems. She requested the swan which spoke to her to go to Nala as her ambassador of love. The swan told her, "Princess Vaidarbhi, I have seen millions and millions of mortal couples. Pardon me, if the husband is intelligent, the wife is not; if the wife is beautiful the husband is ugly; if the wife is dynamic the husband is passive; if one is daring the other is timid; if one is pessimistic the other is optimistic; everywhere incompatibles are clubbed together in weary wedlock.

"I prefer to be brief. If you both are married I can proclaim without any fear of contradiction that for the first time in the history of creation there would be a human couple ideally matched and made for each other." Damayanti was very much pleased with the sweet words of the swan. The swans flew away after feasting in

the lake for some time. Damayanti stood staring at the horizon silently heaving a sigh quite oblivious of the setting sun and the spreading darkness. Damayanti went to bed dreaming about Nala, the swan and her sweet sentiments.

Nala and Damayanti, though separated by distance, were suffering from love-sickness and spending sleepless nights tormented by the floral shafts of cupid, on beds of tender leaves and lotus stems smearing sandal paste mixed with camphor all over their bodies. The maids-in-waiting informed Bhima, the king of Vidarbha that the love-lorn Damayanti was absent-minded and not even taking food or drink. He thought over the matter, decided to proclaim Svayamvara of Damayanti and invited all the princes including Nala. Many princes came to the capital city of Vidarbha followed by huge retinues.

Angels reported to Indra the unprecedented commotion caused on earth on account of Damayanti Svayamvara. Indra and three other rulers of celestial regions decided to attend the Svayamvara and started on aeroplanes. On the way they saw Nala coming to the Svayamvara in his chariot shining like the Sun god and descended to the earth. They met him and said introducing themselves, "We are the rulers of celestial regions. Noble prince, we request you to do us a favour." Nala replied, "Please tell me if there is anything I could do for you." The gods said, "Truthful soul, we request you to go to Damayanti as our ambassador of love. She can marry any one of us; tell her that it would be the greatest privilege of any mortal maiden to be the spouse of celestial gods." Nala replied, "You see how embarrassing is the mission to me, it is an irony of human life that I, an aspirant myself, am obliged to be an advocate for you. Alright, I will try to do my duty true to my word to the best of my ability." The gods said, "We bless you, noble prince, with divine powers. You can enter the royal palace invisible to outsiders on your mission."

Nala entered the chambers of Damayanti in the royal palace and ushered himself into her presence abruptly. Damayanti and her maids stood up in amazement at the sudden intrusion of a princely stranger. She, recollecting her wits, asked him, "Evidently you must be an extraordinary personlity to have entered my chambers unobserved by the guards of the royal palace. May I

know who you are and why you have chosen this daring feat fraught with danger to your person? He replied nonchalantly, "I am Nala, the ruler of Nishadha. For the present I have come as an ambassador of the gods Indra, Varuna, Vayu and Agni. They are fascinated by your beauty and want that you should marry any one of them at the Svayamvara."

Damayanti told Nala, "In fact I am quite delighted to see the prince of my dreams. I am a mortal maiden, how can I marry a god. Everything the swan told me about you seems to be true." Nala replied, "I endorse your statement that what the swan has told is true. I see, you are coveted even by the gods, attracted by your beauty and accomplishments. How can mortals go against the wishes of mighty gods?" Damayanti said, "I will commit suicide rather than marry anybody other than the man of my choice. Anyway let them come to the Svayamvara and I will place the garland around your neck in their immediate presence. I hope they will abide by the rules of the game in a spirit of sportsmanship." Nala met the gods and apprised them with the determination of Damayanti.

The Svayamvara ceremony was started at the appointed hour. All the princes took their seats. The gods wanted to enjoy some serious fun at the expense of Damayanti and sat next to Nala, all looking exactly like Nala. Damayanti arrived on the scene with all the royal fanfare, holding the bridal garland by her right hand. When she looked at the princes seated in the royal auditorium, there were five Nalas instead of one seated in a row. She could easily realise that it was a crafty subterfuge devised by the divine beings. She prayed to them in her heart, "O gods, I have every right to choose my husband. You have absolutely no justification for tormenting me like this, great souls, I request you to show mercy on this mortal maiden."

The gods were pleased with her prayer. Damayanti could spot out the gods with their static eyelids and their non-sweating bodies. On the other hand tiny drops of sweat could be observed on the rosy cheeks of real Nala emitting rainbow colours by the diffusion of scattered rays of light. Damayanti fastened the bridal garland around Nala's neck. The brahmins chanted the vedic hymns. Bugles were blown, and the royal orchestra played the

national anthem of Vidarbha. The marriage of Nala and Damayanti was celebrated with royal splendour blessed by the brahmins. The gods conferred on him great boons. Indra said that he would be personally present at his sacrifices. Agni, the fire god, promised him that he would be at his beck and call. Varuna, the water god and Vayu, the air god agreed to do likewise. The couple departed to Nishadha and the gods repaired to heaven.

46**Kali**

The gods met Kali, the deity of degradation and depravity on their way and asked him, "Where are you going?" He replied, "I am going to Damayanti Svayamvara." The gods laughed and said, "We are returning from the same. The destined gainer is Nala whom Damayanti selected, disregarding everybody else, you can go back." But the disappointed Kali wanted to wreak vengeance on the couple and waited for an opportunity. But Nala gave no quarter to Kali, ruling the kingdom of Nishadha in all glory and grandeur. However Nala was addicted to gambling and Kali entered into dice. Nala was always scrupulous with his hygiene and health. Cleanliness is next to godliness and eternal vigilance is the price of cleanliness. One day Nala inadvertently did not wash his feet carefully at the time of evening worship. Kali seized that opportunity and gained a foothold in the body of Nala. King Puskara one day invited Nala to the game of dice and Nala accepted the invitation following the Kshatriya etiquette. Nala prompted by the power of Kali inside him gambled away all his wealth and kingdom.

Damayanti anticipating the outcome of the gamble sent her two children, a boy and a girl to her parents on a chariot driven by Varshneya. Nala and Damayanti stayed at the outskirts of the capital for three days as commoners and no citizen came to meet them fearing the wrath of Puskara, the new king of Nishadha. The former king and queen had to subsist on water. Nala saw some birds with golden wings, perched on the grass nearby and he threw his garment over them for an easy catch. But the birds flew away taking the garment with them. The birds told Nala from the air, "We are the dice taking the form of birds and we have come to

take away your clothes." Nala then shared Damayanti's clothing and both walked and came to the cross-roads. Nala said, "This path leads to Ujjain; this road goes to Vidarbha; this way leads to Ayodhya and this track takes us to Dekkan. Whither shall we go?" Damayanti said, "Let us go to Vidarbha and stay with my parents." Nala replied, "I have no face to go to Vidarbha. You please go to your parents. At least you can be happy there." Damayanti replied, "How can I leave you? The husband needs the wife all the more in adversity. In hunger or thirst, in worry or work, a wife will serve the husband. Please permit me to follow you." Nala and Damayanti roamed in the forest for sometime and Damayanti fell asleep after sometime under the shade of a tree. Nala was overpowered with grief. The former queen Damayanti once surrounded by hundreds of waiting maids was sleeping on the bare ground. He thought that she would go to Vidarbha, if he left her there and went his way. Very carefully and tenderly he cut a bare piece of cloth from her garment and decided to walk away. He walked a few yards but returned to the spot where she was absorbed in innocent sleep. His mind tossed to and fro for sometime. Finally he made up his mind and went away.

Damayanti woke from her sleep but could not find her lord, Nala. Instead she found that half of her garment torn away. She came to the conclusion that he left her deliberately. She sobbed for a while and roamed in the forest crying aloud. She searched for him going from tree to tree and bush to bush. Meanwhile she was grabbed by a python. Frightened she cried aloud for help and an aboriginal who heard her lamentations came to her, killed the snake and rescued her. She told him her sad story. But the barbarian who was attracted by her ravishing beauty and seeing her lonely condition made bold to make his mind known to her. She was enraged and cursed him and he fell dead, burnt alive by her righteous indignation. She wandered in the forest aimlessly for some days searching for Nala in frenzied hope amounting to lunacy.

Eventually she reached a hermitage where great saints lived, following the traditions of ancient sages like Vasistha, Valakhilyas, Vamadeva, Bhrgu and Narada. She enquired about Nala. The saints received her with due hospitality and learnt with sorrow how misfortune dogged the foot steps of a noble king and his devoted

queen. They were convinced already that almighty Destiny could degrade a king into a beggar or elevate a beggar to an emperor. They consoled Damayanti saying, "We have seen with our mind's eye aided by the power of penance that you will be united with your husband after sometime. He will regain his lost kingdom, glory and grandeur."

Afterwards Damayanti met a caravan crossing the forest. The leader of the business community by name Suchi said to her, "Who are you noble lady? Are you the deity of this forest in human form?" Some members thought she was a lunatic, roaming aimlessly in the forest. Some opined that she was the devil incarnate; some people bowed to her, and some others cracked jokes at her. But Suchi said, "This forest is infested with wild beasts. We are going to the kingdom of Chedi ruled by Subahu; madam, I welcome you to come with us and we will introduce you to the king." Damayanti joined the caravan community and after many days they reached a lake where they pitched their tents to stay for the night. At dead of night elephant hordes came to the lake and were enraged at the sight of the white tents. The beasts invaded the tents and massacred the members of the caravan indiscriminately. Damayanti was among the few survivors. She was shocked at the series of misfortunes striking at her one after another in quick succession. She was agitated whether the celestial beings were wreaking vengeance on her as she rejected them at the Svayamvara. However she recollected the prophetic words of the saints and regained confidence.

The small party of survivors reached the capital city of Chedi after a long and arduous journey through the jungles. As she was passing by the royal palace, the queen looked at her by chance from the terrace and she sent her maid to fetch her. Damayanti was too proud to reveal her actual identity to the queen and told her that she was forsaken by her gambler husband who was otherwise very noble. The queen mother received her with due kindness and asked her to stay with her. Damayanti accepted the offer and said, "I should like to live with you as a sairandhri and serve you. But I am not prepared to do menial jobs. I do not touch your feet nor do I eat left overs or talk with male members." The royal lady agreed to the conditions imposed by Damayanti. She enjoyed the status of a sairandhri. Sairandhri was a lady who was

obliged to seek royal service. She was neither a member of the royal harem, nor a menial maidservant. She valued and preserved her chastity and she was respected by the royal family as an honourable lady. A *sairandhri* of ancient times was more a matron than a maidservant and enjoyed a recognised individuality. The queen entrusted the princess Sunanda to her care and promised to see that she would be united with her husband soon.

47

Karkotaka

Nala after leaving Damayanti with the fond belief that she would somehow go back to her parents wandered in the forest aimlessly for sometime and came across a devastating fire. He was preparing himself to go away from the dangerous spot but heard a heart-rending cry for help and perceived a serpent. The serpent said to Nala, "My name is Karkotaka. I am not in a position to move, please take me out to a place of safety along with you." Nala, out of compassion took Karkotaka on his shoulders to a safe zone and left him on the banks of a lake. But Karkotaka bit him and Nala was instantaneously transformed into an ugly creature. Karkotaka told him, "Please do not curse me that I have bitten you prompted by nature. For the present it is better less if you are not recognised by others in your miserable condition. After sometime, I tell you, you will regain your original personality at your sweet will and pleasure. My poison however will give you perfect immunity from all diseases, viruses and contaminations. This is a blessing in disguise for you." Nala thanked him and went to Ayodhya and sought service with the king Rituparna. He told the king, "My name is Bahuka. I am an expert cook and can serve you the most delicious dishes. I can tame the wildest horses in no time." Ritupurna took Bahuka into his service and asked Jiyala and Varshneya to assist him. Varshneya, the former charioteer of Nala, once again became his assistant, little knowing his real identity.

It was usual with Bahuka to spend sleepless nights thinking of Damayanti. One night he was thinking aloud and began to sing — "My darling, Damayanti, the light of my life, where art thou? Did you reach your parental palace or still roaming in the forests like a

lunatic? Are you alive? The vicious vice of dice is the sole cause of the whole tragedy and I am ashamed to see your face or meet your father! O, I am enduring living death..." Often Jivala listened to his emotional outbursts erupting into sorrow and song and one day came to him and said, "You seem to be dreaming awake and sorrowing about a sweetheart, the queen of your heart, I am not able to make out head or tail of it. Some expressions like — throne, palace and sentences like "I have dethroned myself," are enigmatic. You are spending sleepless nights; it will tell on your health. Your dream girl must be like any other dream girl, the most charming damsel in the three worlds. Of course, nothing can prevent the ugliest wretch from falling in love with the most beautiful princess in the whole world. As a friend, I want you not to go mad." Bahuka replied, "How can you imagine that I am in love with any damsel? You have seen me. Even the ugliest maiden in the world will not care to accept me." "I am happy," retorted tauntingly Jivala, "you have realised it. Better have a sound sleep and do not disturb your neighbours." Bahuka continued, "My dear Jivala, you do not know me. I had an actor friend. He played the role of a prince who lost his kingdom and was separated from his sweetheart. I am just mimicking him. That is all."

Bhima, the king of Vidarbha, came to know of Nala's debacle at the game of dice and the departure of the couple to an unknown destination. He sent intelligent brahmin friends in search of Damayanti honouring them with gifts of gold and jewellery with a proclamation that a thousand golden coins will be presented to any one discovering the whereabouts of the couple. Sudeva, one of the brahmins, went to the kingdom of Chedi and discovered Damayanti living in the royal palace like fire enveloped by smoke, like the crescent moon hidden behind the dark clouds and like a river devoid of water. Sudeva introduced himself to Damayanti, "I am a brahmin and a friend of your father Bhima who has sent several people in search of you. I bless that you and your husband should be united soon like the star Rohini and the moon. Your parents are worried. Your children are dreaming about you. Anyway I am fortunate in finding you here." Silent tears were the reply of Damayanti and Sunanda reported to the queen that Sairandhri was sobbing profusely in the presence of a brahmin. The queen arrived to console Damayanti and asked the brahmin, "Sir, I should like to know the bio-data of this girl. Please tell me

all the details you know." Sudeva told the queen, "She is princess Vaidarbhi, the daughter of king Bhima and the wife of Nala. I could discover her by the lotus mark on her forehead at the meeting point of her two eyebrows." Immediately fresh water was brought and the maids cleaned the face of Damayanti with a wet towel and everybody could clearly see the lotus mark. The queen was overjoyed and said, "Damayanti, you are the daughter of my own sister. Your mother and I are the daughters of the ruler of Dasarna; I have become the queen of Subahu and your mother is the consort of king Bhima." Damayanti was sent to Vidarbha in a royal chariot with precious presents and suitable escort along with Sudeva.

48**The Second Svayamvara**

Damayanti reached Vidarbha but was ever thinking of her husband Nala. One day she told her mother, "Nala is a man with self-respect and it is not easy for anybody to recognise him. Let me suggest a plan. The brahmins who go to the various royal courts must speak tauntingly that it is unbecoming of a hero to leave a devoted wife to her fate in a forest. If anybody gives a retort or an emotional reply, let the matter be swiftly reported to us." The queen told the king and intelligent brahmins were despatched in various directions. A brahmin by name Parnada came back and reported, "When I went to the royal court of Ayodhya, an ugly person, emotionally disturbed, met me privately and told me, 'A wife is not expected to find fault with her husband. If she puts up with the shortcomings of her husband she may get happiness ultimately in the other world, if not in his world,' and he went away silently. I enquired about him afterwards. I was told that he was a proud man, a skilled cook, an adept at horses and a race pilot. His name is Bahuka and the only snag is that he lacks the imposing personality associated with Nala."

King Bhima conferred with his daughter Damayanti and minister of the state. It was decided to send Sudeva to Ayodhya. Rituparna was to be invited to Vidarbha on the pretext of a second Svayamvara for Damayanti, giving a notice of only twentyfour hours. Nobody except Nala could drive the chariot from Ayodhya

to Vidarbha, a distance of more than a hundred yojanas in a single day. In accordance with the plan, Sudeva reached Ayodhya one morning in the early hours and extended a personal invitation to the king Rituparna on behalf of king Bhima for the second Svayamvara of Damayanti, scheduled to take place the very next day.

King Rituparna summoned Bahuka and apprised him of the invitation and said, "I do not believe that there is anybody in this world who can drive a chariot from Kosala to Vidarbha within a single day. The invitation is intriguing." Bahuka replied, "Gracious sir, if you are pleased to go, I will take you to Vidarbha to-day before the sunset." Rituparna said, "Bahuka, I should like to start at least to test you and to enjoy the thrill of such a unique feat." Rituparna asked Varshneya and Sudeva to follow him to Vidarbha. Meanwhile Bahuka was ready with the chariot and the horses which Varshneya brought with him to Ayodhya. Rituparna looked at the horses and remarked, "I wonder whether these slender horses can bear the brunt of our burden, let alone the long journey." Silent smiles were the reply of Bahuka, holding the steadfast reins in his hands and the chariot raced forth at bewildering speed. An apparent mole hill at a distance was soon manifesting itself as a mighty mountain, only to recede away as a tiny black spot in the background and the horses were galloping all the while almost above the ground.

Varshneya was surprised at the speed with which Bahuka was driving the chariot. Rituparna was wondering whether Bahuka was Anuru, the charioteer of the sun in disguise and he dropped his upper garment accidentally on the ground. He asked Bahuka to stop the chariot for a while to enable Varshneya to fetch it back to him. Bahuka smiled and said, "Your upper garment is now separated from you by about one yojana and how can Varshneya fetch it back to you? Varshneya said, "The god of fire, Matali or Nala can drive the chariot with this speed. I know Nala and the ugly Bahuka cannot be identical with Nala. I do not know whether the god of fire or Matali has taken temporary refuge under you."

However Rituparna asked Bahuka to stop the chariot for a minute under the shade of a tree. The galloping chariot came to a graceful halt. Rituparna said to Bahuka, "I appreciate your great

skill in the art of driving the chariot. Each man is blessed with a different talent. I know the art called *Akshahridaya* i.e. the art of arithmetics by which I can compute by sight the number of leaves on any tree without actually counting them." He gave out the number of leaves on the tree under which the chariot was halted. Bahuka out of sheer curiosity got up the tree and counted all the leaves and was surprised to find that the computation was correct. Rituparna initiated Bahuka into the art of *Akshahridaya* and said that this discipline would widen his intellectual horizon and improve his health and purge all evil influences from his personality by removing all angularities. Suddenly Kali emerged out of the body of Nala and bowed to him and said, "I am the root cause of all your troubles. Please do not curse me. All the while I was being tormented by the poison injected by Karkotaka into your body. That is ample punishment for me. Hereafter you will shine like fire freed from smoke." So saying, Kali disappeared. Nala was happy and started to inhale the free air of emancipation.

Bahuka gratefully offered to Rituparna to initiate him into the art of *Asvahridaya* or horse psychology by which one can become an expert charioteer. Rituparna thanked him and said, "I will learn the art at the appropriate time after reaching Vidarbha."

They resumed the journey after the short recess which served as a rest for the horses as well. The chariot reached the royal palace of Vidarbha in the afternoon itself and Rituparna congratulated Bahuka this time with an overwhelming sense of awe and respect. Rituparna was provided with all facilities for his stay in the royal palace and Bahuka rested near the chariot in the manner of an ordinary driver. Damayanti's heart was filled with joy when she heard the terrific sound of the approaching chariot, a familiar phenomenon of the early days of her marriage. She could recognise the rhythm of the horn, the whining noises of the whirling wheels, the harmonious pace of the racing horses, graceful concordance of galloping cadences and she knew that they were the particular characteristics of the proficiency acquired by Nala in the art of chariot driving. She sent her maid-servant Kausikini to Bahuka to probe into his personality. Kausikini came to him and said, "I am the maid-servant of our princess, Damayanti who wanted me to find out the whereabouts of Nala from Varshneya, the charioteer." Bahuka replied, "Varshneya

went to Ayodhya from Vidarbha after handing over the prince and the princess to king Bhima. How does he know about the whereabouts of Nala? How can Varshneya or anybody else recognise Nala when he is in disguise? Better you mind your own business." Kausikini replied, "Sir, this is my business, our princess Damayanti was left to her fate by her husband in the forest. She did not return to Vidarbha but went in search of him without food and shelter. The miseries our princess suffered are too deep for tears. Even today she is always thinking of Nala and wearing the same dirty garment half of which was taken away by her husband. I ask you, is it just on the part of Nala to leave his wife, the noblest specimen of womanhood, like that in the deep woods?" Silent tears were the only reply that emanated from Bahuka and he abruptly went away into the kitchen provided for Rituparna. Kausikini reported the matter to Damayanti who asked her to go to the kitchen and observe him closely.

Kausikini went to the kitchen and came back to Damayanti in a state of bewildered exultation. She reported, "Princess, I cannot describe what I have seen. It is incredible, he could make instant fire with a blade of grass. The fire was burning without fuel. He could create the wind just with a wave of his hand and it was blowing without a fan. Empty vessels were filled up with water automatically at his sweet will and pleasure. Withered garlands regained their floral freshness and fragrance at his mere touch. Bahuka is not a mortal; verily, he is a divine wizard."

Damayanti was almost certain that Bahuka must be Nala in disguise. At that time, Varshneya brought some delicious dishes to Bhima as presents from Rituparna. Damayanti tasted them and certified that they must be Nala's preparations.

Rituparna was placed in an embarrassing position. He summoned Bahuka and said to him, "You see, Bahuka, the position here is rather enigmatic. We were told that many kings were arriving for the so-called second Svayamvara of Damayanti. We find no princes, no preparations, nobody else here knows anything about it. Perhaps they presumed that we are in the know of Nala's whereabouts. Varshneya, of course, was the charioteer of Nala but he protests that he knows nothing. It is very unfair on the part of Bhima to extend a bogus invitation to me for

interrogating Varshneya. What shall we do now? People here told me that Damayanti, the devoted wife of Nala, was leading an austere life and poohpoohed the concept of a second Svayamvara as an absurd proposition. What shall we do?" Bahuka replied crisply, "Let us then go back to Ayodhya." Rituparna said, "I will take leave of Bhima; meanwhile please get ready the chariot and the horses." Bahuka went back to his chariot. Kausikini was there and she introduced the two children of Damayanti to Bahuka who at once embraced them lustily and kissed them profusely. Kausikini was happy and was full of smiles. Bahuka felt guilty and came out with an excuse, "This boy and this girl are pretty and look like my children." Kausikini made fun of him and said, "Today you embraced these children. Tomorrow you may say the same thing about Damayanti and do likewise." Bahuka asked Kausikini to get out accusing her of taking unmannerly liberty with strangers.

Kausikini persisted to plead with Bahuka. She said to him, "I am glad that our plan has fructified. Please come with me this minute and see Damayanti the personification of desolation and sorrow. I will take you to her inner apartment. The permission of the king was obtained already." Bahuka meekly followed Kausikini and met Damayanti who fell at his feet washing them with her tears. She was wearing the same worn out dirty garments and said to him, "What is the sin I have committed to deserve the punishment you have inflicted on me? Is it fair to leave me in the midst of the forest and go away. I appeal to your conscience?" Bahuka replied, "Why do you fall at the feet of this ugly wretch? Why can't you choose a worthier prince as per the scheduled second Svayamvara?" Damayanti replied sobbing, "It is only a desperate ruse devised to discover you out of your disguise. It must be transparently evident to you. I do not deserve this cruel taunt from you. Don't you remember that I preferred you to the gods?" Bahuka said, "I beg your pardon. I was under the influence of Kali, Chaste lady, please excuse me. I wanted you to escape from my miseries." At that moment the air god Vayu proclaimed from the sky in clear tones audible to everybody, "Damayanti's noble character and chastity are known to me, to the sun and the moon. We have developed the greatest adoration for her." There were showers of celestial flowers from heaven at the announcement. Nala invoked Karkotaka who gave him his

original garments. Immediately Nala regained his original shape and stature. Damayanti and Nala united looked like the Rohini and the crescent moon in conjunction.

Bhima invited Rituparna to the reconciliation ceremony which was celebrated on a grand scale. Rituparna congratulated Nala and begged his pardon for treating him as a menial. Nala thanked Rituparna for giving him shelter at a crucial juncture of his life and initiated him into the art of horse-psychology known as *Asvahridaya*. Rituparna stayed at Vidarbha for sometime and departed for Ayodhya taking leave of king Bhima.

Nala stayed at Vidarbha for a month and proceeded to Nishadha taking with him sixteen elephants, fifty cavalry and six hundred foot-soldiers. He asked Damayanti to stay in the chariot and went to Puskara and said, "I have come to invite you to dice or a duel. It is for you to choose the game of gamble or the heroic fight. Verily, the mighty warrior earns the right to rule over the kingdom." Puskara who knew Nala as a victorious warrior as well as a vanquished gambler, preferred the game of dice. Nala offered Damayanti as the wager and Puskara announced that the kingdom of Nishadha was his bet. In the second round of the game of dice, fortune favoured Nala and Pushkara lost the bet. Nala and Damayanti entered the royal palace and lived there happily for a long time.

Nala performed many sacrifices, conferred many benefactions on deserving brahmins and ruled over the ever prosperous kingdom with justice and fair play.

The sage Brihadhasva, who narrated the story, told Yudhis-thira, "Dharmaputra, don't you see, you are better placed than Nala; you have the support of four valiant brothers of proven capacity. You are able to enjoy the company of saints and sages everyday. The royal palace has its own pains; the forest has its own gains. Anyway there is a limit to your trials and tribulations and I am sure that virtue will triumph ultimately. Nala was tormented by Kali, whereas you are protected by Sri Krishna. Adversity is the universal preceptor and you, as the dear disciple of the greatest disciplinarian of the world, are destined to defeat your enemies and emerge victorious in the end."

49

The Pilgrimages

The absence of Arjuna who went in quest of new weapons was weighing very heavy with Yudhishthira and his other brothers. Bhima said, "It is more than four years since Arjuna departed and every day seems to us to be a year. We are very anxious to see Arjuna return endowed with new Astras." Dharmaputra said, "We have overstayed in this forest, let us start for a new abode." At that time the divine sage Narada came and acquainted the Pandavas with the importance of pilgrimage and gave details about the holy places in various parts of India. When the Pandavas were planning to escape from the boredom of the forest life, the sage Romasa came to the Pandavas. He said, "I am coming from the land of the gods where I saw Arjuna sitting on the throne along with Indra. He has acquired many sophisticated missiles which are beyond the compass of human comprehension. I am deputed by Indra to meet you and convey the good news to you. Further I endorse the advice given to you by Narada to visit the various holy places by the time Arjuna comes back to earth. Your establishment even in the forest has become unwieldy. It is not practicable to take all the brahmins with you. I will follow you and conduct you to all the sacred places of pilgrimage which I have visited twice already."

Dharmaputra said to the brahmins, "Great souls, you have blessed us with your gracious company all these years. We have resolved to go on pilgrimage, a discipline prescribed by the sacred scriptures as essential for emancipation. Obviously it is not possible for us and desirable for you all to undertake the tortuous trip in crowded company. So I request you to go back to Indraprastha. Some of you may go to Hastinapura where I am sure you will be well treated by Dhritarashtra and the Kauravas with a competitive spirit to provide a praise worthy contrast. It is long since you left your hearths and homes." Most of the brahmins took leave of Yudhishthira and started for their native places.

Dharmaputra, followed by his brothers, Draupadi, Dhaumya and Romasa and a few brahmins started on the pilgrimage to visit the various holy places. In the epic there is a detailed description of the various places visited by the Pandava party running into

several chapters, Romasa narrating the relevant story signifying the importance of each holy place.

Thus Romasa has narrated many stories to Dharmaputra. The stories of Agastya marrying the princess Lopamudra and his encounter with Mount Vindhya and digesting of Vatapi rakshasa, brother of Ilvala were narrated.

50

Rishyasringa

The story of Rishyasringa, the personification of pristine purity and innocence being enticed by the courtesans of king Romapada, illustrates the instinctive attraction between man and woman with the freshness of the first dawn of creation. Rishyasringa was brought up by his father in the lonely seclusion of his forest hermitage. He obtained a boon from Indra that the land of his stay would be blessed with rains. Romapada sent lovely courtezans to fetch Rishyasringa to the Anga country afflicted with drought. When he saw the lovely maiden, he presumed that she was a brahmachari performing a peculiar penance. He said to his father in whose absence she came, "Dear father, today a lovely brahmachari has come to me. His face is blooming like a beautiful lotus. There are two very attractive elevations on his exquisite chest. He has drawn my lips to his lips and a most melodious voice emanated from the contact. It was a very sweet experience which I wish to enjoy repeatedly. His body is full of fragrance everywhere and the garments he wore were very fine resembling the texture of moonlight. He was holding a red fruit in his hand and it springs into his hand automatically whenever he drops it on the ground. I want to go to his hermitage and perform solitary penance along with him." That was the description of the courtezan given by the son of the sage, who, unable to differentiate the fair sex, still felt the natural attraction. Eventually Rishyasringa married the daughter of Romapada, princess Santa and the country of Anga was blessed with rains and was freed from drought.

51

Agastya

The sage Agastya is a very popular character of ancient Indian literature, legend and life. His story is described

in various puranas. He was the pioneering missionary who spread the Vedic culture south of the Vindhya. Once upon a time - as the story goes - the Vindhya were the highest mountains, in India. Geologically, Vindhya are older than the Himalayas which are considered by modern scientists as the youngest mountain ranges of the world.

The sage Agastya came to Mount Vindhya and the presiding deity of the mountains received Agastya with due hospitality and bowed to him in reverence. Agastya commanded, "I am going to the south. Please do not raise your head till I return to you to go to the north." But Agastya stayed in the south forever and never returned to the north. So Vindhya never raised his head once again. In the south there are hundreds of temples dedicated to Agastya from the Vindhya to the Cape Comorin.

Agastya's encounter with the cannibal rakshasas Vatapi and Ilvala is a popular story. Vatapi and Ilvala were two brothers who received the brahmin saints and sages with outward respect and civilised hospitality. Ilvala used to kill Vatapi and arrange a feast to the guest with his flesh. After the meal, Ilvala used to call aloud Vatapi to come out and he used to come out of the stomach of the holy guest alive; the brothers afterwards feasted on the flesh of the guest who gave up the ghost earlier.

Agastya was received by Ilvala with all the respect due to him. After the feast was over, Ilvala as usual called aloud, "My dear brother Vatapi, please come." Agastya putting his hand on his belly said, "Vatapi, get digested", three times. Ilvala to his horror realised that Vatapi was digested by the sage as there was no response to his repeated calls. He fell at the feet of the sage and presented him with ten thousand cows, and a golden chariot together with twenty thousand gold coins.

Lopamudra was the daughter of the king of Vidarbha. The king hesitated to give Lopamudra in marriage to Agastya who demanded her hand. The princess herself volunteered to marry the sage and followed him gladly into the forest as his shadow and served him for a longtime as a devoted wife. The sage was pleased and once asked her in a gracious moment to specify what she wanted. She said that she was tired of wearing the deer skins and

coarse fibre clothing and wanted the luxurious life of a princess till the birth of a son. Agastya fulfilled the desire of his princely wife after acquiring immense wealth from Ilvala. Lopamudra was blessed with a son.

52

Sukanya

All these stories were narrated to Yudhisthira by Romasa with particular reference to the holy places they visited. The story begins thus— “This is the place where the king Saryati performed the sacrifice at the beginning of Dvaparayuga on the banks of the Narmada. This is the lake where Chyavana performed tapas and later married the daughter of Saryati” so on and so forth.

When Chyavana, the great sage was steeped in tapas, anthills, trees and creepers grew over him. One day Sukanya the daughter of Saryati came to the lake and looked into the anthill. She saw the eyes of the sage twinkling like fireflies and out of childish curiosity, inserted two sticks into them. The royal armies were paralysed by the offended sage. The king came and apologised to him, but the sage demanded that the princess should be given in marriage to him as recompense. Sukanya married Chyavana, the old sage and served him with rare dedication. The celestial doctors, the Asvin twins came to her and said to her, “Why can't you marry a handsome youth leaving this decrepit old hag?” Sukanya replied, “Why are you bothered? I love my husband Chyavana.” Chyavana was pleased with the answer given by Sukanya but agreed with the Asvins. The Asvins entered the lake and Chyavana followed him. All the three emerged out of the lake as youths and asked Sukanya to choose one of them as her husband. The Asvins were noted for their handsome personalities. However, Sukanya chose Chyavana.

Saryati came to them and was very happy to see the youthful couple. Chyavana officiated as the chief priest at the sacrifice performed by Saryati and decreed that the Asvins thereafter should be offered the Soma juice instead of Indra.

53

Sibi

Romasa showed Yudhisthira and his party the place on the banks of the Yamuna where Mandhata performed

the great sacrifice famed in legend and literature when he gave thousands of cows and gold coins to the brahmins as gifts. Later, they visited Kurukshetra and saw the place on the banks of the Sarasvati where the king Somaka performed the sacrifice. Then they went to Mount Bhrigu Tunga where Sibi performed the renowned sacrifice. As the story goes, Indra took the form of a kite and the fire god, the form of a dove. The dove came to Sibi seeking protection and the kite came chasing it. The kite said, "O, great king, the dove is my staple food as ordained by the scriptures; you have no right to deny me my birth-right." Sibi accepted the contention of the kite and said, "I cannot sacrifice the dove which has sought my protection. I will cut my flesh equivalent to dove's weight and you can satisfy your hunger." The kite agreed. A balance was brought. Sibi was cutting piece after piece out of his body, still the dove was out-weighting them. At last Sibi preferred to get into the other scale of the balance and offered his whole body as recompense. The kite and the dove exhibited their true personalities to Sibi and told him, "We came to defeat you but we go back vanquished; your story will be narrated by poets of all climes and times and your immortal fame lasts as long as the spoken word signifies human sensibility."

54

Bhagiratha

Incidentally Romasa narrated the story of Bhagiratha who has performed penance to please Lord Siva and brought the Ganges down to the earth.

The name of Bhagiratha has come down in Indian literature and legend typifying herculian efforts to be made for achieving great projects. Once upon a time in the mysterious past, the sons of a great emperor Sagara numbering sixtyfour thousand were burnt to death by the indignation of the sage Kapila in the low lands of the globe. Bhagiratha first performed penance to please the goddess Ganga for several years. The gratified Ganga manifested herself before Bhagiratha and said to him, "I am pleased with your tapas, please tell me your wish and I will fulfill it." Bhagiratha said, "I request you to come down to the earth

and flow on the ashes of the Sagaras my great ancestors so that their tormented souls go to heaven." The goddess Ganga replied, "I am granting your wish, but the whole earth will be inundated if I come down to the earth abruptly. Proper arrangements must be made with meticulous care for my descent. Approach Lord Siva who is the only person who can contain me in his locks of hair." Bhagiratha had to perform penance a second time in order to please Lord Siva who graciously agreed to receive the torrential Ganges safely into his braid. Again Bhagiratha undertook to penance to make Lord Siva release the Ganges from his locks. Again Bhagiratha made superhuman efforts to carve out the route to be taken by the Ganges from the Himalayan ranges down the slopes to the lowlying lands of the earth. Thus the sea was refilled with water once upon a time drunk by the sage Agastya.

55

Parasurama

In the same way Romasa told the story of Parasurama, the son of the sage Jamadagni who married Renuka, the daughter of King Prasenajit. One day a Gandharva king, named Chitraratha, was sporting in the waters of a lake along with his wives. Renuka who went there to fetch water was attracted by the scene and took part in the revelry. The sage Jamadagni was enraged at the conduct of his wife and asked his four sons one by one to kill Renuka. They refused to kill their mother. Finally he ordered Parasurama to kill his mother. Instantaneously he killed her with his famous axe. Jamadagni was pleased and asked his son to seek any boon. Parasurama said that his mother should come to life, that he should be blessed with invincible prowess in warfare and that his brothers should regain the favour of the father. Jamadagni granted the boons.

Once the famous king of the Haihayas Kartavirya came to the hermitage of Jamadagni and in spite of the hospitality he received, behaved arrogantly towards the sages, humiliated them and took away the sacrificial cow and the calf by force. When Parasurama arrived, he was enraged at the atrocity and went to Kartavirya and killed him in the battle. The sons of Kartavirya in turn came to the hermitage in the absence of Rama and killed his father.

Parasurama in his bereaved indignation vowed to exterminate the Kshatriya race from the globe and killed them, with his terrible axe undertaking whirlwind conquests twentyone times with his terrible axe.

However, in the evening of his life, Parasurama took to pacifism and penance on the Mount Mahendra and lived there for a great length of time extending over many generations.

Dharmaputra and his party met Parasurama on Mt. Mahendra and paid their respects to the great saint-warrior, then, one of the oldest of living beings on the globe.

Romasa narrated the story of Ashtavakra, the born scholar who was regarded as the greatest authority on the vedic lore by his contemporaries. Ashtavakra, as the story goes, found fault with his father while still he was in the womb that his disciples were indulging in wrong readings of the vedic texts, burning midnight oil without rest. The father cursed him to be born with eight deformities. However, the ugly child grew into an infant prodigy. The father was defeated by Vandi in the vedic competition at the court of Janaka. However, Ashtavakra even as a boy went to attend the sacrifice performed by Janaka and he defeated Vandi in discussion and redeemed the reputation of his father. Yudhisthira and party visited the ashram where Ashtavakra and his brother-in-law, another scholar whom Sarasvati served in human form, lived in times of yore.

Romasa likewise told the story of Yavakrita who wanted shortcuts to scholarship and acquired vedic learning by penance without the aid of a preceptor. The arrogant sciolist on a spring day when the whole forest was steeped in vernal bloom, met the daughter-in-law of Raibhya, a colleague of his father when she was alone in the garden. Taking brutal advantage of her loneliness Yavakrita raped her, and met with his end at the hands of a demon created by the righteous indignation of Raibhya. Romasa impressed upon Dharmaputra that scholarship unless reinforced by moral discipline could not elevate man from the inner beast in him.

56

The Golden Lotus

The pilgrimage party reached Mount Gandhamadana where they experienced heavy rain followed by a hail storm.

Suddenly the mountain streams overflowed, huge trees were uprooted with their creepers, and darkness enveloped the whole atmosphere. The party was divided into three groups, Dhaumya, Dharmaja and Sahadeva clustered together at one place, Bhima and Draupadi at another place and Romasa, Nakula and other brahmins at the third place. After the hurricane, the whole party came together but Draupadi swooned. She was made to lie down on the deer skin and Bhima was fanning with a plantain leaf while the twins were nursing her feet. Dharmaputra could not control himself and said with tears in his eyes, "The king of Panchala hoped that his daughter, born of the sacred sacrificial fire and bred in the royal palace, would lead a happy life of luxury and comfort after her marriage with the Pandava heroes. But I feel I am the sole reason for her present miseries." Yudhishthira was consoled by Dhaumya and other brahmins and Draupadi regained her consciousness. Dharmaputra said to Bhima, "Panchali obviously cannot walk any further; what shall we do?" Immediately Bhima invoked his rakshasa son by Hidimbi, Ghatotkacha and he manifested himself on the spot. Bhima said to his son, "My dear boy, your mother Draupadi, is not in a position to walk; you have to carry her on your shoulder." He replied, "I will carry you all including Dhaumya and my followers will carry the brahmins." Romasa said that he would come walking in space propelled by the power of Yoga. The party reached Badari and pitched their tents there. They bathed in the Ganges and saw Mount Mainaka, Mt. Hiranya and lake Bindu and stayed at Badari for six days. On one occasion, when Draupadi and Bhima were taking a stroll, a golden lotus with a thousand petals fell at their feet blown over by a pleasant breeze sublimating the senses with its sweet smell. Draupadi said to Bhima, "Although I have heard about this flower Saugandhika, this is the first time for me to see it. I am attracted by this lovely lotus. Let us grow this golden lotus in our garden. Please get some flowers for me. Meanwhile, I show this to Dharmaputra."

Bhima armed with his bow and arrows started to fetch the flowers to please his beloved Draupadi in the direction from which the fragrance emanated, unmindful of the hazards of his mission. On his way he sported with the wild beasts he met lifting some of them bodily and throwing them against some others to the delight of the celestial ladies who thronged to see the mighty mortal from the slopes of the mountain recesses. He perceived the fluttering

flight of water fowls which were disturbed at his terrific lion roar. He could detect a lake nearby surrounded by plantain plantations. He bathed in the lake and continued his march.

On his way Bhima found an old monkey lying sleepily unmindful of his approach obstructing the passage in lazy defiance. He wanted to frighten the animal out of his way with his thunderous roar. But the monkey simply raised its drowsy eyelids and said to Bhima, "Why do you disturb an old animal like me quite unnecessarily. You are expected to show compassion and not cruelty towards animals as a rational man belonging to the higher species of creation. Anyway mortals cannot go beyond this limit with impunity. If you persist in your adventure you can jump over me."

Bhimasena was amused at the advice tendered by the monkey and replied, "I am not afraid of crossing this limit. I can easily leap over this mountain like the great Hanuman who crossed the ocean of a hundred yojanas in length in one leap. I am the son of the god of wind and so the younger brother of Hanuman. As you belong to the same species, I have a sentimental objection to jump over you." The monkey replied, "I am glad to know that you are the mighty son of the mighty god of wind and thank you for the consideration shown to me. My age is against me and I cannot move; please lift my tail aside and make way for yourself. Be as gentle as you are strong. How sweet is strength combined with compassion!" Bhima tried to lift the tail with his left hand and failed. He used his right hand and tried to lift it with all his might, but failed miserably. In spite of using his immense strength the tail could not be moved even an inch. Bhima tried again sweating profusely till he was completely exhausted as he was not a man to accept defeat easily. Eventually Bhima realised that the animal confronting him was not an ordinary ape. He said to the monkey, "Who are you? Are you a god or a Gandharva or my elder brother Hanuman who came to test me? I crave your indulgence; please forgive me and speak out. I am a strong man and I know how to respect a stronger one." The monkey replied, "My dear brother, I am Hanuman. I wanted to see you and I have utilised this opportunity. I know your strength and bravery and I am very much impressed with your sweet sentiments towards me. This is

the land of the Yakshas and it is dangerous to go further. The lake where the golden lotuses grow is there nearby.”

Bhima was overwhelmed with joy and bowed to the feet of Hanuman who embraced him and blessed him with victory. Bhima said to Hanuman, “I want to see your form in which you leapt over the wide ocean. Please show me your real stature.” Hanuman smiled. Presently the monkey grew to astronomical heights. Bhima was thrilled and said, “This is the most fortunate moment in my life, I request you to assume your concise shape.” Hanuman contracted his body and said, “Ask any boon and I will grant it. Bhima said, “Great brother, your blessings are enough. Pandavas are destined to fight the Kauravas eventually; we want inspiration from you.”

Hanuman said, “In any endeavour, be it war or peace, inspiration rather than perspiration is the main ingredient of success. I will be present on the flag of Arjuna’s chariot. When you roar in the battle like a lion, my voice shall join yours and strike terror into the enemy heart. I wish you success.” Bhima took leave of Hanuman and went to collect the lotuses.

The lake was heavily guarded by the yakshas, who said to Bhima, “The lord of this lake is Kubera and if you want some lotuses better you request him.” Bhima replied, “This lake is a gift of geography and Kubera has no right to lord over it.” A fierce fight ensued and Bhima killed many yakshas including their commander and collected the golden lotuses. Meanwhile, Dharmaputra and party came to the place in search of Bhima who presented the flowers to Draupadi.

Yudhisthira told his brother Bhima not to embark on dangerous adventures single-handed and said, “Please remember, that use of force is the last resort of a wise hero and it should not be used before exploring all other methods. Energies should not be frittered away for frivolous purposes. Strength should be used choosing the proper place, appropriate time and worthy occasion. Unworthy courage is worse than cowardice. It is my duty as your elder brother to give this caution to you.”

The pilgrimage party pitched their tents on Mount Malyavanta after they moved from Mount Gandhamadana. On the eighth day of their stay, Dhaumya called Dharmaja and pointing his finger to the north said, "That is Mount Meru around which the sun, the moon and the stars circle. The paramount trio of the universe, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara live there surrounded by celestial beings." They stayed there for over a month awaiting the return of Arjuna from the land of the gods. One day, the chariot of Indra driven by Matali appeared on the horizon and descended on Mount Malyavanta and Arjuna emerged from the chariot like the rising sun out of the eastern horizon. He bowed to Dhaumya, Romasa, Dharmaja, Bhima and embraced the twins who bowed to him and enquired after the welfare of Draupadi who was extremely happy at his home coming. The Pandava brothers and Draupadi were awake late into the night exchanging their experiences.

57

The Python

The Pandavas who came back to the Himalayas decided to stay there for some time. Ghatotkacha was asked to go back. Romasa took leave of them to go to heaven. One day, while Bhima was wandering in the forest, he was over-powered suddenly by a huge python. Dharmaputra waited for Bhima for some time and then went into the forest searching for him. At one place he found Bhima in the tight grip of the python, and was overwhelmed with sorrow and surprise. He said to the python, "Great soul, you are obviously not a mere python. I am Yūdhishthira, son of Kunti and the person caught by you is Bhima who is equal to a thousand elephants in strength. If you have caught him for merely satisfying your hunger please leave him, we can provide you with as much meat as you want." The python replied, "I am Nahusha, I am one of your ancestors. I performed one hundred Asvamedha yagas and I was elevated to the position of Indra and in his absence ruled over the kingdom of heaven. I am born as a python due to the curse of the great sage Agastya. If you give correct answers to my questions, I will get redemption and your brother will be released automatically."

Dharmaputra said, "Venerable sire, it is as easy to put questions as it is difficult to answer them. My limited intellectual

horizon is in inverse proportion to your versatile experience. However, please put your questions. I will try to answer them to the best of my capacity and light with all the sincerity at my command as it is a question of life and death for my brother, whom I value more than my life." Nahusha put the questions one after another and Dharmaputra answered them serially—

Nahusha : Who is a brahmin?

Dharmaja: A brahmin is one who is a votary of truth and forbearance, cleanliness and kindness, penance and philanthropy and he should view pleasure or pain, prosperity or poverty with equanimity.

Nahusha : Suppose the above qualities are not found in a person born in the brahmin fold. How do you evaluate him?

Dharmaja: Devoid of desirable qualities, a person though born in the brahmin fold is not a brahmin.

Nahusha : How can we distinguish a brahmin from others?

Dharmaja: A brahmin can be identified by his character and conduct. A brahmin must guard his character carefully, character is real wealth for him. If wealth is lost nothing is lost; if character is lost everything is lost.

Nahusha : Suppose the above desirable characters are found in a sudra—how do you evaluate him?

Dharmaja: Such a sudra is the best of the sudras and is equivalent to a brahmin.

Nahusha : A person though untruthful and unpleasant, we are told, verily goes to higher regions of the other world, if he is non-violent. Why is non-violence given such a prominence in the principles of righteousness?

Dharmaja: Non-violence is the best of Dharmas. Non-violence should be observed not only as the best policy but as the supreme creed. There are three gradations, the superhuman, human and the sub-human spheres in which the soul will be oscillating according to the actions performed corresponding to the three species, the gods, homo sapiens and the animals. Man, if non-violent goes to the godly sphere. Otherwise his soul something takes rebirth in the animal kingdom. So man is something that shall be surpassed and he should cultivate the divine in him and curb the cruel animal in him."

Nahusha said, "I am pleased with your answers. I am releasing your brother forthwith and releasing myself from this mundane bondage and going to the higher regions of self-realisation."

Dharmaputra learnt many lessons on spiritual evolution from Nahusha who blessed him with success. Dharmaputra said to Bhima, "My dear brother, today you are a true hero. You have come out of the jaws of Death, devoid of egotism, forgetting your formidable prowess for once. Strength with humility is sublime; humility without strength is unreal. Now your strength is real and hereafter you can face life with courage tempered by humility. The python is your preceptor; our illustrious ancestor has taken the form of this python to teach you the lesson of humility which he has learnt by paying a very heavy price. Fools learn bitter lessons by themselves while wise people learn from the experiences of other people. Let us profit from Nahusha." Dharmaputra, the moral giant was the only person who was competent to tender such advice to Bhima proud of his giant strength and he tendered the advice at the correct time for Bhima to be benefitted.

58

Markandeya

According to the ancient Indian tradition, Markandeya is the sage immortal privileged to be the eyewitness to the cyclic creation, destruction and re-creation process of the universe. The concept of pralaya - universal destruction and deluge is not peculiar to ancient Indian culture. All sciences including astronomy, foresee a point of time, of course, after the lapse of millions of years, the end of creation. According to the ancient Indian concept, the universal creation and destruction are a cyclic process as the alternating night and day. At the time of pralaya, the forces of nature explode causing universal destruction. Twelve suns blaze simultaneously and the whole creation will be reduced to ashes. Afterwards clouds formed by the preceding heat gather over the sky and cause torrential rains which deluge the whole globe. The creator, Brahma then releases great gales which scatter the clouds into the vast recesses of space. Narayana, the almighty god, taking the form of a baby rests on a banyan leaf for thousands of years till

he starts creation afresh. At that time of creation after His spiritual sleep which is termed Yoganidra in ancient Indian scriptures, a lotus sprouts from his navel and again Brahma the creator is born in it. So goes the story of creation *ad infinitum*.

Markandeya came to Dvaitavana, the forest where the Pandavas were residing and narrated many stories to Dharmaputra. Romasa and Markandeya share the major part of Aranyaparva the largest treatise in the Mahabharata. One of the remarkable passages in the Mahabharata is the description given by Markandeya about the shape of things to come in the Kali Yuga. The passage is full of prophetic forebodings and some of the predictions proved true with astounding precision.

In Krita Yuga, the goddess of Dharma taking the form of the celestial cow stands on the four feet. In Treta Yuga, she stands on three feet; that means there would be 25 per cent corruption and 75 per cent righteousness. In Dvapara Yuga, she stands on two legs only and the ratio is 50 to 50. In Kaliyuga, she has to stand on one leg only i.e. the ratio of righteousness to corruption is 25 : 75. In Kaliyuga, there will be around degradation and degeneracy; truth will be the first casualty and the life expectancy will diminish gradually. Class hatred will grow and life will be marked by bitter competition and bizarre conflicts. People will become bellicose and brutal, cruel and crooked and idealism will be given a good-bye. The brahmins will stop the study of scriptures and vedas and the sudras will take up tapas. There will be confusing admixture of various castes. The warrior caste, the Kshatriyas, will lose their courage and character and choose to live as slaves. There will be diminishing returns from crops and everything will be adulterated. The brahmins will enter the fields of commerce and cultivation. Atheistic philosophies will be on the ascendancy. Rationalists will dominate all walks of life criticising the scriptures and denouncing the vedas. Sacrifices will become outdated. Commerce will be another name for corruption. Fear of sin and faith in virtue will go. There will be complete breakdown of law and order. Police will have collusion with criminals and the rulers will be overwhelmed with helplessness. Wars will be fought with ever increasing devastation and ultramodern weapons of mass destruction will be invented. Food will be sold and maidens will give birth to children at the incredible age of eight years. Family

ties will be completely broken, values will change and all loyal ties will be forgotten; even the sacred bonds between the preceptor and the disciple will be violated. Wine, wealth and women will be objects of adoration. The barbarians will seize all seats of power and authority. Righteousness will be publicly relegated to the back ground and unabashed corruption will be the recognised way of life.

At long last when degeneration and depravity reach their zenith, God Vishnu will incarnate himself in the village of Sambala, kill the Mleccha hordes that have captured the seats of authority and re-establish righteousness and inaugurate once again Kritayuga.

59

The Vanity Fair

Some brahmins who lived along with the Pandavas in the forest came to Dhritarashtra and told them how the born princes were undergoing hardships and privations due to man-made misfortune. The brahmanas being pro-Pandava blamed the blind king that he did not avert the catastrophe. Dhritarashtra was suffering from not only guilty conscience but also the fear that his sons would reap the consequences. However Duhsasana, Karna and Sakuni headed by Duryodhana were gloating over the so-called sad plight and severe sufferings of the Pandavas. They wanted to shine by contrast by going to Dvaitavana, where the Pandavas were residing as commoners in exile on the pretext of a hunting mission exhibiting all their royalty and riches, pomp and power attended by the aristocratic nobility and the imperial armies, the cavalcade of chariots and cavalry, courtiers and courtezans. A grand programme was prepared on a festive scale for the royal march to Dvaitavana ostensibly for the sake of hunting. But there was only one snag. They feared that Dhritarashtra would not accept the proposal.

Next morning Karna came out with a novel notion. "Protection of the cows is one of the foremost duties of the state", he announced to Duryodhana, "and Dvaitavana is infested with wild beasts. Large hordes of imperial kine are stationed there; the head

of the department of cattle and animal husbandry can be asked to represent to the king to send a hunting expedition to Dvaitavana for killing the wild beasts and protecting the kine." "Excellent idea" exclaimed Sakuni, "the king cannot refuse permission for the protection of the sacred cow." They approached Dhritarashtra, taking with them a cowherd named "Samanga" who was tutored and briefed fully. Samanga told the blind king, "Dvaitavana is the best place on the globe for rearing the kine but of late the forest is infested with wild beasts which prey on kine. I have come to request you to send prince Duryodhana there on a hunting expedition for the sake of destroying the wild beasts and protecting the cattle." Duryodhana said that he would lead the hunting party as it was the primary duty of a prince to afford protection to the cows.

But Dhritarashtra had his own misgivings. He knew that the Pandavas were residing at Dvaitavana. He said, "The Pandavas are there smarting under the humiliation of defeat and disgrace. Till now, Dharmaputra is able to control them but if you go there, their pent up wrath may burst out. I advise you to live in peace and security till the pledged period is completed. It is not wise to disturb the sleeping dogs; then it is much more foolish to provoke the hungry lions by dashing into their dens. I regret that I did not pay heed to Vidura's words of wisdom. It is not because of poverty that we have driven the Pandavas to the forest; we became prey to covetousness and we grabbed more than what we can gulp because of giddy greed. How can we escape the wrath of Bhima? I hear that Arjuna has acquired supermissiles and superior weapons. If warfare means valour, Pandavas have it in abundance; if warfare means weaponry they are game for it too. Mischief and manipulation can win a game of dice and certainly not a mighty war. If victory means something more than mere human effort, Sri Krishna is on their side. Bhima has killed Jarasandha, Hidimba, Baka and Kimmira. Why should you fall into the fiery wrath of Bhima like moths? I cannot grant you your foolish request."

Karna stood up and said, "I request your majesty to give us permission to perform the sacred duty of protecting the cows. I solemnly promise that our march to the Dvaitavana is an excursion and not an expedition, and never a fight. I assure you that we have no intention to touch even a blade of grass in the possession of the

Pandavas. We go there to protect the cows, certainly not for provoking the Pandavas.”

Sakuni added, “I hope Karna has allayed the fears of the king. Non-violent show of our strength is necessary to demoralise the opposition. I may say that Dharmaputra will never be provoked easily and act in haste before fulfilling the pledge. Prince Duryodhana is not a child and he cannot remain a minor behind the blind king for ever. It is the duty of a father to encourage Duryodhana, the heir apparent and groom him for the great responsibilities ahead. The specific request which has come from the chief of the cowherds from Dvaitavana should not be brushed aside.”

Dhritarashtra who had the propensity to speak like an angel but act like the devil, fell a victim to the preplanned persuasion and granted permission to Duryodhana and the party to proceed to Dvaitavana for the avowed purpose of protecting the cows.

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The Bitter Boomerang

Preparations on a grand scale were made for the proposed march. Special arrangements were made for the spectacular display of pomp and power. Sakuni said to Duryodhana, “Let Panchali feel jealous of your splendour and glory. Your munificence and majesty have already become proverbial with the people at large.” Duryodhana was pleased and the royal party started followed by the four divisions of the army, the chariots, the elephants, the cavalry and the foot soldiers, important citizens and courtiers, musicians and poets, dancers and dramatic troupes. Thousands of tents were pitched in the Dvaitavana. Special rest houses were constructed for Duryodhana and Duhsasana, Karna and Sakuni. Orders were issued to set up the central control camp on the banks of a pond in the vicinity of the Pandava settlement.

Royal auditors were entrusted with the work of inspecting the cattle and verification of the stock.

The advance guards sent to set up the central control camp returned to Duryodhana and complained that a Gandharva prince,

Chitrasena by name was camping at the specified spot and that his men obstructed the Kaurava soldiers. "Throw them out" was the instantaneous orders issued by Duryodhana in a tone of defiant arrogance. In fact, the mighty army of the Kauravas could easily pull out the petty tents pitched near the placid pond. But when the matter was reported to Chitrasena the real fight ensued and he drove the Kaurava army into retreat.

The matter was again reported to Duryodhana who came abruptly to the battle-front with Karna and Duhsasana. Chitrasena used his magical powers and very soon, the Kauravas lost their chariots and weapons, Karna retreated in great haste to his rest house. But Duryodhana remained on the battle-field with adamant foolishness and Chitrasena took him captive and placed him in his chariot hand-cuffed and bound. The Kaurava ministers ran to the Pandavas in panic. Yudhisthira assured the ministers of prompt help. Bhimasena was very much delighted to learn about the defeat and disgrace of Duryodhana and exclaimed in great exultation, "I felt that god was sleeping all these days. Now I see he has waited for the opportune moment. What a poetic justice! Hearty congratulations to the Gandharvas. Let us be delighted. The diligent Gandharvas have discharged unwittingly our outstanding duty."

Dharmaputra scolded Bhimasena for his silly amusement at the sad plight of Duryodhana and said to him, "One should not rejoice at the unhappiness of even the worst enemy. Duryodhana is our cousin. Without any consideration of retaliation or reconciliation it is our pious duty as well as prudence to go to his rescue. I order you as king and elder brother to go along with your brothers and seek his release by peaceful persuasion or by force if there is no alternative." Bhima together with his younger brothers went and attacked the Gandharva forces. Chitrasena retaliated with force. Arjuna told him, "Please release our cousin Duryodhana forthwith. This is the command of Yudhisthira." Chitrasena doubted the sincerity of Pandavas and thought he could score a prestigious victory easily. But soon he was disillusioned as he was overpowered by Arjuna, and sued for peace. Arjuna said to him, "We have no quarrel with you. Please come to Yudhisthira and beg his pardon." Chitrasena agreed and he was received with due hospitality by Dharmaputra who requested him to release

Duryodhana who was immediately set at liberty along with Duhsasana and other captives.

Duryodhana stood hanging down his head in shame. Dharmaputra gave him a comfortable seat and said to him, "I do not know why you have undertaken this adventure obviously without the knowledge of Bhishma or Drona. Arrogance usually underestimates the strength of the opposite camp and comes to humiliation. Pride goeth before fall. You ought not to have attacked the Gandharvas without any foresight. Alright, please go home. Please do not brood over this sad episode any more." Duryodhana departed to the rest house followed by his party.

Karna who retreated from the battle-front, never expected that Duryodhana would keep on fighting with the Gandharvas nor did he anticipate the intervention of the Pandavas. Duryodhana said to Duhsasana, "I am not returning to Hastinapura. I am undertaking a fast unto death." Turning to Karna he said, "Duhsasana shall be crowned king, I expect you to stand by him." Duhsasana fell at the feet of his elder brother and prayed to give up the fast. He told him, "I want to be your follower; if you die, I will also fast unto death, rather than wear the crown." Duryodhana said, "The sharp shafts of Chitrasena did not hurt me as grievously as the sweet sentiments of Dharmaputra. The poison of his patronising platitudes has hurt me beyond recovery. Now I prefer death at the hands of Chitrasena. Yudhishthira's bark is worse than the bite of the Gandharvas." Karna tried to console him saying, "Dvaitavana falls under the jurisdiction of your kingdom. The Pandavas who are residing there are your subjects. It is the fundamental duty of the subjects to fight for their king. If you so choose you can reward them. Look at the Pandavas. No one undertook any fast unto death even when they were exposed to public humiliation and shame. If you persist in your decision you will be helping the Pandavas and exposing all of us to their mercy."

Sakuni said, "My dear nephew, you are unwittingly getting into the trap laid by the Pandavas. They know your self-respect and hypersensibility. Chitrasena is a close friend of the Pandavas and is a subordinate of Indra, the father of Arjuna. The Gandharvas have outmanoeuvred Karna by black magic and

captured you when you were out of guard. They can never kill you; they will be very happy if you commit suicide.”

But Duryodhana continued the fast. On that night he had a dream in which he was transported to some other world where superhuman beings promised full support to him in the war against the Pandavas and predicted his victory.

Next day early in the morning, Karna, after performing his morning prayers, resplendent with the radiance of the rising sun, came to Duryodhana and swore taking the sword into his hands solemnly that he would kill Arjuna on the battlefield in the fourteenth year.

Duryodhana was delighted and said to him, “I am giving up the fast and I have decided to live to see you fulfil your onerous oath creditably.” The royal party returned to Hastinapura.

61

The Vaishnavayaga

Duryodhana was suffering from inferiority complex after his defeat at the hands of the Gandharvas. One day Bhishma said to Duryodhana confidentially, “I am sorry to learn that you have gone to Dvaitavana on wrong advice and reaped the consequences. Dharmaputra true to his title “Ajatasatru” has no enemy on the earth and he has come to your rescue. You have seen with your own eyes how the son of the suta, the brazen braggart, has behaved on the battlefield. Why do you still entertain futile hopes in him? I advise you to make up with the Pandavas and all of you can live in peace and plenty.” Duryodhana was prepared to do anything else to redeem his reputation, except making up with the Pandavas. He did not reply to the Pitamaha and left his company abruptly. Bhishma was offended but kept silent.

Duryodhana consulted his brother Duhsasana, Sakuni and Karna on their future course of action. They decided to perform the Rajasuyayaga on a grand scale. However, the royal priest said, “As long as Yudhisthira is alive you cannot perform Rajasuya without conquering him on the battlefield. Anyway Vaishnavayaga is considered to be more auspicious than the

Rajasuyayaga, and you can perform it. You can excel Dharmaputra by giving greater gifts to the brahmins and scholars." Elaborate arrangements were made for the Vaishnava sacrifice after obtaining the permission and blessings of Dhritarashtra, Bhisma, Drona and other dignitaries. Karna started on Digvijaya yatra, the traditional conquest of the four quarters of the country. He conquered the kings who opposed him and levied tribute from them and returned to Hastinapura in all glory and splendour. Duryodhana congratulated him, saying, "My dear friend, you are equal to all the Pandavas put together in prowess and achieved the conquest of the four quarters single-handed." The Vaishnava sacrifice was performed on a grand scale. Many people came to Dhritarashtra and complimented him saying, "The sacrifice performed by your son Duryodhana is unrivalled. Everything was regulated with mechanical precision and there is not a hitch or hindrance anywhere. Harischandra of yore and Yudhishthira of our times have performed Rajasuya sacrifice. But Vaishnavayaga surpasses them in execution and elegance, grandeur and glory." However, there were some people who felt that the sacrifice performed by Duryodhana did not come up to the level of Rajasuya of Yudhishthira.

All the kings in India from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari attended the sacrifice of Duryodhana whose exemplary hospitality was appreciated. Invitation was extended to the Pandavas by Duryodhana welcoming them to the sacrifice through a special messenger. Yudhishthira told the messenger, "Please offer my hearty thanks first and my congratulations next to my brother Duryodhana for the great sacrifice he has undertaken. Please tell him that I, as a member of the Kuru royal family, am proud of him. I am glad he has enhanced the prestige of our family." Bhima said to the messenger, "Tell Duryodhana, we are coming in the fourteenth year to attend the most bloody sacrifice in the world in which the Dhartarashtras will be killed at the altar of the battlefield. We cannot come now." However, Dharmaputra pacified the messenger saying, that the Pandavas could not leave the forest in view of their pledged word." The messenger communicated both the messages to the Kauravas. Karna said to Duryodhana, "Please listen to me, I will see that you perform the Rajasuya in the fourteenth year. I swear solemnly; let the sun rise in the west, let the oceans go dry, let the stars fall from heaven,

I will not care, I will kill Arjuna on the battlefield and see that you perform the Rajasuya on a grander scale than that of Harischandra." Duryodhana embraced Karna in ecstasy merging their two souls inwardly into one, in spite of their two outward bodies. Yudhisthira who heard of the solemn oath taken by Radheya, born with natural armour and ear rings and an ever radiant halo around his head, spent many sleepless nights. Duryodhana quite conscious of the inevitable war and its uncertain outcome was trying to please one and all with lavish gifts and magnificent munificence. He was bestowing special care and respect on Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama to please them with an eye on the future war.

Dharmaputra one night experienced a curious dream. The animals of Dvaitavana came to him with melancholy faces and represented to him, "Compassionate soul, your brothers are daily hunting us rather indiscriminately. You are having a huge establishment and every day you are having a large number of guests who are being feasted on our flesh. Our population has greatly diminished after your advent here. So, may we request you to move to some other place and spare our lives. Conservation of wild life is one of the cardinal principles of state craft." He narrated the dream to his brothers who said that those words were the reflexes of his own scruples and they were prepared to go to any other place of his choice. Finally the Pandavas selected the Kamyaka forest with which they were already familiar and moved to a place in the vicinity of the hermitage of Trinabindu.

62

The Abduction

One day the Pandavas asked Dhaumya and Draupadi to stay in the hermitage of Trinabindu and went for hunting.

Jayadratha, the king of Sindhu and Sauvira, and son-in-law of Dhritarashtra was marching together with his retinue and armies to Salva to marry his daughter. He saw Draupadi standing at the door way of the hermitage as static lightning observing the passage of the royal entourage. He was struck with the beauty of Draupadi and sent his bosom friend Kotikasya to fetch her. He came to

Draupadi and said to her, "Most beautiful lady, who are you? What are the letters lucky to be incorporated in your name? Who is he that is fortunate enough to be your husband? By the by, are you a mortal maiden? Or, are you the goddess of this forest? Or, are you Sachi, the wife of Indra just descended to the earth for a diversion? Or, are you the consort of Lord Vishnu, coming to the forest to punish your husband out of pseudo-anger for his indiscretion in courtship? I am Kotikasya, the friend of Jayadratha who is looking at you from the yonder chariot. He has sent me to find out who you are and fetch you to his presence." Draupadi was perplexed and composed her self leaving the Kadamba twig she was holding and said to him, "I know, you are the son of Suratha, born in the reputed dynasty of Sibi. I know Jayadratha as well, the son of Subala. I am Panchali, the consort of Pancha Pandavas. As you are both related to my husbands who will be arriving presently, you can partake of our hospitality and go. Now that you have known who I am, I hope you will observe the royal etiquette in speech and manners." Kotikasya went back to Saindhava Jayadratha and told him that the lady he wanted to know so eagerly was none other than Panchali, the wife of the Pandavas. Saindhava blind with passion entered the apartment of Draupadi like a wolf getting into the lion's den. He accosted her asking, "Noble lady, I hope your husbands are keeping good health", in accordance with the traditional etiquette. She replied, "The Pandava heroes are quite alright, hale and healthy. They will soon be here, returning from the daily round of hunting. You can have a hearty feast with delicious meat and I am sure my husbands will receive you with the customary hospitality due to their brother-in-law. You are a brother to me, having married Dussala the daughter of Dhritarashtra." Saindhava replied with a mischievous smile, "Beautiful daughter of Drupada, why do you waste your loveliness and youth here in this forest in the company of shameless beggars? I am a king; you are a gem of a lady; I deserve you; come with me, leave the wretched Pandavas to their fate in the forest. I will treat you as the queen of my heart. Come, please get into my chariot." Draupadi wanted to gain some time till the arrival of the Pandavas and said to him, "You are born of a noble family; it is unworthy of you to covet a family lady. I am, as you know, happily married and I have five children. Better control yourself; I may tell you, you will reap the consequences if you

transgress the limits of decency and decorum. You cannot hope to offend the Pandavas with impunity." Saindhava replied, "I do not like to listen to your tall talk. Please get into the chariot or the royal elephant, I can vanquish the Pandavas in a minute." Draupadi sternly asked him to get out. He caught hold of her and placed her on his chariot and drove away. Draupadi raised a big hue and cry and Dhaumya who heard her sobbings and loud lamentations pursued the chariot running after it like a mad man.

The Pandavas returned from the hunting expedition and the maid Dhatreyika told Indradyumna that Draupadi was abducted by Saindhava. Immediately the Pandavas started fully equipped with weapons and armoury and chased Saindhava. Saindhava was vanquished in the bitter fight that followed. His armies were completely routed and many commanders were killed by the Pandava brothers including the twelve Sauvira warriors. Saindhava's life was spared by the specific instructions given by Dharmaputra who said, "He is the husband of our sister, Dussala. Let us not render her a widow."

However, Draupadi demanded that Saindhava should be killed. A *via media* bargain was struck. Saindhava's head was shaved completely and Arjuna said to him, "If you fall at the feet of Dharmaputra, we will spare your life." He fell at the feet of Yudhishthira and begged his pardon, and he was set at liberty.

Saindhava smarting under the great humiliation inflicted on him by the Pandavas performed penance to please Lord Siva who appeared before him and asked him to seek any boon of his choice. He said, "Please grant me the prowess to conquer the Pandavas." Siva smiled and said, "I cannot myself conquer Arjuna. However, you will conquer the rest of the Pandavas on the battlefield on a single occasion." So saying, Siva disappeared.

After the attempted abduction of Draupadi by Jayadratha was foiled by the Pandavas, Markandeya came to them once again and narrated the story of Ramayana completely including the abduction of Sita by Ravana. It is fairly a detailed description - a very good epitomisation of the Ramayana. Another story related by Markandeya is the story of Savitri who married Satyavan, knowing full well that her husband would meet with premature

death. However, she was able to revive her dead husband back to life from Yama, the god of death. The hero and heroine were living in the forest as the father of Satyavan lost the kingdom.

Exiled life in the forest and the hardships and privations undergone by the heroes and heroines were the common factors in the four classical stories—the story of Nala and Damayanti, Rama and Sita, Satyavan and Savitri, Pandavas and Draupadi. In all these stories, the heroes are idealists and victims of a vicious fate. Owing to a conspiracy of circumstances, they were obliged to endure untold miseries with almost superhuman fortitude, because of their nobility of character. All the heroines were devoted wives, the personification of grace and chastity and underwent untold privations for no fault of theirs. The criticism often laid at the door of India is that there are no tragedies in her ancient literature. Superficially the criticism seems to be valid. But if we probe into the problem analytically, the criticism is absolutely unjustified. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two immortal epics of India are tragedies pure and simple, not to mention the other classical stories referred above.

63

The Classic Quiz

The chapter pertaining to the classical quiz in the Mahabharata entitled “Yakshaprasnas” has been very popular with the scholars across the centuries. The questionnaire of the mythical Yaksha is subtle as well as sophisticated and matching answers of Yudhisthira are conspicuous with sobriety and sublimity.

As the twelfth year of the exile was drawing to a close, a brahmin complained to the Pandavas that his “Arani”, the wooden implement with which he was preparing fire every day for chanting his sacrificial prayers was carried away by a deer. It was entangled in its horns. The Pandavas started in quest of the deer and the Arani. They were exhausted but could not find the deer in spite of their hectic search. They sat under the shade of a tree. Bhima cursed their fate. He said, “For every simple and slight thing we must move. We have no servants to depute even for sundry services. We provided hundreds of Aranis to the brahmins

as free gifts. Now all of us have started on this silly mission as if it is a conquest of the whole globe; still we are at our wit's end to find it." Arjuna quipped, "Why blame the fate for all our woes. Man is the architect of his own fortune, let us blame ourselves. Anyway I am quite exhausted and I am thirsty." Bhima said, "I am hungry as well." Yudhisthira asked Nakula to climb up the tree and locate any freshwater pool nearby. Nakula climbed up the tree and said, "I see cranes flying and I can recognise some water plants grown to a great height. Certainly there must be a pool nearby in the southern direction."

Yudhisthira asked Nakula to go and fetch water. Nakula said, "I am equally thirsty, I will quench my thirst first and then bring you plenty of water." He reached the pool and wanted to sip the placid water. A stern voice from the air was heard to say, "Please do not rush in. I am the Yaksha, lord of the pool, you cannot drink the water with impunity. First, answer my questions." Nakula did not pay heed to the warning; he drank the water, and immediately fell on the ground unconscious.

As Nakula did not return Yudhisthira asked Sahadeva to go. It was the same story again. Next, Arjuna went and the same history repeated itself. Surprised and puzzled Yudhisthira asked Bhima to go. Bhima went to the pond and when he heard the warning, he replied, "You wretched Yaksha, come-out and I will break your head. Obviously, you are a coward and do not want to show your face; first let me quench my thirst drinking the placid water of this pool, a natural geographical gift of God, No one can claim this as his private property." He gazed around and found no body and sipped the water. At once his great strength slipped from him like a loose garment and he too fell unconscious on the ground along with his brothers.

Finally Yudhisthira reached the sylvan pool and saw his brothers lying unconscious on the ground and they looked like scattered flag poles with tattered colours remaining as remnants of a recent festival. He could not control himself at the ghastly sight and wept aloud stroking their limbs and kissing their faces. The mighty heroes were lying motionless on the ground, serene and silent; there were no marks of injury on their bodies and they looked like people who slept in peace and there were no traces of

anger or agony in their faces to indicate any fight or friction. He found no marks or foot-prints of man or beast on the sands. He was overwhelmed by the mysterious tragedy. At last he controlled his sorrow and sobbing which made him more and more thirsty. He slowly descended into the enchanted pool. The stern voice repeated the warning and added, "Yudhisthira, your arrogant brothers did not heed my warning and faced death. Please answer my questions and afterwards you can quench your thirst." Dharmaputra replied, "My brothers were not afraid of death. Now I welcome it. Death is the only comforter of him whom hope has already forsaken. However, it is my duty to answer your questions. Great intellectuals, saints and savants from all quarters of the globe came to me to answer my questions for the last twelve years and I must try to deserve the trouble taken by them. I want to please everybody including your august self if I can help it. With such a spirit of holy humility I invite you to put me as many questions as you please." Yudhisthira realised that; that was the best way—if there was any—to redeem the situation.

The invisible Yaksha posed a series of questions to Yudhisthira in quick succession and he answered them all one by one. Some of the typical questions and answers are given below.

Q. "What makes the sun shine every day and on what support does he stand?"

Ans: The sun shines every day by the cosmic power of the almighty Brahman and he stands supported by truth.

Q. "What is it that comes to the rescue of a man in danger?"

Ans: Courage salvages a man from dangers.

Q. By what study does a man become wise?

Ans: Man does not become wise by any amount of study and theoretical knowledge. Wisdom is acquired by association with experienced people.

Q. Who is a living corpse?

Ans: The selfish glutton who eats without offering due hospitality to guests, servants and parents and celestial beings is a living corpse.

Q. What is it that is weightier and more sustaining than the earth?

Ans: Mother.

Q. What is it that is higher than the sky?

Ans: Father.

Q. What is it that is swifter than the wind?

Ans: Mind is swifter than the wind.

Q. What is it that is more blighted than the withered straw?

Ans: Worry-worn heart.

Q. Who are the kith and kin to the following:

1. Traveller
2. sick-person
3. house holder
4. a dead person?

Ans: 1. Learning 2. Doctor 3. wife 4. Deeds of Dharma—one performed while living.

Q. What is happiness?

Ans: Character is happiness.

Q. By what loss does a man become rich?

Ans: By the loss of desire, a person verily becomes rich.

Q. What is the axis of righteousness?

Ans: Philanthropy is the axis of righteousness.

Q. Which is the supreme ideal?

Ans: Non-violence is the supreme ideal.

Q. What is the loss which gains joy?

Ans: Anger lost is joy gained.

Q. How is the world sustained?

Ans: The world is sustained by good citizens.

Q. How does a man get universal approbation?

Ans: By giving up pride, a man gets universal acceptance and approbation.

Q. Who is a real brahmin, and how do you identify him? By birth or behaviour?

Ans: Nobody is a brahmin by mere birth or learning. He can be identified by his character and conduct.

Q. What is the greatest wonder of the world?

Ans: Every man is a mortal but more often than not he forgets it though he sees many men dying every day. That is the greatest wonder of the world.

Q. Whom do you reckon as the zenith of creation?

Ans: A balanced man who has found his equilibrium between the pairs of opposites, like pleasure and pain, riches and poverty, hope and despair, optimism and pessimism etc.

The Yaksha was pleased with the answers given by Dharmaputra and said to him, "Great soul, I appreciate your answers, I wish to revive to life one of your dead brothers, whom do you want to be brought back to life.?" Yudhisthira pondered over the proposition for a time and said, "Invisible god, let Nakula come back to life." The Yaksha asked him, "Noble king, I hear that Bhima who is credited with the strength of sixteen thousand elephants is dearest to your heart, Arjuna who has acquired the most powerful missiles may be a better choice. Please think over and let me know your considered opinion."

Dharmaputra replied, "Revered Sir, My father had two wives—Kunti and Madri. I am alive being the eldest son of Kunti, Nakula the eldest son of Madri must live in the interests of natural justice. Ultimately, I feel, it is righteousness that can protect me, not Bhima or Arjuna." Yaksha said, "I am very much pleased with your sense of propriety and rectitude. All your brothers who have enjoyed supreme repose and rest here, all the while, shall come back to life with renewed vigour and vitality. I will give you one more boon and you can choose."

Dharmaputra without any further thought said, "I want the Arani of the Brahmin taken away by the deer." The Yaksha said, "Yudhisthira I am no Yaksha, I am Yama, the god of righteousness. I came to test you. I am happy you stood my test. Where is the deer? I came in the form of the deer and took away the Arani to lure you to this pond. Here is the Arani, and you can give it back to the brahmin."

The Pandavas fell at the feet of Yama and bowed to him reverentially. Yama blessed them and said, "You have completed your period of exile and I bless that you would complete the period of your incognito as well successfully. Your enemies will not be able to discover you. I know that the war is inevitable and you will gain resounding victory." So saying, he disappeared.

The Pandavas completed the period of their exile—twelve long weary years, languishing in the forest devoid of all luxuries and royal comforts. However, when the balance sheet was struck the assets outweighed the liabilities. The Pandavas were graduated at the great forest university of fortitude and forbearance, adversity and agony, trials and tribulations. They enjoyed the company of saints and savants. Bhima met his elder brother, the mythical

Hanuman. Arjuna acquired the Pasupata; Nakula and Sahadeva emerged stronger from the probation of discipline and diligence.

The Pandavas looked forward to plan their future with supreme self-confidence and approached the sage Dhaumya for

his guidance and blessings. Yudhishthira took leave of the brahmins, who were with him in the forest all these twelve years, with folded hands saying, "The time has come for us to live in disguise without being detected by the spies of Duryodhana. We take leave of you with a heavy heart. We were obliged to live in exile by a cruel quirk of fate; you have chosen to share our misfortune. Our misfortune has been metamorphosed into the most memorable opportunity—the rare privilege of intimate association with intellectual giants and spiritual stalwarts, because of your gracious presence and we could add the fourth dimension to our personalities. Your company has been ample compensation for the loss of our kingdom." Yudhishthira's voice was choked with emotion as he was bidding farewell to the brahmins and said finally, "We request you to shower your auspicious blessings on us." All the Pandavas bowed to the brahmins individually. The brahmins said, "We all bless you all with long life, prosperity and ultimate victory.

Once upon a time Indra, the great king of the gods, disguised himself as a brahmin and lived in the Nisadha country when he suffered a set back at the hands of his enemies and emerged victorious in the end. Lord Vishnu has descended to the earth a number of times in the guise of a mortal for punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous. Agni, the god of fire, hid himself in the waters for the sake of the gods. The sun sets every day only to rise again. The institution of disguise has been sanctified by great souls, since hoary past to achieve sacred goals. We depart today only to be united with you ere long on the eve of your victory."

The brahmins departed chanting holy hymns of success and prosperity.

VIRATA PARVA

64

Message of Dhaumya

The Pandavas gathered round Dhaumya in a secluded spot in the forest to chalk out their future course of action confidentially. Dhaumya said, "You must seek the suitable disguises. The world is full of square pegs in round holes. Any avocation is a drudgery and very few people have real job-satisfaction. In times of revolution, confusion and chaos, all professions get topsy turvy and here hobbies come in handy. You can conceal yourself behind your hobby and enjoy exceptional job-satisfaction. Aptitude will provide ample compensation for all the hardships incidental to the job. In fact, happiness is a hobby and I suggest that you may choose appropriate disguise in accordance with your aptitudes.

Arjuna said, "I have a blessing in disguise. Urvasi cursed me to be a eunuch but Indra was gracious enough to fix a time limit of one year and said that I could choose my convenience to redeem the curse. Now I propose to seek service as a dance teacher donning the dress of a lady. There are many prosperous kingdoms where we can seek service and live incognito. Among the flourishing states Panchala, Matsya, Videha, Bahlika, Dasarna, Kalinga or Surasena and Dvaraka, I prefer Matsya where there is less scope for detection. Virata, king of Matsya, is a principled ruler and is not a particular friend of the Kauravas. I have got aptitude for music, dance and drama and I had the opportunity to develop my talents when I was the guest of Indra in the company of the Gandharva preceptors. I can practically enjoy rest in the inner apartments of the royal palace. Let me be calm for sometime before I storm the Kauravas."

Yudhisthira accepted the proposition and said that he endorsed the idea of Arjuna to seek service under Virata, the king of Matsya. He added, "What about Bhima? What disguise can he take? His mighty strength, I am afraid, may betray him any minute. Consummate courage is not amenable to clandestine camouflage. Bhima is my hope as well as worry." Bhima laughed and said, "Let nobody be worried on account of me. My only

difficulty is my appetite which cannot be easily satiated. I should like to seek service as a cook in the royal kitchen. I can have a hearty meal everyday. Necessity is the mother of invention; I have invented many delicious dishes with which I can please myself and the king. I can supply all the items of food to my brothers freely. The kitchen will never have any shortage of fuel which I can fetch from the forest once a month. I may fight with wild bulls to entertain the king. I will vanquish any gladiator who comes to the court throwing out a challenge. I promise to control myself. But I am really worried about Yudhishthira who is always accustomed to command. How can he take orders from anybody."

Yudhishthira said, "His holiness Dhaumya has given us good guidance. I will seek service with king Virata as a courtier. I will don the garb of a sannyasin and give him discourses on ethics and classical culture. I can play dice with the king for entertainment. There will not be any difficulty as a sannyasin is respected by everybody including the king. The twins are sensitive souls, and I am reminded of Madri when I think of them." Tears rolled down the cheeks of Dharmaputra when he turned towards them.

Sahadeva said, "My hobby is cattle-breeding and I am more than a veterinary doctor. I can protect the cows, cure all their diseases and I can double the milk-yield within a short time. I will be the greatest asset to the king. I know he will welcome me and employ me as the head of the department of cattle."

Nakula said, "My hobby is the horse which is being now recognised as the rising star on the military horizon. Horsemen are in great demand everywhere and I can procure a job easily and king Virata will appoint me as his chief horseman."

Yudhishthira turned towards Draupadi and stared at her speechless for a few seconds, choked by shame and sorrow lest it might sound blasphemy to say about service to the sensitive soul. Still Panchali could follow every syllable of the silent soliloquy of the eldest son of Kunti and came forward with a ready solution. She said, "I will meet the queen of Virata, Sudeshna and secure the job of a Sairandhri preserving my freedom and chastity. I shall tell the queen that I worked as a companion of Panchali and procure the job. As far as possible, I will try to escape limelight

and confine myself to the inner apartments of the royal palace.”

Dhaumya who was glad that the problem was almost solved gave his parting message to the Pandavas. *Dhaumya Geeta*, as it is popularly known is in the nature of a convocation address delivered by Dhaumya to his pupils just graduated from the university of adversity, and about to enter the portals of the world of hard realities. It is secular and lively in content, and is an epitome of the practical wisdom of the world. It has a universal import and has not lost its relevance even today though it deals with the psychology of the kings. It was not a philosophy propounded by “Dhaumya”: it was the secular advice tendered by Dhaumya to his disciples, the Pandavas in the purely private context of the roles they were obliged to play owing to a curious conspiracy of circumstances and it deals with the delicate and difficult relationship which exists between the rulers and the ruled with the scintillating wit and wisdom, equilibrium and insight of a saint and the objectivity of an intellectual who has no vested interests.

Dhaumya said to the Pandavas “My dear disciples, it is my duty to tell you how you should conduct yourselves in your disguise. It is a doubly difficult and delicate task for you to serve in a subordinate position to which you were never accustomed—that too in a disguise. However, I know you are resourceful enough, and come out of the ordeal in flying colours.

“The king is important and you must be ever vigilant to please him. But that is not all. You must never belittle anybody who has access to the king, let him be a mean mosquito or a mighty elephant—a braying ass or a boorish jackal; you must try to please him as well. You should talk less and offer counsel only when there is a specific request; even then silence is better than unpleasant truth. The ruler is a veritable fire; if you keep the comfortable distance, you are warm; if you go very near, you will catch fire. When he does the right thing, praise him, and offer your congratulations without crossing the limits of decency. Never allow your praise to degenerate into flattery.

“Very often, authority does not want comrades who speak on terms of equality, but expects slavery from the colleagues and will not be satisfied with insubordination. The king may elevate fools

and cowards to commanding positions neglecting the meritorious. You must be a silent spectator and should never criticise the actions of the king, publicly or privately.

“No one should build a house grander than the royal palace. Even if the king invites you to ascend his chariot, you must follow him in your own vehicle duly offering him thanks, profusely and politely. You should never overtake his chariot. When the king confides in you with a secret, you should not be elated and must guard yourself not to betray it to anybody even inadvertently. It is foolish to place too much faith in the king even when he confers special honours on you. If you put up with hardship for this one year you can be happy for the rest of your life. If you crave for happiness now you will be unhappy for the rest of your life. This is the secret of probation.

“A word of special caution, about the ladies of the royal palace. Never try to shine in their presence or exhibit your talents before them. You should avoid acquaintance with the eunuchs or dwarfs who have easy access to the royal ladies.

“Sometimes the grateful citizens may present you with sincere gifts for the good offices rendered by you, you should reject them publicly. It is not enough to be honest, your honesty must be made known to the public, unostentatiously because ostentatious honesty is worse than concealed corruption.

“Let me tell you that you should never be jealous of your colleagues who get premature promotion. ‘Every dog has his day’ should be the motto of the subordinates and you should patiently wait for your turn.

“Finally, I want to impress upon you that there is no royal road to happiness. It is always a zig zag path.

“The path to happiness is paved with sorrow and suffering. Life is a balance, both sides weighing equal, every credit entry having its corresponding debit and the vice versa. Nothing in this world is an unmixed blessing including wealth and wisdom. Riches has many responsibilities while poverty has its own compensatory rewards.

"Ignorance has its inherent bliss; while wisdom is riddled with various doubts. Go to the court of Virata as "Jivanamuktas." *Equanimity is emancipation! Service is self-realisation! Work is worship.*

"It is time for me to bid you farewell. May your path be strewn with prosperity and success." Taking leave of the Pandavas, Dhaumya and Indrasena along with the retinue and the chariots departed for Indraprastha.

65

The Incognito

The Pandavas started for Viratanagara, the capital of Matsya. They stopped at the burial ground near the city and changed their clothes. They deposited their weapons securely wrapped in a deer skin tied to the branches of a huge "Sami" tree, camouflaging the bundle with a carcass. They bathed in the nearby stream and exchanged their ideas with regard to their future behaviour.

Yudhisthira in the guise of a Sannyasin, dressed in saffron robes, went to the court of Virata. The king received him with due respect and said, "You look like a king; you have the royal gait and the royal stature, please tell me the truth; are you a sannyasin or are you a yaksha or a Gandharva who come to test me? I am at your service." Yudhisthira replied, "Great king, you have directed me to speak the truth; truth is a relative concept and nobody in this mundane world can claim to follow the path of truthfulness. You know, a sannyasin is not expected to speak about his past life. Anyway this much shall suffice. I am no Gandharva; I am no Yaksha; I am a mere mortal. I have come to seek shelter and service with you for a year." The king of Matsya said to him, "May I know the sacred syllables which have formed your holy name? You can stay with me, in fact rule me and incidentally my kingdom too." Yudhisthira replied, "I am known as Kanakabhata by my colleagues ever since I have donned these robes. I was a friend of king Yudhisthira at Indraprastha. I am obliged to leave Indraprastha as evil days have fallen on him. I have pursued all the sacred lore, I know a little bit of astrology also. I can amuse you at the game of dice, now and then, though I am not an

“expert at it. Virata said, “I am happy that a friend of the great Yudhishthira has chosen to come to me in his absence. I am flattered. I request you to be my chief counsellor and companion.”

Afterwards Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva joined service as the chief cook, the dance master, the chief horseman and the veterinary doctor in the court of Virata with the names of Valala, Brihannala, Damagranthi and Tantripala respectively. The king was impressed with every one of them and welcomed them to his court with open arms.

Draupadi met Sudeshna and introduced herself as the erstwhile Sairandhri of Panchali. At first, the queen was unwilling to entertain her, saying “Madam, you do not look like a Sairandhri. When I first saw you, I thought you must be a celestial damsel, descended to the earth. Your exceptional beauty may attract the king.” Draupadi replied, “I am a happily married woman. Please entertain me just for one year and I will try to redeem your debt in my own way and you will certainly feel happy for having given me shelter.” Sudeshna entertained her as her Sairandhri. Draupadi told her, “Great queen! let me at the very outset reiterate that I am averse to perform menial jobs; nor do I partake unclean or contaminated food and I expect that my dignity and chastity as a married woman will be respected. I have chosen to seek service under you as you come of a noble royal family with a high tradition of idealism and honour.” Sudeshna was elated at the compliment paid to her and promised to treat her as her companion.

Princess Uttara was entrusted to the care of Brihannala who was teaching her dance and music. The spacious Dance Hall was placed at his disposal to set up the school. Draupadi was meeting him at the hall occasionally and exchanging pleasanties and jokes, which were unintelligible to outsiders. Bhima endeared himself to the heart of the king by defeating the wrestlers who came to the court in a challenging mood. Nakula and Sahadeva did solid work in their spheres unostentatiously. The milk yield was doubled. The cavalry was organised on uptodate lines. The cattle and cavalry of Matsya attracted the attention and admiration of the neighbouring kingdoms within a short time.

*Evam virta nagare hyavasānta pāndavāḥ.
Krishna jathāntahpurametya sobhana.*

*Afr̥nātacaryām pratiruddha manasaḥ,
Yathāgnayo bhasmanigūdha tejasah.**

Thus the Pandavas lived in the city of Virata and Draupadi in the inner apartments of the royal palace incognito, their minds masqueraded and brilliance blighted, like sparks of fire camouflaged by the ashes.

66

The Ribald Lover

One day, Kichaka, the brother of the queen Sudeshna came to her. Accidentally, there he saw Sairandhri and fell in love with her. At once he said to his sister, "Who is this rare beauty? I have never seen such a charming woman in my life! What is her caste? Which is her native place?" By the series of questions put by Kichaka, and the unremitting attention he bestowed on Sairandhri, Sudeshna could easily grasp that her brother was in the violent grip of feverish love. She wanted to divert his attention from Sairandhri and told him, "Your brother-in-law, the king, is anxious to meet you. He is inside. Please go to him and talk." But Kichaka reverted to his original enquiry. He asked his sister, "How long since she is in your service?" The queen knew that his brother could not be brushed aside and said, "She is here for the past ten months as Sairandhri. She told me that she belonged to a noble family and would not like to talk to male members including the king. Anyway she is not the only beauty in the universe and I warn you not to pay unusual attention to her. I learn that five invisible Gandharvas, her husbands, always protect her. If you do not like to meet the king, better go home and take rest."

Kichaka, paying a deaf ear to his sister's words went straight to the place where Sairandhri was knitting some garlands. He said introducing himself to her, "I am Kichaka, the commander-in-chief of the Matsya armies. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I do not like that you should rot here as a Sairandhri. Please come to me, you shall be my queen and live in

*A Samskrita sloka in Roman script together with its translation in English is given as a typical example to illustrate the style, scintillating similes, characterisation and metrical cadence of the original epic.

greater glory and splendour than my sister, Sudeshna." Draupadi was quite exasperated at the brutal frankness with which he proposed to her and replied, "Let me not mince matters, I am a married lady and I do hate your advances. If you persist in your dangerous folly, I have to report the matter to the king and to my heroic husbands, the five Gandharvas. If you are a gentleman, you must stop bestowing any more attention on me. Otherwise, you will reap the consequences." Kichaka replied with an arrogant smile, twisting his mustaches with the fingers of his left hand, "There is no reason why you should not like me. I am the strongest man of the kingdom; in fact I am the real ruler and I have placed graciously the titular king on the throne and he is sitting on the throne at my sweet sufferance. Anyway you cannot frighten me. Why five! I do not mind a hundred Gandharvas. You may not know me being new to this place. I am known to all the people of the realm by my popular epithet, "Simhabala" meaning 'the man with the lion's might'." Draupadi knew that he was mad after her and didn't want to rub him on the wrong side. She silently walked away from his presence.

Kichaka went home and spent a sleepless night. Draupadi met Bhima in the night in seclusion of the Dance Hall, the secret rendezvous where they often talked in confidence. She narrated the revolting talk and ribald behaviour of Simhabala. She broke into uncontrollable sobbing when she recollected how Kichaka treated her as a woman in the gutters. She blamed Yudhisthira tracing all their woes to his pious pacificism and imbecile idealism. Bhima did not endorse Draupadi's criticism of Dharmaputra and said to her, "In the ultimate analysis, Yudhisthira is our greatest asset, you can easily kindle my emotions and if I act in indignant indiscretion and attack Simhabala openly, our identities will be known to our enemies and we will be plunged into exile once again. Having waited patiently so long it is prudence to put up with any provocation at the fag end of our privations. Dharmaputra is never ruffled ever composed and calm in the face of trying privations or promising temptations. My kudos to the eldest son of Kunti! He is a realised soul and deserves our respect, not our derision."

Bhima no doubt was capable of rising to emotional heights when the occasion demanded it but in moments of lucid calmness

he appreciated Dharmaputra's wisdom and forbearance. He added, "Let us wait for the opportune moment. Otherwise, we become the butt of ridicule to our friends as well as enemies. Draupadi praised Dharmaputra and said, "I am not unconscious of his greatness and good qualities of head and heart; in moments of despair and humiliation, he is our natural scapegoat." Bhima advised her to be calm and not to precipitate a crisis. Next day, when Sairandhri was attending to her normal chores, Simhabala came dashing to her and repeated his overtures. She reiterated her stand and said to him, "Beware betimes. Your overtures are suicidal; you shall not hanker after me; the werewolf should not aspire for a lioness to be his mate. If you do not turn over a new leaf, you will be massacred mercilessly by my husbands, the five Gandharvas." Kichaka replied nonchalantly, "You are mine with or without your consent. Anyway I am prepared to die for you." Sairandhri quietly slipped away and Kichaka went to Sudeshna and said, "Dear sister, do not desist me. I am determined and do not like to retreat. As a sister, it is your duty to assist me. I have done so much for you and your husband. Considerations of affection or pity, gratitude or expediency must prompt you to offer your corroboration to me." Sudeshna told her brother blinded by lust, "Please do not create obscene scenes here, go home. I will send her to you to fetch me wine from your house." Kichaka did not wait till she completed her sentences and said that he would gladly do so and hurried home.

Sudeshna called Sairandhri to her side and said, "I am indisposed; I request you to fetch me a bottle of wine from my brother, Simhabala." Draupadi could easily detect the transparent trap and she pondered over the way of escape. She said to Sudeshna "Noble queen, I told you at the very outset that I should not be expected to do menial jobs; I do not want to go to your brother's house." Sudeshna was hurt at the flat refusal of Sairandhri to comply with her request; she did not like her defiant arrogance. She collected her wits and said coolly, "Sairandhri, I always treated you with respect. In fact, I wanted to go to my brother's house and I do not like to send any menial to him. As you are my bosom friend and closest companion I am deputing you to go in my place; it is now for you to choose." Draupadi accepted the assignment cursing her fate and started with a golden jar in her hand to go to the house of Kichaka.

On her way she prayed to the Sun god for protection. Kichaka who was waiting for her arrival eagerly counting every second, welcomed her. She said to him, "Her majesty, your sister has deputed me specially on her behalf to fetch the choicest wine from you. She wants it urgently as she is indisposed." Kichaka said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, "I know my sister; she is quite alright. She has sent you for my sake", and he caught hold of her hand by force. She used all her strength to extricate herself from his grip and ran into the street. Simhabala chased Sairandhri and caught hold of her in public and kicked her. She ran to Virata's court and complained, "Noble king, Kichaka has tried to molest me publicly almost in your presence. Today my honour is threatened; tomorrow the safety of every lady in the realm may be at stake; I implore prompt action." The king, Virata was astounded at the beauty of Sairandhri and gave an evasive answer saying, "Madam, I do not know what has actually transpired between both of you. I must listen to the otherside before I take any action or pronounce any verdict." The courtiers were all afraid of Kichaka and preferred to be silent. Bhima's anger knew no bounds. He stood up, his eyes blazing, lips trembling, whole body perspiring profusely, brows knitting and teeth grinding and was gazing intently at nearby by tree. He was ready to pluck it out and finish Virata first and Kichaka next. Kanka who divined his ulterior intentions said to Bhima "My dear Valala, you are not expected to pluck out a live tree in full bloom which is sheltering the bird and the beast, bearing fruit for man's benefit; there are plenty of blighted plants all round; better pluck them." Bhima caught the hint from his elder brother and controlled himself. He realised that it was worst ingratitude to harm Virata who gave them shelter. Then Kanka asked Draupadi to repair to the inner apartments of the royal palace reserved for ladies, without wasting her time.

Kanka said to Sairandhri, "Madam, this is not the place to exhibit your histrionic talents; haste is the enemy of expediency; waste not your valuable time when you realise that nothing can be done now." Draupadi retorted, "If the king does not care to take action I expect my husbands to wreak vengeance on the culprit" and went away. On her way, she called on Brihannala at the Dance Hall. Women usually gathered around him as he was considered to be an extraordinary eunuch. She narrated the outrage committed by Kichaka, to Brihannala who replied, "Noble

Sairandhri, how can this ineffectual eunuch come to your rescue except sympathising with you?" Sudeshna came to know of the incident though Sairandhri did not tell her. Both were discretely silent. Draupadi met Bhima again that night in the Dance Hall secretly smarting like a wounded serpent and gave the ultimatum to Bhima, "I cannot have any peace unless I see the corpse of Kichaka." Bhima replied, "The whole thing would have ended as a fantastic fiasco today but for Dharmaputra's timely warning to me. I will finish the fellow tomorrow night leisurely. The infatuated mad dog will come to you tomorrow morning. Please do not spoil the show. You must pretend as if you have developed some soft corner for him and lure him to come to the Dance Hall single tonight, in perfect secrecy. I want you to depart lest we should be discovered; the fellow may be hunting after you." Draupadi knew about the strength of Bhima and went to sleep in perfect peace.

Kichaka did not have a wink of sleep that night but came to the inner apartments of the royal palace early in the morning attired in his best dress to woo Sairandhri once more.

This time Sairandhri listened to the overtures and amorous advances of Simhabala, smiling all the while. The attention which Sairandhri silently bestowed on Kichaka flattered him and he began to blow his own trumpet, "Sairandhri, you have seen with your own eyes yesterday that nobody—not even the so-called king, dared to raise his little finger against me. My will is the law in the Matsya realm. I was awake the whole night, though I knew that no Gandharva would turn up, now speak out your mind?" Sairandhri said to him in a hushed voice, "I have seen your self-confidence. Yesterday, I have realised that nobody had the guts to challenge you. I am a family lady. Secrecy is the soul of extramarital excursion. If you come single to the Dance Hall tonight I will meet you there. Please go away soon now, so that no suspicions can be raised," Simhabala was overjoyed when he heard such sweet words from Sairandhri. He reached home and ordered for cosmetics and scents. He got his hair dressed and mustache trimmed with meticulous care. He cursed the sun for not setting early. He was impatient with the air and the environment. At last the sun set and he started for the Dance Hall alone in the darkness that was enveloping all round. He was glad that the

surroundings of the Dance Hall looked quite secluded and already deserted. He entered the main Hall with a confident gait. But it was the dark fortnight of the lunar month and so there was complete darkness. Simhabala walked in slow paces from pillar to pillar and saw the shadowy figure lying on the sofa.

He presumed that Sairandhri was already waiting for him and held out his hand and said, "My sweet heart, today I have reached the joyous zenith of my career." A sweet voice emanating from the sofa replied, "The zenith shall never be surpassed." Suddenly the shadow figure sprang to his feet and caught hold of Kichaka who realised that he was in the grip of the Gandharva husband of Sairandhri. He was not a coward. He was one of the five renowned warrior wrestlers of the age—the other four being, Balarama, Duryodhana, Bhima and Salya. They fought for a long while bitterly. Both were interested in maintaining secrecy and shunned publicity. Bhima was not prepared to reveal his identity and Kichaka was ashamed of the straits into which he ran unwittingly. Both were confident of victory. Kichaka came quite unprepared for the fight and he spent many a sleepless night recently. Bhima was burning with rage, determined to clinch the issue as early as possible. He had the obvious advantage of an early start. At last, Kichaka was overpowered and Bhima killed him and mutilated the corpse beyond human semblance. He informed Draupadi that he achieved his mission, beat a hasty retreat into the royal kitchen, bathed in scented water, applied sandal paste to his body and slept with satisfaction.

Sairandhri woke up the royal guards and conveyed the news of the death of their commander-in-chief. They entered the Dance Hall with flaming torches and were surprised at the ghastly sight. It was not a body, it was a lump of rolled flesh.

Next day the Upakichakas, the brothers and cousins of Kichaka numbering several hundred, wanted to burn the witch, Sairandhri on the funeral pyre of Kichaka. They obtained the formal permission of the king who was in no mood to offend the bereaved brothers. They caught hold of Sairandhri and placed her on the funeral pyre, bound hand and foot, along with the body of Kichaka. Suddenly Bhima emerged from his hiding place and

made short work of all the Upakichakas. Draupadi was set at liberty and Bhima went back to the kitchen, after killing all the Upakichakas.

The whole city was terror stricken; the atmosphere was filled with the fear of the Gandharvas who were reported to have been sighted by several people at various places. Every mishap was attributed to the Gandharvas— the fire in the market place, the sudden death of the breeding bull, the pest to the standing crops, so on and so forth, were all interpreted as the wrath of the Gandharvas. The people were agitated and represented to the king that Sairandhri must be persuaded to leave the city. The king said to Sudeshna "Please tell Sairandhri very gently and with all the politeness at your command to leave the city. The people are scared of the Gandharvas; in fact I am equally afraid." Sudeshna called Sairandhri and said to her "The king as well as the commoner is afraid of the Gandharvas. Of course, you are not to be blamed, you have given ample warning, I am directed to request you to leave the city." Draupadi replied, "Noble queen, I understand your delicacy. I will go. The Gandharvas asked me to request you to give just one month's time." Draupadi was counting the days and she knew that the period of incognito would end exactly in one month.

Sudeshna replied courteously, "Please convey my compliments to the Gandharvas. Please tell them that I have allowed you the time stipulated by them. Please convey my special prayer to them not to harm my husband and my sons." Sairandhri said to the queen, "Noble lady, the valiant Gandharvas are not ungrateful villains; they will not harm the people who gave me shelter. They even told me that they would protect the king and the kingdom of Matsya from external aggression or internal commotion." Sudeshna thanked her for her assurance.

67

The Southern Battle For The Cattle

The spies of Duryodhana who went in search of the Pandavas returned to Hastinapura from all directions and reported that they could not discover their whereabouts in spite of their best efforts.

However, one of the spies who returned from Viratanagara said to Duryodhana, "Great king, I wish to report to you a rumour, for what it is worth. Simhabala, the Commander-in-Chief of the Matsya armies was brutally massacred at dead of night—allegedly by the Gandharvas, the husbands of the Sairandhri of the queen Sudeshna. The Upakichakas, the brothers of the Commander-in-chief, were also done-to-death dramatically within a few seconds with no trace of evidence left."

Simhabala was well-known for his physical prowess as well as bravery. So, Duryodhana and his advisers came to the conclusion that the Pandavas might be taking shelter under the Matsya royal umbrella. Susarma, the traditional enemy of the Matsya kingdom, offered to invade the country from the south by capturing the cattle, and drew Virata and his forces to the battlefield. The plan of Duryodhana was to attack the kingdom from the north, just at the time when Virata was engaged in the South. Then the Pandavas would be compelled to come out openly in support of the Matsya king. Final touches were given to the plan and Susarma attacked the Matsya kingdom from the south and captured the cattle. As Simhabala was not there to lead the armies, Susarma thought that it would be an easy walk over for him and that his forces would wade through the Matsya defences as a knife through butter.

The cowherds and the forces patrolling the borders reported to Virata that Susarma invaded the kingdom with a large army. Virata, in the past had repulsed many an attack by Susarma and his hordes. The war drum was sounded, the proclamation of war was issued. Virata made all the preliminary arrangements for war and was ready to march to the front along with his brothers. They missed Kichaka very badly. At that psychological point, Kanka told Virata, "When I was young I have learnt archery and taken part in warfare. As the sovereignty of the kingdom is at stake, I do not mind to put on the armour for a while; I request your majesty to permit me to follow you to the battlefield and provide me with a chariot, bow and arrows etc." Virata welcomed the offer. Kanka added, "Noble king, it is my duty to offer you good counsel and proper guidance at the appropriate time. Valala, the Chief cook, Damagranthi, Tantripala are known to me while I was at the court of Yudhishthira; they are excellent soldiers and brave fighters.

Victory is a foregone conclusion if we conscript their services and take them to the battle-front providing them with chariots, armoury and arms. They are grateful to you and will gladly fight for you."

King Virata reminded himself and said to Kanka, "On the very day I met them, I proclaimed in the open court that they looked like superhuman heroes. You are my counsellor and bosom friend and please send for them on my behalf; provide them with whatever they want. Let us take them with us with all royal honours." Kanka sent for them and they were very happy to march to the battlefront.

Virata attacked Susarma. A fierce fight ensued. There was heavy loss on both sides in men and material. Satanika, a brother of Virata, died in the battle. At the zenith of the fighting, Susarma by a feat of personal daring and extraordinary courage dashed against the chariot of Virata in a blitz-krieg and took him captive. When the king was taken prisoner of war, Matsya armies began to retreat helter-skelter. Yudhishthira ordered Bhima to initiate the counter-attack on the enemy to secure the release of the captive king. Bhima was ready to leap down the chariot and uproot a tree and advance on the enemy. But Yudhishthira warned him, "No such pranks please. You must defeat the enemy with the conventional weapons. Take the twins with you."

Immediately, the counter-attack was organised. Bhima followed by the twins fought with Susarma and defeated him. King Virata was set at liberty and Susarma taken captive and brought to Kanka. Virata thanked Kanka and said to him, "My dear friend, my thanks to you are quite superfluous. My kingdom belongs to you now by right of conquest. However, I request you to choose any boon and I will gladly grant it formally." Kanka said to Virata, "We are all grateful for the shelter you have given us and we simply discharged our bounden duty. Anyway, as you are pleased to grant me a boon, I request your majesty to set Susarma at liberty." Virata turned to Susarma and said, "In accordance with ancient principles of polity, remnants of fire, enemy personnel and financial debts are dangerous and should not be left out. You have stabbed me in the back by your unprovoked and unexpected attack. However, out of deference for the wishes of this

compassionate brahmin companion, I am setting you at liberty. I hope you will not repeat the mistake once more." Susarma went away hanging his head in shame. "Judged from his character," mused Susarma, "the compassionate Kanka must be Yudhisthira." He could spot out Valala as Bhima and his compatriots who assisted him as Nakula and Sahadeva.

68

The Prince Of Braggarts

Duryodhana, attacked the Matsya kingdom from the north with his army and captured the cows while Virata was engaged in the south. It was a formidable force consisting of the reputed Kaurava contingents including the veteran warrior Bhishma, the preceptor of the bow, Dronacharya, his illustrious son Asvatthama, Kripa and Karna.

The cowherds and the soldiers of the border patrol force came to the royal capital to report the matter to the king. But the king had already left for the southern front to repel the attack of Susarma. The only male member of the royal family available on the spot was prince Uttara who was in a hilarious mood surrounded by the ladies of the palace. When the matter was reported to him, he boasted, "I can conquer any army single-handed; what does it matter even if the reputed Kaurava contingents have taken the field. How can I go to the front; no charioteer is now available in the city." Of course, the ladies took his statement with a pinch of salt, though they never had any means to assess his powers. Sairandhri, who heard the braggings of the prince, could control her laughter with great difficulty and said to princess Uttara, sister of prince Uttara, "My dear princess; there is a very good charioteer available here and now. Brihannala, your dance master is a past master in the art of driving the chariot as well. He was responsible for the success of Arjuna when he engineered the historic Khandava forest conflagration. If your brother is pleased to take Brihannala with him, he can surely conquer the Kauravas and return triumphant to the city, together with the cattle."

Princess Uttara, dancing with joy told her brother, prince Uttara what Sairandhri had narrated to her. But he exclaimed in

derision, "What a ludicrous proposal! My dear sister, how can a hero like me take a eunuch as my charioteer. I hate to look at a eunuch." But princess Uttara was not prepared to accept the derision of her teacher and said, "Please do not underestimate my preceptor. He is a versatile genius. You must take him as your charioteer." Prince Uttara grudgingly accepted the proposal, coming as it does from the princess. Uttara jumped with joy and Brihnnala was ushered into the presence of the prince within a few seconds. In fact, Brihnnala already briefed by Sairandhri was awaiting the opportunity very eagerly. The prince said to Brihnnala, "My dear friend, driving the chariot, you know, is not dancing." Brihnnala said, "Gracious prince, I know that dancing is not driving; I know fighting is neither fun nor frolic. Let us go." Brihnnala was offered the armour and he delighted the womenfolk by pretending ignorance about it and wearing it topsy-turvy. The prince taught Brihannala how to wear the armour and the helmet correctly to the amusement of the womenfolk. Prince Uttara donned the attire of a warrior from tip to toe while Brihannala brought the golden chariot. Uttara ascended the chariot with the gait of a veteran hero and Brihannala took the reins into his hands. Already a band of citizens gathered at the royal gate to give a ceremonial send off to the heroic prince. Maidens showered flowers on the chariot and offered the oblation of lighted camphor to the prince. The bugles were sounded, the trumpets were blown and the chariot started attuned to the fanfare of the royal orchestra. The brahmins recited the Vedic hymns of victory and blessed the prince.

Princess Uttara requested Brihannala to bring some specimen cutpieces of cloth and plumages from the head gears of the Kaurava heroes to decorate her dolls.

"Pretty Princess,"-Brihannala said, "We will get you the pretty present, you are pleased to ask" and drove the chariot exultantly to the north rejoicing at the timely opportunity that presented itself to him to face the Kaurava army. Soon, prince Uttara perceived the tumultuous Kaurava forces surging like the ocean on a fullmoon day. Uttara, cried aloud, exasperated, "Brihannala, halt the chariot for a while." But Brihannala did not halt, and increased the speed of the steeds. The prince was offended and ordered with a tone of authority, "Charioteer, this is

prince Uttara speaking, I command you to stop the chariot." Still Brihannala heeded not and the chariot was heading towards the enemy encampments. Uttara was able to see clearly the Kaurava battalions arranged for the battle. He trembled with fear, his lips quivered, his whole body sweated profusely and he entreated with Brihannala, "I am very young. I have never seen the actual battlefield even once in my life. I am alone; our armies have gone to the south; I request you, to stop the chariot; pray let us go back to the palace." Still Brihannala heeded not the words, commands or entreaties of the prince and was driving the chariot with reckless speed.

Brihannala was not oblivious to the sad predicament in which the prince was placed. He said to Uttara, "Noble prince, you have promised the ladies of the royal palace that you would vanquish the enemies in no time and return to the capital victoriously. Will they not laugh at us if we return to the palace as cowards? Do not worry; I will conquer the enemies; you please drive the chariot." So saying Brihannala speeded up the steeds. Prince Uttara not knowing what to do, jumped down from the speeding chariot and ran away in the direction of the city. Brihannala stopped the chariot, ran after the prince, caught hold of Uttara fleeing with dishevelled hair and trembling frame. Uttara, the embodiment of despair and defeatism said to Brihannala, sobbing,

*suvarnamani mukutanam yadyadichhasi dadami tat,
hastino'svan rathan gavasstriyasca samalankritaḥ.
satakumbhasya suddhasya sristasya rajatasya ca,
dadami sataniskam te munca mam tvam brihannale.
hemadandapratichannam ratham yuktam tu vajibhiḥ,
mattamsca dasamatangan mumca mam tvam brihannale."**

"Brihannala, please leave me. I will give you gems, gold, pearls or whatever you ask; elephants or horses, cows or courtezans duly decorated with gold and silver, I will give you one hundred golden coins in hard cash; please leave me. I will present you with a golden chariot studded with a golden flagstaff together with choicest horses; pray, leave me; I will give you ten mighty elephants, please leave me."

*These typical Sanskrit slokas together with the English translation are given to provide actual acquaintance with the original epic to the interested readers.

But Uttara found himself caught in the tight grip of Brihannala without any hope of escape and said to him, "Please leave me; I am the only son of my dear mother. Life is dear to me and nobody in the whole world can defeat the veteran warriors of the renowned Kaurava army, like Bhishma, Drona, Duryodhana, Karna, Asvatthama, and Vikarna. Still, if you want to commit suicide you can advance forward and please leave me on humanitarian grounds." Brihannala dragged Uttara to the chariot and placing him on the seat of the charioteer comforted him saying, "Prince, do not think that I am a fool, rushing into the jaws of death. Life is equally sweet to me and I do not like to commit suicide. Please drive the chariot; presently, it will be a pleasant surprise for you to see the Kaurava army defeated and routed in disgrace." Uttara held the reins in his hand and began to drive the chariot, himself ridden by compulsive reflexes.

Brihannala asked the prince to stop the chariot under the Sami tree. When the chariot came to a halt, Brihannala asked Uttara to climb up the tree, and break open the bundle of weapons placed on the branch. Uttara climbed up the tree but hesitated to touch the bundle emitting foul smell. He said to Brihannala, "Is it fair on your part to assign this menial task to a prince like me. In fact, I do not like your commanding tone; perhaps you forget that I am the prince and that you are on my chariot by my grace and courtesy." Brihannala replied, "Noble prince, I know who you are; you do not know who I am. Let us not stand on formalities when we are confronted with the common enemy. That is not a foul smelling carcass; the bundle contains the weapons of the Pandavas; the famous Gandiva bow is there in the bundle. Please pick it up for me." Uttara opened the bundle and saw the dazzling weapons which blinded his eyes. He cried aloud in wonder, "These are shining serpents." Brihannala allayed his fears. "Please pack up the bundle carefully after picking up the Gandiva bow together with the quiver." Uttara handed over the bow and the quiver to Brihannala and asked him in baffled amazement, "Why did the Pandavas place their weapons on this tree?" Brihannala replied in gentle tones, "The Pandavas are grateful to your father who gave them shelter; Kanka is Yudhisthira, Valala the chief cook is Bhima, Damagranthi and Tantripala are Nakula and Sahadeva; Sairandhri is the queen Draupadi. The so-called Simhabala was slain by Bhima. Now I hope you realise who I am; I am Arjuna. Prince Uttara jumped down from the tree to the

chariot and bowed to Arjuna who embraced him warmly. Uttara's exultation knew no bounds. He said to Arjuna, "As a born prince, I am ashamed of my conduct, your identity has inspired me. I am no more a coward. Even as a charioteer, I am no more a conscript; I am a volunteer." Arjuna replied, caressing the head of Uttara, "You are never a coward; fear is a natural instinct ingrained in everybody. Those who cannot get over their initial fear are cowards. Nobody is a born hero. Everybody is a born child. Opportunities make heroes and cruel circumstances mar men. You see, you have got a great opportunity to play a historic role. Already, the so-called cowardice in you is gone - gone for good. You are now a hero ready to face any danger. Cowards fear death and death is afraid of heroes. Get up: Let us face the Kauravas." Uttara jumped into the charioteer's seat, caught hold of the reins securely and the chariot moved forward bouncing with joy.

69

The Northern Battle for the Cattle

The Kauravas were looking at the solitary chariot advancing towards them with amusement. There were heated discussions amongst them, as to the identity of the persons in the chariot. Dronacharya was worried about the premature presence of Arjuna and said to Duryodhana in a matter of fact way, "Look at that impostor coming on a single chariot, encircling the tree, like the lord of heaven; I am amazed at his self-complacent arrogance; I wonder who he is!" and looked at Bhishma for the answer. Bhishma caught the hint and said to Duryodhana, "We have crossed the frontiers; there is absolutely no cause for fear. Time is ripe for immediate action; doubts or discussions are quite out of place now. It is the otherside that should be really worried."

Immediately Drona realised that the Pandavas successfully completed the pledged period as Bhishma was credited with the knowledge of the movements of the moon, the sun and the stars. Hence he publicly announced, "The hero who has come to fight single-handed is none else than Arjuna, who will pounce on us with his intrepid indignation pent up over a period of thirteen years, like a lion locked in his den during the rainy season leaping

over a herd of elephants. We hear, he is blessed with divine missiles; I think, though single, it will be an easy walk over for him and he will wrest the cattle from us."

Duryodhana was pricked by the lavish praise bestowed on Arjuna by Drona. He proclaimed, "If Arjuna has come, the Pandavas are bound to revert to exile once again for a period of twelve more years and there is no need for any fight at all. Even if there is a fight, how can it be an easy walk over to anybody, when Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Asvatthama and Karna are here?"

Karna said, "Our army is already demoralised and our soldiers are afraid of the very name of Arjuna, thanks to Drona and his party, who loose no opportunity to discourage them. Bhishma, we all know, will not be able to attack Arjuna sincerely. Nothing more will happen than the grandsire and the grandson exchanging cordial greetings observing dignified military etiquette. Arjuna, having come determined to fight will not go back convinced by our planetary calculations to observe a second round of exile. Let me be frank. I alone will fight Arjuna to the finish. Let me engage him in single combat. Let Bhishma, Drona and party be mere onlookers. I will defeat Arjuna."

Kripacharya intervened and said, "Karna, this is not the opportune time for blowing your own trumpet; we must give concerted fight to Arjuna."

Karna retorted, "It is Drona who has praised Arjuna to the skies; I do not say that the learned man has developed cold feet because of his fear for Arjuna; his fondness for his favourite pupil has clouded his judgement; I know I am speaking the truth and nothing but the truth, when I say that the famous preceptor and his favourite pupil will not fight with each other sincerely, but will exchange pleasantries by means of non-violent arrows. How can I believe that men who sing the glories of the enemy will fight sincerely. They better sing the Vedic songs."

Asvatthama, the princely son of the preceptor, attacked Karna vehemently saying, "Karna, it is buffoonery rather than bravery on your part to say that you can conquer Arjuna single-handed. Let me put a straight question to you. What

became of your bravery when Duryodhana was taken captive by the Gandharvas? Why did you not show your prowess then? What is the fault of Drona? A preceptor's love for a pupil is not a heinous crime; singing the Vedas is no sin. After all, you have never conquered the Pandavas till now on the battlefield; instead you have cheated them of their patrimony by luring them to the shameful game of dice and now you have the cheek to brag about your bravery. Arjuna has come. Gandiva will send forth arrows which cannot be countered by the dice of Sakuni. Bragging is not bravery. I advise you to be discretely silent. The fire cooks the food silently; the sun shines silently without indulging in self-glorification. The mother earth bears the brunt of the whole population without grumble or vainglory. You have no business to insult Drona or Bhishma. I advise you to mind your own business."

Bhishma intervened to pacify the flared up emotions. He said, "O, Asvatthama, please do not get angry at Karna's offensive remarks. We can understand his loyalty as well as sincerity. Let him fight; let him allow us as well to fight. Unfortunately, the lively discussion has degenerated swiftly into a deep dissension. We must forgive and forget. Karna can expect me to fight to protect Duryodhana with all my might, since I cannot kill Arjuna. Let us first concentrate on two things—protecting Duryodhana and keeping the cattle in our possession as far as possible. We cannot fight with Arjuna if we are preoccupied with quarrelling with one another."

Duryodhana said, "Pray, stop all these discussions; I think we should, at the very outset, ask Arjuna to keep up the pledged word and go back once again into fresh exile because of his premature presence. I want the venerable grandsire to give his verdict."

Bhishma said, "According to the lunar calculations, one extra month has to be taken into account once in every two years and a half. The pledged period inclusive of the additional months was over yesterday. Even according to the solar calendar, the pledged period was completed. Therefore, let us decide to fight or seek peace."

Duryodhana said, "The fight is already on and it is for the other party to seek peace. We have seized the cattle. Let us fight to the finish."

Arjuna offered prayers to god Indra. The divine diadem and the celestial conch Devadatta came to him automatically. Arjuna blew his conch and its sound reverberated across the hills and dales. The terrific twang of the Gandiva string heralded the approach of Arjuna's chariot.

Bhishma said, "Let us divide the whole army into four parts; one division shall guard the king, another the cattle. Let the two divisions give fight to Arjuna." Accordingly the army was arranged and the cattle was put in the rear, and Duryodhana occupied the next position.

Arjuna did not find Duryodhana. Instead, he found Bhishma, Drona and other warriors arranged against him in the forefront. He did not start the fight. Instead, he shot two arrows to the vicinity of Bhishma's feet, as an expression of his reverence and adoration for the veteran warrior. Likewise, he offered obeisance to the preceptor. In ancient India, it was customary with the warriors to exchange heroic salutations. War was regarded as a holy sacrament and not as a horrid slaughter. Chivalry was the soul of righteous warfare.

Arjuna told Uttara, "My dear prince, please look at the yonder flag pole—with the ensign of the tall palmyra tree; that is Bhishma's chariot; look at that flagstaff, with the emblem of the bowl. That chariot is that of Drona. I do not want to fight with them. The cattle are on the rear side. Please move on swiftly if they attack us. Look at yonder flag, with the elephant engraved on it. That is Karna's chariot. Please stop our chariot whenever it comes across us. Any opportunity to fight with him is a feast to me. Look for the flag with the insignia of the hooded cobra. That is Duryodhana's chariot. Drive our chariot straight to him. You must tactfully manoeuvre our chariot to avoid others. For us time is very precious."

Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama attacked Arjuna one by one but Uttara managed to bypass them skilfully. Arjuna fought with them only to avoid them. Karna attacked Arjuna and

a fierce fight ensued. In the epic there is a thrilling account of the whole fight, how Arjuna, single-handed, fought with the various heroes. The epic poet described how the angels and the great heroes of immemorial history came in their aeroplanes to watch the momentous fight from the skies. Karna gave a stiff fight to Arjuna but he could not stem his advance. In the course of the war, Uttara swooned and Arjuna fought, driving the chariot with one hand and releasing the arrows with the other. Uttara regaining consciousness offered his hearty congratulations to Arjuna, saying "I was tired while mere driving. It is a unique feat on your part to carry on driving as well as fighting. You are a real ambidexter." Arjuna instructed Uttara, who enjoyed some rest, to drive the chariot to the rear. Uttara drove the chariot to the rear and Arjuna released the cattle and asked the cowherds to take them to the byres swiftly. Immediately he attacked Duryodhana who fought bravely. But after a prolonged battle, Arjuna defeated Duryodhana decisively. Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama rushed to the rescue of Duryodhana and a tumultuous battle ensued. Arjuna,—as the epic poet described, though one, appeared as many to the many heroes who fought him. Eventually, Arjuna released the supermissile, Sammohanastra emitting invisible rays which induce sleep. The whole army fell on the ground dizzy and unconscious, to the utter amazement of prince Uttara. He cried aloud in astonishment, "The Kaurava army is completely routed." Arjuna instructed him not to shout, recollecting the promise he made to the princess. He asked prince Uttara to go and fetch cut-pieces of colourful cloth from the head gears of the Kaurava warriors. He cautioned him, "My dear Uttara, you can go to any warrior; please do not go to Bhishma, he knows the antidote to this astra; if you humiliate him he may cut your throat. Please do not go to Drona, he is my preceptor. We must respect him." Uttara collected plenty of coloured cloth and took the charioteer's seat in the chariot. They stopped at the Sami tree; the Gandiva bow was deposited in the bundle and the chariot started again on its return journey.

70

The Revelation

Arjuna and Uttara exchanged their roles at the city gates. Advance intimation was already despatched to the king about the

victory. The king was overjoyed at the news that Uttara was returning to the city after the resounding victory over the Kauravas. Virata was playing dice with Kanka at that time and he issued a proclamation to accord civic reception to Uttara. Kanka told Virata to include the name of Brihannala in the reception. Virata said, "Kanka, your behaviour is strange; you do not seem to relish the idea of Uttara's victory. Why are you jealous of the prince.

Kanka, replied, "I am not jealous; in the interests of truth and natural justice, Brihannala must get priority." Virata was annoyed at the uncivil reply given by Kanka and said, "Susarma was defeated many a time by Matsya forces; Uttara's success over the Kauravas is astounding and deserves to be engraved in letters of gold in the annals of Matsya kingdom." Again Kanka said, "The prince is fortunate in securing the services of Brihannala whose greatness I know, while he was at the court of Yudhishthira." Virata could not tolerate the persistent affront from Kanka and in a fit of anger flung the dice at him. The dice hit Kanka on his forehead and blood began to ooze out. Sairandhri who was there, saw it and immediately brought a cup of water, washed his face and affixed cotton to the wound. The king asked Sairandhri why she was making so much fuss over a minor mishap. She replied that Kanka's greatness was known to her and added, "Great King, for as many drops of his blood that fall on your ground, so many years of drought will infect your kingdom. I wanted to save you and your kingdom from the great calamity." The king was sorry for his hasty action but he did not care to apologise to Kanka. Meanwhile, the chamberlain announced the arrival of prince Uttara and Brihannala. The king wanted Uttara to be ushered into his presence at once. Kanka instructed the chamberlain to bring Uttara alone. Prince Uttara, as soon as he came, saw the bleeding wound on the face of Kanka and was horrified when the king narrated the cause. He asked his father to apologise to Kanka immediately without wasting a second; king Virata was unable to comprehend the attitude of prince Uttara. However, he begged pardon of Kanka, who said, "Revered king, I entertain no ill-will against you; you gave us shelter; I remember your goodness only with gratitude. I can forgive and forget."

Virata was anxious to know the details of his victory from Uttara. He congratulated him saying, "You have achieved the

most extraordinary feat; how could you defeat the great Kaurava heroes single-handed." Uttara replied, "Dear father, I have not conquered the Kauravas. An angelic prince, endowed with superhuman powers took pity on me and defeated the Kauravas. I acted as his charioteer. It was a sight for angels to see; the renowned warriors, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Asvatthama, Karna and Duryodhana were all routed in the battle." Virata replied, "Then we must honour our saviour. Where is he? Please go and invite him to our palace. I wish to offer the hand of princess Uttara to the great hero."

Uttara replied, "There is no hurry; he will surely come to us. Meanwhile, let us pay our grateful homage to his highness Kanka who saved you and our kingdom from the onslaught of Susarma in the southern expedition. I just now heard about it from the chamberlain." Virata narrated the story of Susarma's defeat and once again praised Kanka as the chief architect of the victory. Brihannala presented the coloured cut-pieces to princess Uttara.

Next day, leading citizens, nobles and high officials gathered in the court hall to celebrate the great victory. Kanka, Valala, Brihannala, Damagranthi and Tantripala sat in the places reserved for the princes. Everybody thought that the grateful king assigned those special seats to them as a mark of his special favour. When the king entered, all the people gave him a standing ovation excepting the Pandavas who remained seated. The king was astonished at their behaviour and remarked, "O, great brahmin, I am surprised at your conduct. In fact the whole festival is organised to honour you; I do not know why you have chosen to remain seated even when the king is entering the court."

Brihannala rose from his seat and said, introducing Kanka to the king. "Your Majesty may be pleased to know that Kanka is only an assumed name. The emperor who has performed the historic Rajasuyayaga after conquering the four quarters of the globe, the noblest soul that has been hailed as the born gentleman without an enemy in the world, the pious philanthropist who has distributed all the teeming treasures he acquired to the needy and the learned by emptying the entire royal exchequer, the embodiment of Truth and non-violence, forgiveness and forbearance, the

walking encyclopaedia of our sacred heritage and culture, is known to every hearth and home in India as 'Dharmaraja', the righteous king, the popular epithet being transformed into his proper name and he is regarded with affection as well as adoration. Kanka is none else than Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pancha Pandavas." Yudhisthira stood up with folded hands and the whole congregation gave him a standing ovation.

Virata immediately bowed to Yudhisthira and begged his pardon for treating him as a subordinate though unwittingly. Yudhisthira embraced him warmly. Virata offered Yudhisthira his throne, kingdom and his services. Yudhisthira thanked him and said, "I value your friendship as the greatest asset of my life. That is more than sufficient." Virata enquired, "Where are your valiant brothers and the noble queen Draupadi?" Yudhisthira replied smilingly, "Our Valala is Bhima. He was daily preparing the most delicious dishes for you; Damagranthi is Nakula; Tantripala is Sahadeva, last but not the least, Brihannala is Arjuna. Let me tell you, Sairandhri is Draupadi." Virata embraced the Pandava brothers one by one, amidst thunderous applause. He sent word to Sudeshna to treat Draupadi with due respect and lodge her in the royal guest house.

Prince Uttara stood up and announced, "Yesterday, it was Brihannala, I beg you pardon, it was Arjuna, who conquered the Kaurava heroes - fighting single-handed. It was my proud-privilege to have piloted his chariot."

The victory celebrations provided the people with theatrical thrills, and the congregation returned home recapitulating the dramatic developments of the day.

71

The Wedding

Virata sent for princess Uttara who came to the court as a living lightning. She bowed to her preceptor Arjuna. King Virata said to Yudhisthira, "Noble soul, I propose that our bonds of mutual affection and regard be cemented with the marital ties. Let Arjuna marry princess Uttara. Yudhisthira looked at Arjuna, who stood up and said, "Princess Uttara has been my dear pupil. I

regard her as my daughter, in view of the sacred relationship which binds the teacher and the taught. However, I welcome the proposal of King Virata. I accept her as my daughter-in-law. Abhimanyu, the nephew of Lord Sri Krishna, who is a suitable match to the princess in age and accomplishments will wed her." There was thunderous applause from the audience. Yudhisthira proclaimed, "I congratulate Arjuna on his sense of propriety. A teacher shall be always above suspicion and set exemplary standards for his character and conduct. I hope this arrangement will be acceptable to his majesty Virata." Virata welcomed the stand taken by Arjuna and Yudhisthira.

Virata ordered that arrangements for the marriage of the princess should be made on a grand scale. A special priest was sent to Dvaraka, to invite Sri Krishna, Subhadra, and the Yadavas with precious presents for the bridegroom, prince Abhimanyu. Yudhisthira sent a personal message to Balarama, extending a cordial welcome to him.

The Pandavas who were no longer obliged to remain in disguise moved to Upaplavya - a city in the kingdom of Matsya country, where they set up their headquarters. Indrasena together with the retinue and chariots rejoined the Pandavas at Upaplavya.

An envoy from Duryodhana came there and met Yudhisthira. After presenting his credentials, he said, "Dharmaputra, you are known for your truthfulness; as Arjuna has revealed his identity before the expiry of the thirteenth year, it is incumbent on you to resume the exile in accordance with your pledged word." Yudhisthira replied, "Please inform Duryodhana that we have redeemed our pledge. If he has any more doubts, let him consult the venerable grandsire, who is universally accepted as an authority on the movement of the stars, the sun and the moon. This is a serious matter and there is no place for silly pranks in straight arithmetics." The envoy returned to Hastinapura and conveyed the message of Dharmaputra to Duryodhana.

The Pandavas, resolved to plan for the impending war, and utilised the marriage function to pool their resources and marshall military support from friends and well-wishers. Messengers were sent in all directions for the ostensible purpose of extending

invitations for the marriage. The Panchala king, father-in-law of the Pandavas, arrived with three divisions fully equipped with arms. His sons, Dhristadyumna and Sikhandi, came bringing Upa-Pandavas. The king of Kasi, Saibya arrived with his contingent of fighting forces. Many princes, friends of the Pandavas joined the allied forces. The Yadava party—Balarama, Sri Krishna, Abhimanyu, the bridegroom, his mother Subhadra, Satyaki and others—came followed by a huge retinue. The Pandavas, Drupada the Panchala king, King Virata received the Yadava party at the city gates and extended the ceremonial welcome. When Balarama and Sri Krishna alighted from their chariots, bugles were blown, trumpets were sounded, drums were beaten and royal reception was accorded to them. They were taken in a grand procession to the special guest houses with the fanfare of the royal orchestra.

The wedding of Uttara and Abhimanyu was celebrated according to the Vedic rites in the presence of the illustrious guests, with pomp and grandeur. After the festive feasts were over, the allies gathered in the royal assembly hall for an informal meeting. Sri Krishna took the seat next to Yudhisthira. Balarama and Satyaki sat beside Drupada. Virata occupied the central seat, in his capacity as the host. Virata formally welcomed the distinguished visitors and asked Yudhisthira to inaugurate the proceedings. Yudhisthira rose and thanked all those present and offered his special compliments to Balarama. He added, "I seek your guidance and counsel; I am at the receiving end. It is for you to speak out. We expect Sri Krishna to deliver the keynote address." For a while there was hushed silence in the hall and Sri Krishna stood up and said, "It is an open secret that the Pandavas have been duped at the game of dice. Look at Dharmaputra who is true to his name; Bhima of unrivalled bravery; Arjuna, the superhuman ambidexter; Nakula and Sahadeva, the valiant twins. They have meekly redeemed their pledge by undergoing untold hardships and privations for thirteen long years. Dharmaputra, the personification of purity and piety is a peace loving person; The Pandavas want to get back their patrimony by peaceful means. They are not unscrupulous war-mongers. I do not know whether Duryodhana would concede their just claim. If past is an index to the future, war may be forced on them. I request you to ventilate your views. Anyway, peaceful parleys must get the first place in

the agenda. Better, an envoy well-versed in the art of diplomacy and discussion is despatched to the Kaurava Court to assess their reaction.”

Next to speak was Balarama. He said, “At the outset, let me proclaim that I am for a peaceful settlement. Violence and war create more problems than they solve. The war will not be a restricted family feud, but will engulf the continent of India from the Himalayas to Kanyakumari and will usher in premature - “pralaya”— causing untold suffering to millions of people. If a peaceful settlement can be achieved, it will not be only good for Dharmaputra and Duryodhana but augurs well for the people at large. I do not want to enter into controversial claims and assess the relative merits and demerits of the contending parties. Much can be said on both sides. I do not know whether the Pandavas can claim their patrimony as a matter of right. It is a complex problem. Given goodwill on both sides, the problem can be solved peacefully.” Satyaki, a scion of the Yadava family did not like Balarama’s ambiguous exposition. He said in anger and anguish, “Balarama has indulged in a jugglery of words. Firstly, the gullible Dharmaputra was cheated by Sakuni. How can the thief be allowed to keep his booty? Secondly, the Pandavas have fulfilled the pledge and their patrimony shall revert to them. Thirdly, no law, no tradition, and no code of ethics can condone the outrage on the modesty of Draupadi. Fourthly, the Kauravas cannot enjoy the patrimony of the Pandavas even by sheer right of conquest as they never defeated them in any battle. The impudent villains, the Kauravas must be slain in the battlefield. There is absolutely no meaning in peace parleys. It is wasting precious time. The war is already overdue.”

Drupada was overjoyed at the heroic stand taken by Satyaki. He said, “I endorse every syllable of what Satyaki has pronounced. The war is inevitable. Duryodhana is a determined man and will not heed our peaceful words. However, as Balarama has suggested, let us first explore all the possibilities for a peaceful settlement. Our priest is a learned brahmin; tactful and wise. I have no objection he send him to the Kaurava court as the emissary of the Pandavas. Let Yudhisthira instruct him he should conduct himself and what messages he should convey to Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarashtra.”

Sri Krishna intervened to say, "I fully endorse the stand of Drupada. We, Balarama and I, came here to attend the marriage. We are for peace. We did not bring our armies with us; Kauravas are also related to us by equal bonds of blood. Peace is desirable at all costs not only for our sake but also for the sake of people at large. My advice is 'prepare for war even while parleying for peace'. We are all returning to Dvaraka. I hope Dharmaputra will intimate to us the outcome of the peace mission."

The Yadava party left for Dvaraka. Meanwhile, Duryodhana and his brothers and friends were not idle. They were making hectic efforts to rally round them not only their allies and friends together with their armies, but also searching for sympathisers and secret adherents from the enemy camps. Duryodhana sent confidential emissaries to Salya to enlist his support, though he was the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva. Nobody was taken for granted. Duryodhana planned a trip to Dvaraka to meet Sri Krishna in person to seek his support. Moves and counter-moves on the political chess board were considered more important than military manoeuvres. Billow of the brain field was prized more than bravery on the battle-field. There was hectic movement of armies from one place to another. In the words of the epic poet, the mother earth trembled, constantly trampled by the marching legions.

UDYOGA PARVA

72

Peace Parley by the Panchala Priest

Yudhisthira sent the Panchala priest to the Kaurava court as an emissary of peace. Drupada told his priest, "Best of brahmins, you know how gentle the Pandavas are; and what privations and sufferings they endured to redeem their pledge. Please meet Dhritarashtra first. The blind king is afraid of the prowess of the Pandavas. Left to himself, he prefers peace as he knows the weakness of his sons. He has great regard and affection for Vidura, who is pro-Pandava and he will be your greatest asset there. You can talk to him privately. Bhishma, Drona and Kripa, in spite of their enmity towards the Panchalas, have a soft corner in their hearts for the Pandavas and they do not like Karna or Sakuni. By your efforts, you may be able to widen the cleavage between them. You can gain first hand information about their war preparations. We will not feel sorry or disappointed if you return empty handed. Your visit will serve many an ulterior purpose. If by chance, you succeed, all glory to you; and immense virtue will accrue to you as the saviour of the lives of millions of people. Even if nothing comes out of your visit, your very presence there will prove a preponderous hindrance to their war preparations. So you can take your own time at Hastinapura and return to us at leisure. Meanwhile, we continue our preparation."

The brahmin left for Hastinapura and went to the Kaurava court. Dhritarashtra welcomed the Panchala priest and enquired after the welfare of the Pandavas, individually. He asked about Draupadi's welfare as well. As soon as the preliminary courtesies were over, the brahmin envoy spoke on behalf of the Pandavas, "Your majesty, Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Asvatthama, Vidura, Duryodhana, brothers and friends, I have come as an envoy of the Pandavas seeking peace. The pledged period is completed. The Pandavas want their patrimony back. The arrangement made by his majesty Dhritarashtra may be revived. The Pandavas desire peace and want to revive their brotherhood with the Kauravas. War will ruin both the parties as well as the people at large. They plead for justice. Though they are strong and

brave, though they have powerful allies, they seek peace. It is a case of non-violence of the strong. They are not ambitious and do not desire to enjoy the whole Kuru kingdom. They want that which justly belongs to them. I request elder statesmen of the realm like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and Vidura to speak out their minds. Pandavas are willing to abide by their verdict."

Dhritarashtra heard with rapt attention, every syllable uttered by the envoy. Bhishma rose and said, "I am happy that the Pandavas are not bent on brutal war and are prepared for the peace parleys. I know Dharmaputra can forgive and forget. Let us seize this opportunity. Let the Pandavas return back to Indraprastha in accordance with the arrangement already made by Dhritarashtra." Before Bhishma finished his speech, Karna stood up and proclaimed in a mood of defiance, "Intelligent brahmin from the Panchala kingdom, you have poured the old wine in a new bottle; it is clear that the Pandavas are puppets in the hands of the Panchalas. Your very presence is proof positive for the truth of my proposition. You have not come evidently to request; your language is couched in uncivil threats. You cannot bamboozle Duryodhana with brave words. In fact, Arjuna came out of his disguise prematurely and if the Pandavas still profess any rectitude, they shall return to the forest."

Bhishma, who felt insulted when he was interrupted rose to his feet once again, in an angry mood to chide Karna and he bursted out, "Radheya, why do you poke your nose into this family feud unnecessarily? Let Dhritarashtra give the reply. Why do you exhibit your ignorance of planetary movements and calculation of time? We heard the twang of the Gandiva string after the pledged period was completed. If we are not willing for honourable peace, we are doomed to humiliating defeat and utter destruction. Even if you want to embark on the suicidal course, you may have some consideration for the people at large. War does not devour you alone; it consumes the whole populace."

There was consternation in the court as the veteran Bhishma exchanged hot words with Karna. Dhritarashtra intervened and said, "Best of Brahmins, please go back to the Pandavas; convey to them my affectionate regards. Please tell them that I am sending Sanjaya to them within a short time. I request you to convey my

best compliments to King Drupada and King Virata for whom I have great regard and respect.”

The brahmin envoy returned to Upaplavya and apprised Yudhishthira with what happened at Hastinapura.

73

“Parthasarathi”—Arjuna’s Charioteer

Duryodhana came to Dvaraka to seek the help of Sri Krishna, in person. He went straight to Krishna’s apartment and found him sleeping. So he sat on the chair behind the head of Krishna. By a strange coincidence, Arjuna too arrived at the same time and he stood at the feet of Sri Krishna, in a prayerful mood. Duryodhana, who was already there pretended as if he did not notice the presence of Arjuna, and sat absorbed in himself in a regal pose. The two rivals did not attempt at any apparent reconciliation even for courtesy’s sake. After some time, Sri Krishna woke up and saw Arjuna first, as he was standing in the direct range of his gaze. He said to him, “My dear brother-in-law; when did you come? Why did you not wake me up? I hope Dharmaputra, the living epitome of rectitude, is alright. How is Bhima, the invincible warrior? Is he amenable to Dharmaja’s discipline? How are the twins? I hope Draupadi is now in a happy mood of optimism.” As he was making a series of affectionate enquiries, he chanced to look at Duryodhana who was cajoling his moustaches, with his fingers, slightly bending his head. Sri Krishna, dramatically turned to him and asked, “King of kings”! when did you come? I hope your revered father and your noble mother are alright. How are your brothers? I hope your dearest friend Karna, and your allies are in an exultant mood.”

Duryodhana replied, “I have come first”, and paused for a while. Sri Krishna, with a smiling twinkle in his eyes replied “I have seen Arjuna first.” The dramatic dialogue between the two dragged on for a while.

“I know you would say that; that is why I paused for a while. You are trying to invent a lame excuse to ward me off.”

“Perhaps you have come to test my hospitality. You are equally welcome.”

"I have not come to test your hospitality; in fact I have come to seek your help actually."

Sri Krishna embraced Duryodhana and after the customary hospitalities were completed, asked him to tell him what he wanted. Duryodhana said, "Omniscient almighty, you know why I have come to you. To be brief, I have come to seek your help in the imminent Kuru-Pandava conflict. I have great regard for you, and that is why I came to you in person. Now the ball is in your court. I feel that Kauravas must be as dear to you as the Pandavas." Sri Krishna replied, "Yes, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, as well as the peoples of the various kingdoms are in fact dear to me. I am an advocate of peace. Unilaterally I am announcing my decision before you and Arjuna— I swear not to handle any weapon in the impending war and I want you to live in peace." Duryodhana was extremely happy at the announcement of Sri Krishna who was considered invincible and said to him, "I am happy that you have established your bona fides; I am quite satisfied that you seek the welfare of the whole world including the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Sri Krishna, peace is good; but war has its own merits. War is a biological necessity and the bitter medicine must be taken by humanity every now and then to keep up its health and heroism. Be specific, Madhava, what is the help which I can expect from you in the event of an inevitable war?" Sri Krishna replied in a serious tone, "If war cannot be avoided, the Kauravas and the Pandavas shall share my help for what it is worth as you both have approached me at the same time. Please listen— As I have already announced, I, with my pious pledge not to wield any weapon, will be on one side. I will be a mere civilian and any assistance can be extracted from me in that capacity only. On the other side, I place my army consisting of ten thousand professional soldiers, who will take part in the fighting with all their equipment and energies. Now you can choose. According to immemorial custom, the choice **must** be given to the junior, Arjuna who is younger than you." Sri Krishna turned to Arjuna and said, "You have heard me. Let me repeat, I wield no weapons and do not take part in actual fighting. I should like to be an unarmed civilian. Please consider well all these points before you make your choice. You are answerable to your brother, Yudhisthira."

Arjuna replied with folded hands. "Sri Krishna, I want you to be our friend, philosopher and guide. Unhesitatingly I choose you.

Your brain is more valuable than a thousand battalions. We will conquer the enemies with your blessings. I request you to be my charioteer." Duryodhana's heart was filled with joy at the unexpected acquisition to his military might; and he was prepared to leave Arjuna to live in his paradise. He took leave of Sri Krishna, saying, "Thanks, I am taking your army with me", and went away to meet Balarama.

Duryodhana met Balarama and narrated to him what transpired between him and Sri Krishna. Balarama's soul was tormented with the thought of the foreboded war and its disastrous consequences. He told Duryodhana without mincing words, "I am for peace. I do not like to be a helpless spectator of the meaningless carnage and cruelty. I want to be strictly neutral. I cannot support you against Sri Krishna; nor do I support the Pandavas. If both parties persist in the pursuit of war, I prefer to go on a pilgrimage to the holy places."

Duryodhana returned to Hastinapura and told Karna in a tone of self-satisfaction. (I have isolated Krishna, and his armies will fight on our side. He swore not to wield any weapon. Balarama has been neutralised. My mission to Dvaraka is a complete success. At one time I was afraid that I would be obliged to pocket the great liability of getting the unarmed lotus-eater, Sri Krishna, to our side as a gratuitous guest free to ride over us, leaving his armies to fight for the Pandavas. It is a pleasant surprise for me that Arjuna chose Krishna, who abdicated the arms, with superstitious adoration. Sri Krishna has an overbearing personality; he will not merely drive Arjuna's chariot but also dominate all the Pandavas; he can whip Arjuna's horses but cannot make the Pandavas win the war."

When they were alone, Sri Krishna said to Arjuna with a beaming smile, "Duryodhana departed from Dvaraka in high spirits bagging my brave army. Instead, you foolishly preferred me; how can an unarmed lotus-eater and an unproductive white-elephant be of any use to you?" Arjuna replied, "You are at perfect liberty to make fun of me and tease me; where Krishna is, verily righteousness is there; where there is righteousness, verily victory is there. Apart from this supreme spiritual satisfaction, I

feel I have come to the correct conclusion, in accordance with the considerations of selfishness or sobriety. Quite naturally I want to outshine all the heroes on the battlefield. When you stand on the battlefield you shine like the midday sun in the sky and by contrast I look like a glow-worm. Moreover, recognised authorities on military science say that the charioteer should be superior to the warrior in every respect; perhaps an impossible ideal elsewhere. How fortunate I am! The omniscient almighty has condescended to be my charioteer. When the reins are in your hands, verily victory is in my grip. I fondly desired that I should not be eclipsed by you on the battlefield; O, destroyer of the demons, it is indeed very kind of you to have granted my wish without my supplication."

Sri Krishna listened to Arjuna, with rapt attention, his face wreathed in smiles and said, "Great Warrior, I appreciate your explanation and I will be your charioteer with pleasure; you have my benediction. May your valour be crowned with victory. May your heroic humility be elevated to the holy throne of historic glory and graciousness in the near future."

74

Flattered Vanity

Human nature is complex. Very often man is a curious compound of contradictory emotions and conflicting sentiments. Every human character in real life is invariably an enigma wrapped up in a riddle. The Mahabharata has depicted varied characters, holding the mirror up to realism. The character of Salya is a typical example.

Salya, the maternal uncle of Nakula and Sahadeva was expected to fight on the side of the Pandavas. In fact, Yudhisthira took his help for granted. He sent Arjuna to Dvaraka to meet Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna, the staunchest ally of the Pandavas, in spite of his professed love and affection towards them, sent his army to fight on the side of the Kauravas.

Salya was a versatile warrior self-conscious of his seniority and stature. Duryodhana wanted to win him over to his side by pampering his self-importance. Salya's love for the Pandavas came

into conflict with his hatred for Sri Krishna who was given the place of pride in the Pandava camp. Salya, if he joined the Pandava camp must reconcile himself to a secondary position. The Mahabharata war, for many people provided the rare opportunity for self-fulfilment. Some utilised the occasion to settle their old scores. Salya's soul yearned for recognition and optimum utilisation of his versatile talents. He considered himself superior to Sri Krishna in chariot-driving; to Bhima in the mace-battle and to Arjuna in archery. There was a lurking fear in the subconscious mind of Salya that he would be relegated to a back-seat in the Pandava camp. Yudhisthira did nothing to allay Salya's misgivings and took his support for granted. In the last resort Yudhisthira preferred Sri Krishna to Salya.

Duryodhana exploited the situation successfully. When Salya started with his armies to go to Upaplavya to join the Pandava ranks, Duryodhana organised receptions at various points on the way and tickled his vanity. Special guest houses were constructed en route for his stay with all amenities and luxuries. Delicious dishes and drinks were served to Salya and his armies. Salya presumed that all those arrangements were made by the Pandavas. He called the concerned officials to offer his compliments. They told him, "Best of the brave warriors, we are the ministers of Duryodhana, who has arranged all these receptions with meticulous care. He has got fruits from Gandhara and wines from the royal palace of Hastinapura. The dancers and musicians were picked up from various troupes ranging from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. If you are pleased to summon Duryodhana, he will come and pay his respects to you in person." Salya was mightily pleased and at that opportune moment Duryodhana called on Salya. Salya embraced him warmly and said, "King of Kings, I appreciate your gesture and good-will, ask any boon and I will grant it." Duryodhana said, "Best of the brave warriors, I want you to fight on my side in the ensuing war; I know your worth and you will occupy a worthy place in my heart and an honourable position in our camp. You know that the Pandava camp is preoccupied with the deification of Lord Krishna and we want you on our side as our counter-balance." Salya was faced with an unexpected situation, suddenly. Prompted by his flattered ego, he said, "Be it so, I have pledged my word to you already."

However, Salya soon suffered from scruples of conscience and told Duryodhana, "King of Kings, this is an unforeseen

development. The Pandavas will be expecting me. I must meet Yudhisthira and apprise him of my decision, in a gentlemanly way. I promise to return to you as early as possible." Duryodhana replied, "I consider you as my saviour, not as my slave; you can do as you please. My only request to you is to remember me and your responsibility."

Salya went to Upaplavya and met the Pandavas. Dharmaputra received Salya with due hospitality, and narrated the sufferings and sorrows they underwent. Nakula narrated how Yudhisthira brought him and other brothers back to life from the ordeal of Yaksha. Salya said to Yudhisthira, "Kunti is more than a mother to Nakula and Sahadeva; you are more than a brother to them. You have made my responsibility very light." Yudhisthira replied, "You are more than a maternal uncle not only to the twins but to all our brothers. We look to you as our saviour and it is indeed very kind of you to come to us well in advance of the inevitable war to help us." Salya was placed in an embarrassing situation and was stunned for a while and searched for suitable words to reply and he was non-plussed. Salya who always considered himself to be a prodigy of prowess looked upon himself as a perfidious pygmy standing before a moral giant obliged to plead guilty of criminal conduct. However he pulled himself up and said to Yudhisthira, "Noble nephew, I have come to beg your pardon and clear my conscience. I was trapped by Duryodhana and I promised him to fight on his side." Salya narrated to Dharmaraja in detail the unsolicited hospitality arranged by Duryodhana during the journey.

Dharmaputra realised his mistake in taking the assistance of Salya for granted and wanted to make the best of the bad bargain. He said to Salya, "Best of the brave warriors, Duryodhana has successfully exploited your generous genius; I cannot criticise you. Your conduct is in accordance with the highest ideals of our ancient culture. In fact I must blame myself. It is our complacent foolishness that gave quarter to Duryodhana. I deserve this punishment."

Salya tried to provide some consolation to Yudhisthira. He said, "One sparrow does not make the summer. I may join the Kaurava forces but I know righteousness is on your side. Where

there is righteousness, verily victory is there. I may fight on the opposite side but I wish you success. Dhritarashtra is blind; but Duryodhana is blinder; he does not read the writing on the wall. He is digging his own grave. I have come to cheer you up and wish you success."

Yudhishthira replied, "Great uncle, we know that your blessings are with us. Duryodhana is in dire need of you. Karna is his prize-boy. He will request you to be Karna's charioteer especially when he plans the final attack on Arjuna, as a counter-balance to Sri Krishna. I have no right to ask you not to accept the assignment when you have accepted willynilly to be on their side. However, I do not desire that Arjuna should die at the hands of Karna because of you." Salya was glad that he could catch an opportunity from a point of no return to a pleasant reconciliation with his nephews. He promised Yudhishthira, "I do not think Duryodhana will dare to ask me to drive the chariot of the son of the charioteer; if he asks, I may turn down his request. Even if I am persuaded to accept the proposal, I promise that Arjuna will not die at the hands of Karna while I drive his chariot. After all, your fears are quite unfounded. Why do you think that the bellicose braggart to be superior to Arjuna?" Yudhishthira rose and bowed to the feet of Salya saying, "Our affectionate uncle Salya has saved Arjuna." He said elaborating his stand, "The most outstanding leaders of the Kaurava side are Bhishma, Drona, Salya and Karna. Our grandsire will not kill us, though he may indulge in indiscriminate slaughter of our armies. Drona may try to capture me alive but will never kill me. I need not speak to you about yourself. Even if I attack you, you may prefer to die at my hands rather than kill me. But Karna is the only warrior who has vowed to kill Arjuna. Now that you have promised to save Arjuna, you will be the actual architect of our victory. Now I have only one thing to pray for. Duryodhana is bound to request you to drive the chariot of Karna. Please accept the request for the sake of saving your nephews."

Salya said, "Noble nephew, do not worry. The arrogant son of the charioteer is bound to blow his own trumpet and indulge in self-glorification. I can never tolerate it; I will cut him to his size and he will be discouraged. Discouragement can cause semi-death; Arjuna can easily overpower him. You can count on my promise.

I am happy I have eased my consciousness." Yudhishthira replied, "I can sleep in solace hereafter." The uncle and nephews spent a happy time rejoicing over their reconciliation. Salya, predicted that the proud Suyodhana, arrogant as well as ambitious was doomed to downfall and destruction and narrated the story of Nahusha to illustrate the point.

75**Pride Goeth Before Fall**

"Once upon a time, in the mystic past, Indra, the king of heaven was obliged to hide his head in shame and resorted to penance to purify himself, in a lotus bud in a remote lake. The citizens of heaven thought that a kingless state would become a prey to confusion and chaos and requested Nahusha, a king who performed a hundred Asvamedhas to be their ruler and occupy the celestial throne. Nahusha, who knew that he was unequal to so great a task, declined the offer politely. He told them with humility, "I am too little to aspire to Indra's crown." But the rishis insisted saying, "Nahusha, we appreciate your humility. We delegate our powers and prowess to you voluntarily and elect you to be our leader. This will be in addition to your innate strength. Moreover, as our presiding deity, you will be able to attract to you the strength and stamina of your subordinates when you look at them." Nahusha accepted and was crowned king of heaven.

Authority is the mother of arrogance, and people rather quite unconsciously pamper authority. One day he happened to see Sachi Devi, the wife of Indra, and not contented with the crown of Indra, he coveted his wife as well. Wine, woman and wealth can each intoxicate any body, more so a person in authority. He summoned Sachi Devi to his palace publicly issuing orders in the open assembly hall. She approached Brihaspati, who gave her asylum in his house and said, "Your husband will return sooner or later. Perhaps sooner than later. Nahusha is proud and intoxicated with power. Pride goeth before fall."

Nahusha was angry with Sachi Devi as well as Brihaspati and gave vent to his indignation publicly. The rishis told him that it was sin to covet another's wife. Nahusha blurted out, "Why do you

quote scriptures to me alone? Did not Indra covet Ahalya? Did you prevent him then? Why do you want to stop me now? Indra is not impeccable and above board on other counts as well. Did he not murder Visvarupa in cold blood while he was engaged in penance? Did he not kill Vritra through deceit? You have connived at all these things and kept quiet; you have no right to teach me morals." So saying, he ordered his servants to go to Brihaspati's house and fetch Sachi Devi. Brihaspati told Sachi Devi, "Please go to Nahusha; brute force must be faced with tact and strategy. I think you can gain some time easily." Sachi Devi took the hint from Brihaspati's exhortation and went to the palace of Nahusha, who was filled with joy. She said to him, "Please give me a week's time, I wish to search for my husband meanwhile; if I do not find him I can accept you with a clear conscience." Nahusha wanted to please her and gave her the time she requested.

Sachi searched for her husband and at last found him, hidden in the lotus stem in the lake, Manasarovar reduced to the size of an atom. He advised Sachi Devi, "My penance is drawing to a close. I will tell you how Nahusha falls. Ask him to come to you, in the palanquin carried by the seven seers."

Sachi Devi returned to Nahusha. His joy knew no bounds. He said to her, "Blessed lady, you have kept up your word. This heavenly empire is nothing for me without you. I am at your service. Bid me what to do." Sachi told him in a sweet voice, "I invite you to come to me in the pearly palanquin carried by the seven rishis. I will be waiting to extend the customary welcome to you." Nahusha intoxicated with infatuation ordered the sages to carry him in the palanquin to Sachi Devi's house. The palanquin bearers were novices to the job and Nahusha impatient at the slow pace of the palanquin said, 'sarpa, sarpa' meaning 'move quickly, move quickly.' The word has another meaning, serpent.

The sage Agastya who was offended at the impudent exhortation, cursed Nahusha in uncontrollable indignation, "Do thou fall from heaven to live as a serpent on earth till you acquire sobriety and true humility from a realised soul." At once, Nahusha fell down to earth as a serpent. Pride goeth before fall.

Duryodhana is doomed to down-fall like Nahusha. You will regain the throne like Indra. The humiliation and insults endured

by Draupadi will soon pass off as historic lessons of warning for succeeding generations. Dharmaputra, you need not worry about Karna; the interests of Arjuna, believe me, will be quite safe in my hands."

The Pandavas gave a royal send-off to uncle Salya. They escorted him up to the outskirts of the city. Salya returned to Hastinapura in high spirits, as a hot favourite of both the contending camps.

76

Pleasant Platitudes and Hollow Hands

Dhritarashtra asked Sanjaya to go to Upaplavya as his envoy of peace. The Pandavas and the Kauravas sent messengers in all directions to their friends and allies who arrived at Upaplavya and Hastinapura with their armies and equipment. The Pandavas collected seven divisions known as 'akshauhinis'. The Kauravas secured eleven divisions. Both the camps were armed to the teeth. Practically all the princes of Bharatavarsha, with all their military might joined one camp or the other. Never in the recorded history of mankind, military preparations were made on such a gigantic scale. Every male adult was a war recruit and thousands of elephants and horses were pressed into military service. No beast of burden was left out. The earth breathed military air.

Sri Krishna, accompanied by his wife Satyabhama, came to Upaplavya. The Pandavas gave him a rousing reception and provided him with a separate guest palace, luxuriously furnished with up-to-date facilities.

Sanjaya came to Upaplavya and went straight to Sri Krishna's lodging in accordance with the instructions given by Dhritarashtra. At that time, Sri Krishna and Satyabhama were entertaining Arjuna and Draupadi as their guests. Evidently, it was a confidential meeting to which even their sons had no access. However, Sri Krishna immediately granted an interview to Sanjaya and enquired after the welfare of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari. The mission undertaken by Sanjaya was a particularly delicate and difficult one. It was responsibility without authority.

He had no representative status nor did he possess the rudimentary right of a reply. He must simply echo his master's voice. He did not bring with him any peace formula and he had nothing to offer to the Pandavas. Yet he was asked to persuade the Pandavas, to follow the path of peace. However, Sanjaya enjoyed the unique reputation of being Dhritarashtra's conscience-keeper. Sanjaya, the deep diplomat was not unconscious of his limitations. Still he undertook the mission because of his devoted dedication to Dhritarashtra.

Sri Krishna showered on Sanjaya extraordinary courtesies and asked him to convey his compliments to Dhritarashtra and hoped that a peaceful and amicable settlement would be found. It was more or less a courtesy call and Sanjaya said that he would meet Yudhishthira next day early in the morning and requested Sri Krishna to participate in the peace parleys. Sanjaya was taken round the military encampments and was lodged in a special guest house by Indrasena, Chief of the Pandava retinue and bodyguards.

Next morning, Sanjaya met Yudhishthira in his court-hall and conveyed the greetings and good wishes of Dhritarashtra to the Pandavas. Yudhishthira enquired after the welfare of all the Kauravas, including the grandsire Bhishma. He wanted his compliments to be conveyed to everybody including Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra, born to his vaisya wife, Karna and Sakuni. After the formalities were completed, Sanjaya as the envoy of Dhritarashtra said to Yudhishthira, "Your uncle is very happy to learn that you have completed the pledged period. He welcomes your peaceful intentions. He desired peace most sincerely from the inner most recess of his heart. He wanted me to compliment you particularly on your well deserved epithet 'Ajatasatru'; you are a personification of nobility and you have no enemies. He is confident that even if the Kauravas do not concede to you, your patrimony, you will not swerve from the path of peace. In fact, life is transient, and full of sorrows and sufferings and it is not worth a terrible war. It is better to beg in Andhaka and Vrishni kingdoms rather than wage a bloody war for persons of your type, who are dedicated to peace. Your uncle is particularly sorry that his sons are not amenable to his discipline, and he exhorts you to be good unilaterally setting an exemplary example. Duryodhana is arrogant that Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama, Bahlika,

Bhagadatta, Somadatta and Salya a gallant galaxy of invincible heroes will fight on his side and he is sure of success. However, Dhritarashtra is confident that you will avoid war at all costs."

Yudhisthira replied to Sanjaya point by point. "Please offer our thanks to our dear and revered uncle for his sweet solicitude for us. In fact we want the arrangement he made so kindly then, to be revived now, and we go back to Indraprastha with pleasure. Sanjaya, you know, I am for peace. If for any reason, our patrimony is not going to be restored to us, I will be just satisfied with five villages, for our five brothers. The world is wide. The Kuru kingdom is large enough. If only there is goodwill, we, the Kauravas as well as the Pandavas can share it and live in comfort and contentment. For thirteen years, we were in the wilderness though we were born princes. The Kauravas have had enough enjoyment. Before I conclude Sanjaya, I should like to refer to the implied threat in your words which glorified the invincible heroes arrayed on the side of the Kauravas.

We want peace, but we do not covet the peace of the grave-yard. We do not want to wage a war of aggression; but we are prepared to fight for our emancipation. Peace is preferable to war; but war is certainly better than slavery. Swords are nobler than chains."

Sanjaya returned to Hastinapura disillusioned and dispirited and met Dhritarashtra. He told him, "I am tired mentally and physically on account of the diplomatic mission and the distant travel. It is already evening now and I will meet you tomorrow early in the morning and give a detailed report to you." He took leave of Dhritarashtra and went home.

77

The Sleepless Night

After Sanjaya went home, Dhritarashtra went to bed but could not get a wink of sleep. He sent for Vidura and spent the whole night in his company, listening to his words of wisdom.

Vidura told Dhritarashtra, "If you decide to give the Pandavas their paternal share of the kingdom, they will live

happily; your sons can live in plenty; people of both the kingdoms will lead prosperous lives; you can have sound sleep.” The love lorn, the greedy who want to grab other’s property and the weak who are afraid to face a stronger enemy, cannot have sleep.

In the epic, Vidura’s philosophy of life and his views on various topics are given at great length. Some typical examples are given below.

“Anger, and arrogance, pride and prejudice, laziness and licentiousness are the characteristics of a depraved person.”

*ya irshyuh paravitteshu rupe virye kulanvaye,
sukhasaubhagya satkare tasya vyadhiranantah.

He, who is envious of others for their aristocratic ancestry, or attractive personality, wealth or wisdom, accomplishments or attainments, honoured position or happy life, will be a perpetual patient suffering from a disease that is incurable.”

Forgiveness is very often dubbed as weakness. But it is the brightest ornament anybody can ever hope to wear. It adds the fourth dimension to one’s personality.”

“Non-violence of the strong, donations given by the poor people out of their meagre earnings, are considered by the wise as outstanding virtues.”

Next morning Sanjaya met Dhritarashtra and reported to him what Yudhisthira told him. He told him about the war preparations he witnessed and added, “Not only Arjuna, Bhima and twins are eager for war, but the pacifist Dharmaputra told me without mincing words that he was prepared for war in the event of failure of peace parleys.” Dhritarashtra summoned Duryodhana and apprised him of the situation and said, “Vidura has advised peaceful settlement.” Duryodhana rose up and exclaimed, “A dog which barks at his own master is an unbearable nuisance. Your greatest obsession is Vidura. I do not want to listen to his platitudes any more.” Dhritarashtra sent for Bhisma and apprised him about Sanjaya’s mission.

*A Sanskrit sloka of the original epic in Roman script is given along with the English translation as a typical example.

Bhisma said, "Duryodhana is counting on Karna. Karna may brag as he please; he is saying that he would slay Arjuna. In my opinion Karna does not equal one sixteenth part of Arjuna. Very recently, Arjuna, single-handed, defeated all of us. Our army as a whole including the great Karna fell unconscious on the battle-field. Uttara cut some coloured bits from the headgears of our heroes. We ought to thank our stars—he was not instructed to cut the throats. It was Arjuna and not Karna who defeated the Gandharvas when they took Duryodhana captive the other day in the Dvaita forest. Ethics as well as expediency counsel us to make peace with the Pandavas."

Dhritarashtra said to Duryodhana, "Listen to the assessment of the Pitamaha. I endorse his views." Duryodhana bluntly refused to have anything to do with peace parleys and went away.

78

Kunti and Karna

The historic city of Hastinapura, the capital of the Kaurava kingdom was filled to the brim and overflowed with bizarre buzz of the bubbling battalions. Troops, troops every where, 'not an inch of space was spared for a civilian to stand and stare'. For miles and miles, both banks of the Ganges were littered with military encampments, hordes of elephants, thousands of horses and innumerable units of cavalry. The earth was covered with tents and the sky was filled with fluttering flags. Vidura told Kunti, "Sanjaya has returned from Upaplavya. He told Dhritarashtra that the Pandavas were prepared for war. We know the Kauravas have made massive preparations; war is knocking at our door-steps. Princes think of war, the greatest of human catastrophe, as a routine disaster. Philosophers have come to regard war as a wholesome relief to Mother Earth, groaning under the heavy burden of over-population. I do not know whether I am becoming alienated or others have become dehumanized. Modern man has become stark mad; very soon we have to pay a heavy price for our foolish over-confidence. Man, in the mysterious strangeness of his being, is devising every day new missiles to destroy himself; man has become spiritually bankrupt; philosophy, confronted with this wholly unexpected phenomenon, stands mute and bewildered.

Very soon the world will be filled with weeping widows, aged mothers who have lost their young sons, and paradoxically enough Dhritarashtra and Gandhari will soon become the most obnoxious parents of Bharatavarsha."

Kunti could read the writing on the wall clearly. Nobody could avert war. Nobody else knew the tragedy brewing in her heart. Karna, her first-born child and the Pandavas were arrayed in opposite sides. Whatever might be the outcome of the war, the certain sufferer would be Kunti.

For Karna, war was the coveted opportunity to redeem the deep debt of gratitude he owed to Duryodhana and he welcomed it with all his heart and soul. His heart throbbed with joy when he looked at the military encampments on the banks of the Ganges stretching from one horizon to the other. The sun, setting over the panoramic tents pitched on the banks of the Ganges was a sight he enjoyed most. One day, he drove to the Ganges, halted his chariot under the chequered shade of a banyan tree, had a dip in the river and began to offer his evening prayers to the sun. He recited aloud his "Pravara" traditional invocation mentioning his biodata, "I, Radheya - the son of Radha and Adhiratha offer you, O visible God Sun, my devotional regards." Even before he finished the first sentence, a gentle voice mingled with the music of the thunder was heard. The voice was clear and it said, "Please stop." Karna involuntarily dropped the water he was holding in his blended palms into the Ganges and stared around. He saw a feminine figure covered with a veil advancing towards him out of the shrubs prodding her way amidst the long evening-shadows. She stopped at the brink of the water and stood silently gazing at Karna. Karna said to her with folded hands, "Mysterious visitor, who are you, standing here like a shadow?*" I have heard a strange voice asking me to stop. I am offering my evening prayers; I hope this is no sin." The strange figure, taken aback, replied in a firm tone, "You are

**Shadow-Chaya-according to ancient Indian tradition was the consort of the Sun-God; Karna used the word in its normal senses; but it conveyed a different sense to Kunti who stood there, certainly not as the wife of Pandu but as the sweetheart of the Sun-God. This is an example to illustrate what the Sanskrit rhetoricians call, 'Anuranana Dhvani', meaning the reverberation of the ulterior meaning.

uttering a blatant lie to the Sun-God who knows the Truth." Karna was dumbfounded for a minute, and replied recollecting his wits, "My birth is still an unsolved mystery! I came to know of a rumour early in childhood that my father found me in a floating box in the Ganges. I often dreamt of my mother; once she kissed me in my dream and when I woke up it was Radha who was more than a mother to me. Anyway, I wanted to meet the mother who gave birth to me; perhaps I am destined to die before I meet her." The mysterious visitor replied in gentle tones, "Your real mother was glancing at you, when you went across the main streets of Hastinapura in your chariot shining like the Sun; can you imagine how many earthquakes have rocked your mother's heart when she left you to the mercy of the waves of the Ganges? The most unfortunate creature in the whole world—the mother who gave you birth is standing before you, here and now covering her head in shame and sorrow. You ought not to look at her face."

Karna was thrilled, and rushed out of the river and bowed to her feet saying, "Revered mother, your words have touched the chords of my heart like the vibrations of Eternal Truth; the mother's love shall never be suspected. The creation comes to a full-stop, the minute the mother's love turns unreal. I bow to you." She embraced him affectionately forgetting everything else in the world. It was an unexpected experience for Karna, and he too forgot everything else excepting Duryodhana's friendship. The Ganges stopped flowing for a few seconds and stared at the son and the mother united in the unique embrace. The God of time was thrilled and he missed his heartbeat for a fraction of a second. Tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of the mother and wetted the head of Karna who looked up and recognised her. He said in baffled amazement, "You are the queen of the late king Pandu and the mother of Arjuna." She replied in a quivering voice, "Yes, I am the unfortunate mother; Mother of Karna and Arjuna who are bent on killing each other." Karna said, "You are the most fortunate mother on the earth; the two most outstanding heroes amongst the eighteen akshauhinis are your sons. What a proud privilege for any mother on the surface of the earth! I understand your anguish. Mother of the mighty heroes, please tell me if I can do anything for you."

Kunti composed herself and said coolly, "The war will lit up funeral pyres in the hearts of millions of mothers. I request you as

a representative of the mothers of the whole world, to stop the war. If there is one person in the whole world, who can avert the war it is Karna, the dearest friend of Duryodhana and the brother of the Pandavas. As the worthy son of a worthy father, the Sun God, who is acclaimed as the benefactor of the whole world, you have to play the role of a peace-maker. If you come to the Pandava side, you will naturally be crowned emperor of India.”

Karna heaved a heavy sigh and said, “War is a sacred sacrament for me. It is a source of self-realisation. This great war is equivalent to thousands of Asvamedhas. Men, even if they sit at home are not immortal; for a warrior, death on the brave battlefield, is any day better than breathing his last, suffocated on the sick-bed. Anyway, nobody who came to me ever went back disappointed. Great Mother, you gave me birth. I will give you an unsolicited boon. I will not kill Dharmaputra or Bhima, Nakula or Sahadeva even when they fall into my hands. Perhaps Arjuna can defend himself. As for me, you should not worry. Take me as lost, long long, ago.”

Kunti was sobbing silently and Karna found tears trickling down her cheeks. He added, “Mother dear, I have one request; reveal not this secret to Dharmaputra till my death. Let my brother, the incarnation of righteousness, offer me obituary oblations afterwards, if he so chooses.”

The sun set meanwhile and Karna saluted Kunti and walked away. Darkness descended on the landscape like the curtain after the close of a thrilling scene in a dramatic performance.

79

The Plenipotentiary of Peace

Yudhisthira said to Sri Krishna in anguish, “You have listened to Sanjaya who came to us with hollow hands and went away repeating pleasant platitudes like a parrot. We know Duryodhana is intransigent and is surrounded by war-mongers. We pitched our hopes on Dhritarashtra who seems to be helpless. My hopes are dashed to the ground. I am now utterly disillusioned and disappointed.

I shudder to think of the consequences of war. Is there no alternative? Vasudeva, you are our ultimate refuge. Your statesmanship alone, I believe, can save us. I prefer an unjust peace to the most righteous war."

Sri Krishna replied, "Dharmaputra, in the ultimate analysis, it is idealism and not arms that win a war. I will go to the Kaurava court as your envoy and try my level best to secure peace." Yudhisthira replied, "Kesava, the Kauravas are conspirators. I cannot risk your precious life in exchange for even the kingship of the three worlds." Krishna said, "I have pondered over the pros and cons of the problem and decided to explore the prospects of peace. I will go to Hastinapura, place the problem before the Pitamaha and the preceptor, Kripa and Asvatthama and the other dignitaries of the court. I will make the final attempt to avert the war. It is a duty we owe to our conscience, to the people at large and the principles we profess to practise. Even if we fail we amass enormous goodwill from all quarters which will stand us in good stead even in the prosecution of the war. With regard to my personal safety, you need not entertain any fears. They know that public opinion will be against them if they harm the envoy. They may be willing to wound but will be afraid to strike. Still, even if they embark on any foolish adventure, they will be reduced to ashes. I will take Satyaki with me for your satisfaction and he will be my bodyguard. I want to know the viewpoints of Bhima and Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva."

Bhima said to Sri Krishna, "We are all solidly behind Yudhisthira. I want you to go to Hastinapura with all sincerity to secure peace for us. I pledge my word to abide by peace."

Sri Krishna said, "Today I have heard extraordinary words from the mouth of Bhima, the so-called embodiment of bravery. The fire vomiting lion has been metamorphosed into a meek lamb. Bhima wants peace. He has lost all his credibility." Bhima was offended at the taunting words of Krishna and flew into a rage. He retorted, "Sri Krishna, I need not learn lessons on bravery from a cowardly cowherd. I never flew away from the battlefield and tried to substitute my brain for bravery." Sri Krishna replied, "My dear Bhima, did you not swear to kill Duhshasana and drink his blood on the battle-field? Did you not

take a public pledge that you would break the thighs of Duryodhana? What became of all that bravado? Are you not prepared now to eat your humble pie and supplicate before the Kauravas for peace? Am I wrong when I say that your courageous pledges have lost their credence?"

Dharmputra stood up with folded hands and requested Krishna not to inflame the emotions of Bhima. Turning round to Bhima he said, "My dear brother, Vasudeva is our esteemed brother-in-law and he is entitled to enjoy fun at our expense. You should not be irritated at his jokes." Bhima said, "I am not afraid of war. Vasudeva, tell the Kauravas that my mace will be suitable match to their intransigence." "This is real Bhima," Sri Krishna exclaimed, "I will go to Hastinapura with the invisible mace of Bhima as my bodyguard." Everybody had a hearty laugh. Next Arjuna told Sri Krishna to go to the Kaurava court formally to explain their stand to the king and the commoner alike." He added, "You can argue our case from a position of strength. You can tell them that I am endowed with divine missiles like the Pasupata. Tell Duryodhana that I am anxious to meet him on the battle-field."

Sri Krishna invited Nakula to express his views. He said, "Vasudeva, I feel it is derogatory to our dignity to go to Duryodhana with the begging bowl; go there to satisfy our revered brother, Dharmaputra. Tell Duryodhana that my sword is thirsty for their blood and we will avenge on the battle-field the wrongs done to us." Sri Krishna, a shrewd psychologist wanted to provide individual satisfaction and a sense of commitment to all the brothers. So he asked Sahadeva to ventilate his opinions. Sahadeva said, "Krishna, in my opinion, you are going to Hastinapura not for the so-called parleys, but to save the precious time. Please go there, talk to them frankly and fix an auspicious time for the battle and come back. We will vanquish the villains and gain the whole Kuru kingdom instead of half of it, by right of conquest."

Sri Krishna congratulated the Pandavas on their righteous stand and said turning to Draupadi, "Dear sister, I am going to Hastinapura with the full knowledge that Duryodhana will not accept peace. The Pandavas have taken a determined stand and

soon the humiliations you have undergone will be avenged memories." He touched the most sensitive chord of her being and he was sure that her reaction would inspire the Pandavas to reach the zeniths of their bravery. Draupadi stood before Sri Krishna exhibiting the twined locks of her hair which shone like hooded serpents. She held them by her right hand and said, "My dear brother, remember these, the villain Duhsasana caught hold of me to humiliate in the public court." Tears rolled down her cheeks and her voice quivered with emotion and she added, "Before you actually leave for Hastinapura, make sure that Yudhisthira is prepared to fight even when Duryodhana turns down his supplication to grant at least the five villages. If the Pandavas are for peace at any cost I think Abhimanyu, Subhadra's son, Ghatotkacha, the son of Hidimba and my sons will fight the Kauravas. Revered Kunti gave birth to great heroes in vain." Sri Krishna consoled Draupadi saying "My dear sister, the honour of women is the real index of the health of the nation. The Kaurava kingdom was doomed to destruction on the very day when Duryodhana and Duhsasana dragged you into the open court disregarding all dicta of decorum and decency. Nemesis is at work and ere-long the Dhartarashtras will be consumed by the fire of retribution." The whole atmosphere was surcharged with emotion and excitement. Sri Krishna asked Satyaki to follow him and requested Dharmaputra to give his parting message and benediction.

Yudhisthira said to Sri Krishna, "You know us, you know the opposite party, you know the intricacies of diplomacy and its delicate diction. You know the art of dialogue, you know how to safeguard our interests. So you are free to speak to Suyodhana as our ambassador plenipotentiary, what you deem fit. Where is the need to brief you?"

Vidura, who was given advance intimation of Sri Krishna's visit, told Dhritarashtra that Sri Krishna was coming to Hastinapura for peace parleys. Dhritarashtra told Vidura, "Sri Krishna holds the key to the problem. Please arrange a rousing reception to him. We must give him lavish presents, precious jewellery, tamed tuskers adorned with brocade and silver caskets, race horses and a thousand beautiful maidens." Vidura replied, "Sri Krishna cannot be bribed with all the wealth of the three worlds. He wants peace, give him what he desires."

Sri Krishna was given a rousing reception. The citizens of Hastinapura and voluntary organisations gave him a great welcome. Apart from being the envoy of the Pandavas, Sri Krishna had a stature of his own and the whole population of Hastinapura greeted him. Soldiers and military officers from various kingdoms encamping at Hastinapura joined the tumultuous crowds and followed Sri Krishna who was taken in a procession to the court hall of Dhritarashtra from the city gates. Duryodhana, his brothers, Sakuni and Karna welcomed him at the entrance of the court hall and Duryodhana invited him for dinner. Sri Krishna met Dhritarashtra and after the usual formalities were over, told Duryodhana. "King of Kings, envoys are not expected to feast before they carry out their mission successfully. Today I will be the guest of Vidura to redeem a long overdue promise. Tomorrow I will come to the court and if I succeed in my peace parleys I will accept your feast." So saying, he took leave of Dhritarashtra and went to Vidura's house to pay his respects to his aunt Kunti Devi.

Sri Krishna told Kunti Devi that the Pandavas were hale and healthy and were looking forward to their future with optimism. Kunti wept bitterly recounting the sufferings which the Pandavas underwent. She always felt that fortune did not favour her heroic sons. Sri Krishna consoled her that righteousness would emerge victorious ultimately.

Vidura cautioned Krishna that his peace mission was foredoomed to failure. He added, "Duryodhana is a determined idiot and is surrounded by evil advisers. His arrogance has been reinforced by eleven akshauhinis, he has been able to collect. He believes that he is invincible because Bhishma and Drona are on his side not to speak of Karna." He advised Sri Krishna not to go to the Kaurava court as he apprehended danger to his life.

Sri Krishna enjoyed the company of Vidura and discussed many subjects with him, besides enjoying his hospitality. A beautiful story from the folklore of India tells us that Vidura procured a rare fragrant variety of Bananas for the sake of Sri Krishna. He stripped off the rinds carefully. Deeply absorbed in a fit of absent-minded devotion, professor Vidura offered Sri Krishna the outer peels instead of the inner-fruit-contents which were thrown into the dust bin. Sri Krishna—as the story goes—

ate the peels to his heart's content. Vidura, to his great consternation, realised his mistake next morning only at the instance of the servant-maid.

Next morning, Duryodhana along with his retinue and friends came to Vidura's house to take Sri Krishna to Dhritarashtra's court with all the regal pomp and fanfare.

When Sri Krishna entered the royal court, he was greeted with a standing ovation. Sri Krishna took the seat, offering salutations to elders and smiles to the rest. After the usual formalities were over, Sri Krishna rose and turning to Dhritarashtra said, "At the outset, let me present my credentials. Now I have come as a messenger of peace from the Pandavas. You know everything and I have not come to tell you anything new. You are conversant with the principles of righteousness and law, justice and fairplay. The kings of the Kuru dynasty are known for their generosity, valour and truthfulness. You are the custodian of a great and noble tradition which I hope your worthy sons will keep up.

"The Pandavas are peace loving heroes and are devoted to you and are ready to extend their hand of friendship and love to your children. No man who is not completely insane could fail to desire peace. War is the most predatory enterprise in the entire world. Nothing is so wasteful and costly as war. Princes owe a duty to the public at large. They are expected to protect the people and it is a sin to sacrifice them at the altar of war. If the Pandavas and the Kauravas are united it will be an invincible brotherhood.

"The Pandavas want their paternal kingdom restored to them. As a unique gesture of goodwill and pacificism, Dharmaputra wanted me to tell you that he would be satisfied with five villages for his five brothers.

"Pandavas who pray for peace are none the less prepared for war."

There was hushed silence in the assembly at the categorical declaration made by Sri Krishna about the imminent war.

Sri Krishna then addressed the members of the assembly. He pronounced the exhortation.

“If injustice is not countered with righteousness and falsehood with truth in any assembly, the honourable members will have to be held guilty. The members of the assembly will be doomed for ever. It is the inexorable duty of every member to uphold truth and justice. Otherwise they are committing moral suicide. Truth is self-luminous and justice is immortal.”

Members of the assembly listened to Sri Krishna’s exposition with rapt attention. It was a memorable experience for them. His dark complexion was just like a cloud hovering over the horizon in the rainy season and his syllables sounded like subdued thunder. His occasional smiles appeared like flashes of lightning. The thrilled audience looked like the Vindhya mountain ranges covered with fresh foliage.

Sri Krishna continued, saying “Why should the poor innocent and peace loving populace die to satisfy the perverse whim of princes whose covetous greed has caused the war? It is for Dhritarashtra to take a decision in consultation with or independent of his children. I resume my seat for a reply.”

Sri Krishna sat down to watch the reaction to his speech.

Dhritarashtra said to Duryodhana, “I endorse every sentence, nay every syllable of what Sri Krishna has said. I want you to give back the paternal share of the kingdom to the Pandavas in the interests of peace and tranquility.

Duryodhana stood up and said addressing his father, “I am the last person to be cowed down by threats. The Pandavas have absolutely no right to ask back the kingdom they staked and lost at the game of dice. When I was young, you have wronged me by giving them half the kingdom. The kingdom always belongs to the eldest prince. It is your fault to partition the kingdom and I have rectified the wrong. When they are prepared for war, all talk about justice, law and fairplay becomes quite meaningless. Let them exercise the right of conquest. The Pandavas have obviously realised the weakness of their stand and are suing for peace even with dishonour. They are prepared to accept five villages. I am absolutely blameless. I have a clear conscience. If I concede five

villages I can as well give away half the kingdom. Let me proclaim my resolve frankly. I am not prepared to give even a needle point of territory to the Pandavas.”

Sri Krishna's anger knew no bounds at the arrogant reply given by Duryodhana. His eyes which were always like white lotuses suddenly turned red with anger, emitting sparks of fire. He rose to his feet and said, “Duryodhana, why do you pretend wounded innocence? Is it not an open secret that you conspired with Sakuni to cheat the gullible Dharmaputra at the game of dice? Are you really blameless? What about your preplanned outrage on the modesty of Draupadi?

Please listen to me in your own interests. Ajatasatru has no enemies on earth and he is the embodiment of universal love and he is incapable of anger. However, his righteous indignation can churn all the oceans. Beware, a hundred Bhismas, a thousand Dronas and ten thousand Karnas will be reduced to ashes in no time, when Dharmaputra is really angry! When the chariot of Arjuna advances on the battlefield with the Hanuman Banner fluttering in the sky, drawn by celestial horses and driven by me, showers of swift shafts from the Gandiva bow will devastate your army and you will then regret that you have rejected my peace parleys. Alright, let by-gones be by-gones, the Pandavas are prepared to forgive and forget; if you are not prepared to accept the proffered hand of peace, please tell me when you want the war to start. Tomorrow or the day after, please, tell me a definite date. I will bid you good-bye. I appeal to members of the assembly to speak.”

Bhisma stood up and said, “Duryodhana, I advise you to accept the offer of peace. No less a person than Sri Krishna has graced us with his presence. We are blessed.” He paused for a reply. But Duryodhana kept quiet immersed in animated conversation with Karna. Bhisma raised his voice and said “Duryodhana, your attention please!” and immediately Duryodhana stood to attention and the Pitamaha was pleased. He continued, “Suyodhana, if you do not accept peace I have a suggestion to offer to save the innocent populace. You are obviously banking on Karna. Let us arrange a duel in archery between Arjuna and Karna and decide the issue.”

Sri Krishna stood up and said, "I welcome Pitamaha's proposal. It is simply splendid."

Duryodhana rose to reply. He said, "It is not true that I am banking on Karna alone. I have Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvathama, Salya and Somadatta, Bhurisrava and Bahlika and many more heroes on my side. Moreover, I have no particular enmity towards Arjuna. Why should Arjuna alone die?"

Drona laughed aloud at Duryodhana's reply and said, "Duryodhana, you are too presumptuous. Why do you take for granted the defeat and death of Arjuna at the hands of Karna? Why do you forget that all of us, including your hero Karna, were defeated by Arjuna at the outskirts of Virata's city very recently. The great galaxy of heroes mentioned by you, all put together cannot conquer Arjuna. I advise you to make peace with the Pandavas in your own interests."

Duryodhana walked to Drona and bowed to his feet saying "Great preceptor, your partiality towards your pupil Arjuna has prompted you to extol him to the skies. Why do you bring in a petty border clash into our picture now? I pray with folded hands not to press for peace against my wishes; I request you to help me".

Karna immediately sprang to his feet, rushed to Duryodhana and caught hold of his hand and said "You can bow to him as a brahmin, why do you request him to help you in war? He will never fight sincerely." So saying he dragged Duryodhana away from Drona. Asvatthama, the son of Drona was infuriated with Karna. He stood up and said "Son of a charioteer, why do you behave as if you are a super-sovereign? Why do you object to Duryodhana bowing to his preceptor?" Turning to his father and uncle, he said "Come let us go; we shall return when Duryodhana requests us."

Asvatthama created a scene and insisted that they should stage a walk-out protesting against the crude behaviour of Karna. Karna retorted, "I know you are frantically searching for a ruse to backout of the war." Asvatthama rushed to attack Karna with his

sword unsheathed. Duryodhana stood between Asvatthama and Karna who were ready to fight with each other.

Sri Krishna said, "Worthy son of the worthy preceptor, please stay for a while. All of us can go. Let Karna, the sole embodiment of loyalty, and devotion to duty, exhibit his lip sympathy towards Duryodhana; why are you bothered? Let him bear the brunt of the war single-handed if he can."

Duryodhana pacified Asvatthama and Karna and both of them resumed their seats.

Dhritarashtra meanwhile sent for Gandhari and asked her to convince Duryodhana. She told Duryodhana, "We both, your father and mother, desire that you should accept the peace offer brought by Sri Krishna. Duryodhana bowed to his mother and said, "Noble lady, my dear mother, I am bent upon war. I request you to bless me and give your benediction for my victory ."

Gandhari said, "My dear son, my blessings and benediction are for righteousness and justice. I say, where there is righteousness and justice, verily victory will be there."

The audience cheered her with thunderous acclamation.

Dhritarashtra once again asked Duryodhana to opt for peace. Duryodhana abruptly left the hall and wanted to arrest Sri Krishna for his impudent remarks. He returned with ropes and chains and there was great consternation in the assembly. Sri Krishna stood up and said, "I do not want to claim any diplomatic immunity. Come and arrest me if you can" So saying Sri Krishna exhibited his universal form to the whole assembly. Dhritarashtra prayed to Sri Krishna to bless him with vision to enable him to see His omnifarious manifestation. Sri Krishna granted him 'the vision divine', to Dhritarashtra who beheld the transcendental form. Dhritarashtra said, "Sri Krishna, I do not want to see this mundane world again with these eyes. I plead for restoring the status quo."

Dhritarashtra became blind as usual. Sri Krishna took leave of Dhritarashtra, Bhishma and Drona. When he reached his chariot he shook hands with Karna who was standing there and said, "Great Warrior, I hope you have come to give me a send off.

Please get into my chariot." So saying Sri Krishna took Karna by the hand into his chariot which sped towards the Ganges.

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Karna and Krishna

Sri Krishna took Karna to a secluded spot in his chariot which was parked under the chequered shade of a banyan tree on the banks of the Ganges.

Sri Krishna started the conversation. He said to Karna "My dear brother-in-law, I wanted to broach a confidential matter with you for a long time and now I utilise this rare opportunity." Karna replied, "Sri Krishna, it is my privilege and at once a pleasure to be addressed by you so affectionately as a brother-in-law." So, you have caught the point," said Sri Krishna, "You are the son of the sun-god by Kunti, therefore I have natural affection and regard for you." Karna replied "But this is quite an unexpected meeting and I have not bargained for it."

Sri Krishna said to Karna, "Son of the Sun god, I have come specially to invite you to join the Pandavas who are your blood brothers. Naturally you will be crowned emperor of India. Yudhishthira will hold the umbrella of pearls, Bhima and Arjuna will wave the chamara fans. The twins will act as chamberlains; the Yadavas led by Balarama will form part of your retinue. I and Abhimanyu will be at your beck and call. You can shine on earth like your father in the sky. Just say 'yes' and I will manage the rest."

Karna said, "Sri Krishna, I know that you are the director of this melodrama and can manage any show. I was picked up by a suta; the suta mother gave me suck. I married a suta maiden. I begot children by the suta wife. Now how can I proclaim unabashedly that I am a born prince? I am proud to call myself a Radheya. What does it matter if I am really a Kaunteya by accident?"

"Krishna, if I were to be privileged to be the emperor of the whole world, I consider it to be my sacred duty to place Duryodhana on the throne and remain his loyal soldier-ever subordinate to his paramount sovereignty.

“However please allow me to think aloud for a while. Dharmaputra the embodiment of fairplay and forbearance deserves the sceptre and I do not want to deprive him of his due. People think that Duryodhana plays to my tune. In fact I play to his tune. You know, he is determined to fight. It is my duty to sail or sink with him.”

Sri Krishna was not surprised at the replies of Karna and he continued his persuasive conversation. He said, “You will not merely be the emperor of India being the eldest brother of the Pandavas. Draupadi born of the sacred sacrificial fire with superhuman beauty, the cynosure of superlative charm and universal adoration, will marry you as her sixth husband.”

Karna replied, “Madhava, renowned as you are as the greatest diplomat and the most astute psychologist in the world, you can afford to say anything. Perhaps everything is fair in politics if not in war and love. Let me not mince words. I cannot leave Duryodhana and join the Pandava camp at any cost.”

Sri Krishna undaunted added, “My dear Karna, this is Sri Krishna speaking. You need not entertain any illusions about victory in the war. Let me frankly tell you that a thousand Karnas and ten thousand Bhismas will perish at the hands of Partha.”

Karna replied with folded hands, “Sri Krishna, don't I know that you are the omnipotent embodiment of fulfilled wills? Victory of the Pandavas in the foreboded war is a foregone conclusion, because of your grace. I prefer brave death on the battlefield to the emperorship of India begotten by betrayal. Let my biography record that I stuck to the post of duty despite temptations and threats, seductions and stratagems of Sri Krishna, the supreme sculptor of shrewdest statecraft, ever to walk on this planet in flesh and blood. Let my martyrdom inspire future poets to scale new peaks of idealism in song and sentiment for ever. After all selfish life *sans* altruism is sound and fury signifying nothing. With your kind permission I should like to take leave of you.”

Sri Krishna embraced Karna and bade him good-bye saying, “Karna, you have justified your role as the principal actor in this

live tragic drama, unparalleled in the annals of human history. My hearty congratulations to you.”

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The Pandava Generalissimo

Sri Krishna returned to Upaplavya and reported to the Pandavas the failure of his peace parleys. He told them, (My visit to Hastinapura has not been in vain. I acquired first hand knowledge of their war preparations and understood the discordant notes of the Kaurava court. I have met everybody that counts and weaned the public opinion in our favour. Above all, we have cleared our consciences. I met Kunti Devi, and Vidura. She exhorted you to prove worthy of your valour and offered her benediction and blessings for your victory.”

Yudhisthira thanked Sri Krishna for all the trouble he has taken. He said to Krishna, “You are equally at home with the arts of peace and war. Guide us safely through the impending holocaust which is forced on us.”

Meanwhile, an envoy from Duryodhana Uluka by name came to Yudhisthira and reiterated the firm resolve of the Kauravas to wage the war. Kurukshetra was fixed as the venue of the war and the Pandavas were invited to come prepared for the war to start on the ensuing Amavasya, the newmoon day synchronising with the first day of Saradritu.

The Pandavas and their allies met to chalk out their future programme for the war. Yudhisthira said, “Now, that we know war to be certain, our first duty is to elect the generals and the generalissimo. We have seven divisions. I think Virata, Drupada, Dhristadyumna, Sikhandi, Satyaki, Chekitana and Bhimasena may be asked to lead the seven divisions as generals.” The proposal of Yudhisthira was carried unanimously.

Yudhisthira said, “Now, let us select the generalissimo who will be responsible for the overall conduct of the war. Needless to add that he should be quite energetic and active, daring and dynamic. Of course, we need not go by seniority because the commander-in-chief, in my opinion, is a first among the equals and

should not be a tyrannical dictator. I want your frank opinions. According to our tradition, let us start with the youngest. If seniors express their opinions first, juniors may not come forward with their ideas lest they should be construed as affronts to elders. I want everybody to have his say, but abide by the ultimate decision scrupulously." So saying, he directed Sahadeva to express his opinion first.

Sahadeva stood up and said, "We have taken shelter under Virata when we were in deep difficulties. He has been our de facto commander-in-chief and host all these days. He is a seasoned warrior who stood by us through thick and thin, weal and woe. I propose him to the post."

Nakula was asked to express his opinion next. He said, "Drupada has been the traditional enemy of the Kauravas. I think he is the senior most general of our army. In age or wisdom, birth or bravery, Drupada deserves to be the generalissimo. He is waiting for a suitable opportunity to wreak vengeance against Bhishma and Drona, the most formidable of the heroes of the opposite camp."

The next turn came to Arjuna. He said, "It is a strenuous job. Let younger shoulders bear the brunt of that burden. In recent years, there is a veritable explosion of knowledge in the military science and one with up-to-date knowledge must be preferred. Most of the soldiers are comparatively young and the generation gap should not be apparent. Dhristadyumna who is young and energetic and who is quite at home with the younger generation, I think will be a suitable choice in view of our requirements."

Bhima was invited to give his views. He said, "I prefer Sikhandi; we have heard from our spies that Bhishma is earmarked for the post of generalissimo of the Kaurava hordes. We must have a matching choice. We are told by sages that Sikhandi is the destined destroyer of Bhishma. Anyway nobody else can defeat Bhishma."

Dharmaputra invited Sri Krishna to give his considered opinion. Sri Krishna said, "All the seven generals are worthy warriors and each one is capable of leading a bigger army as the

generalissimo. Let the responsibility be given to a younger shoulder. I think we can anoint Dhristadyumna as the supreme commander.”

Sri Krishna's opinion carried the validity of a verdict with the Pandavas and the members of the assembly spontaneously burst into cheers.

Dhristadyumna distinguished himself in many ways. He played a prominent part at the Svayamvara of Draupadi and was very much attached to his sister. He was the guardian of her sons during the exile of the Pandavas and was waiting for an opportunity to avenge the humiliation of Panchali at the hands of the Kauravas. Moreover his mission in life was to kill Dronacharya who humiliated his father publicly. So, Dhristadyumna would have job satisfaction and was expected to fight as a crusader.”

Dhristadyumna was anointed as the supreme commander of the Pandava armies amidst the sounding of trumpets, blowing of bugles and conches. The war-drum was sounded. Trumpeting of elephants and lion roars of warriors rent the air. The Pandava army began its march to Kurukshetra amidst the chanting of Vedic hymns and benedictions of brahmins headed by Dhaumya. The Pandava army raised a dust storm enveloping the earth and the sky on its enthusiastic march to Kurukshetra.

The white umbrella and the personal standards of the warriors and the various regimental colours covered the skies. Yudhisthira was seated on an elephant. A pilot cavalry of celestial horses presented by Chitraratha moved in front of the royal elephant. Bhima walked behind Yudhisthira's elephant leading the infantry division. He wore sparkling jewellery studded with gems and was wielding the mace across his shoulders.

Arjuna was seated on the chariot drawn by the white steeds and driven by Sri Krishna with the dazzling Hanuman banner fluttering in the air. He looked like a cloud of the rainy season; his divine diadem shone like flashes of lightning; his Gandiva bow appeared like the rainbow and its twang sounded like the thunder.

The twins walked leading the infantry divisions inspiring the soldiers with their enthusiasm. Prativindhya, Srutasoma,

Srutakirti, Satanika, Srutasena, and Abhimanyu marched on chariots. Drupada led the elephant divisions. Virata followed by his brothers and sons led his division. Satyaki marched along with the Yadava forces. Chekitana marched at the head of his army. Sikhandi was seated on a chariot and he was followed by the Panchala soldiers.

Sahadeva, king of Magadha advanced on a chariot surrounded by surging waves of soldiers. Dhristaketu walked along with his armies.

Ghatotkacha surrounded by dark skinned rakshasa warriors walked briskly dangling his trident in the sky. The king of Pandya, the five princes of Kekaya, Saibya and other kings marched along with their forces. Dhristadyumna led the whole army seated on a golden chariot looking like the embodiment of heroism.

82

Supreme Commander of The Kaurava Armies

Duryodhana consulted his colleagues and brothers on the choice of the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava armies. The towering personality of Bhishma could never be ignored and the ultimate choice fell on him. Duryodhana approached Bhishma and said, "Worthiest of the warriors, we unanimously request you to lead the Kaurava armies to success as the supreme commander."

Bhishma, who already foresaw the situation said to Duryodhana, "I do not know whether you have come to this conclusion after considering all the pros and cons of the problem. This war is forced on me. I am for peace. Let me reiterate my oft-repeated stand. I will not kill the Pandavas or their children. But I will exterminate their hordes, ten thousand soldiers per day approximately. Let there be no regrets afterwards. I will fight for you but I cannot assure you success. 'Where there is Krishna, verily righteousness is there. Where there is righteousness, verily there is victory.'

However, I know you have got great regard for Karna. I have no objection if you make him the generalissimo. Please let me know your considered opinion."

Duryodhana replied, "We request you to be our commander-in-chief and lead our armies as Kartikeya led the army of the gods; we will follow you as calves follow the sire-bull. It is our privilege to be led by the most outstanding warrior of the age."

Bhisma accepted the assignment and vowed, "I will pound the Pandava armies to pieces." Bhisma was anointed as the supreme commander with the usual fanfare and the sounding of the war drums and blowing of bugles and conches.

Duryodhana said to Bhisma, "Great Warrior, you possess the rare experience, ripe wisdom of the world extending over many generations. You know the relative merits of the warriors on both sides. You can give your opinion about each one of them, without fear or favour because of your outstanding stature. I request you to give your assessment."

Bhisma said, "Any evaluation is bound to be subjective. However, I will try to be as objective as possible and I will give you my assessment." In the times of the Mahabharata war, warriors were divided into the following cadres in the order of ascendancy.

The Rathi: Ratha means a chariot and Rathi was a warrior who fights riding on the chariot. The chariot presupposed two or even four horses; at least two wheel protectors and a charioteer. So, Rathi was an aristocratic hero who could maintain at least a small brigade of infantry. Next, in the hierarchy was Maharathi, a seasoned warrior who could command a number of Rathis.

Atiratha was an exemplary hero who was remarkable for his bravery and versatile fighting skill. Atirathasrestha was the highest category. Comparisons are odious but to borrow modern military vocabulary, he may be equated with the modern general of the army.

Bhisma gave his assessment thus. He said to Duryodhana, "Let us begin with the Pandavas. Yudhisthira is a Maharathi, Virata, Drupada, his sons, Chekitana and Satyaki are Maharathis. So also Bhima and the twins. There are many such heroes on the Pandava side like the king of Magadha, Dhristaketu etc. We cannot evaluate Ghatotkacha. Arjuna is more than an Atiratha

and his son Abhimanyu is almost equal to him. I do not want to evaluate Sikhandi. Let me tell you, I do not fight with him as I do not consider him to be a man and in accordance with my cherished principles I do not fight with women, semi-women or eunuchs. There are innumerable Rathis on both sides. Then let us come to our side. You are a Maharathi and your brothers are all Maharathis. Drona is more than an Atirathi and his son Asvatthama is almost equal to him.

The number of Atirathis on our side certainly is greater than those of the Pandava side. However, it may be an unpleasant surprise for you, your dear friend Karna is a Half-Rathi because of many causes. His accomplishments are marred by many factors. Because of the curse of Parasurama, the divine missiles will fail him at the nick of the time. He lost his natural armour. He is susceptible to hasty irritation. He is not capable of sustained seriousness and has a dangerous tendency to leave the battlefield abruptly. He thinks too much of himself and indulges in public boasting. Over-confidence always digs its own grave. Karna in his arrogance and over-confidence neglects finer points of subtle strategy and can never put his talents to optimum use.”

The words of Bhisma evaluating Karna were unpalatable to Duryodhana. But having asked for his assessment he was compelled to be a patient listener. However Karna flew into a great rage. He stood up with flaming eyes and quivering voice and declared, “Grand sire, I have never insulted you publicly. I do not know why you have an innate hatred for me. I am obliged to tolerate your taunts from a long time for the sake of Duryodhana.”

Drona stood up and objected to the words of Karna. He said, “Whatever Karna may think of himself and whatever may be the opinion of Duryodhana, that was Bhisma’s assessment of Karna. We have not yet marshalled our armies and it is height of impropriety on the part of Karna to attack Bhisma. Karna’s indiscipline is an unpardonable affront to the commander-in-chief and I leave the rest to Duryodhana.”

Karna was not subdued. He flared up and declared, “Bhisma has not been just to me. He has no love for Duryodhana and is partial to the Pandavas. Take it from me. He will not fight

sincerely. He has openly proclaimed that he would not kill the Pandavas. I have no objection for Bhishma kissing the Pandavas. The generalissimo is expected to carry all the warriors with him. He must not discourage his colleagues and insult his compatriots. He is sowing dissensions in our ranks. Once upon a time he might have been a great warrior but he has become senile because of advanced age.

“In my opinion Bhishma is unfit to be the generalissimo. Dronacharya has accused me of impropriety; my answer is that I am not the aggressor; whatever I uttered, I said in self-defence. As for the charge of indiscipline against the commander-in-chief, I plead guilty. I have no option but mutiny. I do not recognise him as my Commander-in-Chief at all. I do not want to fight under him. I will join the fight after the fall of Bhishma and I will then conquer the Pandavas.”

Bhishma was offended at the sudden outburst of Karna. However, controlling his anger, he said to Karna, “Son of the charioteer, I have suffered you because of my responsibilities as the supreme commander and my duty towards the king at this critical juncture. Were I a free man, you would not have been alive to indulge in this nonsense any longer.”

Duryodhana prayed to Bhishma and with folded hands, “Gangeya, I need you both at this crucial moment. We are ready to march to Kurukshetra early in the dawn. The infighting is injurious to our common cause. I pray, both of you must help me unitedly.” Bhishma said, “Great king, it is for you to choose between me and Karna, who has sworn not to fight under my command.” Duryodhana tried to pacify Karna in vain. Karna consoled Duryodhana saying, “Bhishma will not kill Arjuna. I will kill Arjuna afterwards and gain the victory for you. Meanwhile, I do not swerve from my solemn vow.” Duryodhana eventually yielded to his wishes and Karna made his exit.

Duryodhana said to Bhishma, “Grand sire, I depend upon you. Let us forget about Karna for the present. I request you to fix the auspicious time for our march to Kurukshetra and issue the proclamation.”

Duryodhana was disappointed and disheartened at the sad turn of events. The unexpected exit of Karna from the arena of

battle was a bad start and it did not augur well. Duryodhana's dreams were centered round Karna. If there was one whom Duryodhana would miss on the battlefield when the war started, it was Karna and Karna swore to stay away from the battle though for a specified period which was bound to be excruciating to Duryodhana. When the war started, everybody would be in the fray. Krishna's forces would be fighting for Duryodhana but Karna would be a dumb spectator. The Mahabharata has portrayed the dramatic irony of human life vividly on a wide canvas with all its comic conundrums and tragic tantalizers, dubious dogmas and dogged doldrums, of different dimensions and diverse directions. According to the Mahabharata, human life is not a simple straight line. It is a complex vector, beyond the compass of calculation.

Duryodhana and the military leaders of the Kaurava armies met in a conference and discussed about the strategy to be adopted in the war. At the end of their discussions Duryodhana said to Duhsasana, "The long expected moment has arrived. Tomorrow, early in the morning, we are starting on our march to Kurukshetra. The crux of the problem is this. If we protect Bhishma, Bhishma will protect all of us. Paradoxical though it may seem, Bhishma said that nobody could defeat him but he would not fight Sikhandi. A jackal may steal an easy military victory over a non-violent lion. A roving ram may kill a sleeping tiger. So I want you and your brave regiment to surround Sikhandi always and never allow him to face Bhishma."

83

Rukmi the Rejected Renegade

Rukmi, the brother of Rukmini, the chief queen of Sri Krishna, came to the Pandavas and offered to fight on their side saying "Dharmaputra, I have come to offer my help to you unilaterally in spite of my enmity towards Sri Krishna who snatched away my sister Rukmini savagely and married her. You need not fear the Kauravas; I appreciate your gentlemanliness and I have come to you in your hour of need." Dharmaputra smiled and looked at Arjuna who was amused at the bravados of Rukmi. He looked at Sri Krishna who remained motionless as a statue.

Rukmi was a close friend of Sisupala and he wanted that his sister Rukmini should marry Sisupala. Rukmini did not like the match and sent a brahmin-priest to Sri Krishna asking him to rescue her from the embarrassing predicament and marry her. The marriage celebrations were in progress. The bridegroom and the party had arrived. Princess Vaidarbhi, the bride Rukmini, arrived at the temple of Parvati situated in the outskirts of the city to offer the customary prayers. Sri Krishna by a daring feat of personal bravery carried her away in his chariot, of course with her consent and connivance. Rukmi attacked Sri Krishna and he was defeated and disgraced by Sri Krishna who spared his life at the intervention of his sister Rukmini. Ever since, Rukmi did not enter the capital and he built a town called Bhojakataka and became its ruler. He wanted to reestablish his credibility and came to the Pandavas with the offer of help.

Yudhisthira told Rukmi "Sir, we decline your offer with thanks. Let me add we are not afraid of the Kauravas. We are blessed with the support of Lord Krishna and so we are sure of our success. You can go."

Rukmi was offended at the reply given by Yudhisthira and took it as an insult. He made an angry exit and went straight to Duryodhana and said, "King of Kings, I have come with my armies to fight on your side. I want to wreak vengeance on the arrogant Pandavas. They refused to accept my proffered hand of friendship."

Duryodhana who understood the situation said to Rukmi, "Lord of Bhoja-kataka, you see, you have come to me after the Pandavas have refused your assistance. Don't you think that it is derogatory to my dignity to collect what the Pandavas have preferred to throw into the dust bin? It would have been a different story had you come to me first, so I am sorry I do not want to accept your assistance. You can take rest at Bhoja-kataka as usual.

Rukmi went back to Bhoja-kataka in shame.

Duryodhana had great regard for Sri Krishna and he never wanted to rub him on the wrong side by entertaining Rukmi into his fold.

The Solitary Pilgrim of Peace

Almost all the princes in the Bharatavarsha took part in the great war. It was considered a privilege and a rare historic opportunity for the exhibition of their talents. It was regarded as a unique honour providing the coveted culmination to their careers.

For many generations afterwards, it became a fashion with the successive royal dynasties to trace their descent from one of the heroes of the Mahabharata war.

According to the ancient Indian tradition, holy death on the battlefield signified direct entry into heaven. As per the epic, the Greeks and the Hunas and many tribes beyond the borders of Bharatavarsha took part in the great war. It was almost a world war. However, Balarama the elder brother of Sri Krishna was the blessed exception and he preferred to be neutral. He did not take part in the war and went on a pilgrimage to the holy places. Before embarking on the pilgrimage, he came to Upaplavya and met the Pandavas. He said to Yudhisthira, "War is terrible, War is cruel. I hate the dreadful destruction. The humanity as a whole, has gone mad. The insane earth has entangled itself in the jaws of death.

"Duryodhana as well as Bhima are my disciples and they both learnt the art of mace warfare with me. I hoped that my brother Krishna would succeed in bringing about a settlement honourable to both the parties. "Peace, production and plenty" is my motto. How I wish that all the swords in the world are beaten into plough-shares and all the helmets are transformed into beehives! Let war die so that humanity may live. I do not want to witness this tragic carnage with my eyes. So I seek consolation in visiting the holy places." "Yudhisthira gave him a warm send off saying, "Great warrior of peace, your reputed weapon is the plough signifying peace and plenty. You do not desire the predatory war; you yearn for the productive green revolution; you know that I cherish your sacred sentiments. This war is forced upon me and I crave your pardon." Balarama took leave of Yudhisthira with tears in his eyes. .

If war is as old as human nature, pacifism and yearning for peace is also as hoary as war. Even in the Mahabharata times,

according to the great epic, there were pacifists and conscientious objectors to war. Balarama was the prince of pacifists of those times as Vidura was the pacifist philosopher. When the society as a whole runs amuck, the perplexed pacifists feel helpless. Individually they may not loose anything. Still their souls sob for the tragic insanity of the society as a whole. The great soul, Balarama sought consolation in wandering amidst the sacred places and started on his journey as a solitary pilgrim.

It did not mean that all those who participated in the battle were war-mongers. Bhisma and Drona pleaded for peace till the very end most sincerely. Kripa, Asvatthama and even Yudhisthira did not want the war. Karna had his own justification. Everybody should not be weighed in the same scale. Psychologies differ. Circumstances were different. The Mahabharata portrayed the eternal drama of human existence; the reaction of each character differed depending on his personality and the peculiar combination of the circumstances.

BHISMA PARVA

85

The War Reporter

Dhritarashtra was agitated over the imminent war and its cataclysmic consequences, and was closetted with Sanjaya. Vedavyasa who had the comprehensive vision of the past, present and the future came to Dhritarashtra to console him.

Dhritarashtra received the sage with all the reverence at his command and said to him, "Holy sire, I am grieved at the thought of the bloody warfare between the brothers and I am overwhelmed with tragic helplessness. What am I to do? My sons have disregarded my advice. The whole world is doomed to dreadful destruction."

Vedavyasa replied with sublime serenity, "My dear child, I understand your anguish. What cannot be cured must be endured; *where there is righteousness, verily there is victory*—let that motto be your solace. Now, war is a reality and there is no escape from it. If you are interested to witness the war, I will bless you with the vision." Dhritarashtra said to Vyasa, "How can I witness this bloody carnage? For at least once in my life I feel blessed that I am born blind. I am saved from seeing this ghastly spectacle. Still I want to have first hand news if I can help it."

Vedavyasa said to Dhritarashtra, "My dear child, I will arrange Sanjaya to be the historic war reporter. It is the most difficult and dangerous assignment. This extraordinary job requires rare resourcefulness and rarer accomplishments. I bless him with the following boons. He shall be able to dive deep into the psychological feelings and sub-conscious thoughts of the various characters. He will have the capacity to move from place to place at will. No weapon shall hurt him. His mind will have access to all the confidential conversations and secret plans of the contestants. Let him work day and night; he will not feel wearisome and exhausted. He can exercise the power of invisibility at his will and acquire omni-comprehensive intellect."

Sanjaya thanked the sage and said to him, "I will discharge my duty to the best of my ability. I thank you for bestowing on me

these great boons and your blessings. With these blessed accomplishments I hope I will be able to do justice to my job.”

Vedavyasa gave his benediction to Sanjaya and disappeared.

In the epic, the account of the great war is given by Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra and is in the form of a dialogue. Every night after the conclusion of the war, Sanjaya used to go to Dhritarashtra and report the happenings of the day to him faithfully.

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The March of the Kaurava Army

On the auspicious day fixed by the priests synchronising with the rising of the sun on the eastern horizon, the Kaurava armies began their scheduled march to Kurukshetra.

The kettle-drum was sounded. The bugles were blown. The warriors indulged in their lion-roars. The army with its fourfold divisions, the chariots, the cavalry, the elephants and the infantry got ready for the march. The march of the army looked like the surging ocean at the time of moon-rise. Duryodhana was seated on an elephant richly decorated with diamonds and brocade. An umbrella of pearls provided a halo of grandeur around his head. The royal standard with the insignia of the hooded serpent, fluttered in the air. His brothers Duhsasana, Durmarshana, Vivimsati and others surrounded him with their fluttering flags.

Bhisma, the commander-in-chief, led the army seated on a golden chariot displaying the ensign of the palm tree and five stars. He was followed by Drona, whose banner glittered with the golden bowl and the bow. Asvatthama marched seated in a chariot and his standard shone in the sky displaying the lion's tail. Kripa moved forward with his banner of the bull. Salya, the lord of Madra, marched forward with his fluttering flag of plaintain tree. Jayadratha, the Saindhava king displayed his banner of the wild boar. Many warriors, Sakuni, the brothers Vinda and Anuvinda, the king of Kalinga, Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha, Bahlika together with his son, Somadatta, and his grandson Bhurisrava joined the march with bubbling enthusiasm. Sudakshina, the king

of Kambhoja, Brihadbala, the king of Kosala, Nila, the ruler of Mahismati, Susarma, the leader of the Trigartas, the Rakshasa heroes Alamba and Halayudha, joined the march with their armies. Salva, Sauvira, Surasena, Abhira, Yavana and Andhra rulers, followed the Kaurava army along with their forces. The whole army comprised of eleven akshauhinis and was equipped with innumerable weapons, the bows and arrows, the maces, the axes, the tridents, the hooks etc. etc. The Kaurava army reached Kurukshetra and carved out a temporary city with tents and prefabricated structures.

The Pandava army reached Kurukshetra and pitched their tents near the five lakes called the Syamanta Panchaka facing the east. Yudhishthira looked at the Kaurava army which reached the spot earlier and said to Arjuna, "Look at the formidable Kaurava army stretching from horizon to horizon. The sheer sight of the gigantic force is awe-inspiring. They have the undoubted advantage of numbers. Bhishma and Drona are on their side." Arjuna replied with a smile, "Once the celestial sage Narada told me in the immediate presence of Bhishma, Drona, and Vyasa that the superiority in numbers on the side of unrighteousness could never assure success. On our side we have Bhima of invincible strength; from my Gandiva, shafts like winged serpents, will dart forth. Drupada, Virata, Chekitana, Satyaki and the Yadavas are a match to the Kauravas. In the younger order, Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha and the Upapandavas, Dhristadyumna and Sikhandi are unrivalled heroes. As far as you are concerned even the gods cannot conquer you. Above all we have Sri Krishna on our side. So we can be sure of success. Where there is Sri Krishna, verily there is victory."

Bhishma marshalled the Kaurava armies arraying them into the formation of a human figure facing the west. The chariots and the elephants, the cavalry and the infantry were interposed at suitable places. As the epic poet described, it was a sight for angels to see. The deities, and the souls of the great warriors of ancient times living in heaven congregated in the skies in thousands of aeroplanes to witness the great battle.

Bhishma addressed the soldiers, "Great Warriors, this is a unique opportunity for all of us. To have been born as a human being is a great blessing. Among the human species, the role of a

brave warrior is a great blessing. Death on the battlefield is the greatest blessing. Brave and brisk, death on the battlefield any day is preferable to the sad and sinister end on the sick bed, for a warrior. He who falls on the battlefield rises as a star over the skies.

Heaven with its automatic gates always extends the warmest welcome to the warriors who give up their ghost fighting on the battlefield. My hearty congratulations to all the gallant heroes who have gathered here to take part in the great war." The soldiers and the military leaders greeted the exhilarating exhortation of the generalissimo Bhishma, with shouts of victory and lion roars.

Yudhishthira instructed the Pandava commander-in-chief Dhrishtadyumna to array their forces in a matching formation and he arranged the forces in the form of a pyramid facing the east.

Both the forces, the armies of the Kauravas and the Pandavas, faced each other ready for the fight.

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The Martial Code

Epic India evolved an exemplary code of conduct for the warriors. The warriors observed with scrupulous care a code of honour with its religious, ethical and social obligations even outside the battlefield.

The warriors as a class were regarded as gallant gentlemen with courage and courtesy who were prepared to fight to uphold righteousness and punish wickedness. Nowhere in the world the soldier was equated with the brutal murderer. Generosity was the hallmark of the hero, who was expected to prefer chivalry to selfishness. Truthfulness was considered as the touchstone of character and one was expected to stick to his word. Oath was regarded as a paramount obligation and it cast the spell of 'do or die' duty on the incumbent.

On the battlefield the epic warriors observed a magnanimous marshal code fortified by individual nobility, family pride and

social conventions. The warfare was strictly limited to the combatants. The menial servants, the drummers or the trumpeters, the craftsmen like the carpenters were not attacked. Unfair advantage was not taken. The horseman never attacked the foot-soldier. The hero on the chariot fought with his counterpart. If by any chance he lost his chariot, he was not attacked till he secured another chariot to resume the fight. The unarmed soldier or the one who sought refuge or the one who fled from the battlefield was spared.

Specific conventions were evolved for single combats and duels. When a hero was fighting with another hero, locked in single combat, their colleagues did not interfere with the course of their fighting. Of course, a single hero was free to engage many heroes simultaneously.

As opposed to the single combats, there was cumulative fighting called the "Samkula-Samara" in which regiments attacked their counter-regiments in a fierce, free for all fight.

The warrior welcomed brave and brisk death on the battlefield instead of the slow and suffocating end on the sick bed. Death on the battlefield signified direct entry into heaven. Every battlefield was considered holy and Kurukshetra was regarded as the holiest of all the battlefields.

The average soldier was a sportsman, who laid down his life chivalrously regardless of defeat or victory. Defeat or victory mattered to the Kauravas or the Pandavas; for most of the great warriors on both sides who joined the fray, the Kurukshetra war was a historic occasion to exhibit their valour and a unique opportunity for self-realisation and salvation. The great Mahabharata war was more or less a magnificent military match played by mighty heroes without a referee. However, the umpiring was done by the unwritten code of martial conventions. Now and then some of these conventions were transgressed and the code of honour was breached but the occasional deviations were looked upon with disdain and derision. The very exceptions justified the general rules.

The soul of bravery was chivalry. Kurukshetra was looked upon as the Dharmakshetra, the pious place for the proper

vindication of righteousness, the sacred stepping stone to the holy heaven of emancipation from the mundane mire of mortal existence.

Dharmaputra Seeks Benediction

When the two rival armies were poised ready for the attack, Dharmaputra descended from his chariot suddenly and proceeded towards the Kaurava army on foot with folded hands silently. Nobody could understand what was in his mind. Bhima and Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva were bewildered and jumped from their chariots and went to him. Bhima asked him, "Where are you going? Why are you going on foot unarmed?" Arjuna said to him, "We are ready for the war and we are puzzled by your conduct." Nakula exclaimed, "Why are you proceeding to the enemy camp?" Sahadeva wondered, "Is this the time for any peace parley?" Yudhishthira did not utter a syllable and moved slowly to the place where Bhishma's chariot was parked. Meanwhile, Sri Krishna, Satyaki and others followed the Pandavas.

Yudhishthira's strange behaviour was a riddle to the Kaurava onlookers. Many comments were heard from the Kaurava camp. "Perhaps, Dharmaputra, because of his predilection for peace, is prepared to seek peace at any price." "He has developed cold feet at the sight of the formidable Kaurava forces." "Dharmaputra is a disgrace to the warrior clan, although he may be a great scholar." "Dharmaputra is a non-violent tiger. Let us not underestimate him."—were some of the comments that were heard from Pandava camp.

Sri Krishna said, "Let there be no worry. Dharmaputra is a great diplomat. After all, simplest goodness is the greatest diplomacy in the world; let us silently follow Dharmaputra."

Yudhishthira went straight to Bhishma and bowed to his feet saying, "Grandsire, I have come to beg your pardon for opting to fight against you. However, I request you to accord your gracious permission to us to begin the fight. I crave your indulgence for our impudence and still pray for your benediction."

Bhisma was pleased and was happy at the sentiments expressed by Dharmaputra. He said to him, "My dear child, I am obliged to fight on the side of the Kauravas. True to my vow, I remained a commoner and I must fight for my king and country. Ethically, I have no other alternative. However, my blessings are with you. I am pleased with your gesture and humility. Seek any boon, excepting the request to fight on your side, I will give it."

Yudhisthira replied, "Invincible hero, please tell me how we can conquer you." Bhisma smiled and said, "My dear Dharmaputra, you will be victorious. Please come to me at the opportune time. You can go now." Dharmaputra bowed to his feet once again and took leave of him. Immediately he proceeded to Dronacharya and bowed to his feet. He said to the preceptor, "I have come to offer my humble apologies to you for daring to fight against you. However, I have come to seek your pardon and pray for your blessings." The preceptor was overjoyed and embraced him warmly. He said, "My dear child, this war is forced on us. But my blessings are with you. In fact, you need nobody's benediction, as long as Sri Krishna, the real architect of victory, is with you. I am pleased. I will confer on you any boon you may be pleased to ask of me."

Dharmaputra said, "Best of the brahmins, tell me, if you please, how we can conquer you." Drona smiled and replied, "Nobody can conquer me as long as I hold the bow in my tight fist. However I may throw away the bow, the minute my mental equilibrium is disturbed. Apparently I have a strong mind, but my heart is quite slender and sensitive. I wish you good luck."

Next Yudhisthira proceeded to Kripacharya and bowed to his feet and repeated the words he uttered to Drona. Kripa was immensely pleased and said to him, "Worthy king, I give my benediction to you. I may live to see you victorious."

Dharmaputra then proceeded to Salya and bowed to his feet and said, "Worthiest warrior, I have come to seek your benediction. You are more than a father to us." Salya was flattered by the visit of Yudhisthira and said to him, "My blessings are always with you." Yudhisthira reminded him of his promise saying, "Versatile Warrior I request you not to forget your responsibility towards

your nephews." Salya said, "Your nobility is your invincible armour; I wish you success."

Yudhishthira returned to his army followed by his brothers and Satyaki. Sri Krishna stopped there for a while and exchanged greetings with Karna who was standing in the background to observe the course of the war. He said to Karna, "Great warrior, I invite you to fight on the side of the Pandavas at least as a sort of diversion. By that you will be hastening the hour of your reunion with Duryodhana. You can fight against Bhishma and avenge your humiliation." Karna replied, "Diplomat of unfathomable depth, my body and soul belong to Duryodhana. In a fit of anger I vowed not to fight under the command of Bhishma. Still I wish him success." Sri Krishna returned to his chariot and took hold of the reins.

Yudhishthira, who stood facing the Kaurava forces, announced aloud, "I extend my warmest welcome to any body who wishes to come to our side; I promise to treat him as my brother." Immediately, Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra by a vaisya wife, joined the Pandavas with his forces, defecting the Kauravas. He criticised Duryodhana for his bellicose behaviour and praised the Pandavas for their upright conduct. The Pandavas received him offering him the traditional welcome. Yuyutsu's army was in a jubilant mood, blowing the bugles and sounding the trumpets. The minor incident, however, worked as a major morale booster to the Pandava forces. A ceremonial welcome on a grand scale was extended to Yuyutsu and his troops by the Pandava forces.

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Bhagavadgita, The Song Celestial

Dhritarashtra said,

"Dharmakshetre kurukshetre samaveta yuyutsuvah
mamakah pandavaschaiva kimakurvata sanjaya."

"O Sanjaya, assembled on the holy field of Kurukshetra, eager to fight, what did my children and the children of Pandu do?"

Sanjaya gave a detailed account of the battle together with the Bhagavad Gita to Dhritarashtra.

Duryodhana who saw the Pandava forces arrayed ready for the battle said to Dronacharya, "Behold master, the mighty army of the Pandavas marshalled by your talented pupil, Dhrishtadyumna, the son of Drupada. The army consists of formidable heroes—Dhrishtaketu and Chekitana, the king of Kasi, Purujit, Kuntibhoja, Saibya, Yudhamanyu, Uttamauja, Abhimanyu all noted for their valour and bowmanship. On our side, yourself and Bhishma, Karna and Kripa, Asvatthama and Vikarna, Somadatta and Salya are here. Many illustrious heroes who have staked their lives for me are on my side. Our army protected by Bhishma is verily invincible. The Pandava army guarded by Bhima obviously is vulnerable. We will be victorious. Therefore, stationed in your respective positions, I request you to guard Bhishma in particular on all sides." The generalissimo, the grand old man of the Kuru race, Bhishma who listened to the exhortation of Duryodhana roared terribly, like a lion and blew his conch to cheer him up. Then conches and kettledrums tabors and trumpets, bugles and horns blared forth from both sides and the noise was tumultuous.

Sri Krishna blew his conch, 'Panchajanya' and Arjuna blew his conch 'Devadatta'. Bhima, renowned for his bravery, blew his conch 'Paundra'. King Yudhisthira, the son of Kunti, blew his conch 'Anantavijaya'. The twins blew their conches, 'Sughosha and Manipuspaka' and the son of Subhadra, Virata and other heroes blew their conches severally. The sounds of the conches and the clarions of the Pandava forces reverberated through the earth and heaven and rent the hearts of the Dhartarashtras.

Arjuna realising that it was time for starting the battle, said to Sri Krishna, "Achyuta, please park my chariot between the two armies and keep it there till I carefully observe the warriors with whom I have to fight. Let me have a comprehensive view of the battlefield."

Sri Krishna stationed the magnificent chariot drawn by the celestial white steeds between the two armies facing Bhishma and Drona and said to Arjuna, "Partha, behold the Kaurava army, assembled here in fighting array ready for the battle."

When Arjuna saw, stationed there in both the armies, his uncles grand-uncles, brothers and cousins, sons and grandsons,

teachers and friends, wellwishers and relations, ready for the mortal combat, he was suddenly overtaken by an overwhelming sense of compassion and sadness. Deeply moved to the inner most depths of his being, he said to Sri Krishna, "When I look at these kith and kin arrayed longing for battle, my limbs give way, my mouth is parched, my hairs stand on end, my whole body is quivering with a burning sensation, my Gandiva bow slips from my hands automatically. I am not able even to stand and my mind is obsessed with a reeling illusion.

"Govinda, I covet not victory nor kingdom nor pleasures; of what use are kingdom, luxuries or even life to us after killing the venerable preceptors and dear relatives, uncles and grandfathers, cousins and brothers?

"Krishna, I do not want to kill them even for the sovereignty of the three worlds, not to speak of this world.

"War is a universal curse; it will disrupt the family and destroy the age long family traditions. As a result, the women will become corrupt leading to the inter-mixture of castes and creeds. Consequently all our cherished values will be subverted and the whole society will be doomed to hell.

"I do not want to kill the Dhartarashtras. I think that it is better if they kill me while I offer no resistance. I do not wish to lift my arms in retaliation. We have embarked on this great sin due to lust for power and greed for kingdom.

"I want to desist from this dreadful destruction unilaterally."

So saying Arjuna, overwhelmed with grim grief, laid down his bow and arrows and sank into the hinder part of his chariot with tears overflowing his eyes.

Sri Krishna who saw Arjuna suddenly sunk with sorrow and overwhelmed with the sense of compassion, said to him, "Partha, why this incongruous infatuation now? It is shunned by noble souls; neither will it bring you fame nor heaven. This is unmanly and unbecoming of you. Shake off this paltry faint heartedness and stand upright, O scorcher of enemies."

Arjuna replied, "Madhusudana, how can I kill with my arrows Bhishma and Drona, who are ever worthy of my worship? It is better to beg for alms in this wide world than to eat the blood-stained food and enjoy the so-called luxuries. Anyway I am placed on the horns of a terrible dilemma. To fight or not to fight is the problem. It is not certain whether we win or they conquer. My mind is paralysed and is not in a position to distinguish cheese from chalk. I am your humble disciple. I am asking you. I seek refuge in you. Please instruct me what I should do. I seek enlightenment from you."

A smiling Sri Krishna gave his celebrated message to the sorrowing Arjuna in the midst of the two armies. Sri Krishna said, "You grieve over those who should not be grieved for and you are advancing ultra-intellectual arguments of the learned. The really learned do not sorrow over the dead or the living.

"Even though the body is slain, the soul is not, for it is unborn, eternal, everlasting and primeval.

"Partha, how will the man who knows the soul to be imperishable, eternal and free from the birth and decay, cause anyone to be killed or kill any one?

"As a man discarding worn out clothes takes other new clothes, the embodied soul likewise, casting off worn out bodies enters into others which are new.

"Weapons cannot cut it; nor fire can burn it, water cannot drench it; nor can wind make it dry.

"O Valiant hero, even if you presume that the soul is constantly being born and dying, you need not grieve like this. For the death of him who is born is certain and the rebirth of him who is dead is inevitable. ,

"Apart from these considerations there can be nothing more welcome for a warrior than a righteous war. If you do not wage a righteous war, you will incur infamy in this world and sin in the next and your colleagues and compatriots will make fun of you. Infamy is worse than death for a conscientious man. Do or die. If you win, you will enjoy the kingdom. If you die, you will go to heaven. So fight.

“Till now, I have discussed about your duty from the view point of knowledge. Even if we take the view point of action we come to the same conclusion.

“Treating pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat alike, get ready for the fight.

“You have the right to work only, but never to the result there of; let not the fruit of action be your object. So, do your duty with detachment indifferent to success or failure, with the spirit of “YOGA”. Yoga means equilibrium.

“The senses are greater than the body. Mind is greater than the senses. Greater than the mind is the intellect. What is greater than the intellect is the soul.

“Arjuna, whenever the righteousness is at stake and unrighteousness is in the ascendent, then, I body Myself forth for the protection of virtue and destruction of evil, from age to age.

“Even if you are the most sinful of all the sinners, you can cross over all sin by the raft of knowledge, for the fire of knowledge can reduce all actions to ashes.”

Arjuna was not merely a passive listener. He followed the message of Sri Krishna with all its implications while facing the complex realities of human existence. Every person shouldering heavy responsibilities is bound to come to the cross roads of life, stop and stare bewildered as to the correct path, puzzled and paralysed. Therefore introspective doubts are not marks of weakness. In fact, they are signs of health in a strong mind. Greatness does not consist in not having doubts but it accrues in overcoming them.

Arjuna put a counter question to Sri Krishna saying, “You are extolling the greatness of the path of knowledge (Sankhya Yoga) on the one hand and glorifying the path of action (Karma Yoga) on the other. Pray tell me conclusively which of these two is decidedly the better.”

Sri Krishna elucidated, “The yoga of knowledge and the yoga of action, both lead to the supreme bliss. They are not divergent

paths. Karma yoga is better because it is easier. He, who does his duty without coveting the fruit, is a sannyasi, a real recluse and a renouncer.

“Better is one’s own duty than the duty of another well done. He who performs action which is compatible with his natural propensities is above board. Kaunteya, one should not abandon one’s work, which has naturally devolved on him on the pretext that it is mean or defective. All undertakings indeed are tainted with some blemish just as fire is contaminated by smoke. You are a soldier; your duty is to fight; you have an added advantage. It is a righteous war and I appreciate that you are not covetous. Ultimately “Yoga” is efficiency and expertise. Paramount ability in any art, in any walk of life, in any field of activity is divinity.

“Arjuna, I am the self, seated in the heart of all beings. I am the beginning, the middle and the end of all beings. I am the Vishnu among the gods. I am the glory of the wind gods called the Maruts. I am the Sama Veda, among the Vedas. I am the life force of the mortals. Among the Rudras, I am Sankara. Among the Pandavas, I am Arjuna. Among the Vrisnis, I am Vasudeva. I am the time. I am the letter “A”. I am the sound ‘OM’. Among the fraudulent practices, I am the gambling. Suffice it to say that I hold this entire universe by a mere spark of my infinite power.

“If, prompted by egoism, you think that you will not fight, your determination is vain, your innate nature will impel you to fight.”

“I should like to initiate you into esoteric revelation culminating into Bhakti yoga, the path of prayer.

“Surrendering all duties to me, seek refuge in me alone, I shall absolve you from all sins; grieve not, arise and fight”.

The message of Lord Sri Krishna illumined the heart of Arjuna. He proclaimed, “Sri Krishna, my delusion is destroyed. I am enlightened by your grace. My doubts are cleared. I will discharge my duty.” The text says that during the dialogue, Arjuna saw the universal form of Lord Sri Krishna as the creator, the

sustainer and destroyer of the worlds and was filled with spiritual ecstasy.

Bhagavad Gita, enshrining the Message of God Sri Krishna to Arjuna, is perhaps the most commented work in the world. It is translated into almost all the languages in the world and there are innumerable commentaries on it written by several scholars belonging to successive generations in the history of India across the centuries.

Bhagavad Gita is free from dogma and fanaticism. It has not prescribed a single panacea for all the ills of the world. *Bhagavad Gita* has advocated a very dynamic concept of duty and efficient action. Criticism is very often voiced that philosophy has enfeebled the Indian masses into sluggish inaction and surrender. After the conclusion of the *Gita*, Arjuna fought bravely on the battlefield but did not exchange his Gandiva bow for an ascetic's bowl. Along with Arjuna, across the succeeding centuries, millions and millions of people who were perturbed and perplexed, puzzled and paralysed on account of life's problems found comfort and consolation and faced them with courage and conviction, inspired by the *Bhagavad Gita*. The essence of the *Gita*, to be presented as an over-simplification is—"Do your duty with detachment in a spirit of selfless surrender to God." Here are three postulates. Conception of duty presupposes discernment and discretion. It is Jnana Yoga or the path of knowledge. Performance of duty is action. It is the path of action or Karma yoga. Any action should not be egoism and one can never be sure of success. So it must be done with a sense of surrender to God in a mood of prayerful humility. That is Bhakti Yoga. In fact all the three are one and are not divergent.

Sri Krishna said in the *Gita*, "If in the discharge of thy duty, thy faint heart fails, bring me thy failure. That is enough." Success or failure is equally acceptable to him when offered with devotion and detachment.

The criticism, very often ventilated against Indian Philosophy, is that the overbearing importance accorded to the theory of "Karma", and that action and reaction leave no room for the redemption of the sinner who must reap the consequences of his

deeds. This is an uncharitable charge. Repentant surrender to Him absolves all sins. There is an interesting story in the folk-lore of India. Once, as the story goes, a king cobra came to Sri Krishna and said, "Lord, I have nothing to offer you except my venom" and the Lord was pleased to accept the poison as nectar."

The sinner as well as the saint, can seek solace and self-realisation from the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Sri Krishna says, "A brahmin who has obtained enlightenment has the same use for all the Vedas as one has for a small reservoir of water in a place flooded with water on all sides. "Enlightenment is emancipation", "Work is worship" are the key notes of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Bhagavad Gita. in the eyes of the scholars is a masterly paraphrase of the Upanishads. However, it is a metrical composition forming part of the Mahabharata text. Then who is the author of this *Bhagavad Gita*? Veda Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, is the author of the piece, *Bhagavad Gita* and obviously the verses were composed by him along with the other verses of the epic.

In the text, it is explicitly stated that Sri Krishna was the author of *Bhagavad Gita*. "Bhagavan uvacha", The Lord said, "Arjuna uvacha." "Arjuna said", are the explicit sentences to be found in the text. However, immemorial tradition has resolved this tangle. The Upanishads have taken the form of a cow. Arjuna was the calf. Sri Krishna was the cowherd, Gopala. *Bhagavad Gita* is the milk of the Upanishadic cow.

In the concluding colophons of all the chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita* the following inscription is found.

"Thus in the Upanishads sung by the Lord, the science of Brahma, the scripture on Yoga, the dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna ends this chapter entitled..."

Bhagavad Gita contains eighteen chapters and seven hundred verses—

The following are the chapters and their synopses—verse-wise

Chapter I The Yoga of Dejection of Arjuna

Verses

- 1 — 11 Description of the principal warriors on both sides
 12 — 19 Blowing of conches by the warriors on both sides
 20 — 27 Arjuna observes the warriors arrayed for the battle
 28 — 47 Arjuna's anguish.

Chapter II Sankhya Yoga or the Yoga of Knowledge

Verses

- 1 — 10 Dialogue between Sri Krishna and Arjuna with regard to the latter's faint heartedness
 11 — 30 Enunciation of Sankhya Yoga
 31 — 38 The warrior's duty elucidated
 39 — 53 Elucidation of Karma yoga or the Yoga of Disinterested Duty
 54 — 72 The characteristics of the enlightened man of equilibrium - "Sthithaprajna."

Chapter III Karma yoga or Yoga of Action

Verses

- 1 — 8 Importance of performing duty with detachment
 9 — 16 The sacrifices
 17 — 24 The necessity for action on the part of the enlightened and even on the part of God Himself for the good of the world
 25 — 35 Qualities of the wise and the unwise. Importance of action with equanimity.
 36 — 43 How to conquer desires

Chapter IV Yoga of esoteric knowledge as well as the discipline of action "Jnana-Karma Sannyasa Yoga."

Verses

- 1 — 18 The glory of god with his attributes and the importance of selfless action
 19 — 23 The characteristics of Yogis and sages and their glory
 24 — 32 Different forms of sacrifices
 33 — 42 The glory of Knowledge

Chapter V The yoga of action and knowledge "Yoga of Karma Sannyasa"

Verses

- 1 — 6 Disinterested Action

- 7 — 12 Attributes of Nishkama Karmayogi - the person who performs actions without an eye on the result
- 13 — 26 Jnanayoga or the yoga of Knowledge
- 27 — 29 Meditation and Devotion
- Chapter VI The yoga of self control "Atmasamyama yoga."
Verses
- 1 — 4 Karma Yoga - principles of action and the qualities of a Karma yogi
- 5 — 10 God realisation
- 11 — 32 Dhyana Yoga—Meditation and devotion.
- 33 — 36 Control of the Mind
- 37 — 47 The pitfalls of Yoga
- Chapter VII Knowledge of Brahman and Manifest Divinity
Verses "Jnana Vijnana Yoga"
- 1 — 7 Knowledge of manifest divinity
- 8 — 12 Inherence of god in all objects
- 13 — 19 Men of demonic Nature
- 20 — 23 Worship of other gods
- 24 — 30 Ignorance of the glory of God
- Chapter VIII Yoga of the Indestructible Brahman - "Akshara
Verses Brahma Yoga
- 1 — 7 Answer to Arjuna's seven questions
- 8 — 22 Bhakti yoga or the path of prayer.
- 23 — 28 The bright and dark paths
- Chapter IX The Yoga of the sovereign science and sovereign
Verses secret "Raja vidya Raja guhya yoga
- 1 — 6 The glory of knowledge
- 7 — 10 Creation
- 11 — 15 Men of demonic nature, qualities of devotees
- 16 — 19 God as soul of universe
- 20 — 25 Worship - motivated and unmotivated
- 26 — 28 The glory of devotion.
- Chapter X "The Yoga of divine glories"
Verses

- 1 — 7 Description of God's glories and power of Yoga with the fruit of their knowledge
- 8 — 11 Bhaktiyoga - its fruit and glory
- 12 — 18 Arjuna offers his praises to God and prays to the Lord for a description of His glories and power of Yoga
- 19 — 42 The Lord describes His glories and power of Yoga
- Chapter XI** The Yoga of the Universal form "Visvarupa
Verses Darsana Yoga"
- 1 — 4 Arjuna's request
- 5 — 8 The Universal form described by the Lord
- 9 — 14 Sanjaya's description of the universal form
- 15 — 31 Vision of the Universal form seen by Arjuna
- 32 — 34 Exhortation to Arjuna
- 35 — 46 Arjuna's fright
- 47 — 50 Vision of the four armed gentle form seen by Arjuna
- 51 — 55 The importance of exclusive devotion
- Chapter XII** The Yoga of Devotion "Bhakti Yoga."
Verses
- 1 — 12 God with form and without form: Means of god realisation
- 13 — 30 Qualities of persons who realise god
- Chapter XIII** The Yoga of Discrimination between the field,
Verses and the knower of the field
"Kshetra Kshetrajna Vibhaga Yoga"
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90

The Great War—First Day

Dhritarashtra asked Sanjaya, “Please tell me how the battle commenced and who started the attack first.”

Sanjaya described to Dhritarashtra in detail the course of the War.

Duhsasana led the offensive against the Pandava armies on the first day in the first encounter. The elephants trumpeted, the horses neighed, the warriors indulged in lion roars, conches and bugles, kettledrums and horns were sounded; the tumultuous noise rent the sky. Bhima led the attack from the Pandava side. The encounter of the infantry divisions raised clouds of dust to the skies. Arrows flew in the air like flashing meteors.

The brothers Duhsasana, Durmukha, Dushpraha, Durmarshana, Vivimsati, Vrishasena, Chitrasena and Vikarna attacked Bhima. The terrific carnage was of such a magnitude that the blood spilled, could subside the clouds of dust raised by the fierce encounter.

Bhisma, the Kaurava generalissimo, displaying the dazzling standard, inscribed with the Palmyra tree dashed against the Pandava army in a blitzkrieg attack and there was a terrific uproar. Arjuna attacked him to stop his advance. A fierce fight ensued between the two renowned heroes to the delight of the divine beings who were witnessing their encounter from the heavens.

Fierce fighting continued in other fronts also. Satyaki attacked Kritavarma, Abhimanyu attacked the king of Kosala, Yudhishthira attacked Salya. Dhrishtadyumna dashed against Drona. Magadha Sahadeva was arrayed against Bhurisrava. Dhrishtaketu attacked Bahlika, Ghatotkacha fought with Alambasa. Sikhandi and Asvatthama, Virata and Bhagadatta, Brihatkshatra and Kripa, Drupada and Jayadratha, Yudhamanyu and Vikarna, Chekitana and Susarma, Prativindhya and Sakuni, Srutasoma and Sudakshina, the king of Kambhoja, Eravanta and Srutayu, Kuntibhoja and Vinda fought with each other.

Every minute, the elephants fell, horses died, the soldiers perished by hundreds. Everywhere, broken pieces of arrows and swords, armours and helmets, tusks, tridents, blinkers and boots were strewn over the battlefield.

Arjuna could not stem the advance of Bhisma who attacked the Pandava forces fiercely. The kings of Panchala and Chedi who fought with Bhisma were repulsed in no time. Bhisma, in spite of his age appeared as the incarnation of bravery and the Pandava

armies suffered a very heavy toll of life at his hands. Bhishma moved so swiftly on the battlefield that he could not be spotted at any particular place and he could be located only with the help of his fluttering flag. The Pandava soldiers lost all hopes of survival at the very sight of his chariot and they described his movement as the "deadly dance of the dreadful destroyer." The grand old warrior, the great generalissimo of the eleven akshauhini army massacred the Pandava forces mercilessly.

Abhimanyu, who saw the pitiable plight of the Pandava armies attacked Bhishma fearlessly. At the very first onslaught, Abhimanyu brought down the towering Palmyra standard of the grand sire and he was lustily cheered by the Pandava forces. The Kaurava warriors rallied round Bhishma, but Abhimanyu continued the fight undaunted. Bhishma was hit nine times, Kripa twice, Kritavarma once, and Salya seven times. They said, "The young fellow seems to be greater than his father, Arjuna." Bhima, Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna and Virata rallied round Abhimanyu. Bhishma engaged them all and the cumulative fight continued for a long time."

Meanwhile, Uttara, the son of King Virata, mounted on an elephant and led a fierce attack on Salya. Salya was surprised at the audacity of the young prince and counter-attacked Uttara with his bow and arrows. But Uttara continued the charge, and the elephant advanced forward, trampled on the horses and killed the charioteer of Salya. Salya, hurled a javelin at Uttara and it pierced his breast. Uttara fell down dead on the ground but his elephant continued the onward march and wrecked Salya's chariot to pieces. Salya drew out his sword and cut the trunk of the elephant and killed it thrusting a trident into its forehead. Kripa, meanwhile came to the rescue of Salya, and gave him a lift into his chariot.

Sveta, the brother of Uttara came rushing in his chariot to attack Salya, to avenge the death of his brother. Salya who secured a fresh chariot for himself gave stiff fight to Sveta. Kaurava warriors were surprised at the skill displayed by Sveta. He parried the arrows sent by the veteran warrior Salya with his counter-shafts. Duryodhana sent reinforcements to help Salya. In the battle that followed, Sveta killed thousands of Kaurava soldiers, wrecked hundreds of cars, and countered innumerable javelins thrown at him. The Kaurava reinforcements fled helter-skelter unable to withstand Sveta who pushed forward and attacked

Bhishma. The palmyra standard was brought down by Sveta and the Pandava forces blew their conches in jubilation. Bhishma sent swift shafts against Sveta in quick succession but Sveta repelled them with his counter-shafts and succeeded in killing the horses of Bhishma. There was uproar in the Kaurava Camp. Sveta hurled a mace at Bhishma's chariot. Bhishma who anticipated its thrust, jumped down from his chariot with his bow and arrows and at once pulled the string of his bow to his ear and sent a swift shaft against Sveta with unerring aim. Sveta's head severed from his body rolled down on the ground. Duhsasana blew his conch in frenzied ecstasy.

Bhishma got into a new chariot and advanced on the Pandava army and his dance of destruction continued unabated. The Pandava armies reeled under Bhishma's attack. Cars crumbled to pieces. Elephants groaned on the battlefield, with truncated limbs. Horses fell dead scattered here and there. Everywhere were found dead bodies of innumerable soldiers in heaps and heaps. Bhishma's chariot waded through the Pandava forces like a forked lightning, hitting down everything on its way. The Pandava soldiers prayed for the sun-set, the scheduled time agreed upon, for the cessation of hostilities for the day."

At the sunset, Bhishma abruptly stopped his chariot and announced the closure of the combat for the day.

The Pandava soldiers heaved a sigh of relief. Dharmaputra was deeply distressed at the outcome of the war on the first day. Duryodhana was in an exultant mood. The Pandava forces suffered very heavy losses in men and material."

Yudhisthira, after the nightfall went to Sri Krishna's tent to talk to him. His brothers and other leaders followed him. Sri Krishna received them warmly. Dharmaputra said to him, "Damodara, I have come to you to confess. I could never imagine that war could be so cruel. I must admit at the very outset that I am unequal to the task. I have underestimated the strength of the grandsire. He moved like the irresistible forest fire, and nobody could stand before him. He is more than a whirlwind, a thousand thunderbolts and he is a roving earthquake. I had immense faith in Arjuna but I found him blinking. All our heroes fought bravely but nobody is a match to Bhishma. Bhima strived against odds and fought sincerely. Thank God, Karna is not fighting now. Why should I sacrifice my brothers and the brave warriors who have

come to fight on my side, at the altar of Bhishma. I have a mind to go back to the forest. Anyway, I seek your guidance. and your verdict."

Sri Krishna said, "I am equally distressed but I am not disheartened. The Kauravas have the advantage of numbers and have the psychological advantage of an early start. Bhishma and Drona are formidable warriors. Their early enthusiasm is bound to wear day by day. Dhrishtadyumna is a young man; Arjuna will pick up to-morrow. Bhima is invincible and ever ready. The veterans Virata and Drupada will come into their form gradually. Satyaki will outshine everybody to-morrow. I am here to help you in every way. After all, your righteousness will assert itself the minute you choose to march forward. There is no worry." Having uttered these words of encouragement and exhortation, Krishna looked towards Dhrishtadyumna who vowed, "Dharmaputra, don't be dejected. This is the first day. You can judge us by our performance to-morrow. Actually, I consider that my destined mission in life is to slay Drona. Duryodhana was already doomed. Our victory is a foregone conclusion as we have the blessings of Lord Krishna."

Sri Krishna said, "Dharmaputra, you can have sound sleep to-night; to-morrow the tables will be turned against the Kauravas."

Yudhisthira took leave of Sri Krishna and they repaired to their tents.

91

The Great War—The Second Day

Dhrishtadyumna arranged the Pandava armies in a 'heron' formation. Arjuna was at the beak, Kunti Bhoja and Saibya formed the eyes. Drupada with his armies stood at the plumage. Rulers of Dasarna and Kirata were at the throat. Bhimasena and Dhrishtadyumna formed the wings. Nakula, Sahadeva, Ghatotkacha, Virata and the King of Kasi, formed the belly. Yudhisthira and others were at the rear.

Duryodhana was puffed up with the outcome on the first day and declared in a self-complacent tone, "Brave warriors, we are assured of victory. We can march forward with optimism." He turned to Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama and said,

“Individually everyone of you can vanquish the Pandava army. I am sure, the enemy already demoralised, will be routed to-day. Dhrishtadyumna has arrayed the forces in the heron formation. I request Bhishma to arrange our armies in a matching array.” Bhishma divided the Kaurava armies into three groups with Duhsasana, Vikarna, Vinda, Anuvinda, Surasena, Yavana and Trigarta forming the left flank, Dronacharya, supported by the forces of Kuntala, Dasarna, Vidarbha, Gandhara, Sindhu and Sauvira on the right flank. Bhishma with the rest occupied the central sector. Kritavarma, Salya and Duryodhana with his brothers were in the rear.

Bhishma charged forth with deadly vigour and the three Kaurava divisions attacked the Pandava forces and shattered its defences. Arjuna said to Sri Krishna “The grand sire, once again, is able to break through our cordon; it is time we stem his advance. I request you to drive the chariot to the spot where he is fighting.”

Sri Krishna piloted the chariot with lightning speed, and soon Bhishma and Arjuna met face to face on the battlefield. Arjuna at first, shot shafts at the feet of Bhishma, signifying military salutation. Immediately afterwards, Bhishma was drenched in a rain of arrows. Bhishma parried the shafts of Arjuna with counter-shafts. Drona and Kripa, Vikarna and Salya joined Bhishma and they all shot swift shafts at Arjuna. But Arjuna, as the epic poet described, stood firm like a mountain amidst the torrential rain. With his two hands, Arjuna shot arrows at them. Bhishma was hit by twenty arrows, Drona by sixty, Kripa by nine, Vikarna and Salya by five each. Meanwhile, Abhimanyu, Upandavas and Dhrishtadyumna joined Arjuna. In the tumultuous battle, hundreds of horses, elephants, chariots and thousands of soldiers perished on both sides.

Duryodhana approached Bhishma in the midst of the thick fight and said to him, “Grand Sire, Arjuna has wrought havoc with our army. I never expected this. I am sure, he cannot advance by even one inch unless you relent. Now I am recollecting the words of Karna, and I regret that he is not here now.” Bhishma was deeply hurt at the insinuation of Duryodhana and replied, “Wait a minute, you will witness my powers.” The enraged Bhishma marched against Arjuna aggressively and hit him with fifty shafts. Arjuna hurled the fire missile against Bhishma who countered it with the water missile.

Bhisma hit Sri Krishna with an arrow which wounded him in the chest. Blood began to ooze out of his armour and Krishna looked like a palasa tree full of crimson blossoms. Arjuna could not brook the sight and hit Bhisma at several places. The fierce fight raged for a pretty long time.

In another sector, Dhrishtadyumna attacked Drona. The two warriors fought like two sturdy bulls. Dhrishtadyumna's bow was broken many a time. Drona's flag was brought down. Eventually Drona killed Dhrishtadyumna's charioteer and the horses of his chariot. The son of Drupada, in a fit of rage took the mace into his hands, jumped down from his chariot and advanced towards Drona, who shot an arrow cutting the mace into pieces. Bhimasena rushed to the spot to retrieve the situation. He gave a lift to Dhrishtadyumna into his chariot and carried him to a place of safety.

Duryodhana sent Kalinga forces to attack Bhimasena. Satyaki, Abhimanyu and other warriors rushed to Bhimasena's succour. Bhima wrought havoc with the Kalinga forces and destroyed the whole elephant squadron of the Kalinga army.

Bhisma came to the aid of the Kalinga forces. Satyaki attacked Bhisma, killing his charioteer. The horses which were hit by Satyaki's shafts, dragged the chariot away from the battlefield. The Pandava forces blew their horns and conches triumphantly. Arjuna, taking advantage of Bhisma's absence, mercilessly massacred the Kaurava forces. By the time Bhisma returned to the battlefield, the Kaurava army was in utter disarray.

Srutayu, enraged at the destruction of his army by Bhimasena, attacked him with reinforcements. Ketumanta and Bhanumanta, his brothers joined him. In the melee, Bhima lost his chariot and the horses, but undaunted; he dashed forward with his mace on his shoulders, and advanced into the enemy camp. Bhanumanta charged forth on Bhima, riding his elephant. But Bhima killed the elephant together with its rider, Bhanumanta. Bhima, with his gigantic strength perfected the art of slaying the elephants hitting over their foreheads with his sturdy mace. He gained the reputation as an elephant killer.

Dhrishtadyumna came to the spot and gave a lift to Bhima in his chariot.

By the time Bhishma returned to the battlefield, the morale of the Kaurava army was at its lowest ebb. Arjuna took a very heavy toll and the performance of Satyaki was superb. Bhima excelled himself on the second day.

Typical comments, heard from the ranks of the Kaurava battalions were all in praise of Arjuna's valour. The average soldier was a sportsman and merit even in an enemy was spontaneously recognised.

Bhishma who gauged the situation announced the termination of hostilities for the day, immediately after the sunset.

The soldiers, in both the camps, after the day's combat was over, used to mix freely as friends. Music concerts and dramatic performances were arranged in the nights to provide entertainment to the troops, by both sides, extending invitations to members of the opposite camp. Of course, spies were active in both the camps and used to secure vital information infiltrating into enemy lines under the cover of the night festivities.

92

The Great War—The Third Day

On the third day, early in the morning, Bhishma arranged the Kaurava army in the eagle formation. He stood at the nose. Drona and Kritavarma formed the two eyes. Kripa and Asvatthama were stationed at the head. The Trigarthas, Bhurisrava, Salya and Bhagadatta were ranged at the throat. Jayadratha, Vinda, Anuvinda, Surasena and the Dhartarashtras were at the tail end. The Kalingas formed the right wing while the Karnata and the Kosala armies provided the left wing.

Arjuna instructed Dhrishtadyumna to array the Pandava forces in the crescent formation. Bhima together with the Pandya and Magadha forces stood at the right. Arjuna occupied the left flank. Yudhisthira, the twins, Satyaki, Abhimanyu and others stood in the centre.

The two armies charged against each other simultaneously and the dust raised by the terrific encounter darkened the sun. The

warriors introduced themselves to their counterparts in loud tones giving out their names together with their family titles while starting single combats in view of the poor visibility. Streams of blood flowed on the battlefield with the result the artificial dust storm subsided after some time.

Bhisma, Drona, Saindhava and Saubala attacked the Pandava forces and they were opposed by Bhima, Ghatotkacha, Satyaki and Saibya and the warriors fought ferociously. Bhisma and Drona advanced towards Yudhishthira swiftly. Arjuna came to the rescue of his brother and stemmed their onward march. Abhimanyu and Satyaki attacked the Gandhara forces and put them to flight.

Duryodhana attacked Bhimasena. Both the warriors fought tenaciously. Bhima was waiting for the opportunity and he shot a swift shaft at him drawing the string of his bow to his ear with all the strength at his command. The arrow hit Duryodhana in the chest and he swooned at the shock and fell unconscious on the floor of his chariot. The charioteer drove the chariot out of the battlefield to avoid demoralisation of the army. However, the Kaurava forces began to flee in utter confusion. Bhima took advantage of the situation and worked havoc among the Kaurava soldiers.

Bhisma and Drona came rushing to the scene, rallying the forces around them and attacked the Pandava army. After sometime, Duryodhana, regained consciousness and returned to the battlefield to resume the fight. However, he was distressed beyond measure and said to Bhisma, "Best of the warriors, the Kaurava forces have fled in panic before your eyes. I feel that you have fooled me. You ought to have told me that you did not want to fight. I know that the Pandavas cannot move forward by an inch unless you and Drona connive at them." Bhisma smiled and replied, "King of Kings, I have told you in plainest words not to embark on this war. The Pandavas are invincible. Their allies are not cowards. They are seasoned heroes. I am redeeming my pledge to you. In the last two days I have massacred more than twenty thousand soldiers of the enemy camp. This is war. Both sides must be prepared for heavy losses. This is not a punitive raid against a petty prince. We are in the midst of the most mighty war

in the history of mankind. In the weird clock of war, the pendulum will be oscillating between triumphs and tragedies, hopes and despairs, exultations and exhaustions. Loosing the war is no doubt a catastrophe; however, winning a war is not a comedy. Even success in war has its own snags and sighs, sorrows and shocks. Defeat or victory in war is equally a diabolical doom. I have cautioned you about this many a time.

Now you have actual experience of it. Anyway, I will promise once again that I will fight to the best of my ability and lay down my life for you. What more do you expect."

So saying, Bhishma darted forth to attack the Pandava forces. Pricked by the thorny words of Duryodhana, the Kaurava generalissimo resumed his fight. He rallied his forces and raged about the battlefield like a wild fire. He appeared like the veritable incarnation of the God of Death, who descended to the Kurukshetra to collect ready booty. Dhristadyumna and Satyaki, Bhima and Sikhandi tried to stem his advance. Bhishma bypassed Sikhandi and overpowered the rest. The Pandava army began to retreat in utter disorder. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "Savyasachi, this is the time for you to act unflinchingly. If you do not retrieve the situation and slay Bhishma, beware, the battle is lost."

Arjuna cried aloud, "Drive on the chariot to attack Bhishma." Sri Krishna in a minute took the chariot to the spot where Bhishma was practising the deadly dance of the dreadful destroyer. "Hail great warrior, Arjuna, I welcome you," said the grandsire and sent a shower of arrows on him. Arjuna, constructed a moving fortification around himself with his arrows and broke the bow of Bhishma, who resumed the fight taking a fresh bow. Arjuna was hit a number of times by the unerring aim of the grandsire and he was compelled to be on the defensive. Sri Krishna drove the chariot very skilfully, but he was not spared by the aggressive generalissimo who hit him in the chest. Sri Krishna could not tolerate the situation. He said to Arjuna, "Great hero, you are not able to get over your compunction to hit Bhishma. If you cannot kill Bhishma, I will do it." So saying, Sri Krishna placed the reins on his seat, took his discus and jumped to the ground. Satyaki, immediately came to the spot, exhorting the retreating Pandava armies to come back. Sri Krishna said, "Why do you request the cowards to come back;

I have decided to jump into the fray. I will kill Bhishma, conquer Drona, and defeat Duryodhana and all his warriors. Nobody else need fight. I will crown Dharmaputra to-day. Come what may, I will not flinch." Everybody was surprised. The whole Kaurava army was aghast, and all the warriors stared at Sri Krishna, advancing with his discus in his hand. They were dumbfounded and motionless like the deers which were suddenly confronted with the presence of a tiger. Duryodhana too was dazed and looked stupified.

Bhishma said to Sri Krishna, " Hail, Lord of the universe, Hail. Please accept my hearty welcome. I have no wife, I have no children; Omnipotent Lord, you are my sole refuge. I seek none else, come; cut off my head with your discus. I am looking forward for this blessed moment. You have come, taking up arms against me breaking your vow. What better testimony do I need? Can I visualise a holier end to my career than to be slain by the Almighty. War is my penance, my lord, it is my sacred sacrament. I have offered my only possession, my valour, at your lotus feet, as my humble worship. I am most fortunate; come and cut off my head. Release me quickly from this mortal existence and mundane bondage."

Meanwhile, Arjuna too jumped from his chariot and ran after Sri Krishna and caught hold of him, in a suppliant embrace. He said to Sri Krishna, "I request you to return to your reins. It is indeed great of you to have forsaken your solemn vow and took the discus for the sake of protecting your devotees—the Pandavas. Please excuse me. I will fight to your entire satisfaction. If you advance a step forward holding your discus, I stand condemned. If you return to your seat on the chariot, the Pandavas are blessed."

Sri Krishna was pleased, went back to the chariot, and blew his Panchajanya conch. Arjuna blew his conch Devadatta and resumed the fight with redoubled fury. Bhishma and Bhurisrava, Salya and Duryodhana attacked Arjuna, who hurled the divine missile "Indrastra" at the Kaurava army. The missile multiplied itself into thousands of weapons and hit the Kaurava army with devastating effect. Bhishma lost his charioteer, horses and the chariot; Bhurisrava's bow was broken and Salya swooned. As a result of the Indrastra, hundreds of chariots, and thousands of

horses perished. Everywhere streams of blood, pieces of bones, and dead bodies were found and the whole battlefield was littered with helmets, flagstuffs, armours and sundry wreckages. Arjuna did not stop fighting even after the sunset; the fighting continued till darkness enveloped the battlefield. The warriors repaired to their encampments and tents with the help of flaming torches.

93

The Great War—The Fourth Day

On the fourth day of the Great War, the Kaurava army started for the battlefield early in the dawn. The elephants trumpeted, the horses neighed, the noise of the moving chariot wheels rent the sky and the warriors blew their conches. Gangeya, followed by Duryodhana and Bahlika led the Kaurava forces. The Pandava forces were led by Arjuna.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna seated on the same chariot shone like the sun and the moon conjoined in the same constellation.

As the sun rose on the eastern horizon, there was headlong collision of the two armies resulting in terrific loss of life to both sides. The battlefield was covered with blood and littered with broken limbs and precious ornaments of the fallen warriors.

In the epic there is a detailed description of the battlefield, in twentyfive stanzas, with a touch of surrealistic glamour and mystic fascination which have exercised ineffable influence over the mind of man across so many centuries of human history. The epic poet described the battlefield as fantastically beautiful.

“The battlefield looked bewitchingly beautiful, with blood, bones, ornaments of heroes and fallen colours, like an aristocratic lady adorned with costly jewellery and cosmetics.”

Perhaps, hidden in the innermost depths of human psychology, there is a mystic propulsion towards the war, like that of the moth to the fire. A major segment of the Mahabharata is the description of the Great War, not to mention several battles in various other contexts. In the Mahabharata, we come across war many a time with the same monotonous tones and sonoric

sentiments. However, war forms an important ingredient of the story, and there is no escape from it.

On the fourth day again, Bhishma appeared on the scene as the dominating personality. Abhimanyu attacked him; Duryodhana, Drona, Kripa and Somadatta, Salya and Vivimsati joined Bhishma. Abhimanyu gave a stiff fight to all the seven heroes. Arjuna hurriedly joined Abhimanyu and attacked Bhishma, and there was a single combat between the two famous heroes. Warriors in both the camps stopped their hostilities for a while and witnessed the momentous fight between Bhishma and Arjuna. After some time, the cumulative battle was resumed. Arjuna broke the bow of Duryodhana and felled the flag of Salya and overpowered the rest.

Dhrishtadyumna who saw Arjuna and Abhimanyu isolated and surrounded by a powerful combination of Kaurava warriors rushed to the scene. Kritavarma and Kripa, Asvatthama and the son of Salya attacked Dhrishtadyumna. In the melee, the son of Salya lost his chariot, but undaunted advanced on Dhrishtadyumna with his sword and shield. It was a magnificent exhibition of valour and the Kaurava soldiers blew their conches and sounded their trumpets in admiration, as he successfully countered the swift shafts of Dhrishtadyumna with his dynamic display of the art of sword and shield. Dhrishtadyumna, however, sent a crescent shaft with great force and it cut the head of the hero advancing menacingly towards him with the unsheathed sword in his hand. But, the body devoid of the head, advanced a few yards towards the enemy with the outdrawn sword in one hand and the shield in another before it fell on the battlefield.

Salya immediately attacked Dhrishtadyumna and a bitter fight ensued. Seeing Dhrishtadyumna, exhausted and unable to cope up with the fight, Abhimanyu rushed to his rescue. Duryodhana sent his brothers Durmukha, Dussaha, Satyavrata, Chitrasena and others to the help of Salya. Nakula and Sahadeva joined Dhrishtadyumna and gave a stiff fight to their uncle. It was a pleasant surprise for Salya and the fight continued undecidedly for a long time.

In another sector, Bhimasena attacked the elephant division of the Kaurava army. Bhima revelled in the art of killing the

elephant hordes and soon became a renowned pastmaster in the art. Abhimanyu assisted Bhima in the enterprise. Bhima advanced on foot, wielding his famous mace. Abhimanyu followed Bhimasena on a chariot and killed many elephants. Magadha who was commanding the elephant division attacked Abhimanyu riding a ferocious elephant. Abhimanyu made short work of him, and killed him with his elephant. Bhima excelled himself that day and wrought havoc with the ferocious beasts. Some lost their tusks, some their trunks, some their ears and some their eyes. All the ferocious elephants which were unable to put up with the multiple injuries inflicted on them, began to retreat in utter disorder. Suddenly the great assets were transformed into unexpected liabilities. Hundreds and thousands of Kaurava soldiers were trampled under their feet. Duryodhana was distressed at the immense damage caused by the stampede of the retreating elephants which ran amuck and ordered an all-out attack on Bhimasena. Senapati, Sushena, Jalasandha, Sulochana, Bhima, Bhimaratha, Bhimabahu, Dushpradharsha, Durmukha, Vivitsu, Alolupa, Vikata, Sama and Ugra, the fourteen brothers of Duryodhana attacked Bhima. Bhimasena after a fierce fight killed them all and blew his conch in triumph.

Duryodhana, distressed at the death of his brothers dashed against Bhima. It was a terrific encounter. Eventually Bhima was hit in the chest by a powerful arrow from Duryodhana and he fell on the chariot unconscious, stretching his back to the flagstaff. Ghatotkacha, who saw the plight of his father, advanced towards Duryodhana in a fit of anger. He attacked the Kaurava army with the fury of a thousand hurricanes.

Bhagadatta advanced on Ghatotkacha riding his famous elephant, but he was repulsed. The havoc wrought by Ghatotkacha was unparalleled and everybody said that he excelled his father. Bhishma and Drona, Bhurisrava and Kripa rushed to the rescue of Duryodhana. Yudhisthira, Virata and Drupada joined Ghatotkacha. Both sides suffered heavy losses. Bhishma said to Drona, "It is time for sunset. Let us bide our time till sunset. Till then let us be on the defensive. After the night fall, the rakshasas will fight more vigorously and we will be at a disadvantage. We must stop the war to-day as early as possible."

The war was stopped exactly at sunset. The Pandava and the Kaurava forces repaired to their barracks. Bhishma was happy that

the Kaurava army escaped bitter annihilation at the hands of Ghatotkacha that day. Duryodhana was distressed as he lost his fourteen brothers in the battle that day. The Pandavas rendered proper medical aid to Bhima, who after regaining consciousness, had not recovered fully.

Dhritarashtra said to Sanjaya, "Every time you are narrating heart rending stories and giving an account of heavy casualties on the Kaurava side. The Pandava losses seem to be relatively negligible. They are not obviously afraid of Bhishma and Drona, Salya or Somadatta, though their forces are greatly outnumbered. What is the reason for the persistent reverses on the Kaurava side?"

Sanjaya replied, "I am only a reporter; How can I manufacture the so-called 'good news' to you. I am not a magician or a mesmerist nor do I have the power of any supernatural spell to change the course of the war. Vidura has already told you. Even in warfare, the moral strength outweighs the overwhelming brute force. Truth and justice are on the side of the Pandavas. In fact Duryodhana put the same question to Bhishma to-day after the white flags were hoisted for the day and bugles were blown announcing the truce for the night.

Bhishma's answer to Duryodhana was significant. He told Duryodhana, "Destiny is more powerful than human effort. By this time you must have realised in which way the wind is blowing. I have advised you to make peace with the Pandavas. It is not too late even now. You can approach Sri Krishna with a penitent request. Dharmaputra, I am sure, will welcome peace." Bhishma's words were not palatable to Duryodhana and he paid a deaf ear to his advice.

Dhritarashtra burst into tears and said to Sanjaya, "The course of the war points to total annihilation of the Kaurava armies. Indeed, divine dispensation seems to be more powerful than human might. Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Salya, Bhurisrava and Bhagadatta are the mightiest heroes of the earth. Still, my sons are being killed by Bhima before their very eyes. What is their plan?"

Sanjaya replied, "People are blaming you. You ought to have acted in time and prevented the war. The world is wide. The Pandavas and the Kauravas could have ruled their respective kingdoms quite amicably. You refused to follow the salutary advice given by Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Vidura. Why do you shed tears now? Having sown the wind, you have to reap the whirl wind.

94

The Great War—The Fifth Day

As usual, the battle on the fifth day started exactly at the sunrise. Bhishma arrayed the Kaurava army in the crocodile formation. Dhrishtadyumna arrayed the Pandava armies in the shape of a dove. Bhimasena stood at the nose. Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi formed the eyes. Satyaki stood at the throat. Arjuna occupied the right wing. Drupada and Virata stood at the left wing. Abhimanyu and sons of Draupadi occupied the belly. Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva were at the tail end.

Bhima entered the crocodile formation with the iron mace and soon disturbed the array cutting it into two. Bhima attacked Bhishma and shone like fire propelled by ghee. Duryodhana went to Drona, who was at the other end and said to him, "Great sire, you are the unrivalled champion in archery and nobody can conquer you and Bhishma. The Pandavas are able to score success after success obviously because of your connivance. I feel frustrated and badly let down." Drona was deeply distressed and said, "Obstinate prince, your insinuation is an unfounded fabrication. I do not think it is easy to vanquish the Pandavas. Moreover, we never boasted that we would conquer them. We are doing our best. Even when dipped in the ocean, a pot can draw water limited to its capacity only. What is the use of indulging in wishful thinking and daydreams. However, I assure you to fight to the best of my capacity."

Drona, goaded by Duryodhana's harsh words led a fierce attack on the Pandava forces. Satyaki confronted him and gave him stiff resistance. Bhima, Dhrishtadyumna and the sons of Draupadi joined Satyaki and the fight reached its usual crescendo.

Both sides fought vigorously. Sikhandi arrived on the scene and attacked Bhishma, who went away bypassing him. Bhishma was not prepared to fight with Sikhandi whom he considered to be a semi-woman. Drona retrieved the situation. He attacked Sikhandi who was chasing the generalissimo.

In another sector, Abhimanyu was locked with Lakshmana, the son of Duryodhana, in a single combat. Both the young heroes fought bravely to the admiration of applauding onlookers. Ultimately Abhimanyu wrecked the chariot of Lakshmana, killed the charioteer and the horses. Kripa immediately arrived on the scene and took away Lakshmana in his chariot.

Satyaki attacked Bhishma in a single combat and the two heroes fought an exhibition duel, scaling unusual heights of archery.

Meanwhile, the sons of Satyaki, ten in total challenged Bhurisrava to fight saying "Renowned warrior, you can choose any one of us to a single combat." He smilingly replied, "I will fight with all of you simultaneously. I know, no one amongst you, can face me single-handed." Offended at his words, all the sons of Satyaki attacked Bhurisrava simultaneously and he engaged them all. They fought bravely and surrounded his chariot in a terrific charge. Bhurisrava, with his seasoned experience and unrivalled powers killed all the ten young warriors.

Satyaki, who was distressed at the death of his sons at the hands of his traditional foe Bhurisrava, dashed against his chariot with tremendous force. The two chariots crumbled into pieces immediately. Undaunted, the two warriors stood against each other, with unsheathed swords and shields. Bhima hurriedly came to the spot and took away Satyaki, by force, in his chariot. Bhima knew that Bhurisrava was one of the greatest swordsmen known to history. Satyaki was primarily an archer. So Bhima wanted to save Satyaki, one of the foremost bowmen of the age and salvaged him.

It was midday by that time and Arjuna renewed the attack on the Kaurava forces. Duryodhana despatched twenty thousand car-warriors against Arjuna. They attacked Savyasachi simultaneously surrounding him from all sides. For a time, Arjuna's

chariot was submerged in the surging waves of the invaders. Sri Krishna piloted the chariot most skilfully. The attacking forces engulfed Arjuna who looked like a mountain peak covered by rain-bearing clouds. The chariot driven by Sri Krishna moved like flashes of lightning. When Arjuna was sending swift shafts against the challengers in straight lines, the arrows hit them at unexpected places because of the circular movement of the chariot. All the twenty thousand car-warriors perished like moths in fire.

Bhisma was aghast at the deadly devastation wrought by Arjuna within a few hours. He said to Duryodhana, "Sheer numbers cannot procure victory. You have provided easy fodder for the Gandiva by encouraging this cumulative attack. Fortunately it is time for sunset. Let us stop the fight for to-day."

Both the armies stopped the fighting for the day. The combatants repaired to their encampments praising Sri Krishna's skill in driving the chariot. They said, Arjuna coupled with Krishna is a formidable combination, like the God of Fire conjoined with the God of Wind. They have the innate potentialities to reduce any army to ashes at the opportune moment.

95

The Great War—The Sixth Day

On the sixth day, the Pandava army was arrayed in the shape of a crocodile while the Kaurava army was arrayed in the 'heron' formation.

Arjuna and the Panchala King stood at the head. The twins formed the two eyes. Bhimasena stood at the trunk, Ghatotkacha and Satyaki at the sides. The rest formed the body.

In the Krauncha or heron formation of the Kauravas, Bhisma stood at the nose, along with the preceptor. Kripa and Asvatthama formed the eyes, and Kritavarma the head. Kings of Bahlika and Kambhoja were at the throat. Suyodhana and the brothers formed the belly. Vinda, Anuvinda and Susarma were at the left and the right wings. Srutayu and Bhurisraya were at the rear.

Drona led the attack from the Kaurava side; Bhima opposed him from the Pandava side. Drona hit Bhima nine times and

Bhima killed the charioteer of Drona, who fought piloting the chariot himself. The Kaurava forces began to retreat at the onslaught of Bhima. Bhishma and Drona exhorted the soldiers to stand firm and led the counter-attack. Within a short time, both the armies were in utter disarray and promiscuous fighting raged unabated on all the sectors. Everywhere, lay scattered on the battlefield, dead bodies and soldiers, debris of the chariots, and weapons of all kinds including broken swords and shields.

Taking advantage of the confusion and chaos prevailing in both the sides, the Kaurava brothers, Duhsasana and Durvishaha, Durmada and Duhsaha, Jaya and Jayatsena, Vikarna and Chitrasena, Charuchitra and Suvarna, planned a concerted drive to isolate Bhima and kill him. Duhsasana exhorted his brothers exclaiming, "This is a golden opportunity. Now or Never. Let us surround and slay the ferocious pest." Vrikodara did not confine himself to the chariot. He said to his charioteer, "My dear Visoka, the Kaurava brothers are surrounding our chariot with so many of their chariots. My freedom of movement will be circumscribed if I remain on my chariot. I am getting down to fight with my mace. I can wreck their chariots in quick succession. Do not be afraid. Please bide your time and come to me at the appropriate minute."

Bhima, jumped from his chariot, with his iron mace and advanced forward wrecking the chariots and killing the elephants on his way. Whenever there was confusion, the attention of the Pandava leaders turned towards Bhima, who was known for his adventurous spirit. Dhrishtadyumna went in search of Bhima. When he found Bhima's chariot, unoccupied, Dhrishtadyumna's anxiety reached its zenith. He enquired in consternation, "Visoka, where is Bhimasena, Why are you sitting idle? I am worried about his welfare. I love him more than my life." Visoka stood up in military salute and replied in cool tones, "Generalissimo, he has instructed me to stay here and went forward with the mace in his hand anticipating a concerted attack by the Kaurava brothers. I think there is no cause for worry."

Dhrishtadyumna went in search of Bhima. He could locate the route taken by Bhima as it was strewn with the carcasses of elephants and the wreckage of chariots. He found Bhima surrounded by the Kaurava brothers.

Bhima, dashed forth into the enemy forces with the mobility of a serpent and the strength of a monster. Dhrishthadyumna was overjoyed to find Bhimasena safe and he requested him to get into the chariot of Kekaya. Bhima got into the chariot of Kekaya and Dhrishtadyumna attacked the Kaurava brothers.

Yudhisthira directed, Dhrishtaketu and Abhimanyu to go forth in support of Dhrishtadyumna, Kekaya and Bhimasena. Drona rushed to the support of Kaurava princes and attacked Dhrishtadyumna. In the fight, the bow of Dhrishtadyumna was broken many a time. Drona killed Dhrishtadyumna's charioteer and smashed the chariot together with the horses. Abhimanyu gave a lift to Dhrishtadyumna into his chariot. A new chariot was procured and Dhrishtadyumna got into it and renewed the fighting with the preceptor. Meanwhile, Visoka arrived with the chariot and Bhima got into it.

Duryodhana came to the spot and attacked Bhimasena, together with his brothers. Bhima was sorry that he missed a good opportunity to kill the Dhartarashtras who in turn were disappointed at the failure of the concerted drive. The fight continued for a long time indecisively. At one point, Duryodhana and Bhima came face to face and exchanged hot words and hotter arrows. Bhima brought down the standard of Duryodhana, killed his charioteer and smashed the chariot to pieces. Duryodhana swooned on the wreckage of his chariot. Kripa rushed to the scene, put him into his chariot and rendered him first aid. Duryodhana was hit at a number of places and Kripa removed the shafts from his armour carefully.

Dhrishtadyumna continued to fight with the Kaurava princes and hurled at them the stupor missile, which was given to him by Drona. The Kaurava princes fell on their chariots, unconscious and seemed quite lifeless. There was consternation in the Kaurava camp. Drona immediately came to the spot and brought back the princes to consciousness with the help of the anti-stupor missile.

Jayadratha attacked Bhima, and the Kaurava princes fought with Abhimanyu. Satanika, the son of Nakula, fought against them along with Abhimanyu.

Bhisma and Arjuna continued their fight in another sector till the sunset.

Bhisma promptly announced the suspension of hostilities for the day.

After the nightfall, Duryodhana met Bhisma at his encampment, and showed him the injuries on his person inflicted by Bhima. Bhisma applied a healing balm to all the wounds with his own hands. Duryodhana said to the grandsire, "Great Warrior, I honestly counted on you to conquer the Pandavas; I even asked Karna to step aside, in my sincere bid to please you. Even now I hope with all the earnestness at my command that you will conquer the Pandavas. I am now at your mercy."

Bhisma took pity on Duryodhana and exhorted him, "You need not be disheartened. In life as well as war, vicissitudes are as common as waves in the ocean. You are now the lord of the greatest army that the world has ever known. The strength of the Pandava army has been depleted considerably. In fact, there is cause for the Pandavas to worry. Your army is in tact. You see what will happen to-morrow."

Duryodhana was heartened at the encouragement given by Bhisma and went to his residence and slept peacefully.

96

The Great War—The Seventh Day

On the seventh day of the war, Bhisma arrayed the Kaurava armies as a vicious circle. Duryodhana after a refreshing sleep on the previous night came to the battlefield followed by his brothers with great enthusiasm. Dhrishtadyumna, at the instance of Yudhisthira arrayed the Pandava army in the 'Diamond' formation. As the sun rose, the two armies charged against each other. Drona and Virata, Asvatthama and Sikhandi, Duryodhana and Dhrishtadyumna, Salya and the twins, Vinda, Anuvinda and Yudhamanyu, Kritavarma and Bhimasena, Abhimanyu and Duhsasana, Bhagadatta and Ghatotkacha, Alambasa and Satyaki, Bhurisrava and Chekitana, Kripacharya and Yudhisthira were locked up in single combats at the start of the battle. The remaining warriors attacked Arjuna.

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "A number of warriors assisted by the Trigartas have come to attack me simultaneously. Better to nip them in the bud." So saying, Arjuna hurled the divine missile, 'Indrastra' at them. The missile hit the warriors like a hurricane and soon the battlefield was covered with the wreckage of the chariots, carcasses of elephants and horses and dead bodies of soldiers. The Kaurava armies fled in panic and sought refuge with Bhishma who advanced on Arjuna. Duryodhana rallied all his troops to the aid of Bhishma.

In another sector, Drona and Virata fought with each other. The preceptor broke the bow of Virata and brought down his flag. Virata hit Drona with one shaft and his horses with four and wrecked his chariot. Drona got into the chariot of his son Asvatthama and they both continued to fight with Virata, and wrecked his chariot. Virata got into the chariot of his son and then the father and son continued their fight with Drona and Asvatthama. Drona, in a fit of anger sent a swift shaft at Sankhu, son of Virata. It hit him in the chest and came out of his back. Sankhu fell dead on the ground due to the velocity of the arrow and the Pandava armies were terror stricken. Sikhandi arrived at the spot and attacked Asvatthama, hitting his forehead with three arrows. Asvatthama, was enraged and killed the charioteer of Sikhandi, smashing the horses and the chariot simultaneously. Sikhandi stood on the ground, undaunted with the outdrawn sword and the shield. Asvatthama, in a minute cut his sword and shield into pieces discharging swift shafts with unerring aim. Satyaki arrived at the spot and gave a lift to Sikhandi who stood there unarmed and dazed, into his chariot.

Dhrishtadyumna attacked Duryodhana, broke his bow, killed his charioteer and the horses and hit him with a powerful shaft. Duryodhana advanced on Dhrishtadyumna, with the sword and the shield, but Sakuni intervened and took him away in his chariot.

Alambasa gave a stiff fight to Satyaki who hurled the great Indrastra at him. Alambasa fled in fear and Satyaki roared like a lion to the delight of the Pandava forces.

Kritavarma was defeated by Bhima and lost his charioteer, the chariot and the horses and he got into the chariot of

Somadatta. Vinda and Anuvinda were likewise defeated by Yudhamanyu.

Bhagadatta gave stiff fight to Ghatotkacha but eventually Ghatotkacha inflicted heavy injuries on his elephant which retreated from the battlefield in uncontrollable pain.

Salya fought with the twins in a complacent mood. At first, he was able to wreck the chariot of Nakula. But Sahadeva attacked him fiercely. The king of Madra swooned and fell unconscious in his chariot. The charioteer drove the chariot away from the battlefield. The twins blew their conches in exultation.

Srutayu fought with Yudhisthira bravely and hit him in the chest nine times. But Dharmaputra in a fit of anger wrecked his chariot, killed the horses and the charioteer. Srutayu fled from the battlefield to save his life.

Kripa lost his chariot and the charioteer fighting with Chekitana. Undaunted Kripa advanced on the Yadava Chief, with his sword and the shield. Chekitana jumped from his chariot with his sword and shield and the two fought a duel bravely. After some time, both swooned and fell on the ground unconscious. Immediately, Sakuni from the Kaurava side and Satyaki from the Pandava side came, took Kripa and Chekitana respectively into their chariots and went away to give them first aid.

Abhimanyu alone fought with the Kaurava princes bravely. Bhisma followed by many Kaurava princes attacked Abhimanyu. Arjuna, seeing Bhisma advancing on Abhimanyu said to Sri Krishna, "Look at Bhisma and the Kaurava princes who are pouncing on a boy. Abhimanyu does not want to kill the princes in view of Bhima's vow. Let us go to that spot." Krishna drove the chariot to the place where Abhimanyu was fighting with Bhisma and the Kaurava princes.

The Kaurava forces attacked Arjuna and a cumulative fight started. The Trigarta warriors advanced on Arjuna and he killed thirtytwo of them with sixtyfour shafts.

Sikhandi came to the scene and attacked Bhisma who did not retaliate. Immediately, Salya intervened and hurled the fire

missile at Sikhandi who countered it with the water missile. Gangeya brought down the flag of Yudhisthira and broke his bow and blew his conch. Bhima jumped from his chariot and dashed against Duryodhana, but Jayadratha intervened and gave fight to Bhima.

Bhima in a fit of anger hurled his iron mace into the sky. As it whirled in the sky, the soldiers ran helter-skelter as nobody could anticipate where it would fall. In the words of the epic poet, "Sweet is, 'dear life' even to the soldiers who come prepared to die on the battlefield."

Bhisma wrecked the chariot of Yudhisthira killing the horses and the charioteer. Nakula gave a lift to Dharmaputra into his chariot. The promiscuous fight continued upto the sunset. Bhisma announced the suspension of the hostilities for the day. Both the forces repaired to their encampments.

Dhritarashtra told Sanjaya, "You seem to give me a one-sided picture. You are telling me about the continuous success of the Pandava heroes only. What is the matter?" Sanjaya replied, "Best of kings, it is the lot of a reporter to give out the truth, however unpleasant or unpalatable it may appear to be."

Dhritarashtra heaved a heavy sigh of despair.

97

The Great War—The Eighth Day

Bhisma arrayed the Kaurava army in tortoise formation. Yudhisthira asked Dhrishtadyumna to arrange the Pandava forces in a matching array. The Pandava armies were arrayed in a cross. Exactly at the sunrise, the two armies clashed. The friction of the swords produced fire without smoke and the sky and the earth reverberated with the lion roars of the warriors, intermingled with the noises of the kettledrums and conches.

Bhisma spearheaded the attack from the Kaurava side. Bhimasena opposed him as the Pandava forces began to retreat in disorder. Bhisma, the veteran warrior was the embodiment of terror, and there was nobody in the Pandava army who could

oppose him with any degree of success. Bhima discovered a shortcut to fight Bhishma. He killed the charioteer, and hit the horses. The frightened horses dragged the chariot out of the battlefield and Bhishma blew his conch in exultation.

Sunabha, one of the brothers of Duryodhana attacked Bhima. In fact, Bhima was waiting for such an opportunity and Sunabha was killed in the fight. His brothers, Adityaketu, Bahavasi, Pandita, Kundadhara, Visalaksha and Mahodara, in a fit of rage attacked Bhima and lost their lives in the fight.

Meanwhile, Bhishma returned to the battlefield with a new charioteer and offered his condolences to Duryodhana on the death of his brothers. Duryodhana said to him, "Great Warrior, it is a great bereavement to me and a blot on your stewardship. You are too indulgent towards the Pandavas and they are exploiting the situation." Bhishma replied, "What is the use of crying over spilt milk: let us not waste our time in recriminations. Let us fight the enemy to the best of our capacity. Let us accept that we are confronted with powerful opposition." So saying, Bhishma advanced towards the Pandava forces to resume the fight with Bhima. At the instance of Yudhisthira, Dhrishtadyumna rushed to join Bhima.

In another sector, Chekitana, sons of Draupadi and Savyasachi fought with Duryodhana and the allied kings. On the third front, Ghatotkacha and Abhimanyu fought with the Kaurava princes. Drona fought with Drupada.

Iravan, the son of Arjuna by the Naga princess Ulupi, was attacked by the Gandhara princes, Suka, Sarmavan, Vrishaka, Arjava, Gaja, and Gavaksha, with their cavalry force. In the fight Iravan's horse was killed by a spear. Undaunted he jumped to the ground with his sword and shield and gave a stiff fight to the Gandhara princes who lost their horses. They advanced on Iravan wielding their swords in a simultaneous encounter. Iravan, in a splendid show of his skill in wielding the sword, cut the six opponents into twelve pieces. There was great uproar in the Kaurava camp.

Duryodhana said to Alambasa, "Iravan combines in himself the maternal mobility as well as the paternal prowess. It is not easy

for ordinary mortals to defeat him. His cavalry has the most poisonous potentialities. The venomous snake must be killed and his cavalry must be destroyed. You are the only warrior, worthy enough to undertake this assignment." Alambasa, flattered at the special attention bestowed upon him by Duryodhana, attacked Iravan mustering his rakshasa forces. His cavalry was smashed by the demonic hoards by magical feats and illusory tactics. Iravan was ambushed and killed by Alambasa.

Ghatotkacha got exceedingly angry at the death of his brother and fell on the rakshasa forces of Alambasa in great fury. Alambasa's forces fled in panic at the fierce onslaught of Ghatotkacha, who diverted his attention to Duryodhana.

Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama, Saindhava, Somadatta and Bhurisrava, Brihadbala, Vinda and Anuvinda rallied round Duryodhana at the instance of Bhishma who was preoccupied with his fighting against the Panchalas. Ghatotkacha, rose to the sky like a rainy cloud to escape the combined attack mounted against him by the Kaurava warriors.

Yudhisthira asked Bhima to go to the rescue of Ghatotkacha. Bhima rushed to the spot and attacked Duryodhana and the Kaurava warriors. Duryodhana fought bravely and hit Bhima with a powerful shaft wounding him in the chest. Immediately Abhimanyu and Ghatotkacha combined and attacked the Kauravas, joined by the sons of Draupadi. It was a fight between the youngsters and the veterans. After a fierce and inconclusive fight, Ghatotkacha and his rakshasa hordes resorted to magic and mesmerism. The false bodies of the Kaurava warriors, Drona and Duryodhana, Kripa and Asvatthama and eight others, were exhibited to the Kaurava forces as if they were lying unconscious with bloody wounds on their chariots. The optical illusion created by the crafty rakshasas shattered the morale of the Kaurava forces which retreated in utter confusion and chaos. Duryodhana shouted at the top of his voice that it was all the result of the foul play of the rakshasas; but the fleeing forces could not distinguish reality from the apparitions.

Bhishma asked Bhagadatta, to counter the tactics of Ghatotkacha and relieve Duryodhana from distress. Soon Bhagadatta

and Ghatotkacha were locked in a furious battle. Bhima and Abhimanyu aided Ghatotkacha. But Bhagadatta piloted his famous elephant, "Supratika" with unrivalled agility and gave stiff fight to Bhima and Abhimanyu in addition to Ghatotkacha. Duryodhana, Kripa and other warriors joined Bhagadatta in the fight. The Pandava armies fled in disarray at their onslaught.

Arjuna, who sensed the disaster hurried to the scene and rallied the forces round him and repulsed the attack of Supratika discharging uninterrupted showers of shafts from his Gandiva.

Bhima conveyed to Arjuna, the news of the fall of Iravan on the battlefield after a brave fight. Arjuna was overwhelmed with grief at the death of his son, wept bitterly falling over his dead body. He exclaimed aloud, "War is a tragic curse. Now I understand why Dharmaputra was so solicitous for peace at any cost; I do not think that Duryodhana is happy either. Why this war? Whither are we?"

Sri Krishna smiled and said, "Partha, you are not the only parent to lose a child; this is war." Arjuna stood up and asked Sri Krishna to drive the chariot against the enemy forces, to avenge the death of his son. Bhagadatta and Kripa, Duryodhana and Bhishma opposed Arjuna. Satyaki joined Arjuna and attacked the Kauravas.

Bhima advanced against the Kaurava princes—Kundabhedhi, Anadhrishya, Kanakadhvaja, Viravi, Subahu, Durgabahu, and Durgalochana and killed them as the sun was setting.

The hostilities came to an end for the day. Duryodhana lost sixteen brothers on the eighth day of the Great War and he was distressed beyond measure. He asked Duhsasana to go and fetch Karna at once.

Duryodhana, Duhsasana, Sakuni and Karna met confidentially. Duryodhana explained, "It has become amply clear that Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama, though apparently fighting on our side are neutrals at heart; they are not putting their hearts and souls into the fight. I do not know what to do." They discussed the problem at great length. Karna told

“You better ask the generalissimo to step down and let him not come to the battlefield to-morrow. I will defeat the Pandavas.”

Duryodhana asked Sakuni and Karna to go to their lodgings. He started for Bhishma's residence followed by Duhsasana on a chariot, in his best attire. A hundred torch-bearers, led the way, pouring scented oil on the cotton lamp-heads. The Vandiṣ and Magadhas walked in front chanting the traditional eulogies. The chariot of the royal bodyguard piloted the retinue carriage. Duhsasana alighted first, and Duryodhana descended from the chariot leaning on the arm of his brother. The chamberlain went to Bhishma and heralded the arrival of Duryodhana to the accompaniment of the royal fanfare. Duryodhana bowed to Bhishma who embraced him affectionately and asked him to be seated beside him.

Duryodhana said to Bhishma, “Great Warrior, you know, to-day I have lost sixteen of my brothers. I am afraid, that you are too soft to the Pandavas; I have come to request you to relinquish your post if you are not prepared to defeat the Pandavas.” Bhishma replied, “This is the basest ingratitude! If you have lost your beloved brothers in to-day's battle, Arjuna too is bereaved; he has lost his dear son, Iravan. King of Kings, I need not reiterate that this is war.

“I hope you do not mean what you say. Evidently you must be having the same grouse against Drona or Kripa or Asvatthama. We have no objection to step out. The Pandavas, as I always cautioned you, are formidable opponents. Together with us, you are faring like this. Just imagine, what will be your fate without Bhishma and Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama. You have lost your brothers. But you should not lose your courage. I share your bereavement. As the generalissimo it is my infamy.

“Let us remain united and fight the enemy to-morrow. I will tell you a way out. I will not fight with Sikhandi and I do not think I can overpower Arjuna. You isolate them and I will scorch the rest.”

Duryodhana was very much pleased with the words of Bhishma and said, “Great Warrior, we will isolate the Pandavas and

Sikhandi. We depend upon you to annihilate the rest of the Pandava forces and the Panchalas.”

Bhisma smiled and said, “Yes.”

Duryodhana took leave of Bhisma and returned to his residence in exhilaration and slept conjuring up sweet dreams of victory.

98

The Great War—The Ninth Day

On the ninth day of the great war, the Kaurava and the Pandava armies, as usual were ready for the battle before the Sunrise.

Bhisma arrayed the Kaurava forces into a “Sarvatobhadra” formation in the shape of a circle inside an equilateral triangle. Kripa and Kritavarma, Salya and Sakuni stood at the front together with Bhisma. Bhurisrava and Bhagadatta, Drona and Somadatta, Asvatthama and Vinda-Anuvinda were stationed at the three angles. Duryodhana, Trigartas and others occupied the central zone.

Dhrishtadyumna organised the Pandava forces in the shape of a petal. Sikhandi was at the centre. Satyaki and Virata were at the left flank and Abhimanyu and the Panchala king Drupada were at the right side. Yudhisthira with the rest of the warriors occupied the rear portion. Arjuna and Bhima stood in the front, at the two opposite poles.

Abhimanyu led the attack and darted through the Kaurava defences like a spark of fire drilling a hole in a bundle of cotton. The Kaurava defences collapsed like an edifice constructed with a pack of cards.

Duryodhana went to Alambasa and said to him, “Unrivalled Warrior, look at Saubhadra, he seems to be more powerful than his father Arjuna. I request you to add a second feather to your cap, by making a short way of him. Nobody else is competent to do this work.”

Alambasa attacked Abhimanyu and the Pandava army with great fury, mustering his rakshasa forces. So great was the impact of his attack that the Pandava forces reeled under the attack and the soldiers fell on the battlefield like withered leaves from the trees blown by cyclonic gale. Abhimanyu hit Alambasa with a powerful shaft and he swooned on his chariot. The Pandava forces rallied round Abhimanyu and attacked the rakshasas. For a while, the soldiers in the vicinity belonging to both the opposite camps stopped their fight to witness the single combat between Alambasa and Abhimanyu. Both fought ferociously as if two dynamic mountains were dashing against each other. Abhimanyu wrecked the chariot of Alambasa who fled from the battlefield jumping to the ground, to the great delight of the Pandava forces who blew their horns in exultation and excitement. The Kaurava forces retreated helter-skelter in all directions.

Bhisma rushed to the spot, rallying the Kaurava forces around him. Arjuna who was observing the situation from a distance came to the aid of Abhimanyu. Kripa and Asvatthama joined Bhisma, Satyaki joined Arjuna. In the cumulative encounter, Kripa swooned hit by Satyaki. Asvatthama attacked Satyaki who broke his bow and hit him with innumerable shafts. Meanwhile, Drona arrived and attacked Satyaki. Arjuna attacked Drona. Duryodhana, the Trigartas, Salya and Bahlika joined Drona. Bhisma attacked Dharmaputra in another sector, while Bhurisrava and the twins were locked in fight in another front. The king of Kalinga and Bhagadatta fought with Bhima.

Yudhisthira overpowered by Bhisma shouted for relief. Bhima who was wounded by Bhagadatta rushed to the rescue of Dharmaputra, blood oozing from head to foot out of the wounds. He looked like a moving mango grove covered with tender leaves. Simultaneously, Dhrishtadyumna, Virata and Drupada arrived at the spot, along with Sikhandi. Bhisma who was allergic to the very presence of Sikhandi avoided him, hitting the other three warriors who were shining like the three primal fires. Sons of Draupadi, the Kekayas and the Yadavas rushed to attack Bhisma. Bahlika joined Bhisma. Bhima wrecked the chariot of Bahlika.

Dharmaputra who looked isolated a short while ago was saved and Bhisma had a tough time in fighting with many warriors

of the Pandava Camp. Duryodhana said to Duhsasana, "Bhisma is fighting bravely to-day; Yudhishthira escaped just by a hair-breadth. Now the generalissimo is surrounded by many warriors of the enemy camp. Sikhandi is there. You rush to his help along with Sakuni." Duhsasana and Sakuni, taking sixteen thousand horsemen with them joined Bhisma and attacked the Pandava forces.

Duryodhana did not like to take any chance and requested Salya to join Bhisma in the momentous fight. Drona, Kripa and Asvatthama likewise were requested to be there. Arjuna too arrived at the spot. Thus, almost all the illustrious warriors belonging to both the camps were concentrated at the same front. Both sides suffered severe losses.

Duhsasana and the other Kaurava warriors concentrated on Sikhandi and did not allow him to face Bhisma. Drona held Arjuna at bay. Bhima was countered by Kripa. Bhisma moved with lightning speed and killed the Pandava forces in thousands. The Pandava forces fled in panic.

Duryodhana felt happy at the performance of the generalissimo and wanted to press forward. The Pandavas were aghast. The deadly dance of the dreadful destroyer unnerved the warriors on the Pandava side, once again.

Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "On the third day, Bibhatsa, you have promised to defeat Bhisma; this is the ninth day, afternoon. Bhisma is moving on the battlefield like wild fire. Earlier, you told Sanjaya when he came to Upaplavya that you would not speak with your tongue but would answer with the Gandiva. You must rise to the occasion and put an end to Bhisma. If he continues to battle in this fashion, our entire army will be annihilated in a day or two."

Arjuna said, "Please drive the chariot. I will stem his advance." Sri Krishna drove the horses in galloping speed and Arjuna faced Bhisma. The Pandava forces, seeing the Hanuman flag, fluttering opposite the Palmyra standard rallied round Arjuna who hit Bhisma at several places and cut the string of his bow many a time. Bhisma, renewing the strings, hit Arjuna, his horses and his charioteer Sri Krishna. The horses, hit by the

powerful shafts of Bhishma turned their faces backward and Sri Krishna found it hard to control them. He said to Arjuna, in angry irritation, "You are not able to protect your horses and the charioteer. How can I expect you to slay Bhishma? I will kill Bhishma here and now." So saying, Sri Krishna placed the reins on his seat and jumped down to the ground holding the whip in his hand, and advanced towards Bhishma's chariot.

Bhishma hanged his bow over his shoulder and said to Sri Krishna with folded hands, "Almighty, Lord of the Universe, my hearty welcome to you. I feel exceptionally honoured. Come, chop off my head. My hearty welcome. My heart is already heavy with the promiscuous slaughter. I am in need of redemption.

"Yasoda has seen you as the embodiment of pristine purity and childish innocence. The Pandavas have seen you as their friend, philosopher and guide. It is my unique privilege to see you in all your blazing brilliance with your curly hair dancing on your comely forehead, your white lovely lotus eyes suddenly changing into the crimson colour, your silken robes sliding over your broad shoulders and chest as lightning flashes across the clouded skies. What a beautiful sight! I am blessed. What more do I want?" So saying, Bhishma went into a trance and stood like a marble statue.

Meanwhile, Arjuna came running after Sri Krishna and overtook him. He fell at his feet and requested him to resume his seat, saying, "Madhava, I will do your bidding. Have mercy on me. Please do not slight me publicly." Arjuna caught hold of Sri Krishna and tried to pull him back. But Sri Krishna freed himself from the clutches of Arjuna and dashed forward. The Kaurava forces cried aloud in tumultuous noise "Bhishma is dead, Bhishma is dead." However, Arjuna with a strong grip of his hands, took Sri Krishna back to the chariot and said to him, "Achyuta, did you forget your vow not to fight. I request you to excuse me. I will do your bidding." Sri Krishna took his seat on the chariot and held the reins. Arjuna ascended the chariot along with Sri Krishna. With Arjuna and Sri Krishna on the board, the chariot looked like the double peaked mount Gauri Sankar.

Bhishma resumed the fight and killed the Panchala forces like a giant trampling on the little ants under his feet, while terror-

stricken warriors on the Pandava side were helpless spectators. For the first time in the war, Bhimasena stood staring at the carnage wrought by Bhishma in bewildered silence.

The sun set mercifully for the Pandavas and the hostilities ceased for the day.

At the sunset, Yudhisthira looked at his distressed forces which were badly mauled by Bhishma and they appeared like a docile cow steeped in deep mud.

Duryodhana was overjoyed and felt that victory was within his easy reach, and repaired to his residence together with his brothers and allies praising the performance of Bhishma.

99

The Secret Meeting

Yudhisthira, after the night fall went to Sri Krishna's residence together with his brothers, deeply distressed at the outcome of the day's battle. Sri Krishna said to Yudhisthira, "I am expecting you here and you have come." Yudhisthira said to Sri Krishna, "You are an eyewitness to the havoc wrought by Bhishma to-day. What is the use of courting complete annihilation. I think it is better to go back to the forest. I feel I am the sinner that embarked on this war. Can you kindly suggest any honourable way out, short of complete surrender?"

Sri Krishna said, "You cannot back out now. Even if you go back to the forest, Duryodhana will pursue you. To-day I would have killed Bhishma, but for Arjuna. In this one day, Bhishma has massacred more than half the Panchala forces, not to speak of his other exploits. If you do not think otherwise, I will take up arms to-morrow and put an end to Bhishma."

Dharmaputra intervened and said "Krishna, I do not want that you should break your vow. The remedy, you suggest, is worse than the disease. All of us then will become the laughing stock of the world."

Sri Krishna replied, "Then Arjuna must act with determination." Arjuna said, "Janardana, I will do your bidding. Please give your verdict."

Sri Krishna said, "Yudhisthira. Bhishma asked you to meet him at the appropriate time. I think this is the time. Let us go. I know that you are resourceful enough to win over your grandfather to your side."

The Pandavas together with Sri Krishna went to Bhishma in their simplest dresses and met him confidentially, bowing to his feet. Bhishma embraced everyone and enquired after their health individually by name. Yudhisthira said to Bhishma, "Grandsire, you have asked me to come at the opportune moment. I have come. You have blessed us with victory. It is for you to make it true. We have tried our level best to defeat you. It is proved beyond the shadow of least doubt that nobody, including Arjuna can defeat you in the battle."

Bhishma mused aloud, "True. True. It is also true that I wish you victory. Nobody can kill me as long as I wield the bow. I do not fight Sikhandi, in accordance with my vow, as he is a semi-woman." Yudhisthira interrupted him, and said, "You are too strong even unarmed for Sikhandi; his arrows cannot pierce your armour. The Kaurava heroes do not give quarter to Sikhandi at all."

Bhishma exclaimed, "Dharmaputra, you want that I should say it with my mouth. I will say then. I am fed up with this wicked violence. I feel that the gods and my colleagues in heaven are inviting me to them. Let Arjuna use Sikhandi as a live rampart. Before I bid you good-bye, let me add my last wish. Please do not hesitate; it is twice blessed; it blesseth you and it blesseth me. I want to be at last rid of these mortal shackles. Follow Lord Krishna and He will lay the royal road to victory for you."

The Pandavas and Sri Krishna took leave of Bhishma and returned to their camp. Arjuna said, "How can I kill the great warrior and my grandsire unjustly taking unfair advantage. What is this irony? If we were prepared for injustice and unrighteousness, we could have begun this war thirteen years ago."

"It is for you to choose" said Krishna to Arjuna, "you promised to do my bidding. I ask you to do it as a soldier with determination and discipline."

Arjuna replied with folded hands, "Sri Krishna, I will do your bidding as your humble devotee." Yudhishthira embraced Arjuna. The Pandavas went to bed with heavy hearts; grim determination and heavy responsibility, however lulled them to sound sleep.

So Sri Krishna repaired to his residence looking forward to the momentous dawn, hoping that it would herald a turning point in the historic war.

100

The Great War—The Tenth Day

The Pandavas were ready for the battle well before the dawn on the tenth day of the war.

Sikhandi was accorded the pride of place and he stood at the centre. On his right side was Arjuna. Bhima was on his left side. Behind them was Abhimanyu, Chekitana and Satyaki. Yudhishthira was at the rear flanked on both sides by Dhrishtadyumna and Virata.

Bhisma stood at the centre of the Kaurava forces, flanked on both the sides by Drona and Kripa. Duryodhana was in the middle together with Kritavarma and Bhagadatta. The rest occupied the rear.

As usual, exactly at the sunrise, the two armies charged against each other with fury. There was terrible carnage on both sides. The Pandava forces fought with extraordinary fervour.

Sikhandi opposed Bhisma and attacked him enthusiastically. He hit Bhisma with shafts and said, "Stop, why do you bypass me. You are a great warrior, famed in life and legend. We are told that you conquered the great Rama of the axe. But I will defeat you to-day." Bhisma replied, "Miss Sikhandini, when you aim your arrows at me, I cannot help laughing; I do not get angry, I enjoy the fun; I am not provoked to fight" Sikhandi was offended and replied, "Why all these silly excuses? Fight if you can." So saying, he hit Bhisma five times. Arjuna was surprised at the audacity of

Sikhandi and wondered, within himself musing, "Perhaps coming events cast their shadows before. Sikhandi never before exhibited so much enthusiasm. He is to-day very eager for a frontal encounter with Bhishma. This is a good augury."

Arjuna said to Sikhandi, "My hearty congratulations to you for attacking Bhishma so boldly. But, people will laugh at us if we do not match action with the words we uttered."

Bhishma turned away from Sikhandi. Duryodhana met him and said, "Great Warrior, yesterday you excelled yourself. To-day we must bag victory again." Bhishma replied, "I am old; I feel weary. I promised to kill everyday ten thousand soldiers of the enemy camp. I feel I have redeemed my promise as well as my debt to you. You are all young and the future belongs to you. Anyway, to-day I will fight as well. This is my promise. Either the Pandavas should be defeated decisively or I should die." Duryodhana rejoiced at the words of Bhishma, without grasping the implications, between the lines.

Bhishma roared like a lion and attacked the Pandava forces, killing countless soldiers. He advanced on the Panchala forces like the smokeless fire. Arjuna exhorted Sikhandi, "You must be true to your word to-day. Bhishma has attacked your father and brother. It is time for you to attack. I will follow behind you and will protect you from all eventualities."

Dhrishtadyumna ordered a wholesale counter-attack on Bhishma. The Matsyas and the Kekayas, the Pandyas and the Panchalas attacked Bhishma in the ferocious onslaught, blowing the bugles and conches. Satyaki and Chekitana, Dhrishtaketu and Kekaya enclosed Bhishma. On the Kaurava side, Bhurisrava and Bahlika, Kritavarma and Kripa joined Bhishma, together with Duhsasana and his brothers. Duhsasana attacked Sikhandi. Arjuna hit Duhsasana with a powerful shaft and he swooned on his chariot.

The Pandavas, in order to divert the attention from Bhishma attacked the Kaurava warriors individually. Thus Satyaki and Bhagadatta, Alambasa and Ghatotkacha, Abhimanyu and Sudakshina, Virata and Asvatthama, Sahadeva and Kripa, Bhimasena

and Bhurisrava, Chekitana and Chitrasena, Yudhishthira and Drona were locked in single combats.

Duhsasana regained consciousness and attacked Sikhandi, but Arjuna intervened and fought with Duhsasana, who after giving a stiff fight fled from the battlefield.

Drona sensed the strategy of the Pandavas and directed Asvatthama to join Bhishma. He said, "To-day I find extraordinary glow in the faces of the Pandavas. Even the twins are to-day very exuberant. There is a concerted drive against Bhishma. To-day I am not in my form. My hand is reeling and my whole body is aching. I want you to go and guard Bhishma. In Yudhishthira's face, ardent anguish is replaced by aggressive anger, to-day. Smiles are twinkling in Sri Krishna's eyes. This seems to be a fateful day for the Kauravas."

Bhishma fought bravely, killing elephants and wrecking the chariots, defeating the warriors and driving away cumulative attackers till the midnoon. Yudhishthira instructed Dhrishtadyumna not to relent but to increase the tempo of attack. When Asvatthama arrived at the spot, Abhimanyu engaged him in a fierce duel. Bhagadatta also came to the scene, but Arjuna shot incessant shafts against his elephant Supratika, which fled taking a right-about-turn. Bhagadatta attacked the Panchala army, going to another sector of the battlefield.

Sikhandi, came to the forefront and hit Bhishma five times. Bhishma was enraged, wanted to retaliate but controlled his anger and mused within himself, "How long should I be a party to this cruel carnage? I have redeemed my debt to the King. I gave word of honour to the Pandavas yesternight in the presence of Sri Krishna. I blessed them with victory. It is time for me to renounce all this violence and seek peace." While a cyclone was raging in the mind of Bhishma, who looked exhausted, Satanika the brother of Virata attacked him suddenly. Bhishma was offended and reacted like a wounded serpent. He wrecked Satanika's chariot, killed the charioteer and the horses and cut off his head shooting several shafts in quick succession.

Sikhandi again hit Bhishma with five shafts; but they could not pierce his armour. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "Why this

dilly-dallying? Sooner or later, you must hit the grandsire in accordance with your professed word. Better you discharge your duty sooner than later."

Immediately, Arjuna encouraged Sikhandi to shoot at Bhisma and Arjuna too shot powerful shafts under the cover of Sikhandi. Bhisma put his bow down on the chariot and was preparing to get down. Sikhandi and Arjuna shot showers of shafts at Bhisma. Dhrishtadyumna and other warriors, the Panchala soldiers shot several arrows at him. Bhisma's whole body was covered with shafts.

Bhisma told Duhsasana, "You see, these are the arrows shot by Arjuna and certainly not by Sikhandi, who is a novice. I am quite conversant with the shafts of the ambidexter, their pace and pitch, strength and swiftness and I can easily distinguish them from those of Sikhandi." So saying, Bhisma fell from his chariot leaning on the arrows which formed into a bed of spikes for the brave warrior.

Immediately, all the warriors of both the camps gathered around Bhisma to pay their tribute of honour to the greatest soldier of the times, observing a de facto truce. Dharmaputra ordered that his troops should not indulge in rejoicing; and blowing of conches and bugles etc., was prohibited. All the warriors stood to attention in lines around Bhisma, in solemn silence.

Duhsasana went to Drona at the instance of Duryodhana and conveyed to him the news of Bhisma's fall. Drona swooned for a while and after regaining full consciousness came to Bhisma.

Bhisma thanked all the warriors who came to him to pay their last respects. He said, "The bed of arrows is the worthiest for a warrior. I have it, but I need a pillow." At once Duryodhana sent his brother Duhsasana to fetch good pillows made of softest silk and cotton. But Bhisma declined them with thanks and looked at Arjuna who immediately shot four arrows to the ground, providing a pillow of arrows to the grand sire.

Bhisma asked for fresh water. He said, "I am weary and exhausted, and I am thirsty." When fresh water was brought to

him by Duryodhana in a golden jug, he declined it and again looked at Arjuna who shot an arrow deep down into the bowels of the earth chanting prayers. A fresh fountain sprang up, to the surprise of the spectators, water falling into the mouth of the grand sire.

Bhisma thanked Arjuna and said to him, "Sages have told me that you are the re-incarnation of the divine sage Nara, the great friend of Narayana, who is born on the earth as Sri Krishna." He turned to Duryodhana and said, "I advise you to make peace with the Pandavas even now. Then my martyrdom will not be in vain." Duryodhana was silent. At the sunset, the warriors departed taking leave of Bhisma.

Bhisma told the departing warriors, "The sun is in the southern hemisphere and I will live till he crosses the winter solstice and turns north. Meanwhile, warriors who may be alive may meet me."

The Pandavas and the Kauravas stayed on till the nightfall. Meanwhile, physicians and surgeons arrived at the instance of Duryodhana and offered to render medical aid and surgical treatment. Bhisma refused all medical attention and sent them away bestowing precious presents on them.

Duryodhana made all arrangements according to the protocol of the times for guarding Bhisma round the clock. Watchmen were posted along with civilian officers to attend on Bhisma. Musicians and dancers, scholars and savants were arranged in groups for his recreation and rest. Suitable lighting arrangements were made.

After the nightfall, Bhisma asked the Kauravas and the Pandavas to go to their encampments.

Duryodhana and his brothers repaired to their residences with tears in their eyes, plodding their way with the help of flaming torches.

Yudhisthira and his brothers bowed to Bhisma's feet and returned to their camps followed by Sri Krishna.

After they reached their camp, Sri Krishna congratulated Yudhisthira saying, "Dharmaputra, you have conquered Bhisma,

the invincible hero of our times. Righteous hero, you have proved that in the long run, right is mightier than might." Yudhisthira replied, "you are the real architect of our victory and we are your devotees."

101

Karna and Bhishma

After all the warriors went away taking leave of Bhishma, Karna came to Bhishma alone on foot, in simple mourning dress and bowed to him washing his feet with his warm tears. Bhishma asked the watchmen to keep themselves at a distance for the while and hugged Karna to his chest with the only hand he could move in a semi-embrace as a gesture of his goodwill and affection. Karna in accordance with traditional protocol introduced himself, saying, "I am Radheya. I have come to offer my most sincere obeisance and respectful salutations to you and I request that you may be gracious enough to accept my humble homage." Bhishma replied, "Son of Surya, you are not a Radheya.¹ You are a Kaunteya. You are not an ordinary mortal. I could always discern the divine halo around your head and your bravery and brilliance are superhuman. I know I underrated you. I committed that mistake intentionally with a selfless design to discourage Duryodhana and avert this cruel carnage, dreadful destruction, meaningless massacre, demonic devastation, brutal bloodshed and horrid holocaust compendiously called war. The apparent anger I evinced against you, was indeed only the obverse of my admiration.

"I am aged enough to know what war is. You have seen the outcome. Even now, I advise you to make peace with the Pandavas. They are invincible. Sri Krishna is on their side."

Karna replied, "Great soul, I have come to know already that I am the son of Kunti; still I am proud to call myself, the son of Radha. I know that the Pandavas are mighty warriors; I have the greatest regard for Yudhisthira's righteous character and conduct. I know that the divine Krishna is on their side; still I consider

(1) Radheya means literally the son of Radha and Kaunteya means the son of Kunti.

that it is my duty to lay down my life for the sake of Duryodhana. I must be true to my salt. True, I was born to Kunti; true, the Pandavas will receive me with open arms; true, that I may be crowned emperor of India, if I were to cross the floor. But I will not leave Duryodhana. Duryodhana is determined to fight and I will sail or sink with him.

“If you are pleased to accord permission I will fight with the Pandavas with all the earnestness at my command to procure the victory for Duryodhana. I will attack Sri Krishna and Arjuna to the acclamation of the whole warrior-world. I crave your indulgence and pray for your blessings.”

Bhishma replied, “Great Warrior, I admire you and you have my hearty blessings. I give you my whole-hearted consent to fight for Duryodhana.

“Unrivalled hero, your history will be studied by the generations to come with admiration and amazement.

“Your name will be a synonym for self-sacrifice and your exemplary conduct will inspire future poets to sublime summits of song and sentiment all over the world.”

Karna replied, “Noble hero, I am inspired by your great words.”

Karna again bowed to Bhishma and took leave of him.

In the biography of Karna, there are three confidential meetings which he had, with Kunti, Krishna and Bhishma, from which he acquitted himself creditably. These three form the most memorable and momentous amongst the many interesting and inspiring episodes of the Mahabharata.

DRONA PARVA

102

The Great War—The Eleventh Day

After the fall of Bhishma, as the poet described, the Kaurava army looked like a herd of sheep without the shepherd; like a woman without the husband, like a deer confronted with a wolf, and like the scorched earth devoid of crops.

On the eleventh day, the Kaurava army marched to the battlefield in mournful solemnity. The thoughts of everybody instinctively turned towards Karna, who abstained from the fight all those ten days. "Invite Karna to conquer the Pandavas" was the slogan heard everywhere. They recalled Karna's challenge to Bhishma—"If you conquer the Pandavas, I will retire to the forest as a recluse; If you fall, I will fight and conquer the Pandavas. I do not fight under your command." After the fall of Bhishma, Karna was expected to join the fight. Karna came to the battlefield, followed by his sons and soldiers, resplendent like the rising sun. The battered armies of the Kauravas looked upon Karna as the prospective saviour in the same way as the shipwrecked regard an island on the high seas.

Duryodhana along with the armies extended a warm welcome to Karna, who embraced him and proclaimed, "All these days, the great warrior, Bhishma as the Commander-in-Chief of the Kaurava army has rendered commendable service to our cause and acquitted himself most creditably, and wrought dreadful damage to the enemy. Let us complete the work which the great hero has begun. On my part, I will kill Arjuna and conquer the Pandavas. Otherwise, I will go to heaven. Let us do or die." Karna was cheered lustily; The inspired soldiers blew their horns and beat their kettledrums.

Karna asked his charioteer to hoist the elephant standard on his chariot. As soon as the flag was hoisted, he bowed to Duryodhana and ascended the chariot and blew his conch. Immediately, thousands of conches were blown by the Kaurava warriors in joy and excitement and there was unprecedented enthusiasm in the Kaurava camp.

Karna went to Bhishma in his chariot accompanied by his friends and followers. He descended from the chariot at a distance and went to him on foot and bowed to the grand old warrior, wetting his feet with his tears. He said in the usual traditional style, "Great Warrior, I am Radheya, I have come to offer my humble homage to you and crave your pardon in public. Unrivalled hero, no mortal can ever equal you in valour in this world. The Pandavas are no doubt great heroes. But you rendered them helpless, and made Krishna jump down from his seat twice in utter anguish. Noblest of the heroes, I have come to seek your blessings; with your benediction I go to conquer the enemies." Bhishma replied, "Great Warrior, you are a born hero, and a brave soldier. You have conquered the Amlosta, Videhá and Paundra lands single-handed; you have proved that friendship is the noblest of all sentiments in this world superior to the bonds of blood relationship. Duryodhana's greatest asset in his life is his friendship with you.

"You are thrice blessed; you are blessed in your birth. You are blessed in your official ties; you are blessed in your private life; you have distributed your affluence to the needy and nobody ever went away from you disappointed; your name will go down in the annals of our country as the greatest and noblest donor ever to walk on this planet, in flesh and blood. Great hero, May you be the architect of Duryodhana's victory."

Karna took leave of Bhishma, bowing to his feet and returned to the battlefield.

The chariot of Karna, with the dazzling elephant standard drawn by crimson studs decorated with golden jewellery and jade was conspicuous by its presence on the battlefield for the first time.

Duryodhana came to Karna and said, "Great Warrior, our armies were commanded by Bhishma, universally acclaimed as the greatest hero of our times. Now I request you to suggest the name of a suitable warrior who can step into his shoes. I leave the choice to you."

Karna replied, "King of Kings, amongst your generals everybody is competent to hold the post of the generalissimo. All

are accomplished and seasoned warriors. However, it is not possible for all of them to be Commanders-in-Chief simultaneously. Drona, the senior most amongst the veteran warriors, I feel, will be the fittest choice. By age and ability, wisdom and valour, Drona will be the ideal generalissimo. If he is appointed, nobody will grudge and nobody will feel bypassed and aggrieved. A brahmin by birth, an acknowledged preceptor of the bow by universal choice, acclaimed as the most outstanding warrior by friend and foe alike, I feel, Drona will be the correct choice."

Duryodhana followed by Karna and other leaders approached Drona and said, "Great Preceptor, by character or capacity, age or ability, valour or wisdom you are the stalwart amongst us. Gangeya was always telling us that you excel him in every way. We have unanimously decided to request you to be our generalissimo and lead us to victory."

103

The Preceptor's Promise

Drona was pleased with Duryodhana for offering him the post of the Commander-in-chief. He did not conceal his joy. However he said, "I have studied the Vedas and the Vedangas; but destiny has made me the so-called preceptor of the bow. I cannot vouchsafe for my valour or your victory. But I will do my best, I will try to lead the Kaurava armies with discipline and decorum, and defeat the Pandava armies with your co-operation."

Duryodhana anointed Drona as the generalissimo amidst the chanting of the Vedic hymns, blowing of horns and beating of the kettledrums. The priests poured the sacred waters of the holy rivers over his head. Conches and clarions were blown and trumpets were sounded. The Vandis and Magadhas recited the traditional homages.

Drona who was elated at the honour done to him, said to Duryodhana, "King of Kings, I am pleased with your conduct, sense of sobriety, correct perspective and propriety. Ask any boon, I will give it." Drona's words were a pleasant surprise for Duryodhana. He conferred with Duhsasana and Karna and said to

Drona, "Master of the bow, I thank you for your gracious gesture. As a noble teacher, you love the Pandavas and I do not ask you to kill them. The boon I solicit from you is to take Dharmaputra as a prisoner and hand him over to me alive."

It was a pleasant surprise for Drona as well. He said "Yudhisthira richly deserves the title of Ajatasatru. His worst enemy has not asked for his head but wished him to be taken captive alive. Alright, I will give you the boon on one condition. If Arjuna frustrates me in my attempt, I cannot help it. If you can draw Arjuna away to another sector from Yudhisthira, I will capture him alive and hand him over to you. Anyway, let me know what you propose to do then, as a prisoner of war cannot be put to death."

Duryodhana said, "I hope to persuade him to a fresh game of dice." Drona had a hearty laugh.

Duryodhana arranged drummers to broadcast the vow of Drona, that he would take Dharmaputra captive, amongst the soldiers and gave it wide publicity. The Kaurava army received the announcement with great enthusiasm blowing their conches and clarions and indulging in lion-roars.

Duryodhana was an able administrator and a shrewd strategist. He could win over Salya to his side, and tried in his own way to neutralise the Yadavas and succeeded in his efforts to a remarkable extent. Sri Krishna's army and Kritavarma were fighting on his side, Balarama went on a pilgrimage. A good administrator is not necessarily the ablest amongst his colleagues. The best administrator is one who puts the abilities of his colleagues to their optimum use and extracts the best from them. He knew that Bhishma would not kill the Pandavas. However, Duryodhana extracted the best out of a bad bargain, like a true administrator. Karna is prepared to lay down his life for his sake. Duryodhana knew that Drona would not kill the Pandavas. He also knew of his superlative abilities as a bowman. So, he planned for optimum utilisation of his services and extracted the coveted promise. Duryodhana collected eleven divisions whereas the Pandavas could collect only seven divisions. It is human nature to back or bet on the winning horse. Duryodhana was considered by a

majority of his contemporaries as a prospective conqueror, though Bhishma or Drona entertained no illusions about his victory.

Yudhisthira came to know of the vow of the Kaurava generalissimo, preceptor Drona, through his spies and held consultations with Arjuna and other leaders. They decided to guard Dharmaputra carefully. Arjuna said to Yudhisthira, "We provide suitable protection to you. Even otherwise you can defend yourself. It is not such an easy proposition to take you prisoner; first they have to defeat you, next all of us. Then our vast army is there. Not Drona, not even the gods can do it. Let there be no fear at all." Dharmaputra was delighted at the words of Arjuna. The warriors blew their conches and indulged in lion-roars.

Dhrishtadyumna arrayed the Pandava forces in the heron formation. Arjuna, with his dazzling Hanuman standard fluttering over his chariot stood at the beak. Dhrishtadyumna and Bhima formed the right and left wings. Other warriors were stationed at the appropriate places.

The Kaurava armies were formed into the "Cart" array. Saindhava supported by the Kalingas stood at the centre. The cavalry supported by the elephants was at the forefront. Drona flanked on either side by Duryodhana and Duhsasana stood in the middle. Karna with his Anga forces stood at the fore front. The battle on the eleventh day started with the head-on collision of both the forces. As usual the battle was fierce and both sides sustained very heavy losses.

Drona, who was naturally eager to cut a good figure on the first day of his generalissimoship, indulged in indiscriminate slaughter of the Pandava forces; he destroyed the elephant divisions; killed the cavalry units, wrecked the chariots and slayed the soldiers in thousands. He looked like the incarnation of the infernal god of death, on earth.

In other sectors, there were many single combats, involving Sakuni and Sahadeva, Bhurisrava and Dhrishtadyumna, Vivimsati and Bhima, Chekitana and Vinda, Alambasa and Ghatotkacha, Dhrishtaketu and Kripa, Satyaki and Kritavarma, Karna and Virata, Drupada and Bhagadatta, Abhimanyu and Saindhava.

Sakuni wrecked the chariot of Sahadeva who jumped down from the chariot with the mace in his hand and advanced towards the former. Sakuni fled from the battlefield in haste to save his life. Similarly, Saindhava also fled from the battlefield, defeated by Abhimanyu.

Salya advanced on Abhimanyu holding the mace in his hand. Bhimasena intervened and asked Abhimanyu to step aside. Salya and Bhima clashed with each other with their maces in single combat, like two mountains, sprung to sudden animation. The warriors around, halted their fight for a while to witness the mace-battle between the two renowned experts. It was more or less an exhibition match, each trying to excel the other. The two maces clashed many a time in a second, emitting sparks of fire due to heat produced by friction and rhythmic sounds reverberating across the horizons. They fought for a pretty long time; it was a sight for angels to see and the epic poet described that the gods witnessed the fight from their helicopters. Eventually, both the gladiators swooned simultaneously. Kripa rushed to the spot and took Salya in his chariot. Bhima regained consciousness in due course. Nakula's son Satanika fought with Vrishasena, the son of Karna.

Meanwhile, Drona visited all the sectors of the battlefield going in a whirlwind tour and returned to attack Yudhisthira to fulfil his promise. He attacked and advanced on Yudhisthira like a tidal wave. Yudhisthira gave a stiff fight to Drona, who broke his bow and roared like a lion. Immediately Nakula and Virata, Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and Sikhandi attacked Drona to stem his advance. Drona hit Nakula five times, Virata nine times, and defeated Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna. Yugandhara attacked Drona in a furious bid and Drona made short work of him and his head rolled on the ground. Drupada and Virata advanced on Drona who repulsed their attacks and defeated them.

Vyaghradatta and Simhasena, two young warriors from the Pandava fold, dashed against Drona like twin meteors. However, Drona killed them shooting two swift crescent shafts severing their heads.

Sukumara, the Superintendent of Yudhisthira's chariot wheels attacked Drona who killed him on the spot.

Drona came very close to Yudhisthira and was ready to pounce upon him. There was tumultuous uproar and the Pandava forces raised a terrific hue and cry. They shouted, "Yudhisthira has been taken captive, Yudhisthira has been taken captive." The Kaurava armies blew their conches and clarions. Suddenly, Arjuna arrived at the spot, like the lightning flash. He immediately attacked Drona. The whole sky was covered with the shafts released by the master and the disciple obstructing the sunlight. The Kaurava warriors soon arrived to give support to their generalissimo. The sunset and darkness enveloped the battlefield. Hostilities ceased for the day.

Drona's bid to capture Yudhisthira was foiled by Arjuna at the nick of time, much to the disappointment of Duryodhana.

Drona explained to Duryodhana in the night, "King of Kings, when I gave you the promise to capture Dharmaputra alive, I had a premonition that Arjuna would foil my attempt; I told you so. He is a tough guy and he knows my ins and outs and being my own pupil can very easily anticipate my moves and checkmate them. If you can devise a sure way to distract him successfully and take him from the scene of my action, I will capture Yudhisthira."

Susarma, the leader of the Samsaptakas came out with an extraordinary offer. He said, "We will challenge Arjuna to a separate fight. We will fight to the bitter end and will not retreat. I promise to hold back Arjuna.

Duryodhana welcomed the offer and thanked Susarma profusely. Susarma organised the Samsaptaka hordes as a suicide squad. They lighted a sacrificial fire and vowed before it to fight Arjuna without retreating from the battlefield. They knew fully well that they could not defeat Arjuna; however, a vow was a vow, soaked in despair and determination. They offered oblations to their souls in the fire in advance and put on sacrificial robes and donned round red marks on their foreheads drawing their own blood with their swords.

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The Great War—The Twelfth Day

On the twelfth day of the battle, the Kaurava and the Pandava forces reached the battlefield before the sunrise.

The Samsaptaka suicide squads reiterated their solemn vows in the presence of Duryodhana and the Kaurava armies to kill Arjuna or be killed by him. They chanted—"Victory or Valiant Death". Susarma their leader, his brothers Satyavrata, Satyakarma and Satyavarma administered the oaths to ten thousand chariot-warriors and their followers. They were lustily cheered by the Tunda - Kerala - Malava - Silandhra - Magadha and Macchillika forces who promised to emulate their example. The Narayanagopa soldiers, who were harbouring a grouse against Arjuna for rejecting them, loudly supported the Samsaptakas. They marched to the Southern sector which signifies the abode of the god of death. Susarma, their leader, challenged Arjuna to fight with them.

Arjuna said to Yudhisthira, "I have to accept the challenge posed by the Samsaptakas. Please permit me to go." Yudhisthira replied, "Beloved brother, you know that the preceptor has vowed to capture me alive. You know his unrivalled eminence in the art of war and unrelenting resolve. We know that he is a master of major moves as well as minor details. It is upto you to come to a decision." Arjuna replied, "Great soul, Satyajit, the Panchala prince will guard you. Bhimasena and Satyaki will be watching you. I have no other go." Arjuna bowed to the feet of Dharmaputra and obtained his blessings. He asked Sri Krishna to drive the chariot to the southern sector.

Drona arrayed the Kaurava armies in the 'eagle' formation and stood at the beak. Duryodhana and his brothers formed the heads, Kripa and Kritavarma its eyes. The Sinhala, Abhira, Surasena and Kekaya forces were stationed at the neck. Bahlika and Bhurisrava, Somadatta and Salya occupied the right and left wings respectively. Asvatthama, Vinda, Anuvinda, Sakuni and others formed the belly. Bhagadatta, mounted on his Supratika, occupied the central zone.

Dhrishtadyumna arrayed the Pandava forces into the crescent formation. Yudhisthira told Dhrishtadyumna, "Great Warrior,

you have to guard me to-day carefully, from your rival generalissimo, the preceptor." Dhrishtadyumna assured him, "He cannot approach you to-day. We will repel him."

As usual, the two forces charged against each other at the sunrise with unprecedented ferocity. Dhrishtadyumna attacked Drona who considered the encounter as an inauspicious beginning. However, he hit Dhrishtadyumna thrice and bypassed him.

In the Southern sector, Arjuna pounced on the Samsaptakas like a hungry tiger jumping at the deer. The Samsaptakas had no illusions about their success but swarmed on Arjuna from all sides shooting arrows from all directions. The shafts and counter-shafts covered the sky like clouds and darkness engulfed the battlefield. The Gandiva rained death among the doomed Samsaptakas; but they continued the attack in utter desperation, intoxicated by their valiant vows. Arjuna hit Susarma and Subahu, Suratha and Sudhanva several times. When Sudhanva tried to hit Sri Krishna, Arjuna cut off his head with a crescent shaft. Sri Krishna drove the chariot with all his skill, sometimes in circular and semi-circular movements and sometimes in parabolic curves. At one point, Sri Krishna shouted aloud, "Savyasachi, I am not able to see you or the battlefield. I am driving the chariot rather by instinct. I want reassuring directions from you to drive the chariot, first respond that you are safe and still alive."

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "Safe—quite safe. Look at these Trigartas; they are bravely jumping to certain death like moths falling into the fire. "Madhava, your words are not mere enquiries addressed to me; I take it as encouragement. Drive on undaunted." Arjuna continued the merciless slaughter beating back the attackers. Susarma reminded the retreaters, "We have taken the most solemn vow not to flinch. Let us not become a laughing stock." The retreating Samsaptakas returned and renewed their attack on Arjuna who continued to cut their throats with swift shafts like a farmer cutting the corn.

In the northern sector, Drona advanced on the Pandava forces with relentless vigour. The old man appeared to have regained his youth and he looked like Kumarasvami, the mythological generalissimo of the gods. As Drona pressed forward to

reach Yudhisthira, Satyajit promptly attacked him ferociously. He broke the bow of the preceptor and hit him thrice. Meanwhile, another Panchala prince, Vrika charged against Drona who in a fit of anger wrecked the chariot of Satyajit and killed his horses. Satyajit got into another chariot and renewed the attack. Drona shot two simultaneous shafts, killing Vrika and breaking Satyajit's bow. Satyajit took another bow but before he could use it, Drona cut off his head with a swift shaft and blew his conch.

Meanwhile, the warriors of the Pandava army, Satyaki and Sikhandi, Yudhamanyu and Uttamauja, Dhrishtadyumna and Chekitana, Kshatradharma and Vasudana rallied round Yudhisthira. Drona fought with all the warriors simultaneously, establishing his undaunted supremacy. He held Dhrishtadyumna at bay hitting him thrice. Satyaki was hit five times. The rest were hit thrice or four times. Suryadatta, the brother of Virata rushed to the scene and attacked Drona in frenzy, but his head immediately rolled to the ground. It seemed as if there was nothing to prevent Drona from pouncing upon Yudhisthira, who sneaked to a safer place in the rear. But, the Pandava forces, in frenzied agony cried aloud, "Yudhisthira is caught" "Yudhisthira is caught".

Duryodhana was delighted at the performance of Drona and said to Karna, "Look at our generalissimo; he is on the verge of capturing Yudhisthira if he has not already done so. The Pandavas were never personally afraid of Bhishma. To-day, the preceptor has struck terror into them." Karna replied, "Let us go and support Drona before Bhima reaches the spot." While they were still discussing the matter, the Pandavas rallied together for a counter-attack on Drona.

Yudhisthira, with his crescent flag fluttering over his chariot, driven by grey horses, Bhima exhibiting the lion standard on his chariot, drawn by chestnut coloured steeds, Nakula hoisting the rhino flag drawn by green horses, Sahadeva with the baby elephant standard, together with Virata and Drupada counter-attacked Drona who appeared like a mountain peak covered by dark clouds.

Duryodhana and Karna rallied to the support of Drona, together with Kritavarma, Saindhava, Duhsasana, Chitravarma,

Salya, Bahlika, Vinda, Anuvinda, Vivimsati and Salya. Bhurisrava, Alambasa, Kripa and other Kaurava warriors joined the fray. Abhimanyu, the sons of Draupadi and other warriors of Pandava side as well joined the fight. Duryodhana led the elephant division against Bhima supported by the ruler of Vanga.

Bhima, who delighted in fighting the elephant hordes, killed many elephants and hurled a missile on Duryodhana with terrific force and roared like a lion firmly believing that it would hit him. However, the ruler of Vanga came in between them and he fell dead together with his elephant, thus saving Duryodhana's life. Warriors on both sides blew their conches, one side extolling Bhima's performance and the other rejoicing over Duryodhana's lucky escape.

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Supratika

Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha charged against Bhima, riding his elephant Supratika, the most renowned war elephant of the times. The very name of Supratika struck terror into the hearts of the enemies. Bhagadatta, at the time of the Mahabharata war was a pretty old man. His face was wreathed in wrinkles and his drooping eye-lids obstructed his vision. So he used to tie thin folds over his forehead with a silken kerchief so that they might not block his sight.

The gigantic animal, especially trained for war and experienced in innumerable battles rushed towards Bhimasena's chariot, and lifted it into the sky with its trunk and dashed it against the ground. Bhimasena jumped to the ground at the nick of time and sought safety by getting below the belly of the fierce beast. The elephant tried to catch Bhima by its trunk; but he managed to stick to its under regions with extraordinary manipulation. He was an expert in elephant psychology and he was biding for time to come out choosing a safe moment. Supratika wanted to crush Bhimasena under its belly and knelt down. However, he crawled to safety and remained clutching its legs. As Bhima disappeared from sight, the Pandava army raised a big hue and cry. The shouts "Bhima is crushed" rent the sky.

Yudhisthira was overwhelmed with grief and asked the King of Dasarna, who was reputed for his elephant divisions, to lead a counter-attack on Supratika. He charged against Supratika on his elephant. But Supratika pounced on the Dasarna elephant with its tusks and within a few seconds the elephant and its rider, the ruler of Dasarna fell dead on the battlefield. However, Bhima escaped to safety taking advantage of Supratika's preoccupation with the onslaught on its rival. The Pandava forces cheered Bhimasena in exultation, seeing him alive.

Satyaki attacked Bhagadatta. But Supratika seized his chariot and lifted it up and tossed it in the air. He jumped from his chariot and ran away. Supratika moved forward, wrecking the chariots, killing the cavalry and trampling the infantry under its feet. When the warriors of the Pandava army hurled missiles at it, Supratika's fury increased and Bhagadatta goaded it to greater devastation.

The Pandava forces retreated in disorder. Meanwhile, Bhima resumed the fight, equipping himself with a new chariot. However, Supratika lifted up its trunk and blew out blood and bones on the horses. The charioteer could not control the horses and they galloped away in fright.

Bhagadatta roared like a lion and Supratika trumpeted in exultant fury. The dust raised by the retreating elephants and the fleeing forces in the northern sector rose to the skies.

Arjuna who looked at the sky and heard the trumpeting of the elephants realised that it was the havoc wrought by Supratika and asked Sri Krishna to drive the chariot to the northern sector. He feared imminent danger to Yudhisthira. But Susarma and the Trigartas followed his chariot, challenging him again and again. They hurled two powerful javelins, one at Arjuna and the other at Sri Krishna. Arjuna cut them to pieces and Sri Krishna drove the chariot to the north with galloping speed.

The Pandava armies, seeing Arjuna arrive on the spot rallied round him. Bhagadatta attacked Arjuna, goading the Supratika. It was a fierce double edged drive. The illustrious rider as well as the impervious elephant attacked the enemy with unrivalled ferocity. Bhagadatta was a seasoned warrior and hurled fourteen missiles

at Arjuna in quick succession. But Arjuna cut them to pieces and punctured Supratika's iron armour. Enraged, Bhagadatta threw a javelin at Sri Krishna, but Arjuna met it with a counter-shaft on its way, and shot a powerful shaft at the elephant, piercing its forehead.

Bhagadatta goaded the elephant to attack Arjuna's chariot, but the wounded beast refused to move, its head reeling under the injury. Bhagadatta took the golden goad which he used for driving the elephant and induced into it the Vaishnava missile and threw it at Arjuna with terrific force. Seeing the missile burning like a meteor, the Pandava forces cried in consternation, "Krishna and Arjuna perished," "Krishna and Arjuna perished." Sri Krishna with a calm smile lightning up his lips, stood up on his seat and presented himself as the target. The missile, to the utter amazement of all the onlookers, descended gently over Sri Krishna's neck and adorned his chest as a golden garland.

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "You have humbled me by your action. You have vowed not to take part in actual warfare." Sri Krishna smiled and said, "Arjuna, this is the Vaishnava missile. It is irresistible. So I saved you. In fact, it has reached its rightful owner. Anyway, Bhagadatta is bewildered that his supreme weapon has become ineffective. This is the time to deal the death blow to the elephant as well as its rider."

Arjuna hit Supratika with a powerful shot and the great elephant fell dead on the ground. At once, Arjuna shot arrows at the silken kerchiefs and Bhagadatta was almost blindfolded. He threw a javelin at Arjuna who aimed two arrows, one hitting the javelin and the other Bhagadatta's neck. The renowned warrior too fell dead on the dead body of his famous elephant.

The Kaurava army, after the fall of Bhagadatta, fled in utter confusion and took shelter behind Drona. Duryodhana and Karna rallied the forces for a counter-attack on the Pandava army.

Dhrishtadyumna and other leaders rallied round Dharmaputra and stemmed the advance of Drona successfully, heartened by the death of Bhagadatta along with his elephant 'Supratika'.

Sanjaya said to Dhritarashtra, "Great King, any account of the great war rendered in empty words is bound to be insipid. It

was my privilege to be an eyewitness. Then consider what a unique historic opportunity it is, to be able to take part in it. The warriors who fall fighting on the brave battlefield are certainly blessed. In spite of the carnage and cruelty, violence and wickedness, bloodshed and brutality, there seems to be something sublime about the war." So saying, Sanjaya continued his narration, giving a detailed account of the war to Dhritarashtra.

The Samsaptakas came to Arjuna and again challenged him to the fight. They proclaimed, "Some of us are dead; we are not defeated." They shouted, "Shame to Arjuna if he does not accept the Samsaptaka challenge." Arjuna immediately asked Sri Krishna to drive the chariot to the southern zone and resumed the fight. At that juncture, the Narayana Gopas joined hands with Samsaptakas and charged against Arjuna and tried to ambush him. Arjuna hurled the divine missile given to him by Tvasta against them. The Narayana-Gopas were blown to pieces by the whirlwind released by the superhuman missile, which was gradually withdrawn by Arjuna.

In the northern sector, Bhima filled the gap, resulting from the absence of Arjuna. He attacked Bahlika. Duryodhana and Drona, Kripa and Karna rushed to the rescue of Bahlika.

Nila from the Pandava side attacked Drona who despatched him to the abode of the god of death with a quick shaft.

Dhrishtadyumna, supported by Abhimanyu and other warriors joined Bhima and attacked the Kauravas. Meanwhile, Arjuna returned from the southern sector and joined them. Soon Drona realised that it was a formidable combination and asked Karna to attack Arjuna. Soon Karna and Arjuna were locked in a single combat, for the first time in the Great War. The two renowned warriors fought with supermissiles. Karna hurled the fire missile against Arjuna who countered it with the rain missile. It was an equal combat and the indecisive battle continued for a long time to the delight of both the contending armies. After some time, three brothers of Karna attacked Arjuna fiercely and Arjuna made short work of them and they fell dead in the battlefield. Equally fierce battle raged between Satyaki and Asvatthama,

Sakuni and Sahadeva, Satanika and Srutavarma, Sikhandi and Vikarna, Srutasena and Salva, Subahu and Nakula, Yudhisthira and Salya.

The two armies fought till sunset, when the truce for the day was proclaimed.

Duryodhana and the Kaurava warriors repaired to their camps wading their way through darkening shadows, down cast with a sense of deepening dejection and damping despair.

The Pandavas returned to their residences in high spirits.

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The Great War—The Thirteenth Day

On the thirteenth day, early in the dawn, Duryodhana went to Drona and said to him, "Esteemed master of the bow, yesterday I expected you to capture Yudhisthira. Your partiality towards the Pandavas was responsible for not fulfilling the pledge. Actions of great people are perhaps inexplicable."

Dronacharya was offended by the base accusation of Duryodhana. Controlling his irritation he replied, "My dear Duryodhana, I am doing my best. Everything went off according to my plan yesterday and Yudhisthira was in my easy reach. Just at the nick of time, Arjuna intervened. There is a destiny that shapes our ends. Man proposes but God disposes. However, let us do our best to-day. You must somehow remove Arjuna from the scene of my action."

Again the Samsaptakas came forward to attack Arjuna with the suicidal frenzy. They challenged Arjuna. He accepted the challenge and Sri Krishna drove the chariot to the southern sector.

The Kaurava army was arrayed in the lotus formation. It was technically known as the "Padma Vyuha." It was in the shape of a vicious circle, and it was not easy to find the way out without the intricate professional knowledge and experience. There was only one entrance and the enigmatic exit was beyond puzzling criss-cross, blind-alleys and peremptory pathways. Drona

stationed himself at the entrance. Salya and Sakuni, Kripa and Kritavarma, Bhurisrava and Bahlika, Karna and Duryodhana were stationed at strategic points. It was an impregnable fortification, comprising of fighting personnel.

Yudhisthira told Abhimanyu, "Brave son, the preceptor has posed the most perplexing problem by arraying the Kaurava army in the yonder 'Padma Vyuha'. See, he is standing at the gate. This is the most formidable challenge of my life. Your worthy father and your illustrious uncle went to the southern sector to conquer the Samsaptakas. The generalissimo has vowed to capture me. You are our only hope in the absence of your father. Nobody here has any knowledge of this extraordinary array, devised by Dronacharya."

Abhimanyu, bubbling with youthful enthusiasm replied, "I should like to be the worthy son of a worthy father, and a matching nephew to my great maternal uncle, Sri Krishna. My father told me how to enter the array. But I am yet to be initiated into the intricacies of extrication and exit. However, I am going for breaking open the passage."

Bhima said, "That is quite enough. We will all enter the array in your wake to protect you. Who can stop us? When once you make the passage, we will break through and pound the whole army to pieces. The question of your coming out does not arise. Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi, Satyaki and Chekitana, so many of us will get in and give fight. These arrays are there to be broken and everyday we are doing it. It is for you to make the first dent and immediately we all will smash the fortification."

Dharmaputra said, "All our warriors tried their level best for the break through but failed miserably. Our prestige is at stake; they are cruel veterans of war; you are an urchin, your young wife is pregnant; you are the only son of your mother Subhadra; I am not able to convince my conscience to send you into the lotus array, knowing fully well that it is a tough job."

Abhimanyu told Yudhisthira, "Please don't worry. Drona cannot stop me." Turning to his charioteer, Sumitra, he said, "Dear friend, drive the chariot towards Drona" and blew his

conch. Bhima, Dhristadyumna and other warriors blew their conches and followed Abhimanyu.

Sumitra, the charioteer of Abhimanyu cautioned him saying, "Brave boy, you are rushing single-handed, inexperienced as you are, to attack experienced veterans like Drona and Karna. Beware."

Abhimanyu replied, "I have faced them many a time already. I am even confident that I can conquer Savyasachi and Sri Krishna, not to speak of Drona, Karna and Vikarna."

Abhimanyu charged against Drona like a forked lightning, on his chariot, displaying the dazzling 'Karnikara flower', on his flag. Drona told him, "This is an impregnable fortification. I will not allow you to enter it; in fact, Arjuna, Sri Krishna and his son Pradyumna are the only warriors who have the know-how to break through this lotus formation. Please go back." Abhimanyu replied with reckless shafts. Drona tried to caution the boy-hero but he fought with him fiercely and made a small cleavage. It was a small crack and not a crash. Drona held the formidable formation in tact in spite of the terrific onslaught made by Abhimanyu who forced his entry through the small breach, with a bang. He pushed forward with amazing vigour, killing elephants, destroying cavalry units and slaughtering infantry on his way.

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Saindhava Jayadratha

The Pandava warriors led by Bhima marched forward but suddenly Saindhava obstructed their way and closed the breach created by Abhimanyu, successfully. The Pandavas surged forward surrounding him from the three sides like the surging waves of the ocean but Saindhava stood like a rock and did not give way.

Saindhava's chariot drawn by the famous horses of his Sindhu country, displaying the brilliant boar standard, decorated with rare pearls, brocade diamonds and gold was conspicuous by its presence that day at the entrance of the lotus array. Saindhava Jayadratha took his seat on the chariot, and held the Pandavas at bay.

Yudhisthira cut his bow into two. Jayadratha calmly took another bow and renewed the fight with rare calmness and composure. He appeared as the very embodiment of self-confidence. He hit Satyaki thrice, Bhimasena eight times and Dhrishtadyumna twenty times. The Pandavas were expecting that Saindhava's unexpected brilliance to be a passing phase. But Saindhava wrecked the chariot of Bhima with reckless ease and shot scorching shafts at Yudhisthira piercing his armour. The Pandavas kept up their attack hoping that Saindhava would give away any minute.

Dhritarashtra exclaimed in admiration and amazement "Sanjaya, it is strange that Saindhava could hold the whole Pandava army at bay single-handed. I should like to know the real cause, if there is any, behind the incredible performance of Jayadratha." Sanjaya narrated the story of Saindhava's humiliation at the hands of the Pandavas when he abducted Draupadi and added, "Great King, your son-in-law subsequently performed penance and obtained a boon from Lord Siva that he would have the satisfaction of defeating the Pandavas with the exception of Arjuna on the battlefield on a single day."

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Abhimanyu

Abhimanyu, was unmindful of the untoward predicament of the Pandavas. He did not look back and continued his forward march and dashed towards Duryodhana like a hungry lion leaping on an elephant.

Immediately the Kaurava generalissimo raised his hand and shouted aloud, "Warriors, come, the son of Arjuna has attacked the King. Please rush to his rescue."

Kripa and Asvatthama, Kritavarma and Karna, Salya and Sakuni, Bhurisrava and Bahlika rushed to the rescue of Duryodhana and attacked Abhimanyu from all sides. He engaged them all in fierce battle, hitting them all several times. Meanwhile, Asmaka made a frontal attack on Abhimanyu who made short work of him and his head rolled down.

Abhimanyu hit Karna piercing his armour. Salya attacked Abhimanyu who wrecked his chariot and hit him hard with

powerful shafts. Salya swooned on his chariot. Abhimanyu blew his conch triumphantly. Salya's brother attacked Abhimanyu who cut off his two hands first and the head next with three shafts. Nobody could stem the advance of Abhimanyu who indulged in indiscriminate slaughter, undaunted by the combined attack of the Kaurava warriors. Drona said to Kripa, "Look at the son of Savyasachi, worthy son of the worthy father. He stands undaunted against the cumulative attack of the Kaurava warriors like an erupted volcano facing the rain. Can there be such a hero anywhere in the world?" Duryodhana was standing beside Kripa and he heard the remarks of Drona and said to Salya and Salva, Bahlika and Bhurisrava in an agonised voice, his face betraying a tragic smile of derision and despondency. "This presumptuous lad is able to continue his unabated carnage owing to our indulgent generalissimo. Drona has evidently a soft corner for him as well as for his father in his heart. Otherwise, he could not have moved forward an inch. It is time we stem his tide. Let us all surround him and put an end to his dance of deadly destruction."

Duhsasana said, "I will defeat him and put him to death in a single combat. If he dies, Arjuna will automatically collapse. Without Arjuna the Pandavas will collapse. Consequently we can surely pocket victory." Enunciating his oversimplified thesis, Duhsasana attacked Abhimanyu who was overjoyed to see him. He said to Duhsasana, Pseudo-hero, this is a battlefield; this is not the Kaurava Court where you humiliated Draupadi." So saying, Abhimanyu wrecked the chariot of Duhsasana, killed the horses and the charioteer and pierced his armour, hitting him with several shafts. Duhsasana swooned and Duryodhana took him into his chariot to render medical aid.

Karna attacked Abhimanyu at the instance of Duryodhana and gave a stiff fight to him for some time. However, Abhimanyu defeated Karna and drove him from the battlefield and blew his conch in exultation. Karna's brother attacked Abhimanyu only to lose his life. Afterwards Vrishasena fought with Abhimanyu and was defeated by the indefatigable hero.

Rukmaratha, the young son of Salya, in his blooming teens charged against Abhimanyu's chariot in desperate fury. Abhimanyu shot three simultaneous shafts, one cutting his right hand

holding the bow, the second cutting the left hand clutching the arrow and the third cutting off his head where his two eye brows twained together in the angry pose.

The next victim of the fury of Abhimanyu was prince Lakshmana, the son of Duryodhana. Lakshmana and Abhimanyu fought bravely for sometime locked in equal combat but Abhimanyu got the better of him and chopped off his head with a crescent shaft. Yasmantaka, the Magadha prince, the Kalingas and Nishadas, Brihadbala, the king of Kosala met their death at the hands of Abhimanyu.

Duhsasana's son rushed to the spot and hit Abhimanyu with three shafts, his charioteer with two and the horses with four. Abhimanyu told him, "You have seen the fate of your father." So saying he wrecked his chariot, killed the horses and the charioteer. Duhsasana's son quickly got into another chariot.

The King of Anga went to Drona and said, "Great generalissimo, Arjuna's son has humiliated everyone of us. Duryodhana is badly mauled. Duhsasana is under medical treatment. It is your duty now to save your army and retrieve the situation." Drona replied, "This is the vigour of the third generation. Arjuna has excelled me; Abhimanyu has excelled his father. Nobody can defeat him while he wields the bow. As he is a mere boy, he knows no fatigue. Someone must break his bow. Somebody else must kill his charioteer. Some other must wreck his chariot. A concerted drive only can defeat him."

All the Kaurava warriors surrounded Abhimanyu in a cumulative fight. Drona killed his horses. Kripa killed the charioteer. Karna broke his bow shooting an arrow from the rear. Salya and Asvatthama together wrecked his chariot.

Abhimanyu jumped from his chariot and stood on the ground holding his sword and shield. He wrought havoc with the Kaurava army, moving like an elephant in a lotus pond. His sword and shield were cut to pieces. Undaunted he took out the wheels of his chariot one by one and fought bravely hurling them against the enemy. Meanwhile, the son of Duhsasana attacked him with his mace and both fell down dead.

The Kaurava army blew their conches and cries of victory rent the sky. However, many good people in the Kaurava army shed tears silently.

Sanjaya told Dhritarashtra, "While the Kaurava warriors danced round the dead body of Abhimanyu, in exultation as the savage hunters do over their prey, Yuyutsu, your son cried aloud, "Shame to Kaurava soldiers. The heroic code is transgressed. You can revel to-day in wicked joy. But beware, you will reap the consequences to-morrow. This is not merely the death of Abhimanyu. The sacred code of martial honour is dead to-day on the holy field of Kurukshetra." So saying he threw his weapons on the battlefield and went away.

109

The Father's Grief

In the southern sector, the Samsaptakas gave the toughest fight to Arjuna and perished at his hands unflinchingly. After the conclusion of the day's battle, Arjuna and Sri Krishna started for their camps. Arjuna who looked weary after the strenuous battle said to Sri Krishna, "I do not know what happened to Dharmaputra. The Samsaptakas did not give me time even to think of him. Drona is a hard task-master. My mind is agitated. After the sunset, I did not hear the usual clarion sounds, the joyous bugles and the lion roars from our armies. Did you hear them?" Sri Krishna replied, "I did not, but we were preoccupied with the Samsaptakas. Anyway, let us first go to my camp and have the refreshing bath and put on fresh clothes and then go to Yudhisthira. He is perfectly safe." So saying, Sri Krishna drove the chariot swiftly to his camp.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna started for Yudhisthira's camp. Arjuna said, "Krishna, I find the route rather desolate. The soldiers, who are standing guard at the junctions, surprisingly, are not saluting me. The evening orchestra is dumb. The silence and stillness are intriguing." Sri Krishna told him, "Yudhisthira is safe. Your brothers are safe. As usual there must have been some minor

mishap. Yudhisthira, who is sentimental and sensitive might have ordered state mourning. Let us go inside and ascertain the truth."

Arjuna said, "Madhava, I heard that the preceptor had arranged the Kaurava armies in the lotus formation. Nobody else except Abhimanyu has the know-how to break it. I do not find Abhimanyu here to receive us." Sri Krishna tried to console him, "This is not your tent. This is Yudhisthira's encampment. Why should Abhimanyu be here?" Meanwhile, they heard Yudhisthira sobbing; he was crying aloud saying "O Abhimanyu, the greatest warrior of the world, you have defeated the mighty confederacy of great warriors. Cruel Death has snatched you away. You have humbled the masters of the bow, Drona, Karna and Kripa, Asvatthama and Salya; but cruel Death has snatched you away." Tears were rolling down his cheeks and he was losing his consciousness every now and then.

Arjuna listened to the sobbings of Yudhisthira overwhelmed with sorrow. He too wept like a child. After some time, Yudhisthira came to consciousness and wept bitterly embracing Arjuna. He said, "Arjuna, I sent Abhimanyu to break the lotus formation. I have murdered my own child with my own hands" and he cried aloud eulogising his bravery on the battlefield. Sri Krishna intervened, "Dharmaputra, there is nothing wrong in allotting that work to him. You are assigning duties to everybody. The ways of Destiny are verily mysterious." Arjuna asked Yudhisthira, "Why did he go alone? What about Bhima? What about Dhrishtadyumna? What about Satyaki and others? The whole thing is enigmatic, you could have disarrayed the lotus formation in time."

Yudhisthira replied, "True, it was exactly our plan. All of us followed Abhimanyu. Bhima and Satyaki, Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi, Chekitana and Virata, everybody was there. In fact I led the encounter. But all of a sudden Saindhava appeared on the scene as a bolt from the blue. Surprisingly, he held all of us at bay. We were expecting to break through every minute. Later, we learnt that he obtained a boon from Siva to defeat us on a single day. Unfortunately that happened to be to-day. Otherwise, we would have smashed the lotus formation within few minutes. Our plan was foiled by Saindhava Jayadratha."

110

The Vow

Arjuna's fury knew no bounds. Immediately he stood up and vowed, "I will kill Saindhava to-morrow before the sunset on the open battlefield. Let Drona obstruct or Duryodhana fight. Even if Lord Siva comes I do not spare him. If I cannot fulfil my vow, I will immolate myself in fire alongwith my Gandiva bow." There were tumultuous acclamation from the soldiers on watch duty. The whole atmosphere of mournful gloom was suddenly changed into militant challenge. The royal orchestra, hitherto silent, suddenly sprang to life and burst forth martial music. The military band played the marching song. Bhima blew his conch.

Sri Krishna told Yudhisthira, "Grieve not, great king, your brother will avenge the death of Abhimanyu and rout the Kaurava armies. You will have the first glimpses of victory to-morrow." Yudhishtira replied, "Sri Krishna, Saindhava may be slain to-morrow. But can I see the smiling face of Abhimanyu again in my life." So saying, Dharmaputra broke down. Medical aid was rendered to him and he regained consciousness. Sri Krishna said to Yudhisthira, "Great soul, you should not weep. If you sob, the whole army will be demoralised."

"Arjuna has taken upon himself the heaviest responsibility on account of his terrific oath. Of course, I am confident that he will be able to rise to the occasion and achieve the historic feat. You must inspire Arjuna and bless him." Immediately Yudhisthira stood up and said, "Abhimanyu has achieved immortal glory as one of the greatest heroes of history. His martyrdom is sure to inspire our warriors to scale new heights of heroism. My hearty congratulations to Arjuna on his bold stand."

Arjuna bowed to Yudhisthira's feet seeking his blessings. Dharmaputra said, "Savyasachi, you have my benediction. I wish you success."

Sri Krishna told Arjuna, "Great hero, you have embarked on an unprecedented venture which requires superhuman effort. Great achievements are wrought by silent prayer and penance. I advise you to go to your tent; take rest to-night in meditation and prayer. I will go to my sister to console her."

Sri Krishna went to see his sister, Subhadra. Panchali and Uttara were there already. They wept bitterly. Sri Krishna said, "Abhimanyu has become an immortal hero. As the proverb goes, those whom angels love, die young. You are the wife of a hero; you are the mother of a hero. You should not grieve. Anyway, everybody must vacate this world when the time comes. All mundane existence is a malignant curse and the mortal body is a prison. The virtuous soul is relieved earlier. Philosophically, one must rejoice over his early emancipation."

After consoling his sister, Sri Krishna returned to his residence. He knew what a great ordeal lay ahead to-morrow. Arjuna took the terrible vow on the spur of the moment overwhelmed by sorrow. He asked his charioteer Daruka to keep company with him as he could not get sleep. He was equally bereaved. His sister's grief tormented him.

Krishna said to Daruka, "The fate of the contending parties, hanging in the balance all the while, will be decided to-morrow. You must be ready with the chariot. Let our dear horses,—Saihya, Sugriva, Meghapuspaka and Valaha, be yoked to the chariot; hoist the eagle ensign. The equipment, my bow Sarnga, my mace, Kaumodaki etc, especially my discus must be kept ready for use. You must put on your armour and stand ready to start. If I blow my conch, Panchajanya, successively thrice, you must hurry up to me. I must be prepared for all eventualities. If Arjuna fails to fulfil his vow, I will swing into action. I will kill not only Saindhava, but Duryodhana and Drona, Karna and Kripa, Salya and Somadatta on the spot simultaneously."

Daruka replied, "Esteemed Sir, of course I will be ready; however, I hope such a contingency will never arise. Savyasachi is a seasoned hero, you are his charioteer. Janardana, you know that problems are not obstacles, but more often than not, they are rare opportunities for the optimum utilisation of latent potentialities. Any problem viewed from a distance is a dangerous tiger. If you tackle it with tact and talent it is a mild cow. After you solve it successfully, it is an obedient donkey to carry your load or luggage. It is good Arjuna is confronted with a real problem to-morrow. I wish you both success."

According to ancient Indian Polity, the charioteer is expected to be better accomplished than the warrior. If the warrior happened to be a king, the charioteer he enjoyed the status of a cabinet minister. The warrior treated his driver as a bosom friend. It was the duty of the driver to offer unsolicited advice to the warrior. The charioteer was of course a subordinate of the warrior but certainly not a slave.

Spies carried the news of Arjuna's vow to Duryodhana who summoned leaders to a conference. Saindhava Jayadratha trembled with fear and said, "Why should Arjuna vow to kill me. I am not the only culprit. In fact, I was far away from Abhimanyu. I have not done anything unjust. Still I am made a scapegoat. At the sacrificial altar, the lion is not killed; the elephant is not killed; but invariably it is a goat that is killed. Even the Gods prefer the massacre of the innocent weaklings. Better I go back to my kingdom leaving the battlefield. I wish to take leave of you."

Duryodhana, who was an astute and able administrator said to Saindhava, "Beloved brother-in-law, if you flee, Arjuna may leave you, but Bhima will certainly chase you and you will be killed before you cross the frontiers of Kurukshetra. However, if you choose to stay with us, there is a sure chance of your survival; Drona and Duhsasana, Kripa and Karna, Asvatthama and Salya, Bhurisrava and Bahlika will rally round you and protect you. It is not that easy for Arjuna or anybody else to conquer all these heroes within twelve hours. It is an impossibility. I give you my word of honour that we will all protect you. It is not merely your life that is at stake. Our prestige, our future, our victory and everything is at stake."

Saindhava said, "If Drona and Duryodhana, Kripa and Karna, Asvatthama and other warriors want me to be here, I will accept their word of honour. I request the generalissimo to enlighten me about the odds. I wish to know his assessment about myself and Arjuna."

Drona said, "Jayadratha and Arjuna, are my students. Both had the same coaching. Arjuna no doubt has improved himself by tireless striving. Anyway, Saindhava need not be afraid of Arjuna to-morrow. All of us are bound by honour to protect him. Anyway, nobody here is going to live for ever. It is only a question

of priorities. It applies not only to the Kauravas but also to the Pandavas and the Panchalas as well as the Yadavas.

“Cowards die many times before their death. The valiant die only once. Anyway, it is a more difficult task for Arjuna and the Pandavas. Many heads have to roll before they can spot out Saindhava whom we will place at the centre surrounded by our great warriors. I advise Saindhava to sail with us all.”

Saindhava proclaimed, “I am heartened by the sentiments expressed by Duryodhana and Dronacharya. I will stay. Let to-morrow be the fateful day for Arjuna.”

The Kaurava warriors blew their conches in acclamation. Bugles were blown and war preparations for the next day were started in right earnest.

111

The Great War—The Fourteenth Day

On the fourteenth day of the Great War, Yudhishthira woke up early in the dawn, bathed in holy waters, applied sandal paste to his body, wore new clothes and adorned himself with floral garlands. He came out of his house and offered prayers, worshipping the cows. He distributed gifts to learned brahmins and received their blessings. Afterwards, he occupied the golden throne in the assembly hall, opposite the elephant stables.

The chamberlain announced the arrival of Sri Krishna. Yudhishthira received him with a happy smile and offered him a seat beside him. As Sri Krishna took his seat, Bhima, Ghatotkacha, Nakula, Sahadeva, Drupada, Virata and other warriors came and took their seats, after the exchange of customary salutations. Sri Krishna asked Satyaki to sit along with him on his sofa.

Yudhishthira said to Sri Krishna, “You are our Pole-star; You are our saviour. Any fresh supplication to you is superfluous. In this great war, in the thick of the grim and gruesome battle to-day, we may forget you upset by the ebb and tide of warfare. Please do not forget us.” Sri Krishna smiled and said, “Your goodness is

matched by your cleverness. Now I am your most obedient servant and the charioteer of your brother."

Arjuna arrived as Sri Krishna finished the sentence and bowed to Yudhishthira who blessed him with success, embracing him heartily. Arjuna narrated the dream he had last night. He said, "I offered prayers to Siva, sitting on the holy grass—mat presented to me by Sri Krishna, whom I garlanded at the very outset. Lord Siva presented me with the Pasupata missile and blessed me with victory. I was amazed to find the same garland which I placed around the neck of Sri Krishna, adorning the chest of Siva who said to me, smiles twinkling in his eyes, "I am Sri Krishna, there is no difference between us if you look with your mind's eye." I am confident of success." Sri Krishna smiled profusely. The warriors blew their conches and the soldiers their bugles, horns and clarions.

The Pandava army reached the battlefield, before sunrise. Arjuna said to Satyaki, "Guarding Dharmaputra is as important as fulfilling my vow. Let us share the responsibilities. I will go to kill Jayadratha; you remain here to protect Yudhishthira; Bhima and Dhrishtadyumna will support you in warding off Drona's attack. The preceptor will be waiting like a wolf to-day to pounce upon Dharmaputra. I think he will be more interested to redeem his pledge than in the fate of Jayadratha. This is an unexpected opportunity, 'now or never' for him. Beware."

Drona arranged the Kaurava armies in a spectacular, three pronged array. Facing the Pandava armies was the car formation. Behind it, was the lotus array. In the rear a needle formation was contrived, stretching twelve miles from the lotus formation. Saindhava, surrounded by seasoned warriors like Kripa and Karna, Salya and Asvatthama, Bhurisrava and Vrishasena was stationed at the eye of the needle. A hundred thousand soldiers, twenty thousand cavalry and ten thousand Car-warriors formed the ring around the eye of the needle. Drona stood at the entrance of the cart formation. From the cart to the last point, the eye of the needle, it was a long distance and it was considered almost impossible for any chariot to cover the distance, winding through innumerable hurdles, before dusk.

Drona was dressed in white robes, with a spotless white turban, and white armour. His golden chariot drawn by crimson horses with its insignia of the sacrificial altar presented a sublime sight.

Arjuna blew his Devadatta and Sri Krishna his Panchajanya. Immediately, Durmarshana charged against Arjuna leading his elephant division. The Kauravas wanted to create a terrific first impression in the preliminary war of nerves. Durmarshana shouted aloud, "Where is Arjuna? Where is Arjuna? Why this inordinate delay? To-day we want to clinch the issue." Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "Look at this cheap propaganda stunt; he shall be the first casualty. We waive an auspicious beginning."

Sri Krishna drove through the elephant hordes under the cover of Savyasachi's bombardment of shafts. Elephants lay dead; soldiers retreated in disorder giving way to the chariot and Durmarshana fled from the battlefield for sweet life. However, Duhsasana attacked Arjuna, raining showers of arrows on him. Arjuna blew his Devadatta parrying the arrows of Duhsasana and hit him several times. It was impossible for Duhsasana to face the determined fury of Arjuna that day even for a few minutes. Duhsasana lost his chariot, the charioteer and the horses. He jumped from the chariot quickly and fled towards Drona, showing his back to the enemy. Arjuna cried aloud, "Duhsasana, Shame! Shame!" and hit him in the back with gentle shafts.

Arjuna asked Krishna to proceed swiftly to reach the destination, the place where Saindhava was stationed. The chariot started, the first hurdle was Drona who challenged Arjuna to fight. Arjuna sent bowing shafts to the feet of the preceptor in reverent military salutation. Drona said, "Great hero, it is unbecoming of you to bypass a challenging enemy; defeat me and then you can advance forward." Arjuna replied, "Venerable Master of the bow, you are not my enemy; you are my revered preceptor, you are more than my father; actually you are my God. I am a small chip of your great block. I must Worship you. How can I attack you? If you attack me you will be defeating yourself." Sri Krishna skilfully by-passed him; however Drona shot swift shafts at Arjuna menacingly. But very soon, the chariot galloped beyond the reach of Drona.

Kritavarma attacked Arjuna and hit him and Krishna with various shafts. Arjuna broke his bow. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "our destination is different, no dilly-dallying please" Arjuna wrecked the chariot of Kritavarma and hit him hard. Before the latter could recover, Sri Krishna moved the chariot forward.

Srutayudha rushed forward and charged against Arjuna, hitting him thrice. With a ready smile, Arjuna killed his charioteer and the horses. But, Srutayudha undaunted, jumped from the chariot and advanced towards Arjuna with the mace in his hand. It was a remarkable mace which was preserved as a family treasure. As the story goes, it was the gift of the God Varuna, who attached a condition to it. It would kill any enemy but if hurled against a non-combatant, it would recoil on the assailant himself. Srutayudha, who, in the heat of the battle, found Sri Krishna to be an easy target, hurled the mace at him. It hit Sri Krishna's chest, bounced back and killed Srutayudha himself.

After the death of Srutayudha, the king of Kambhoja, his valiant brothers Srutayu and Ayutayu assailed Arjuna. Soldiers of Surasena, Sibi and Vasati regions surrounded him. Srutayu hurled a spear against Arjuna and it hit him in the chest. Arjuna was shocked and leaned on the flagstaff for a while. The Kaurava armies blew their conches and clarions in exhilaration. Sri Krishna exhorted Arjuna, not to mind minor mishaps and retaliate fiercely.

Srutayu hurled a mace at Sri Krishna but Arjuna parried it on the way. With another powerful shaft, he hit at Srutayu whose head rolled on the ground.

Thus, Arjuna defeating, Durmarshana and Duhsasana, bypassing Drona and Kritavarma, killing Srutayudha, Srutayu and others crossed the cart formation victoriously and headed towards Saindhava Jayadratha, the chief target of the day.

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Duryodhana's Discomfiture

Duryodhana went to Drona in a fit of frenzied fury and said, "Great generalissimo; you asked Saindhava, who wanted to go

away to Sindhu, to stay and fight with us, promising full protection.

“You have allowed Arjuna’s entrance into our array even without a fight. You are stabbing us in the back treacherously. I have come to remind you of your duty to save Saindhava from death. If Partha fulfils his vow and slays Saindhava today, verily, is the beginning of our end.”

Drona smiled and replied, “Duryodhana, I am not offended at your outburst at all. You are to me just like my own son Asvatthama. Please listen, I have no regrets and I need not apologise. Arjuna anyway cannot be contained by me. It is a tactical advantage to us to entice him deep into our array and then entangle him. Now you see, he is entrapped and cannot return back to the rescue of Yudhisthira.

“Let me tell you, I am very particular about my pledge to you. To-day I will capture Dharmaputra. Satyaki and Bhima are guarding him. I think they will try to join Arjuna if you give stiff fight to him. Then I will pounce upon Yudhisthira, at the nick of the moment.

“Meanwhile I am giving you this coat of armour with my benediction and blessings. As long as you wear this, you are invincible. Go and fight with Arjuna. I want you to get the credit of saving Saindhava Jayadratha.

“Anyway Saindhava is safe, protected by Kripa and Karna, Bhurisrava and Bahlika.

I know your valour. It is nearing noon and Arjuna has not yet covered one third of the distance. You must stop him. If I leave my post of duty here, Dhristadyumna and Satyaki, Bhima and Sikhandi, Virata and Drupada will break our array. If I am here I can hold them all at bay. My dear son, this is my strategy: You can save Saindhava and I can capture Yudhisthira.”

Duryodhana was convinced. Immediately, he rushed to Arjuna and challenged him to a single combat. He said to Arjuna, “Renowned warrior, I have come to test your ability, as well as the so-called discernity of Sri Krishna. You have embarked on your suicidal vow. I will not allow you to reach Saindhava.” So saying,

he rained a shower of arrows on Arjuna, who parried them all, with counter-shafts. It was an equal combat for some time.

Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "It is strange that your arrows are not able to pierce his armour. Is the string of Gandiva lost its tension? Or did you lose the usual strength of your shoulder. This is a rare opportunity for you. Defeat him and drive him out quickly. To-day time is most precious."

Arjuna smiled and replied, "Duryodhana is wearing the special coat of armour designed by Drona. No shaft can pierce it. However, I know the counter secret." So saying, Arjuna began to hit at the uncovered parts of the body of Duryodhana with penetrating precision. Blood oozed out of his wounds profusely. Arjuna taking advantage of his predicament, wrecked his chariot, killed the charioteer and the horses. Asvatthama took him away in his chariot.

Sri Krishna blew his conch Panchajanya in exultation.

Yudhisthira, who heard the sound of Panchajanya, unaccompanied by that of Devadatta was tormented by worries. He said to Satyaki, "Great Warrior, I see clouds of dust reaching the sky in the rear of the Kaurava forces. I did not hear the twang of the Gandiva. Instead, I hear the sound of Panchajanya. I want you to go to the rescue of Arjuna. You are more than a brother to him."

Satyaki replied, "Noble soul, Arjuna is not in danger. I need not go to his rescue. I am prepared to lay down my life for him if needed. How can I leave you?" However, Dharmaputra insisted that Satyaki should go. Satyaki asked his charioteer to refresh himself and yoke new horses to his chariot. He bathed and drank his favourite brand of wine. He bowed to Dharmaputra and said, "I am going fully prepared. I seek your blessings." Yudhisthira blessed him. Satyaki asked Bhima to guard Dharmaputra.

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Satyaki and Bhurisrava

The first hurdle Satyaki faced was, of course, Dronacharya who was fighting with Dhrishtadyumna. They were fighting for a

long time. It was rather a hide and seek. Drona turned his attention to Satyaki and said, "I do not allow you to get in; first fight with me." Satyaki said, "I am going to the rescue of Arjuna at the instance of Dharmaputra, who was worried about the safety of his brother, as he did not hear the twang of the Gandiva for a long while. In fact I do not want to go. Arjuna asked me to guard Dharmaputra." Drona was waiting for this opportunity. Meanwhile, Satyaki's charioteer bypassed Drona skilfully. The preceptor, exclaimed, "Oh, you are following the same tactics of your preceptor Arjuna. "However, Drona chased him for a while till Kritavarma attacked Satyaki.

Meanwhile, Bhimasena and Dhrishtadyumna, Drupada and Virata attacked Drona who returned back to fight with them. Kritavarma and Satyaki had old scores to settle and the two fought bitterly. Satyaki entered the field quite refreshed and after a fierce struggle he wrecked the chariot of Kritavarma, killed the charioteer and the horses. Satyaki advanced forward leaving Kritavarma. Drona sent a fresh chariot to Kritavarma. He wanted to pursue Satyaki but Sikhandi charged against him unexpectedly. Both were engaged in a single combat.

Satyaki's advance was stemmed by king Jalasandha, the ruler of Magadha. But, after a fierce fight, Satyaki killed him. Likewise, another king Sudarshana by name, challenged him to fight and he too met with the same fate as Jalasandha.

Duryodhana did not like Satyaki's swift advance and sent Duhsasana, Durmarshana and his other brothers to oppose Satyaki. However, Satyaki after a prolonged fight defeated them all and advanced towards Arjuna.

Arjuna successfully crossed the lotus formation and reached the needle point. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "Brave hero, you are not tired, but the horses are tired; they are not machines. They need rest; they are thirsty. It is past noon and we have a wearier time ahead. Let us drive to a nearby pond." Before Arjuna could reply, the brothers, Vinda and Anuvinda led a fierce assault on Arjuna at the instance of Duryodhana.

Arjuna fought with them, killing Vinda in the first instance. Anuvinda undaunted fought with Arjuna bravely for some time, but shared the fate of his brother, Vinda.

Arjuna asked Sri Krishna to unyoke the horses; he cleared a large plot of the battlefield and planted a fence of spikes with his arrows. He shot deep arrows into the bowels of the earth creating instantaneous fountains. Soon an artificial lake was formed. The horses drank and danced. Sri Krishna quenched his thirst, washed his face and congratulated Arjuna, asking him to refresh himself. He replied, "I will not drink water till I kill Saindhava. I am ready to start."

Sri Krishna said, "Great hero, rest is the secret of efficient work. Even from the view point of vested interest, the steed or the slave must be provided with rest and recreation. Better work and rest are blood brothers. Rest is the mother of rejuvenation."

While Sri Krishna and Arjuna were giving rest to the horses, fierce battles were raging all around. In one front Drona was fighting with Dhrishtadyumna, Virata and Drupada who were giving stiffest fight to the generalissimo in the absence of Arjuna, to stop him from capturing Dharmaputra.

In another sector, Ghatotkacha was locked up in a fierce fight with Alambasa who was directed by Duryodhana not to allow him to join hands with Arjuna. Both were pastmasters in the arts of illusion, black magic and trickery. Both the sides indulged in relentless cruelty till noon. Ghatotkacha and Alambasa continued the fight, with dogged tenacity.

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Bhurisrava

Satyaki waded his way through the battlefield fighting every inch. He killed many warriors and defeated many more. At last he reached the spot where Arjuna was engaged in forcing his way into the needle array. When he was in the visible distance of Arjuna, Bhurisrava, the Yadava hero challenged Satyaki to a single combat. Satyaki was weary after a restless and nerve-breaking march, but he accepted the challenge. Moreover they were

traditional foes. Both started to fight with frenzied fury. Soldiers in the vicinity stopped fighting to witness their duel. Both exchanged powerful shafts. It was an equal combat. Satyaki brought down the flag of Bhurisrava who retaliated by cutting down the flag-post of Satyaki. Both the chariots were wrecked, horses slain, and the charioteers killed by each other's shafts. Eventually, both the warriors jumped down from the wreckage wielding the sword and the shield. After a prolonged fight, Satyaki showed signs of exhaustion. Bhurisrava disarmed him and Satyaki fell on the ground. Bhurisrava, sat on his chest, saying, "You have come as if to save Arjuna, presumptuous fellow, who will save you now?" There was an uproar from the soldiers, who shouted, "Satyaki is dead; Satyaki is dead."

Sri Krishna who saw the plight of his brother Satyaki said to Arjuna, "See, Arjuna, Satyaki has come to you quite exhausted, risking his life. Now you must save him. Delay not, any wavering on your part, Satyaki is gone!"

Bhurisrava and Satyaki were involved in a single combat and it was against the accepted code of heroic conduct for Arjuna to interfere. When Arjuna looked at Satyaki, Bhurisrava finished his recrimination and lifted his right hand holding the sword for the final thrust. Arjuna shot a powerful crescent shaft at Bhurisrava and it cut off his right hand. The sword together with the hand rolled on the ground.

Bhurisrava looked around and could easily identify the source of the shaft which cut off his right hand. He said to Arjuna, "Can you hereafter call yourself a hero after your dastardly intervention which is against all canons of propriety. When you go home to-night, can you show your face to your noble brother Dharmaputra? Nobody who has real blue blood in his veins will ever stoop to such a heinous crime.

"I know you are incapable of this vicious sin. You must have been instigated by your charioteer, son of Vasudeva. Dharmaputra and you are not tired of proclaiming that you are waging this war for the sake of righteousness. You have already lost the war to-day even if you kill all the Kauravas together with their allies to-morrow."

So saying, Bhurisrava spread the arrows on the battlefield and sat on the mat of spikes in a meditative mood. The soldiers shouted "Hail Bhurisrava" and "Down down, Arjuna and down, down, Sri Krishna."

Arjuna explained to the shouting soldiers, "Dear comrades, I intervened when Bhurisrava was in the act of killing a disarmed warrior who ceased fighting and was lying prostrate on the ground. Satyaki came to lay down his life for me. It is my duty to protect him. If this is sin, I will gladly face any hell." He turned round to Bhurisrava and said, "Great soul, yesterday you did not prefer to deliver your lecture on righteousness and code of heroic honour to your compatriots who killed unarmed Abhimanyu, surrounding him like armed savages hunting a wild boar. Were you not a party to the crime? This is war and I have done my duty."

Bhurisrava drooped down his head and did not reply. Satyaki who regained his strength by the time, stood up and picked up the sword lying nearby and advanced on Bhurisrava. Sri Krishna and Arjuna rushed to the spot jumping from the chariot crying, "Stop, Stop." But propelled by impetuous passion and wicked vengeance, Satyaki struck off the head of the old warrior Bhurisrava. The Kaurava soldiers shouted, "Shame, Shame Satyaki, Shame, Shame, Arjuna, Shame, Shame Sri Krishna."

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "Janardana, I do not know whether what I have done is correct. All violence is wicked; War is violence. Can there be a righteous war anywhere in the world? Again and again I see the wisdom of Dharmaputra. We may start a righteous war but violence will degrade us into brutes. Look at the heckling. What is the use of victory?"

Sri Krishna replied, "Righteousness is an integral vision. If you take out a stray incident tearing it out of the context, you arrive at a perverse picture.

"Satyaki saved is Satyaki doubled. Righteousness is in dire need of his services.

"I am happy you have acted with decision and determination. You are now in your form. Time is running out; let us go."

Arjuna said, "Drive on. Let us reach our destination swiftly. I think we have so far successfully crossed all the hurdles." The chariot moved forward.

115

Bhima's Exploits

Sri Krishna blew his conch, Panchajanya thrice consecutively. That was the signal for Daruka to bring Sri Krishna's chariot. Satyaki who was rendered chariotless was standing on the bareground. Daruka was awaiting the signal. He reached the spot speedily with the chariot and Sri Krishna asked Satyaki to use his chariot. Satyaki ascended the chariot and an invincible glow twinkled in his eyes.

Dharmaputra too heard the repeated sound of Panchajanya and he said to Bhima, "My dear brother, I want you urgently to dash off to Arjuna's aid. I am worried. The Panchajanya is blowing like a siren. I feel it is an alarm signal from Sri Krishna. Sri Krishna, I fear, has taken up arms. I fear Arjuna is slain. My charioteer has just now told me that Daruka drove Sri Krishna's chariot straight to him. So go at once without arguing with me. I can defend myself. Even if I am captured to-day, you can fight for my release to-morrow. We cannot sacrifice Arjuna."

Bhima immediately started on his chariot to join Arjuna but he was stopped by Drona. He said, "Vrikodara, your brother Arjuna was allowed to go on compassionate grounds. A hero like you is expected to defeat the enemy and then advance forward. I do not like you to bypass me stealthily."

Bhima became very angry and said "Worst of the brahmans, I am not Arjuna to crawl and cringe before you. You are my enemy as per your own pronouncement. I accept the challenge." So saying, he hit the preceptor with three shafts. Drona enraged at the audacity of Bhima, broke his bow. Bhima immediately jumped from his chariot and walked swiftly to Drona; lifted the chariot up and threw it away. Drona too jumped to safety and his chariot, the charioteer and the horses were reduced to pieces. Bhima ascended his chariot and the charioteer triumphantly drove the chariot towards Arjuna.

Bhima continued his relentless advance. Duryodhana was aghast when he saw Bhimasena marching triumphantly; he asked his brothers to attack Bhima, and stem his advance. He said to them, "Now it is a life and death struggle for us. We cannot afford to allow Bhima to join hands with Satyaki and Arjuna. I do not know why Drona has allowed him into the array."

Duryodhana's brothers, Dussala, Chitrasena, Kundabhedhi, Vivimsati, Durmukha, Dussaha, Vikarna, Sala, Vinda, Anuvinda, Sumukha, Durgabahu, Sudarsana, Brindaraka, Suhasta, Susheshna, Durgalochana, Abhaya, Raudrakarma, Susarma, Durvimochana surrounded Bhima and attacked him from all sides. Bhimasena, then looked like an angry lion surrounded by deer. In the fight that ensued he killed Susarma and Sudarsana and defeated all the other brothers.

Karna who saw the plight of the princes, came to their rescue and assailed Bhimasena with powerful shafts. After a fiery fight, Bhima killed the charioteer of Karna, wrecked his chariot and killed the horses. Karna got into the chariot of Vrishasena and escaped from the fury of Bhimasena. Meanwhile, the Kaurava princes fought with Bhima. After some time, Karna returned to the battlefield equipped with a new chariot. Again Bhima defeated Karna, breaking his bow, killing his charioteer and the horses. Duryodhana, seeing the plight of Radheya sent his brothers Durjaya and others to his rescue. Bhima made short work of them and their heads rolled on the ground in the immediate presence of Karna. Karna standing on the bareground hurled a mace at Bhima who parried it with his shafts. Then Karna got into the chariot of Durjaya and rode away from the battlefield, while Bhimasena roared like a lion and blew his conch.

But the Kaurava princes continued the fight. Karna again returned to the battle-front equipped with a fresh chariot and charged on Bhima along with the Kaurava prince Durmarshana, Durmada, Dussaha, Vijay and Vichitra. But Bhima killed all the five princes and defeated Karna. Duryodhana sent his brothers Chitra, Vichitra, Chitraja, Charuchitra, Chitradhvaja, Chitrayudha and Chitrakarna to the aid of Karna but they met with the same fate.

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Humiliation of Bhima

Karna was grieved beyond measure at the death of so many Kaurava princes who came with the ostensible purpose of relieving him. He pulled himself up and gave stiff resistance to Bhima who was tired and looked exhausted. Duryodhana again sent his brothers, Satrunjaya, Satrusaha, Sudeha, Madana, Druma, Chit-rabahu and Vikarna to aid Karna. Bhima put them all to death. Bhima roared like a lion and blew his conch thrice.

Dharmaputra who heard the Simhanada of Bhimasena felt happy that it signified his success.

Bhima looked at the body of Vikarna and mused aloud shedding tears, "The life of a warrior is wretched. Vikarna, you are a noble-soul; you are a great exponent of righteousness. You are an impartial scholar. Still I am obliged to kill you."

Karna took advantage of Bhima's penitent mood and hit him hard. Bhima could not regain his lost form though he gave stiff resistance to Karna. Eventually, Radheya brought down the flag of Bhima and killed the horses of his chariot. Bhima jumped down from the chariot and began to hurl the dead bodies of elephants at Karna who parried them all. Eventually, Bhima stood on the battlefield staring at Karna, quite exhausted and gasping for breath. Karna said to Bhima, "Great Glutton, I do not kill you, an unarmed mass of flesh. You are unfit to be a warrior, go home and practice wrestling. This is war. Here the need is for brains which you do not possess. There the spinal chord is enough and that is the only thing you have. You can go. I leave you." Karna kept in mind the pledge he gave to Kunti, and did not kill Bhima.

Meanwhile Visoka, Bhima's charioteer came with the chariot yoked to new horses. Satyaki rushed to the spot and asked Bhima to go to Arjuna and challenged Karna to a single combat. Karna and Satyaki were locked in a single combat for sometime and fought with missiles. Karna, psychologically, was under the spell of the tragedy of the mass massacre of the Kaurava princes by Bhima. Satyaki, bubbling with enthusiasm, having wrecked vengeance on Bhurisrava, defeated Karna, wrecked his chariot and killed his charioteer together with the horses and blew his conch.

Bhima narrated the story of his humiliation to Arjuna who comforted him saying that he would kill Karna. Arjuna asked Sri Krishna to drive the chariot to Karna's spot and found him stranded on the ground chariotless. Arjuna said to Karna, "Son of Suta, I do not want to take unfair advantage now and fight with you. You ought not to have humiliated Bhima with harsh words. You forget that you were defeated many times at the hands of Bhima."

Duryodhana hurriedly came to the spot and gave a lift to Karna in his chariot.

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "The sky is clouded; let us seek out Saindhava before sunset. Sri Krishna drove the chariot to the "eye" of the needle formation where Saindhava was stationed. Kripa and Salya, Asvatthama confronted Arjuna raining showers of arrows at him. Bitter fight raged all around feverishly.

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Death of Saindhava

The sky was covered with clouds, dust and shafts and the visibility was poor. Everybody thought that the sun set. Sri Krishna said, "Arjuna, this is not sunset; finish your job." There was uproar in the Kaurava army and cries of "The sunset, The sunset" rent the sky. Saindhava was elated at the thought and peeped at the western horizon to make sure of the sunset. A powerful shaft from Gandiva took away his head into the sky. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna in excited tone, "Great Warrior, keep the head in the sky." Arjuna was tossing it continuously in the sky and asked Krishna "Please tell me how long shall I keep it in the sky." Sri Krishna said, "Use the Pasupata and see that it falls on the lap of his father who is offering his evening prayers in his hermitage in the nearby Syamanta Panchaka. I will tell you the story, afterwards." Arjuna did as directed, the severed head of Jayadratha fell on the lap of his father Vriddha Kshatra who was immersed in deep meditation. He pushed the head to the ground inadvertently. Instantaneously Vriddha Kshatra's head broke into pieces and he died."

Sri Krishna narrated the strange story to Arjuna. Vriddha Kshatra, the father of Jayadratha obtained a boon from Siva to the

effect that whosoever hurled the head of his son, Jayadratha on to the ground would suffer instantaneous death, his head crumbling into pieces. Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, "Madhava, this is a thrilling conclusion to a thrilling story. This is pleasant poetic justice."

Soon the clouds cleared away from this sky. The dust settled down. The sun was visible, shining in the western horizon crowning the clouds in the sky with golden splendour and Arjuna with sensational success on the earth.

Arjuna blew his Devadatta, Sri Krishna his Panchajanya and Bhima his Paundra. Yudhisthira who heard the triumphant sounds of the distinguished conches, blew his Anantavijaya in response, his heart bouncing with joy.

The Kaurava forces were bewildered to see the sun shining again and they ascribed Arjuna's success to Sri Krishna's divine prowess. They said, "Sri Krishna, a short while ago, covered the sun with his discus and created artificial twilight. Actually the sun is setting now."

However, the hostilities did not cease. The Pandava forces intoxicated with the spectacular success achieved by Arjuna, continued the attack and charged on Drona with unprecedented fury. The Kaurava forces rallied around Drona and retaliated with equal fury. The fierce battle raged unabated with the help of flaming torches even after darkness set in.

Sri Krishna and Arjuna went to Dharmaputra and bowed to him. He embraced them in acclamation. He said to Sri Krishna, "All this is due to your sweet solicitude for us. You are our friend and philosopher, guide as well as god. You are victory and you are with us." Likewise, Dharmaputra embraced Satyaki and Bhima with blood oozing out of their bodies, saying, "Oh, you have come adorned with new medals all over your bodies." He embraced Yudhamanyu and Uttamauja with especial warmth and complimented them saying "You are the real heroes of the day though you preferred to remain behind the curtain escaping limelight. You bore the brunt of the battle.

118

The Nocturnal Fight

Duryodhana went to Drona and said, "This nocturnal fight is forced upon us. You have allowed Arjuna first, and Satyaki next to make a dent into our array. Bhima wrought havoc, and killed so many of my brothers. It is my misfortune that you have chosen to remain a silent spectator. You have sacrificed Jayadratha at the altar of your partiality for the Pandavas."

Drona heaved a heavy sigh, and said, "King, this is not the time for recriminations. Bhima killed all the Kaurava princes in the very presence of Karna. This is war. It was clear how the wind was blowing even at the time of the fall of Bhishma.

"I accepted this assignment though I knew that Arjuna and Sri Krishna were invincible. Why all this wicked violence for a brahmin like me but for you? Anyway, I vow not to take off my armour till I exterminate the Panchalas." Duryodhana said, "Great Warrior, please excuse me if I have offended you. I am quite pleased with your promise; that is enough. Karna will attack the Pandavas."

Drona drove towards the Panchalas. Duryodhana went to Karna and narrated his verbal encounter with the preceptor. Karna said to him, "There is no use of blaming the preceptor. We have seen Arjuna in action. It is not easy to beat him. Fate was against Saindhava. Please forget about him; come let us attack the Pandavas."

Drona attacked the Panchalas and killed their elephants, cavalry and infantry mercilessly. The Kekayas rushed to their relief along with the Matsyas. But Drona killed Sibi, the Kekayas and the sons of Dhrishtadyumna and continued his dance of destruction.

In another sector, Bhima pounced on the Kaurava princes and killed many of them including Durmada and Duskarna.

Somadatta attacked Satyaki to avenge the death of Bhurisrava; Duryodhana supported Somadatta leading a cavalry unit.

Dhrishtadyumna joined Satyaki. Eventually, Satyaki killed Somadatta and blew his conch in triumphant exultation.

Asvatthama fiercely attacked Satyaki who was tired and exhausted. Immediately Ghatotkacha arrived on the spot and asking Satyaki to step aside assailed Asvatthama. In the bitter fight that ensued, Asvatthama wrecked the chariot of Ghatotkacha who got into the chariot of Dhrishtadyumna. Meanwhile Anjanaparva, the son of Ghatotkacha, charged on Asvatthama but was killed by him.

Ghatotkacha returned to the battlefield in a fresh chariot. Enraged at the death of his dear son, he rained death and destruction on the Kaurava forces. It was estimated that the Kaurava forces annihilated by the rakshasa on that day equalled to one full akshauhini.

Duryodhana sent Alambasa to attack Ghatotkacha and his hordes. But Ghatotkacha defeated and killed Alambasa, completely destroying his forces.

In another sector bitter fighting raged between Bahlika and Bhima. The old warrior attacked Bhima like a wounded tiger most ferociously. Eventually, Bahlika was slain by Bhima.

Duryodhana was grieved at the reverses his army was suffering one after another. He spoke to Karna, "This is the time for you to mount the counter-attack on the Pandavas. Kripa and Asvatthama will assist you."

Karna said, "Don't worry, I will fight with the Pandavas single-handed."

Kripa was pricked. He said "Karna, enough of your bravados. We have seen your prowess at the northern battle for the cattle on Virata's territory. Earlier have I not seen your valour when Duryodhana was taken prisoner by the Gandharvas? Why do you brag"?

Karna was offended and drew his sword and said, "You brahmin, black-sheep, I will cut off your tongue." Asvatthama was offended at the affront to his uncle and he joined issue with Karna drawing his sword at him. Immediately Duryodhana stood between the two and said, "My hopes are centred on you, your

father, Kripa, Karna and Salya. Are we not helping the enemy indirectly if we fight amongst us? For my sake you must be friends." Kripa said, "Karna, I treat you as my friend sincerely for the sake of my king Duryodhana." Karna said, "I am starting to attack the Pandavas" and rose. Kripa, Asvatthama and others followed him.

Dharmaputra saw Karna leading the attack. He said to Sri Krishna, "Look at Karna. He is coming as if the sun has arisen at midnight." Sri Krishna told Dharmaputra, "Kripa, Asvatthama and Salya are supporting Karna. It is a formidable combination. They seem to be a determined lot. As this is night time, better send Ghatotkacha against them. The rakshasas gain strength during the night." Yudhisthira summoned Ghatotkacha and told him, "Our army is battered all the day and is reeling under the attack of Karna and other Kaurava warriors. We now look to you to lead the attack on them." Ghatotkacha replied, "I will smash the Kaurava hordes; please bless me." Yudhisthira blessed him and Ghatotkacha charged against Karna fiercely. He wrecked their chariots, killed their charioteers and horses. Elephants and cavalry perished every minute by thousands.

The Kaurava forces began to retreat in utter confusion, scattered like clouds blown by a hurricane. The soldiers came to Karna crying aloud, "Karna, save our souls." Duryodhana came to Karna and said "Dear friend, we must first escape from utter destruction. Hurl the "Shakti" missile given by Indra at Ghatotkacha. We can think of Arjuna afterwards."

Karna shot the Shakti missile at Ghatotkacha who fell dead on the field. The Kaurava forces blew their conches and indulged in Simhanadas crying aloud "Hail Maharathi Karna, Hail Maharathi Karna."

Bhima and Yudhisthira were plunged in grief. Arjuna consoled Bhima saying, "Yudhisthira was never for war. We see his wisdom now. We opted for war. Let us put up with it."

Sri Krishna afterwards said to Arjuna, "In fact, my only worry is relieved now. I was always worried that Karna would hurl Indra's missile at you."

“Karna lost his natural armour long ago to Indra and Indra’s missile to-day. Now you are saved. Sisupala, Jarasandha and Ekalavya are not available, otherwise Duryodhana would have enlisted them. Then nobody could have defeated them.”

Arjuna was aghast at the analysis of Sri Krishna. He mused, “Men are pawns in the hands of fate.”

In another sector Drona fulfilled his pledge. He killed Drupada and Virata in a prolonged fight though they gave stiff resistance to him and inflicted crushing defeat on Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi.

Sahadeva attacked Karna in the wake of Ghatotkacha’s death. But Karna defeated Sahadeva wrecking his chariot. Karna said to him, recollecting his promise to Kunti “Young lad, go to Arjuna and tell him that I spared your life.”

Arjuna went into the battlefield, and shouted aloud, “I propose truce. Let us resume the fight to-morrow early in the morning as usual.” Both sides greeted the announcement with cheers and the fighting stopped. However, the combatants slept on the battlefield, warriors on their chariots and elephants and the infantry on the bareground, unmindful of the dead bodies, blood and bones.

In the words of the epic poet, “Sleep is the universal sweet-heart eagerly embraced by everybody.”

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The Great War—The Fifteenth Day

On the fifteenth day of the great war, the two armies resumed the fight at the sunrise. There were fierce encounters between Duryodhana and Nakula, Duhsasana and Sahadeva, Drona and Arjuna. Bhima was engaged in cumulative fight with the Kaurava princes. The fight continued upto noon.

Drona and Arjuna fought using divine missiles for a long time, and the single combat was a treat for others to see. It was an indecisive fight. Sri Krishna exhorted Arjuna to clinch the issue.

Arjuna said, "Madhava, he is my preceptor who is more than a god to me. I cannot shoot to kill. I can fight in self-defence only."

Drona turned his attention on the Pandava forces and the whole battlefield was soon littered with dead bodies of elephants, horses, soldiers and wreckage of chariots. Yudhisthira followed by Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva approached Sri Krishna and said, "Destroyer of the demons, look at Drona; he has killed Drupada and Virata and is now in full swing. Who can stem his advance? Arjuna is suffering from sentimentality."

Sri Krishna replied, "You have caught the point. Even if Arjuna, let us be frank, wants to finish him, Drona will not die as long as he wields the bow in his hand. I will give you a clue. His inordinate love for Asvatthama whom he wanted to bring up as a prince is the root cause for the great brahman to take to arms early in his life. If you tell him that his most beloved son 'Asvatthama is dead' he will lose all interest in life. He cannot outlive the shock for a minute."

Arjuna said "I am unequal to the task." Yudhisthira said, "I feel it is unjust and unbecoming of me." Sri Krishna added, "Yudhisthira, you can sacrifice one life to save thousands and thousands of lives. Please think over the matter. Otherwise, you will be responsible for total annihilation of your army."

Bhima said in exultation "Madhava, I have just now killed an elephant named "Asvatthama" belonging to the Kalinga battalion. I will go and tell the preceptor "Asvatthama is dead." This is an excellent ruse."

Bhima dashed towards Drona and said "Great brahmin, your attention please; I am extremely sorry to report to you that I have killed Asvatthama." Drona dropped his bow involuntarily, from his hands. He said musing aloud, "I do not believe it." Bhima reiterating, said, "Believe it or not, great preceptor, I think it is my duty to convey the news to you. I have in fact done the most unpleasant duty."

Greatly agitated, Drona said, "I have lived to hear the most terrible news."

Bhima continued, "Great preceptor, brahmins are expected to be kind hearted. You preach that non-violence is the highest ideal. But you practise brutal violence.

"Revered sire, you know justice is on our side; yet you are fighting on the side of injustice.

"If Bhishma and you refused to take part on the side of unrighteousness, Duryodhana would not have embarked on this war. Life is very dear to old people and they cling to life unlike the young who dare to die. Abhimanyu died; Asvatthama died. Bhishma does not die. You don't die. You want to kill us who are like your own children."

Drona was pricked. He dashed to Dharmaputra and said, "Great soul, you are an embodiment of Truth and never utter a lie even for the sovereignty of the three worlds. Please tell me whether my son Asvatthama died."

Dharmaputra was placed on the horns of a terrible dilemma. He was tossed between the ideal of truth and the temptation of success. He said, in a loud tone "Died Asvatthama" and added in a low pitch, "the elephant". At the instance of Sri Krishna, the Pandava armies blew their bugles and conches immediately after Yudhishthira uttered the first part of the sentence, "Died Asvatthama" and the next part, "the elephant"—was actually drowned in the tumultuous noise.

Dharmaputra's chariot which was moving always four inches above the ground because of his idealism and righteousness, suddenly touched the earth as soon as he uttered the untruth. Dharmaputra who was quite distinct from other mortals and stood above mundane immorality and terrestrial temptations succumbed suddenly to surreptitious tactics for success in a weak moment. "The head of an establishment" Yudhishthira thought within himself, "must devour poison like Sankara." He shuddered to think of the consequences had he not uttered the untruth. Bhima would have been exposed to the wrath of Drona along with the whole Pandava army.

Drona was never happy with his role he was obliged to play in the great war. He recollected Bhima's words. He decided to

renounce the world and threw away all the weapons and sat on the floor of the chariot spreading the mat made of the sacred grass in the lotus-pose of a yogi. Soon he was immersed in transcendental meditation and mystic trance.

Dhrishtadyumna who was waiting for the opportunity like a wolf pounced upon the chariot and cut off the head of Drona to the consternation of all those around, amidst shouts of denunciation. A visible blaze of light emanated from the body of Drona and ascended to heaven.

Arjuna was distressed beyond measure and chided Dhrishtadyumna and Bhima. "I am sorry you have done the most heinous crime. Asvatthama will not tolerate this and will try to avenge the death of his father. Terrible retribution is ahead of us."

Bhima said, "Arjuna, you are forgetting that we have carried out the bidding of Sri Krishna. Moreover this is war. This is polity. Let us be prepared for all eventualities."

Dhrishtadyumna was more blunt. He told Arjuna, "Savyasachi, you need not quote scriptures to us. I have fulfilled my destiny as I am born to kill Drona. You have killed Bhishma, the grandsire by adopting questionable means. Bhagadatta, your father's companion was killed by you. Let me not speak about Bhurisrava. Anyway, Drona has deceived his disciples and joined the opposite camp. He is not even neutral. I have no regrets."

Satyaki was enraged at the words of Dhrishtadyumna. He said, "you are speaking nonsense. If you open your mouth I will cut off your tongue." Dhrishtadyumna and Satyaki crossed swords. Bhima rushed to them and separated the two."

Sahadeva said to both, "Dear comrades-at-arms, you are our saviours. For the sake of Dharmaputra, you both must work united. The enemy is not yet defeated." Yudhisthira and Sri Krishna pacified the two warriors.

Asvatthama who learnt about the dismal subterfuge played on his father was enraged beyond measure. In a fit of uncontrollable vengeance, he hurled the "Narayana Astra", the supreme missile at the Pandava army as a burning ball of revolving fire. Everybody

was aghast, Sri Krishna said, "Dear comrades-at-arms, this is an unassailable supra-missile. However, it does not harm non-combatants. Please get down your vehicles and lay down your arms." The whole Pandava army laid down the arms. Arjuna and Sri Krishna got down from the chariot and stood bare footed on the ground. But Bhima alone stuck to his arms and did not descend from the chariot. He said, "What a naive remedy! If we lay down our arms with hands up, it is acknowledging our defeat. It is derogatory. I can't do it." Sri Krishna cried aloud, "We must stoop to conquer; get down." Soon the fire engulfed Bhima's chariot. Bhima hurled the rain missile at it. But it proved ineffective and hot vapour enveloped the battlefield. Sri Krishna and Arjuna rushed to Bhima and got him down the chariot by force. Bhima too stood on the ground unarmed and he was saved.

Sri Krishna explained, "Defeat and death are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. Thus we are able to render this omnifatal missile futile."

Duryodhana congratulated Asvatthama hilariously and asked him to renew the missile.

Asvatthama replied, "I am helpless. This omnifatal missile if used a second time will recoil on us. Sri Krishna has rendered it ineffective. It is our bad luck." So saying he threw his bow and arrows on the ground together with his armour and helmet and walked away from the battlefield in utter despair and desolation, brooding over his inability to avenge the death of his revered father.

The Pandava army resumed the fight which continued till sunset.

The Kaurava armies repaired to their camps in grief and gloom. The Pandava forces returned to their camps in exultation and excitement.

Dhritarashtra asked Sanjaya, "Why did not Karna hurl the unfailing Sakti missile of Indra against Arjuna all these days? He wasted it on Ghatotkacha."

Sanjaya replied, "In fact every night the Kauravas discussed the matter and reminded Karna and asked him to hurl it at

Arjuna. But Karna used to forget about it all through the day. Some attribute his forgetfulness to the curse of his perceptor Parasurama. In fact Karna argued with Kaurava princes one night, "There is no use of hurling Indra's Sakti at Arjuna. I can depend upon my own prowess and I possess another infallible missile the "Sarpamukhastra" specially intended for him. Even if Arjuna is killed, Sri Krishna will continue the fight and Yudhisthira will be crowned king. Even if all the Pandavas are slain, wily Krishna will instal Kunti or Draupadi on the throne. To-morrow, I will hurl the missile at Sri Krishna." But next day as usual he forgot all about it. I think Karna, well-known for his magnanimity and professional excellence, developed the professorial absent-mindedness. Anyway, Destiny's working is inscrutable."

All these days he forgot to hurl the infallible missile at Arjuna or Sri Krishna. Ultimately, urged by Duryodhana and the Kaurava warriors, Karna killed Ghatotkacha, who seemed at the moment most menacingly invincible. Thus the most dangerous warrior on the Pandava side was killed by Karna, on the spur of the moment, within a second.

KARNA PARVA

120

The Great War—The Sixteenth Day

Early in the dawn on the sixteenth day of the great war, Duryodhana asked Asvatthama, "Worthy son of the worthy preceptor, your father, the unrivalled master of the bow, commanded our army for these five days ably. This is the time to choose the successor; I seek your guidance."

Asvatthama replied, "King of Kings, I feel Karna should be our obvious choice. Apart from the fact that he is your bosom friend, he is the most deserving candidate even judged by pure merit. Let us request him to accept the post. He has the capacity as well as character, dexterity as well as dedication needed for this purpose."

Duryodhana went to Karna followed by Asvatthama and other warriors and requested Karna to be the generalissimo. He accepted the offer with pleasure. He was very much pleased with the gesture of Asvatthama. Bhishma derided Karna as, "Semi-Rathi" and Drona used to address him derisively as "the son of Suta." Asvatthama and Karna were always at loggerheads and just a day or two ago they both drew swords against each other. But, now Asvatthama and the warriors of the Kaurava camp requested Karna to be their generalissimo with one voice. That was the dramatic irony of human life. It was an exhilarating moment in the life of Karna, known as the son of Suta, when he was called upon to occupy the prestigious position adorned by Bhishma and Drona, as their successor generalissimo.

Karna was anointed as the commander-in-chief of the Kaurava armies with all the military fanfare and religious fervour. The priest recited Vedic hymns and poured the holy waters of the sacred rivers over his head and blessed him. Karna distributed costly presents to them. Shouts "Hail, Maha Rathi Karna, Hail, generalissimo Karna" rent the sky.

Quite elated, Karna promised Duryodhana that he would defeat the Pandavas and kill Arjuna. He said, "King of Kings, I

tell you here and now, the defeat of the Pandavas is a foregone conclusion." The bugles and conches were blown. The kettledrums were sounded. The inspired soldiers roared like lions with unprecedented enthusiasm.

Duryodhana proclaimed, "Bhisma has fallen, Drona is dead; nonetheless I am confident that Karna will conquer the Pandavas." The announcement was lustily cheered by the soldiers.

Karna started on his golden chariot drawn by crimson horses displaying the dazzling standard with the insignia of the elephant, in all his glory.

The two armies charged against each other at the sunrise as usual. The Pandava armies were led by Bhima and Asvatthama spearheaded the Kaurava forces. Asvatthama shot a shaft which stuck to the forehead of Bhima and he looked like an angry rhino charging forward. Bhima shot three arrows which stuck to the head of Asvatthama and he looked like the Trikuta mountain with three peaks.

The other high lights of the day's battle were the death of Kshemadhurti at the hands of Bhima and Chitra at the hands of Prativindhya. Duhsasana was defeated by Sahadeva; Dhrishtadyumna attacked Kripacharya who wrecked his chariot and defeated him. Yudhisthira and Duryodhana were locked up in a single combat for sometime. Duryodhana swooned and the charioteer drove the chariot out of the battlefield.

Arjuna was challenged by the remnants of the Samsaptaka hordes and he was locked up in a bitter fight with them.

Nakula attacked Karna who hit him thrice. Karna cut the string of Nakula's bow. Nakula restrung his bow and renewed the fight. Ultimately Karna killed the charioteer of Nakula, wrecked his chariot killing the horses. Nakula jumped to the ground with his sword and the shield. Karna broke the shield and cut the sword into pieces.

Nakula stood on the ground helpless.

Karna caught hold of Nakula by hurling his bow around his neck as a noose. Nakula looked like a mountain covered by a

cloud inlaid with a rainbow. Karna said to Nakula, "Young man, it is derogatory to my dignity to fight with you. I do not want to take unfair advantage of you and kill you; you go away to-day and send Arjuna to fight with me to-morrow.

In other sectors, Yuyutsu, the son of Dhritarashtra fought with Uluka, the son of Sakuni, Srutakarma with Satanika and Srutasoma with Sakuni.

Duryodhana afterwards regained consciousness and returned to fight with Yudhisthira and the fight continued till sunset.

Both the armies stopped the battle for the day and returned to their camps.

Karna said to Duryodhana, "To-day I could not meet Arjuna. He was fighting with the Samsaptakas who challenged him. To-morrow I will surely kill him. However, let me tell you one thing confidentially. Arjuna has one decided advantage against me. Sri Krishna is his charioteer. But for Sri Krishna, Arjuna would have been killed by Bhagadatta. We are equals in the art of archery but he is inferior to me in distant delivery and macro-manipulation. He has the Gandiva bow and the inexhaustible quiver presented by the god of fire. But I have a bow "Vijaya" presented to me by my preceptor Bhargava Parasurama who used it while conquering the Kshatriya warriors over and over twenty-one times. To-morrow I will use it. Of course I can get to-morrow cart loads of arrows and arrowheads behind my chariot. The only difficulty is the charioteer. If I can get Salya, lord of Madra, to drive the chariot my task will be easier. Salya can outwit Sri Krishna in manoeuvres and is superior to him in steed psychology. If we can secure his services for driving my chariot I will kill Arjuna to-morrow. I can assert this beyond the shadow of any doubt as the serpent missile is with me."

Duryodhana said, "Beloved friend, I will persuade Salya to be your charioteer to-morrow. Now I am quite confident of victory."

Karna thanked him saying, "To-morrow, I will discharge the deep debt of gratitude I owe you. You can take Arjuna as already

dead." Duryodhana went to bed that day full of confidence and contentment dreaming about victory in the great war.

121

The Great War—The Seventeenth Day

The Kaurava armies on the seventeenth day of the great war reached the battlefield well before the dawn.

Duryodhana went to Salya followed by Karna and said "Great soul, my hopes are centred around you and Karna. I have come to request you especially to save Karna. Nobody else is competent enough to undertake this task. I request you to be the friend, philosopher and guide to Karna and drive his chariot in the interests of our victory."

Salya replied with apparent indignation, his eyes, inflamed with anger, eyelids entwined together and voice quivering with emotion. "King of kings, I have never expected this gratuitous insult from your imperial hands. I am a warrior, every inch born of blue blood. You have the cheek to ask me to be the charioteer of Karna, the son of a charioteer. Do you rate me inferior to him as a warrior? I propose to go home in protest."

Duryodhana replied, "Lord of Madra, you are certainly superior to Karna as a warrior. Standard works on polity and military science have prescribed that the charioteer should be better accomplished than the warrior. That is why I have come to your feet at this momentous juncture. In fact you are certainly superior to Sri Krishna in everyway including chariot driving. This is my cherished conviction shared by many of our compatriots, even before you were pleased to join our ranks. We are able to disregard Sri Krishna because of your gracious presence amidst us. In fact I request that you may be pleased to view my request as the symbol of our confidence in your capabilities."

Salya said to Duryodhana "King of Kings, you have put it correctly. I am gratified to note that you all regard me as superior to Sri Krishna and realise my importance. I accept to drive the chariot of Karna on one condition. I should like to be frank and forthright in my opinions and Karna should not take offence at my remarks."

Duryodhana said, "I accept your stipulation whole-heartedly. In fact you have the right to command and correct us in every way. I hope Karna will welcome my stand."

Karna said to Salya, "Great Warrior, I will abide by your condition. Now I feel honoured. We both can attack Sri Krishna and Arjuna to-day with confidence and candour."

Salya was requested to take his seat on Karna's chariot ceremoniously with all the military fanfare and chanting of Vedic hymns by the priests, and conches and clarions were blown. Salva ascended the chariot followed by Karna.

Karna said to Duryodhana, "Esteemed friend, I have nothing to complain. I am extremely happy that the lord of Madra whom I consider to be superior to Matali is driving my chariot. I will defeat the Pandavas and kill Arjuna and crown you with decisive victory to-day." Duryodhana was pleased. The Kaurava army gave a resounding ovation to Karna and blew their conches.

The two armies started the battle at the sunrise as usual. Karna said to the cheering soldiers, "Where is Arjuna? I will present a thousand gold coins, one hundred horses and ten elephants to anybody who locates Arjuna's chariot to me." Turning to Salya, Karna said, "My dear friend, speed up the chariot."

Salya replied, "Presumptuous braggart, look up, yonder shines the dazzling Hanuman standard. You, being an upstart aristocrat, waste money on undeserving multitude. Squandering wealth is different from spending it. Nobody need locate Arjuna. Duryodhana is deluded to depend on you. A chatter-box is never a man of action. You cannot kill Arjuna. You are verily rushing to your doom and damnation."

Karna replied, "Lord of Madra, the finger that points out the faults is not the hand that helps. I am surprised at your words. Either you are ignorant or partial. I know Arjuna from my childhood. He is born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Many a gem of purest ray serene may be confined to the unfathomable depths of the ocean. Unrecognised merit may be wasting its

fragrance over the desert sands of social conventions. Ekalavya, the living martyr to the heartless tyranny of traditional prejudice and tainted persecution, is an unforgettable example.”

Salya said to Karna, “Son of the charioteer, you are indulging in irrelevant nonsense. Hatred is an acid which consumes you before it hurts the opponent. I will tell you a story known popularly as the tale of the swan and the crow.

Once upon a time there lived a crow which grew fat, eating the left-overs in a rich merchant’s house. It challenged a swan to a flying race over the high seas. The crow thought very high of itself. It hurled challenge after challenge against the soft mannered swan. At last the race began. The crow showed initial strength and in fact has overtaken the swan for a time. Ultimately the swan could fly on and on tirelessly owing to its innate strength. The crow perished, exhausted and entangled in its own malevolent misadventure. In this metaphorical story, I hold up the mirror to you, you can recognise yourself.”

Karna was enraged at the insinuation and said to Salya, “You are alive because of my pledged word. I have tolerated you because of Duryodhana. Please drive on.”

122

Karna and Yudhisthira

Yudhisthira attacked Karna and a fierce fight ensued. The Panchalas joined Yudhisthira but Karna rained death and destruction on the division. He killed seven Panchala princes and defeated Dhrishtadyumna. Sikhandi and Satyaki came to the rescue of Yudhisthira but Karna repulsed them and blew his conch. Nakula and Sahadeva rushed to the scene. But Karna defeated them and charged on Dharmaputra relentlessly. Yudhisthira fought with Karna bravely, giving toughest resistance to him; but Karna killed his charioteer and broke his bow. Dharmaputra hurled a mace at Karna who smashed it into pieces.

Dharmaputra’s armour was pierced and his whole body was covered with blood and he looked like the celestial Kalpaka tree

with crimson flowers. He stopped fighting with Karna and began to flee, himself driving the chariot. Karna chased him hitting his back with soft shafts. He said to Yudhisthira, "Learned coward, the correct place for you to live is the forest surrounded by the Brahmins. Why did you come to the battlefield? You need not flee for your sweet life, I do not want to kill you." As he uttered the words, he remembered the pledge he gave to Kunti.

Yudhisthira was distressed beyond measure at the decisive defeat he suffered at the hands of Karna whose humiliating words tormented him more than the bleeding wounds he received in the course of the war.

Dharmaputra repaired to his tent and lay down on his bed; his sensitive soul smarting under shame and sorrow.

In other sectors, fierce battles raged between Dhrishtadyumna and Asvatthama, Bhima and Duryodhana, Nakula and Vrishasena, Sahadeva and Sakuni, Duhsasana and Satanika, Satyaki and Kritavarma.

The Samsaptakas, the few who still survived, challenged Arjuna who routed them completely in the morning hours.

Bhima killed Satyasena, the son of Karna.

Kripa killed Suketa, a Panchala prince. Asvatthama killed Malayadhvaja, the ruler of Pandyas.

Karna attacked the Pandava armies and hurled the 'Bhargavastra' against them. Some of the battalions of the Pandava armies were reduced to ashes. The chariots, the elephants and the horses were piled up into heaps of ruin. Duryodhana was delighted to see Karna in his form and was confident of victory.

The Pandava armies retreated in utter confusion and ran towards Arjuna's chariot chased by Karna. Arjuna looked at Karna resplendent with a halo over his head on the chariot driven by Salya. Karna told Salya, "Lord of Madra, look at the Pandava armies reeling under my attack; earlier you have seen Dharmaputra fleeing unabashedly showing his back."

Salya was surprised at Karna's achievements that day. He said to Karna, "Don't gloat over your early successes against the Pandava warriors. You have not yet encountered Arjuna." Karna said, "Then drive on our chariot to face Arjuna."

Arjuna saw the dazzling elephant standard from a distance speedily approaching him. He said to Sri Krishna, "Madhava, look at Karna, the Kaurava generalissimo, shining in all his glory like the midnoon sun. He looks like the very embodiment of valour. This is not the time to attack him. There is no point in facing sure defeat. Discretion is the better part of valour. The dead are debarred from success for ever. Any blessings can only be enjoyed while alive, therefore for the present, turn back the chariot."

Sri Krishna taking right about turn instructed Bhima and Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and Sikhandi to attack Karna.

Here some critics have pointed out that this is a blemish in the otherwise spotless character of Arjuna. This superficial criticism is shallow and the argument does not hold water. Caution is not cowardice. Timing the attack is part of bravery. According to the Mahabharata which propogates practical idealism, success is a chemical compound of man with the opportune minute. Exhibition of bravery—bravery for the sake of bravery—is worse than cowardice. The seed shall be sown just before the onset of the rainy season. All great heroes in history who have shaped human destinies have very carefully chosen the opportune moment and caught the tide by the forelock. The incident enunciates the deepest psychological truth. The Mahabharata, unique in the literature of the world, has unfathomed the great ocean of human psychology to its bottomless depths: Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "It is good, you decided to take rest for a while, while the king of Anga is tired by relentless fight with our warriors. Where shall we go then?"

Arjuna replied, "I learn that Dharmaputra was defeated and disgraced by Karna menacingly. He is not to be seen in the battlefield. Let us go to his tent and enquire after his welfare; I am afraid he is badly wounded."

123

Beloved Brothers At Loggerheads

Sri Krishna drove the chariot to Yudhisthira's tent. He received Sri Krishna and Arjuna with open arms. Presuming Karna to be dead, Yudhisthira said to Arjuna, "My hearty congratulations. At long last, you have killed Karna and I am waiting for this very moment all through my life."

Arjuna was aghast, Sri Krishna said, "Great soul, we learn that you are menacingly mauled by the Kaurava generalissimo. Arjuna came back to enquire about your welfare. He will go to kill Karna immediately."

Dharmaputra lost his temper perhaps for the first as well as the last time in his life and bursted out in uncontrolled emotion. Turning to Sri Krishna, he said, "Destroyer of the demons, this fellow, this psuedo-hero, has deceived me. When I was spending sleepless nights, afraid of Karna's prowess, he always indulged in bravados and proclaimed that he would kill Karna.

"I appreciate the Samsaptakas who dared to die. You see, a hero is expected to exterminate his enemies or enter the soldier's heaven facing death bravely. Did Arjuna come to enquire after my welfare? or has he come to enjoy the fun at my expense?"

"I would not have been the victim of the vicious arrows, and the taunting terminology of the cursed son of the charioteer, had I remained in my forest abode.

"Kunti gave birth to two sons. Then a female baby would have been better as the third. Alright, the male child was born and he lost his manhood. Unfortunately he regained his manhood. Let him regain his manhood. It is a pity, he has chosen to wield the great Gandiva bow gifted to him by the god of fire shamelessly, without putting it to proper use."

Dharmaputra could not control his anger even after the emotional outburst; he turned to Arjuna and said, "I know you do not have the capability to kill Karna, I know how Karna will be killed. Give the Gandiva bow to Sri Krishna and request him to wield it as the warrior; you better drive the chariot as his charioteer. Then Karna will be killed in a few seconds."

Arjuna too was emotionally upset. He drew his sword and pounced upon Yudhishthira perspiring and sweating all over the body.

Of course Sri Krishna stood between the two brothers smiling in silence. Arjuna was aggrieved at the words of Yudhishthira and said, "Sri Krishna, I have vowed to kill anybody who dared to ask me to relinquish my Gandiva; leave me. I must kill him."

Yudhishthira said, "Achyuta, release him; let me be relieved of this heinous sin at once. Let Arjuna be renowned in history that he has assassinated his own brother unable to withstand the onslaught of the son of the charioteer. This war is forced on me."

However, Sri Krishna held Arjuna's right hand in his firm grip. Arjuna turning to Yudhishthira said, "Most unworthy brother, you have the cheek to accuse me while you are the real culprit.

"You have gambled away the whole kingdom, you are the root cause of the humiliation suffered by Panchali within the open Kaurava court.

"Because of your foolishness, Kunti, the mother of the great heroes, is put to untold privations.

"The sons of Madri, embodiments of innocence and nobility, have laboured as slaves, not to speak of Bhima, of unrivalled strength and bravery.

"I must say, 'physician, heal thyself.' We have lost Abhimanyu because of your indiscreet leadership."

Yudhishthira reacted vehemently and retorted, "Arjuna, you think, you are a great hero. Please tell me the name of one warrior whom you have killed. Bhishma would not have fallen but for Sikhandi. Drona was not defeated by you; nor did he die because of your valour. You could not have killed Saindhava Jayadratha without Sri Krishna's succour. Now, you are not able to face the son of a charioteer. Krishna is the real architect of the glory and you have always shone in borrowed feathers. You do not deserve the great reputation you have acquired by Sri Krishna's grace.

“To be frank, I prefer to be assassinated by you in cold blood rather than live this dishonourable life.”

Arjuna, by that time, was overtaken by remorse. He said, “I realise my mistake. Sri Krishna, my vow has maddened me; otherwise, do I assault my brother, the noblest soul ever to walk on this planet in human flesh and blood?”

Sri Krishna said, “You have redeemed your vow. You have indulged in character assassination which is worse than culpable homicide.”

Arjuna in a fit of repentance exclaimed aloud, “I am the hero that killed the Kalakeyas and the Nivatakavachas; I sat on the throne of Indra.

“I have killed the daredevils, the Samsaptakas. As a mortal being, I was naturally offended by Dharmaputra who underestimated my all-round achievements. Anyway, I should not have retorted. I repent sincerely and I will not kill him, instead I will cut off my throat as punishment.”

Yudhisthira was aghast and shed tears profusely. Sri Krishna smiled and said to Arjuna “You have already killed your self. Self-praise is tantamount to suicide; all the while you are indulging in it.

“My dear Arjuna, fall at the feet of brother, Ajatasatru, who has already excused you and beg his pardon formally.”

Arjuna bowed to Dharmaputra saying, “Noblest soul, I crave your benediction. Nothing in this world, as Sri Krishna puts it, can kill Maharathi Karna, excepting your righteous indignation. Now that it has taken away his longevity, I will go and formally kill him at once in to-day’s battle.” Yudhisthira said, “I sincerely bless you; go forth: I wish you success”.

The episode of Yudhisthira and Arjuna involving the two beloved brothers in inordinate quarrel and condemnation of each other has given rise to diverse criticism. Is it not a blemish on the ideal brotherhood so reverently cherished by millions and millions of Indians across so many centuries? Why did Veda Vyasa

introduce this? In fact he could have simply concealed it. Instead he dealt with it at great length. No effort was ever made by the original author or later redactors of the epic to camouflage or conceal unpleasant truths. Undoubtedly, this enhances the value of the Mahabharata epic.

Differences of opinions do arise amongst best colleagues, bosom friends and beloved brothers. The Mahabharata has churned the milky ocean of human psychology. To borrow the metaphor of the well-known mythological story, the Halahala (great poison) as well as the Amrita (nectar) obtained from it, in addition to the Kalpa Vriksha, the celestial tree which fulfills all desires, and the Kamadhenu, the divine cow capable of granting any wish, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, the Airavata, the white elephant of god Indra. Human nature, with all its complexities and contradictions, is portrayed in the Mahabharata. Viewed in the proper perspective, the episode depicting the emotional tussle between the two great brothers provides the rare insight into the intricacies of human psychology.

124

Death of Duhsasana

While Yudhisthira and Arjuna were locked in verbal combat, Bhima was engaged in bloody battle with Duhsasana. Dhrishadyumna and Satyaki gave stiff resistance to Karna.

A fierce battle raged between Duhsasana and Bhima. They exchanged hot words at the outset and challenged each other to a single combat. Bhima brought down the flag of Duhsasana and wrecked his chariot, killing his charioteer together with the horses. Duhsasana retaliated by killing the horses of Bhima's chariot.

Bhima and Duhsasana, both rendered chariotless, fought with maces. Eventually, Bhima overpowered Duhsasana whom he threw over the ground and sat over his body. Bhima asked him, "Wretched fellow, where is your hand that dragged Draupadi by her braid?" Duhsasana proudly raised his right hand and proclaimed, "This is the hand that gave thousands of cows as free gifts to hundreds of brahmins, this is the hand looking like the trunk of

an elephant lulled many a virgin beauty to ecstasy, this is the hand that defeated several enemies." Bhima cut off the right arm of Duhsasana and danced with joy hitting him all over his body with the severed hand. It was a ghastly sight. Bhima pounced upon Duhsasana like a tiger on a frightened deer and tore his body into pieces. He rent his chest with his finger nails and drank the warm blood that oozed out. He said, "I drank my mother's milk, I have taken cow's milk many a time; I have enjoyed several soft drinks. But nothing ever tasted as sweet as this." The Kaurava armies ran helter-skelter in all directions, panic-stricken and frightened.

The Kaurava princes, Kavachi, Nishangi, Pasi, Dandadhara, Dhanurgraha, Nalopa, Saha, Shanda, Vatavega and Suvarchasa charged against Bhimasena to avenge the death of Duhsasana. Arjuna who arrived at the spot and was expecting the encounters, shot ten simultaneous shafts at them. Their heads at once rolled on the ground.

Salya who witnessed the gruesome performance of Bhimasena said to Karna, "Great Warrior, it is high time for you to initiate the counter-attack. Duryodhana stands dazed. Your valiant son Vrishasena is attacking Bhima who is supported by Arjuna".

Nakula joined Bhima in a counter-attack on Vrishasena. Kripa and Kritavarma, Duryodhana and Asvatthama went to the rescue of Vrishasena. Arjuna joined Bhima. But Vrishasena wrecked the chariot of Nakula and hit Arjuna thrice.

Arjuna shot a swift shaft with unerring aim at Vrishasena whose head rolled on the ground in the vicinity of Karna.

125

Fall of Karna

Karna in a fit of rage attacked Arjuna. The epic poet described that the gods assembled in their helicopters and aeroplanes to witness the combat. Karna asked Salya, "Lord of Madra, suppose I am killed by Arjuna, what will be the consequences?"

Salya replied, "The great war will be continued. I will take up arms and I will kill Sri Krishna and Arjuna and crown Duryodhana with victory."

Arjuna put a similar question to Sri Krishna, "What will happen if I die, Achyuta?"

Sri Krishna smiled and replied, "The hypothetical question does not arise at all. You are sure to win. The glorious Bhishma fell. The great preceptor died, Karna is destined to follow them. Everybody knows how the wind is blowing.

"Look at Bhima who has fulfilled his terrible vow by killing Duhsasana. It is time for you to rise to the occasion. Draupadi's hopes are centered round you"

The two reputed heroes, Karna and Arjuna were locked in a fierce single combat. They fought with the divine missiles. Arjuna hurled the fire missile and Karna parried it with the rain missile. When Arjuna shot the cloud missile, the whole battlefield was covered with darkness. But Karna soon dispelled it by the wind missile. Arjuna hurled the Indra shaft at Karna and it multiplied itself into a million shafts and attacked him. However, Karna parried them all with counter-shafts.

Bhima perceived that the missiles hurled by Arjuna were successfully parried by Karna. He went to Arjuna and said, "You are not able to clinch the issue. If you want I will dash against Karna and break his head into pieces with my mace." Arjuna told him that it was against the accepted code of honour for anybody to intervene in their single combat.

Karna hit Sri Krishna thrice with powerful shafts which pierced his armour. Arjuna retaliated by hitting Salya nine times, and the guards of his chariot wheels several times. They fled from the battlefield and Krishna blew his conch, Panchajanya in exultation.

Karna said to Salya, "Lord of Madra, I am shooting the serpent-shaft called the Sarpasilimukha astra at Arjuna. The Naga prince Asvasena who wants to wreak vengeance on Arjuna entered into it. Arjuna will be no more in a few seconds." As Karna was arranging the shaft to the string of his bow, Salya said,

“Great Warrior, please have a second look. I am afraid, your aim is wrong.” That was all what he could do to save Arjuna from the fatal shaft. Karna looked at Salya contemptuously without having a second look at the shaft and shot it aiming at the neck of Arjuna. The shaft darted forth with a bang.

Sri Krishna who perceived the shaft darting forth with great velocity managed the horses to slip their legs so that the height of the chariot was reduced by about ten inches. Arjuna was saved but the shaft shattered his divine diadem to pieces. The epic poet described that the gods rained showers of celestial flowers on Sri Krishna in recognition of his unrivalled mastery of the art of chariot driving.

Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, “Look at this serpent shaft. It has fallen on the ground but it is advancing against us menacingly.” Arjuna cut it into pieces with his swift shafts.

Arjuna who remained aghast for a while at the loss of his diadem, covered his head with a white turban and renewed the fight. Both the warriors were bleeding profusely with multiple wounds from head to foot, but the fierce fight continued. After a while, Karna’s chariot was stuck in the mud and the wheels did not move. Karna thought that the curse of the brahmin began to take effect. Once Karna quite inadvertently killed the calf of a brahmin who cursed him that the wheel of his chariot would sink into the mire, at the mortal hour. Karna jumped to the ground to retrieve the wheel, but could not raise it to the ground. He knew that the fatal hour had approached.

Karna said to Arjuna, “Savyasachi, you see, my chariot has sunk into the mire. I hope you will not take unfair advantage of my predicament. Wait, till I set my chariot aright.”

Arjuna looked at Sri Krishna who said to Karna, “Radheya, you are now quoting the scriptures, and rules from the code of honour. From the burning of the wax-palace up to the exile of the Pandavas cheating them at the game of dice, you never thought of fair play or any code of honour.

“What code of honour did you observe when you stealthily broke the bow of Abhimanyu from behind?”

Karna heaved a heavy sigh in silence and did not choose to give a reply to the denunciation of Sri Krishna. Karna vainly tried to recapitulate the mantras of the divine missiles, but his memory too failed at the nick of the time. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna “Great Warrior, delay not. Now is the opportune moment.” Arjuna shot a swift shaft at Karna and the severed head rolled on the ground. A brilliant light emerged from the body of Karna and merged into the setting sun.

The battlefield together with the hearts of the Kauravas was plunged in darkness. Cessation of hostilities was proclaimed for the day.”

Sri Krishna and Arjuna went to Yudhisthira and bowed to his feet. Yudhisthira embraced them fondly. He congratulated Arjuna saying, “The Panchalas have conveyed the good news to me before your arrival. I am glad you have avenged my humiliation.” Turning to Sri Krishna he said, “Achyuta, all this is due to your stewardship. Hereafter I can have sound sleep. Even when Saindhava fell, I did not have any glimpse of victory. Duryodhana, devoid of Karna, is a walking corpse. Our victory is in sight.”

Sri Krishna replied, “Dharmaputra, it is your righteous will power that has inspired Arjuna to-day. Undoubtedly, Karna is a great hero. To be frank, he defeated all the Pandava brothers including Arjuna at one time or the other. Arjuna developed cold feet by noon to-day. But for your unprecedented admonition to Arjuna to-day, history of the great war would have been quite different.

“In fact it is not Arjuna alone that killed Karna, the noblest benefactor of mankind and the greatest warrior of our times. He fell owing to a curious conspiracy of circumstances. The preceptor who cursed him, Indra who took away his natural armour, the mother who left him to float in the Ganges, Salya the charioteer who discouraged him, I, that took away the wind from his sails among others, are the assassins incognito. Arjuna is the last straw that broke the camel’s back.”

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Duryodhna's Grief

Duryodhana was plunged into grief at the death of his beloved friend Karna. Kripa and Kritavarma, Salya and Asvatthama went to Duryodhana to offer their condolences. Salya said to Duryodhana, "Grieve not, O King of Kings, it is a moral victory for Karna and a mean success for Arjuna who took unfair advantage to slay his opponent. Of course, Arjuna is an accomplished warrior but Karna is no doubt superior to him in every way. It is my privilege to witness from close quarters such a historic battle. To-day from dawn to dusk, Karna humbled everybody in the battle including Yudhishthira who fled from the battlefield. Karna fell simply because Fate was against him."

Kripacharya said, "I agree with Salya. If Arjuna was able to slay Saindhava in the teeth of our concerted opposition, it is due to divine grace. Human effort, however great it may be, is powerless before divine dispensation. I advise you to seek armistice and sue for peace. I think Dharmaputra will accept Dhritarashtra as the sovereign. The Pandavas can be given Indraprastha again. You can live to serve your aged parents. After all nothing is gained by death. Any blessings can only be enjoyed while living."

Duryodhana remained silent for a few minutes, heaved a heavy sigh of deep anguish and replied, "Great preceptor, I thank you for your solicitude for my life. Much water has flown under the bridge since the commencement of the great war.

"To-day you have seen the beastly performance of Bhima who drank the blood of my beloved brother Duhsasana. I cannot hope to save my skin or soul by suing for peace now.

"Even if I make peace now, how can I get back my brothers and colleagues who laid down their lives in the battle for me? I must fight to the finish."

Salya congratulated him on his heroic decision and they decided to continue the war to its logical conclusion.

The spies arrived and told Duryodhana that the Pandavas were moving to the battlefield with the help of flaming torches.

Kritavarma said, "They may try to precipitate a nocturnal fight, elated by their success now. We should not be lured into

their trap. Let us not sleep in our encampments to-night. Let us go to the rest houses on the banks of the Sarasvati river which is just two yojanas distant." Duryodhana and his colleagues repaired to the rest houses on the banks of the Sarasvati for the night stay.

Dharmaputra followed by his brothers, Satyaki and other warriors went to the battlefield to see the dead body of Karna, preceded by a contingent of torch bearers.

He said to Sri Krishna "To-night I hope to enjoy perfect sleep for the first time in my life."

The flaming torches of Yudhishthira's nocturnal visit to the battlefield were mistaken by the Kaurava spies for a preplanned peremptory drive on the part of the Pandavas to start the nocturnal attack.

SALYA PARVA

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The Great War—The Eighteenth Day

On the eighteenth day of the great war, Duryodhana, his brothers, Kripa and Kritavarma, Salya and Asvatthama, and other warriors bathed in the waters of the Sarasvati river before dawn. He said to Asvatthama "Worthy son of the worthy preceptor, we have to march to the battlefield to-day electing the generalissimo. To me you are more than a preceptor. I require your guidance now."

Asvatthama replied, "King of Kings, Salya is a veteran warrior, well-known for his versatile talents, matchless in might and majesty. He is the one person, who commands the fear as well as respect of both the camps. Salya has the stature as well as the sensibility to do justice to the onerous responsibility of the post of the generalissimo of our army at this critical juncture. I am confident that he can lead us all to victory against the enemy forces."

Duryodhana together with his brothers Duspradarsana and others, followed by Kritavarma, Asvatthama and Satyasena, the son of Karna, approached Salya and requested Salya to lead the Kaurava armies as the commander-in-chief saying, "Great Warrior, we all request you to be the generalissimo." Salya replied, "I am pleased with your gesture. I have pledged my life to you on the day I threw my lot with your side. To-day, I rededicate myself to your cause. Don't worry that Bhishma has fallen, Drona and Karna are dead. I promise to kill Sri Krishna and Arjuna to-day when I meet them on the battlefield and crown you with victory."

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Hypnotism of Hope

The Kaurava forces were enthused at the bold stand taken by Salya and cheered him vivaciously blowing their conches and clarions.

Duryodhana was happy and said to Salya, "Mighty Warrior, I feel I should have made you the commander-in-chief earlier. Any-

way better late than never. You have installed into my heart the refreshing hope of victory. You have the capability to play the historic role which you so gallantly accepted.”

The Kaurava armies longed to move forward under the leadership of Salya with renewed enthusiasm and rejuvenated effulgence. Salya could cast a magic spell on the king and the commoner and he boosted up the morale of the Kauravas. Duryodhana honestly entertained the fond hope that Salya would undoubtedly conquer the Pandavas that day.

The great grandsire Bhishma with his reputation as the greatest warrior of the times, fell on the battlefield. Drona, venerated as the master of the bow, died. Karna, universally recognised as a matchless hero, was no more. The stalwarts fell one by one inexorably; still Duryodhana believed that Salya would conquer the Pandavas. That was the hypnotism of hope.

The hypnotism of hope is as old as human existence and is as new as to-day. Hope holds the greatest fascination for human life. “Salya will conquer the Pandavas”—the typical sentiment of Duryodhana since the Mahabharata times— has become proverbial in Indian life and literature, legend and lore for ‘fond hope’.

Salya was anointed as the generalissimo of the Kaurava armies with the customary pomp and fanfare. The holy water of the Sarasvati was brought by the priests in a golden jug and was sprinkled over the head of Salya to the accomplishment of Vedic hymns and the martial band in an impressive ceremony.

The Pandava spies returned from the Kaurava camp and reported the matter to Yudhishthira who went to Sri Krishna together with his brothers for consultation. He said to Sri Krishna, “Madhava, Salya is now the Kaurava generalissimo. What shall we do? We must finish the war to-day.”

Sri Krishna said “Great king, I endorse your view. But don’t think that it will be an easy walk over to-day, you should not devalue Salya, he is a greater warrior than Karna, to be placed on

a par with Bhishma or Drona. I have absolutely no doubt that Arjuna is unequal to the task. Salya is superior to Arjuna in age and ability. All these days Salya was a dormant fire camouflaged by the ashes. To-day he is the generalissimo. If I and Arjuna attack him, he will not spare either of us. Salya will try to outshine all others to-day. Let us not forget Saindhava Jayadratha. In war sometimes feathers will drown and stones will float surprisingly. Ill-fated Karna suffered from so many limitations. Salya has absolutely no compunctions and he will try to prove that he is the ablest of the Kaurava generalissimos."

Yudhishthira exclaimed, "Then Sri Krishna, you must tell us the way out."

Sri Krishna replied, "Noble soul, it is not proper on your part to expose me and Arjuna to the fury of Salya. I propose that you must attack him and kill him to-day. He came to you and blessed you with victory. Having given his solemn benediction to you, he will not have the face to defeat you, not to speak of killing you.

"All his military versatility will be no use against you. You are a seasoned warrior and you choose your own time to finish him. Meanwhile, Arjuna will annihilate the remnants of the Kaurava forces.

"You can have the final glory of killing the last generalissimo of the Kaurava forces and snatch the garland from the goddess of victory."

Yudhishthira said, "Sri Krishna, I can only say I am thy tool, thine will shall prevail, I will lead the attack on the Kaurava generalissimo to-day."

At the sunrise the two armies charged against each other with unprecedented ferocity eager to gain the upper hand in the final encounter.

Bhishmasena was on the look out for the Kaurava princes and killed Durvishaya, Duspradharshana and others. Sahadeva killed Uluka, the son of Sakuni.

Nakula killed Chitrasena, Satyasena and Susarma, the son of Karna.

Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and Sikhandi attacked the remnants of the Kaurava infantry and cavalry and rained death and destruction on them.

Asvatthama killed Suratha, a Panchala prince. Kripa and Kritavarma were locked in single combats with Sikhandi and Satyaki respectively. Dhrishtadyumna killed Salva along with his elephant.

Sakuni with the help of his cavalry charged on Nakula but after a fierce fight and heavy losses on both sides lost his life in the battle.

Yudhishthira and Salya were locked in single combat for a long time. Salya wrecked the chariot of Yudhishthira but Bhimasena engaged him in a mace fight till Yudhishthira returned to the battlefield equipped with a fresh chariot. At one time Yudhishthira swooned but renewed the fight after regaining consciousness.

Salya, meanwhile, wrought havoc on the Pandava forces. Eventually, Yudhishthira hurled an iron missile 'Sakti' on Salya who fell dead on the floor of his chariot.

Salya's kith and kin attacked Yudhishthira, Arjuna and Bhima. Satyaki and Dhrishtadyumna joined Yudhishthira. The morale of the Kaurava army was completely shattered with the death of their generalissimo and they fell easy prey to the Pandava warriors. The whole battlefield was covered with broken chariots, dead bodies, blood and bones. The Pandavas also suffered heavy losses in men and material.

Duryodhana lost his chariot, his charioteer and the horses as well. He stood alone in the solitary desolation and walked away from the battlefield on foot, placing his iron mace on his shoulders into the outside wilderness.

In the Kaurava camp, three people, Kripacharya, Kritavarma and Asvatthama escaped death. The Pandavas searched for Duryodhana and at last learnt that he was hiding in the waters of the Dvaipayana lake. They got the clue from some hunters.

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The Final Encounter

The Pandavas together with Sri Krishna went to the Lake Dvaipayana. Bhima said that he would dive into the waters of the lake to capture Duryodhana. Sri Krishna said, "Bhimasena, it is a hazardous job. Nobody, except Dharmaputra, can draw Duryodhana out.

"His tactful tongue alone is the most powerful weapon now. Duryodhana is a person with deep self-respect. Yudhisthira knows how to exploit it.

Yudhisthira addressed Duryodhana in a loud tone. He said "O King of Kings, you have lived a most majestic life, ruled over a vast empire, stretching from sea to sea. You are renowned as the exemplary embodiment of dignified demeanour. It is unbecoming of you to hide in a corner of a lake. You have lost your dearest friend Karna in the battle; you have lost all your brothers as well as your sons. Innumerable rulers well-versed in the art of warfare have laid down their precious lives for your sake. I cannot rush to the conclusion that you are hiding here for your sweet life.

"If still you want to cling to your life, tell me I will give half the Kingdom to you. Please come out. Not to speak of a noble warrior like you, even the worst of cowards will not go into hiding after bravely initiating the great war which is sure to be immortalised by future poets. I know that you will not shrink to play the hero's role whether you win or loose, live or die."

Duryodhana replied, "Dharmaputra, I hereby abdicate my throne. You can rule the kingdom. Now that you have got what you desired, you must be satisfied."

Yudhisthira replied, "Suyodhana, I am not a brahmin to seek the crown as a benevolent gift from you. I have come to Kurukshetra at your invitation to exercise the right of conquest."

Duryodhana replied, "Son of Kunti, I do not have the chariot, the bow and the arrows; nor do I possess an army to fight with you. Where is the question of a battlefield? Do you want me to come out to be hunted by you, like a mad dog?"

Yudhisthira said, "King of Kings, we do not want to take unfair advantage. I will provide you with the chariot, and all the

weapons you indent. You can choose any one among our five brothers for a single combat using any weapon of your choice; if you win, you can rule over the empire; if you die we will rule the kingdom.”

Duryodhana said, “Dharmaputra, you are true to your reputation. I appreciate your magnanimity. I do not want your weapons, nor do I seek any benefit or concession at your hands. I have my iron mace, which is superior to the one wielded by the god of Death—Yama, with me. Come, all of you, or any one of you, to fight with me.” So saying, he came out of the waters of the lake, hissing like a snake.

Bhima came forward challenging him to the fight and Duryodhana accepted the challenge. Just at that time, Balarama returned from the pilgrimage. Yudhisthira received him warmly and offered him the customary hospitalities. Sri Krishna gave an account of the great war to him.

Balarama was the greatest living exponent of the mace battle. Duryodhana and Bhima were his disciples.

The party moved to Kurukshetra from the Dvaipayana lake for the final encounter.

Duryodhana and Bhima were locked up in the mace battle for a long time; Bhima in spite of his enthusiasm and strength was not able to clinch the issue. Arjuna said to Sri Krishna, “Janardana, we are on the verge of victory. Still Bhima is not able to make a short work of Duryodhana. I am surprised at the stamina of this villain.” Sri Krishna replied, “I will not be surprised even if he wins, I am surprised at the foolishness of Dharmaputra. The successes after successes, the soldier so laboriously piles up on the battlefield staking everything, the so-called statesman barter it away afterwards at the bargaining table for the sake of his personal glory. Dharmaputra has offered him the most liberal terms. Thank god, Duryodhana has not chosen Sahadeva for the mace fight. Even now, look at Bhima, he is by no means on the road to success.

“We have moved earth and heaven to defeat Bhisma, Drona and Karna. We could conquer great warriors like Bhagadatta and

Bahlika, Salya and Somadatta. Now our fate is hanging in the balance. Duryodhana, in my opinion, is a greater master in the art of mace fight.”

“What is the way out”, Arjuna implored Sri Krishna. “Please come to our rescue once again.” Sri Krishna replied, Bhima has vowed to break the thighs of Duryodhana in the open court on the day of Draupadi’s humiliation. There is no other solution. Otherwise, all the herculean efforts we made will go waste.” Arjuna was agitated and signalled to Bhima to hit the opponent on the thighs. Bhima knew that it was unchivalrous and against the accepted code of martial conduct. He tried his level best to defeat his adversary with all the strength at his command. The sun was about to set. Duryodhana exhibited all his latent talents and compelled Bhimasena to be on the defensive and hit him hard on the chest. Bhimasena, in a fit of excited fury and encouraged by Arjuna, hit Duryodhana below the navel. Duryodhana fell on the battlefield, his two thighs completely fractured. Everybody cursed Bhima for hitting his opponent below the belt. Even Dharmaputra said, “Bhimasena, you have made me to hang my head in shame at the moment of our final victory.”

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Balarama’s Indictment

Balarama was enraged at the unchivalrous behaviour of Bhima and bursted out, “You have done the most heinous crime in the history of the holy mace, the most manly weapon ever wielded by any warrior. I will not tolerate this atrocity.” So saying, Balarama advanced on Bhima wielding his plough. Sri Krishna stopped Balarama and tried to pacify him, saying “You must take into account of the atrocities perpetrated on the Pandavas by Duryodhana earlier. Moreover, Bhimasena has vowed publicly to break Duryodhana’s thighs. The war was over already, when Duryodhana left the battlefield for the lake. This is an encounter by Bhimasena for fulfilling his vow.” Sri Krishna added, “Dear brother, these are the shadows cast by Kaliyuga which is fast approaching. The economic man, in the pursuit of easy gains, is bound to sacrifice his spiritual idealism. Great soul, I request you to maintain your sacred neutrality.”

Balarama was not convinced or pacified by Sri Krishna. He said, Duryodhana has obtained the warrior's heaven. Let the Pandavas enjoy the ignoble success in infamy and disgrace. I will go away." So saying, Balarama repaired to Dvaraka without taking formal leave of the Pandavas.

Yudhishthira went to Duryodhana and sat beside him for sometime shedding tears. He said, "Illustrious brother, you have led a great life. You have been the lord of eleven divisions, the mightiest army known to history so far. I was always against this brutal violence. I am sincerely sorry for what has happened." Bhima did not like his brother offering apologies to Duryodhana. He came in a fury and kicked Duryodhana's head with his left foot and said "Villain, I have fulfilled my vow. You ascend heaven, I do not mind going to hell."

Dharmaputra angrily chided Bhima "Foolish brother, you have committed a most unworthy act. Duryodhana, what ever be his faults, is our brother and has been one of the greatest emperors of our country. I am sorry I am grieved beyond measure." Tears rolled down his cheeks while he was uttering these words of anguish and repentance.

Duryodhana said, "Dharmaputra, I do not care for Bhima's kick; presently I am going to die and afterwards eagles and crows, will be hovering over my body, which will be preyed by jackals and worms. Bhima is their forerunner." So saying he turned to Sri Krishna and said, "Distinguished cowherd, Sri Krishna, I do not blame the Pandavas at all. You are the evil genius behind all their misdeeds. You have instigated Arjuna to attack Bhishma from behind Sikhandi, you have prompted Dharmaputra to utter a lie to Drona and engineered his death. You are the architect of Karna's death by commanding Arjuna to kill him while he was on the ground unarmed and unresisting. You are responsible for all the crimes committed by the Pandavas. You must be ashamed of your conduct.

"As for me I have ruled my kingdom justly. I have read the Vedas, performed many sacred sacrifices; I have endowed the temples and choultries with rich charities. I have no regrets. The Pandavas proclaimed that they were fighting for righteousness-

then they really lost their war, though they gained the unholy victory. In fact I am the real conqueror and I am going to my warrior's heaven."

When Duryodhana uttered those words, the gods rained showers of celestial flowers on him, in acclamation. He was lustily cheered by the warriors present.

Sri Krishna said to Duryodhana, "King of Kings, you are uncharitable to me. I did not vote for war, nor did I wield a weapon. I did not hurt anybody. In fact, I came to you as an ambassador of peace. You rejected the proffered hand of friendship and love. Now you should blame your self for choosing war. Violence is inherent in war and it cannot be eschewed all along as man worships the wicked institution of war." Sri Krishna's peroration was aimed at convincing the warriors present there rather than Duryodhana. He said to the Pandavas, "It is already dark; why waste our time here? Let us go."

The Pandavas and the princes left for their encampments, together with their soldiers.

Sri Krishna said, "We are in need of rest. This place is contaminated with foul smell. Let us take rest to-night, on the banks of the river Oghavati which is at a short distance from this place."

The Pandavas, Satyaki and Sri Krishna went to the Oghavati, pitched their tents there for taking rest for the night.

SAUPTIKA PARVA

131

The Massacre at Midnight

Kripacharya, Kritavarma and Asvatthama, the three survivors of the Kaurava camp met Duryodhana lying fatally wounded on the battlefield after the night fall. Duryodhana narrated how Bhima hit him below the belt at the instance of Sri Krishna. He said "Dharmaputra himself chided Bhimasena, not to speak of Balarama. Anyway, the ways of fate are inscrutable. Till yesterday I was an emperor attended by thousands of rulers, now, I am a crippled corpse with vanishing vestiges of life."

The three warriors were visibly moved at the plight of Duryodhana. Asvatthama could not control his emotions and he declared, "King of kings, I cannot excuse even the so-called Dharmaputra who sheds crocodile tears. He is the worst hypocrite, donning the deceitful armour of righteousness. He uttered the damnest lie to hoodwink my father who was his preceptor. In fact I was not so much agitated even when my father was killed as I am now, when I see you here hit below the belt by that butcher named Bhimasena. King of kings, I solemnly swear that I will avenge your disgrace, as well as the death of my dear and distinguished father. I will kill all the Pandavas and the Panchalas together with their armies in the presence of Sri Krishna. Please give me permission to go."

Duryodhana was delighted at the words of Asvatthama. He said, "Son of the greatest master of the bow, you are not the person to utter empty words. You are my last hope."

Duryodhana asked Kripa to fetch a tumbler of water. Kripa procured a pot of water from the students of a local hermitage. Duryodhana anointed Asvatthama with the holy waters as the commander-in-chief of his army saying, "Unrivalled hero, I should have done it long ago. I have no doubt that you will exterminate the Pandavas. I request Kripacharya and Kritavarma to assist you." Kripacharya and Kritavarma nodded their heads in consent. The three heroes drove away in their chariots, towards the east where the Pandavas set up their camps.

The charioteers stopped the chariots near a pond to give rest to the horses. The three warriors sat beneath a banyan tree. Kripa and Kritavarma who spent restless days and nights for over a fortnight fell asleep. But Asvatthama whose head was reeling under contemplation of revenge perceived an owl surreptitiously surrounding the crows, living on the tree. There were hundreds of crows living in their nests with their families on the huge tree. The crows which could not see during the night time fell easy prey to the nocturnal invader.

Asvatthama woke up his uncle Kripa and his colleague Kritavarma and unfolded his plan. He said, "I have learnt a great lesson from this owl. Let us attack the Pandavas and the Panchalas during this night and kill them."

Kripacharya replied, "My dear nephew, it is a dastardly plan. Your vision is temporarily clouded by emotional disturbance. It is the height of cruelty to kill sleeping people. It is against all canons of chivalry. A soldier is not a murderer. A Kshatriya will never do such a thing. We are brahmins. We ought not even contemplate such things. The greedy Duryodhana deserved his fate. There is nothing we can do now."

But Asvatthama was bent on wreaking revenge. He said, "Father too loved the Pandavas. But they killed him by the vilest subterfuge. Bhisma who showered affection on them in season and out of season was the victim of foul play. They killed Karna likewise. Their latest exploit is hitting Duryodhana below the navel. I want to repay my debt of gratitude to my king and my father. I am going to translate my plan into action to night." So saying, Asvatthama started on his chariot.

Kripacharya and Kritavarma too followed him in their chariots. Kripa said to Asvatthama, "My dear nephew, I have told you my opinion but we will not leave you. I once again ask you to reconsider your decision. You have an unblemished record, you are reckoned among the great heroes. Let us sleep to-night. To-morrow we will fight with them. Let us not embark upon this dark project which is darker than darkness. Your venture is immoral and unjust."

Asvatthama replied, "Dear uncle, the Pandavas have opened the flood gates of immorality and injustice. They have butchered

my father, killed Bhurisrava, Karna and Duryodhana unjustly. If it is sin to kill sleeping warriors, I do not mind going to any hell, I do not mind to be reborn as a wriggling worm or a ferocious beast. To-night I will kill Dhrishtadyumna and the Pandavas together with all the Panchalas. Let my father's soul rest in peace. I must convey the good tidings to my king before he breathes his last."

Kritavarma and Kripa said that they would follow him. Violence is a vicious circle. Immorality is a chain reaction, one transgression leads to another.

The brute in man may assert itself under the influence of revenge and a desire for retaliation in spite of exceptional accomplishments, exemplary learning, and nobility of birth.

Asvatthama entered the Pandava camp. Kripa and Kritavarma stopped and stood at the gates. Asvatthama experienced a strange feeling when he was about to commence the ghastly massacre at the midnight. He saw an apparition, which materialised into the form of Siva, the god of Universal destruction and death. Undaunted, Asvatthama moved forward imploring his benediction. Siva presented him with a sword.

Asvatthama first attacked Dhrishtadyumna and killed him, cutting his body into pieces. Uttamauja, Yudhamanyu were put to death similarly. The soldiers on watch and ward duty raised an alarm but they were done to death. Some people tried to escape but they were promptly killed at the gates by Kripa and Kritavarma. The sons of Draupadi and Sikhandi who woke up attacked Asvatthama but he killed them all. There was utter confusion in the camp. Taking advantage of the darkness and disorder, Asvatthama killed the soldiers, wrecked the chariots and destroyed the cavalry and the elephant divisions.

Asvatthama followed by Kripa and Kritavarma went to Duryodhana to break the news to the dying king. He threw away his bow and arrows on the ground, jumped from the chariot to the ground and embraced Duryodhana placing his head on his lap. Duryodhana opened his eyes with difficulty. Asvatthama told him, "King of kings, I have come to comfort you with good news. I have killed Dhrishtadyumna, Sikhandi and the sons of Draupadi and destroyed the remnants of the Pandava armies completely.

Only seven of the opposite camp, the Pancha Pandavas, Satyaki and Sri Krishna are alive and I will put an end to them also in the near future. They were not there but I will hunt after them.

“My only regret is that I am alive to see my king die before my eyes. Glad to tell you that Kritavarma and Kripacharya co-operated with me in this great venture and annihilated the Pandava forces.”

Duryodhana pulling up his energy to the last ounce said to Asvatthama, “Great soul, you have given me the greatest delight in the hour of my death. My hearty congratulations to you. Kripacharya and Kritavarma, you have achieved what the great Bhishma, and the venerable preceptor, could not achieve. We had great hopes on Karna. Salya was acclaimed as a greater hero than Karna. But they fell struck down by cruel fate. But you have achieved the impossible. I am happy; I hope to meet you sometime afterwards in future in heaven. Adieu. So saying Duryodhana breathed his last.”

The three warriors, ascended their chariots and went away from the battlefield unobserved by anybody in the twilight before the dawn.

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The Gruesome Gem

After the sunrise, the charioteer of Dhrishtadyumna went to Yudhisthira and said to him, “Great king, last night Asvatthama aided by Kripacharya and Kritavarma attacked our camp. In the merciless massacre at midnight, Dhrishtadyumna and Sikhandi, the Upapandavas together with the soldiers, cavalry and elephants perished.”

Yudhisthira was overwhelmed with sorrow and cried aloud, “Sri Krishna, the warriors who successfully crossed the fire, perished in the smoke. Asvatthama, the son of our preceptor, has acted as a butcher. The great victory has been transformed into the worst tragedy.”

The Pandavas followed by Sri Krishna and Satyaki rushed to their camp.

Draupadi's grief was unconsolable. She lost her sons and brothers. Bhishma vowed to wreak vengeance on Asvatthama. The Pandavas and Sri Krishna went in pursuit of Asvatthama. They reached the hermitage of Veda Vyasa and bowed to him. They located Asvatthama donning the attire of a hermit. He besmeared his body with ashes and held a rosary in his hand and sat amongst the disciples of Veda Vyasa. Bhima said to Asvatthama in angry tones, "You pseudo-hermit, what a change! Foulest of the brahmins, how can you cover up your sins by simply changing your robes? Come to the battlefield."

Asvatthama did not reply but took a blade of grass and charged it with the mantra of the divine missile, known as the Brahmasiras, chanting, "May this annihilate the Pandava race." The missile rose blazing forth fiery radiation like a thousand volcanic eruptions. Sri Krishna said to Arjuna, "It will destroy you, your brothers and everything connected with you. You must counter it with the same astra." Arjuna hurled the Brahmasira astra to counter it. Veda Vyasa stood between them and said, "These ultra-modern missiles will result in universal destruction and are capable of wiping out life from our globe altogether. Already the earth is trembling. The oceans are disturbed and the whole atmosphere is contaminated with radiation. You must withdraw them in the interests of humanity at large." Arjuna accepted the proposal and withdrew his missile. Asvatthama tried to do it unsuccessfully, and bent his head low in shame.

Veda Vyasa said to the Pandavas, "I should like to effect a compromise between you. Take away the precious gem from Asvatthama's turban as a token of his submission and leave him."

Asvatthama grudgingly surrendered the gem to the Pandavas who spared his life.

Bhima gave the gem to Draupadi and consoled her saying that the hero Asvatthama was dead and only a walking corpse was residing at the hermitage of Vyasa.

Draupadi gave the gem to Dharmaputra to wear it in his diadem as a heroic memento. She said, "I do not want that Mrs. Drona should weep for her son as I do; let Asvatthama be alive."

STRI PARVA

133

The Condolences

Sanjaya said to Dhritarashtra, "I have completed my mission as the privileged reporter of the great war. The extraordinary capabilities that developed in me by the grace of Vyasa have deserted me. No more can I give you further information."

Dhritarashtra wept bitterly crying aloud like a haunted child. He said, "I did not listen to the advice of Sri Krishna. I am now living like a giant bird, clipped of its wings. What is the use of such a life?"

Veda Vyasa arrived and consoled him. Vidura tried to comfort him saying, "Your sons are now the guests of Indra, the lord of heaven. Wealth, youth and life are fleeting. Alas! Goddess of wealth is fickle-minded. The wise man is ever happy comprehending the eternal drama of human existence."

Sri Krishna came to Dhritarashtra. He was offered a chair by the side of Dhritarashtra but he sat on the ground saying, "I prefer to sit on the floor in the presence of the Kulapati Veda Vyasa. I have come to offer condolences to Gandhari, the embodiment of chastity and rectitude and to Dhritarashtra, on my behalf and on behalf of the Pandavas."

Dhritarashtra said, "Janardana, I do not blame you nor do I blame the Pandavas. You came here as a messenger of peace. My sons did not benefit by your message."

Sri Krishna said, "The ways of Destiny are inscrutable. Dharmaputra may be crowned king, but he wanted me to tell you that he would rule as your regent only. He will look after you and Gandhari as your devoted son. Your word shall prevail. All arrangements are being made for offering oblations to the departed souls. The priests will meet you presently. The Pandavas are coming to offer their obeisance to you and to Gandhari." Dhritarashtra thanked Sri Krishna for his gesture of good will.

Veda Vyasa said to Dhritarashtra "My dear son, all living beings must die. Thousands of warriors gave up their lives

gallantly for the sake of your son. Mother earth has been burdened with over-population. Sages say that war is a divine dispensation to relieve the earth of its unbearable burden. Dharmaputra is a gentleman and henceforward you must treat him as your own son."

Yudhisthira, followed by his brothers, came to Dhritarashtra. Everywhere there were weeping widows and mourners. Every family in Hastinapura was bereaved. It was a heart-rending experience to everybody, more so to a sensitive soul like Dharmaputra. He approached Dhritarashtra sobbing and bowed to him wetting his feet with tears. Dhritarashtra embraced him silently, shedding tears. Next, Bhima was announced. When Bhima approached Dhritarashtra, Sri Krishna pushed him aside and placed a dummy figure made of iron in his place. Dhritarashtra who was burning with rage against Bhima, hugged the iron statue to his chest in a tight embrace and the metal image was crushed to pieces. Dhritarashtra who believed that Bhima who killed his one hundred sons was thus done to death, began to shed crocodile tears. He said, "I am sorry, I have killed Bhīma in a fit of emotional delinquency."

Sri Krishna said to the blind king, "Son of Vichitravirya, your anger is normal. Human psychology can be anticipated. Bhima is safe and you have crushed the iron dummy only. We are amazed at your strength, which, we suppose, equal to a hundred elephants. But for your blindness, you would have been a world conqueror. Your bereavement is beyond normal human forbearance and no one can misunderstand you." Dhritarashtra felt ashamed like a thief caught red-handed and kept quiet.

Dharmaputra went to Gandhari and bowed to her feet saying, "Venerable mother, I am Yudhisthira, the wicked murderer of your sons. Noble queen, I know I am the worst sinner. Indeed I am not able to excuse myself. How can I crave your pardon, I deserve to be burnt to ashes by your curse."

Gandhari embraced Yudhisthira and said, "Dharmaputra, hitherto I considered that I had one hundred and five sons. Now I have five sons only. How can I curse you, I have no complaint

against anybody except Sri Krishna who instigated Bhima to hit Duryodhana below the navel.

At that point Bhima made bold to approach Gandhari and bowed to her feet announcing himself. He said to her, "Noble mother, What I did was in sheer self-defence. My illustrious brother Duryodhana was invincible, otherwise. On the day when Draupadi was insulted, you would not have blamed me had I killed him then and there. We were bound by Dharmaputra's righteousness. Revered queen, ultimately one must blame war and violence which generate inordinate emotional imbalance. Transgressions were there on both the sides. This is the time for sincere repentance. I am sorry for my conduct. In fact I did not drink the blood of Duhsasana as alleged by some. I made just a pretence of it. I am a human being and I am not a beast to do it."

Gandhari said, "I wish you spared at least one amongst the hundred to look after his parents."

Dharmaputra intervened and said, "Dear mother, we are five to look after you. I solemnly promise to look after you in the same way as I serve Kunti?"

Gandhari said, "I suppose you have not gone to Kunti. Please go to her. I am equally sorry for Draupadi." Draupadi came and bowed to her. Gandhari said to her, "My dear Panchali, I share your grief. Nobody can console us. Let us console ourselves; we both lost all our sons.

Pandavas took leave of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari and went to Kunti to meet her. Dharmaputra bowed to her. Kunti took him into her hands and said looking at his feet, "The nails of your feet look burnt." Sri Krishna said smiling, "The vision of blindfolded Gandhari fell on his feet partially. So his nails are burnt. Thank god, his whole body is not burnt to ashes. Dharmaputra shall put up with this deformity for life. Bhima escaped death from the cruel clutches of Dhritarashtra. He is more fortunate."

Kunti blessed her children and offered her congratulations on their victory, though she felt sorry at the death of Abhimanyu and the Upapandavas.

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The Sorrowful Secret

Dharmaputra with his religious bent of mind, made extensive arrangements for offering libations to the dead. Dhritarashtra with the aid of priests offered oblations to the departed souls with sesame and water and gave gifts to the brahmins. It was a pathetic sight. Dharmaputra and brothers offered libations to Abhimanyu, Iravan, Upapandavas and other departed souls. In peace time, youngsters performed the obsequies of elders. In the aftermath of war, it is a piteous sight to see fathers offering libations to their sons. War no doubt is terrible, but lamentations of the widowed wives and the oblations offered by parents are heart rending scenes. In the Mahabharata, one volume entitled "Stri Parva" (volume on women) deals with this subject at length.

Gandhari entered the battlefield together with her daughters-in-law. The widows spotted out the dead bodies of their husbands and wept bitterly. The parents sobbed aloud. Sri Krishna tried to console Gandhari. She said to Sri Krishna, "If there was one who could avert this tragedy, undoubtedly you are that one. Instead of sincerely striving for peace, you preferred to solve the problem of the explosion of population and relieve the burden of the mother earth. Your Yadava race shall perish fighting like the Kauravas and the Pandavas."

Sri Krishna replied, "Madam, your accusation is baseless. I sincerely worked for peace. However, your curse is redundant. A mighty race will always perish by the weight of its inner contradictions and conflicts. That is the inexorable law of history. I agree with you. No outside power can overwhelm our Yadavas."

Kunti came to the battlefield and tears rolled down her cheeks when she saw the dead body of Karna. She revealed the story of Karna's birth to the Pandavas.

The Pandavas were shocked at the most unpleasant surprise, sprung on them by their mother Kunti. Yudhisthira exclaimed in deepest anguish, "Mother dear, how could you keep this secret in your bosom so long? Verily, Verily it is a feat to carry sparkling fire hidden in your kerchief all along. What can I do now."

Kunti said, "My dear son, offer libations of sesame and water to him and his sons and perform the obituary rites prescribed by the scriptures."

Dharmaputra performed the funeral rites for the peace of Karna's soul, and the souls of his sons and endowed permanent charities in their names. He told Kunti, "Great Lady, the secret of Karna's birth still haunts me. He inherited his beautiful feet and stately gait from the mother and the celestial radiance of his face from the sun. What a noble character! To-day, Karna has the largest number of mourners in the country and nobody else can fill the void left by Karna, acclaimed as the greatest benefactor of his fellowmen. What a tragedy!" After much lamentation, Dharmaputra told Kunti, "The secrecy is a sin. There would not have been this catastrophic war but for this secret. Let no woman hereafter be capable of keeping any secret."

The popular belief that women are not capable of keeping a secret, perhaps has emanated from the Mahabharata. Conversely, the Mahabharata might have channelled the popular belief into this story. As per this story, women are capable of keeping secrets. Even if the curse of Dharmaputra persists, womanhood is ennobled as it will then be less susceptible to hypocrisy. The curse is silent about men. Obviously, there can be many men who cannot keep secrets. Yudhisthira's pronouncement, in the context of the most melancholy mourning, may be taken as his wishful thinking on his part at the moment rather than as a permanent curse on all womanhood, for ever.

SANTI PARVA

135

The Integral Equilibrium

The Pandavas, followed by Sri Krishna went to Bhishma to pay their affectionate homage to the great hero, bowed to him and sat at his feet.

Sri Krishna said to Bhishma, "Bodily pain, we are told, is more unbearable than mental anguish, a single thorn stuck in the boot can cause constant pain. It is really marvellous how you are able to sleep on your bed of spikes." Bhishma smiled and replied, "I have caused bodily pain to thousands of soldiers mercilessly; I presume I have no rebirth when a balance sheet can be struck. I must pay the penalty here and now. In fact I am glad to do so."

Sri Krishna asked Yudhishthira to sit at the feet of Bhishma daily and learn important lessons on administration and statecraft. Everyday Dharmaputra approached Bhishma and the instruction given by him to Yudhishthira on various topics form the bulkiest volume of the Mahabharata entitled the "Santi Parva." The treatise on peace, Santi Parva, has a cyclopaedic range and deals with spiritual as well as secular subjects. The subjects discussed in the Santi Parva pertain undoubtedly to a very ancient society, removed from modernism by distance of time, space and context. Still most of them have not lost their relevance to modernism. Some of them are refreshingly relevant to our times, and deal with problems and eternal verities of human existence with an ultra modern approach bordering on surrealism and existentialism. There are many parables; the characters are animals and birds, but the moral and the purport is essentially human. Population-explosion, the concept of the welfare state, non-violence, action, renunciation, crime and punishment were some of the subjects discussed at length in the Santi Parva.

After the great war, the mind of Dharmaputra was overwhelmed with grief and guilt at the death of his kinsmen as well as the wholesale destruction caused by the war. Very often, he discussed the matter with Bhima and Draupadi, Arjuna and

Nakula. He said to his brothers, "Please leave me, I should like to go back to the forest renouncing the world. Please crown Bhima who will be a better ruler." Bhima replied, "It is sheer lunacy to think of renunciation at this juncture, ordinary madness can be cured by medicines, you are the victim of too much learning; Vedic scholars, steeped in scriptures tend to become good for nothing; if inaction is the correct path for emancipation and redemption, then the stones and trees in the forest must be the first to get salvation. We all want you to be the king. It is people's wish and prayer."

Sahadeva said, "Great soul, I do not know the intricacies of philosophical doctrines. You are more than a brother to me. You are my mother, you are my father, you are my preceptor and you are my God. I request you not to leave me and go to the forest."

However, it was Veda Vyasa who administered the healing touch. He said to Dharmaputra, "It is a pity that a philosopher has no kingdom to rule, and a king invariably has no grasp of philosophy. You will make an ideal king, you are a philosopher as well as a king. Your personality is the confluence of the great qualities of the head as well as the heart and you will make an ideal administrator."

The Pandavas proceeded to Hastinapura and all arrangements were made for the coronation of Yudhisthira.

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The Coronation

Yudhisthira was given a rousing reception at the gates of Hastinapura by the citizens. He was overjoyed at the spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm and exhibition of affection towards him and his brothers. He acknowledged the greetings of the crowd with folded hands standing on the floor of his chariot. He announced, "I thank you, one and all for your welcome. I propose to enter Hastinapura with your consent and comradeship. I request the people to accord me permission to enter Hastinapura." "Hail Yudhisthira," "Hail Pandavas," "Hail Sri Krishna" were the slogans raised. As and when the din subsided, a lone voice said, "Yudhisthira, why all this melodrama? Why do you seek people's

permission now? You are a conqueror and nobody can stop you with immunity. The very same throats which are shouting welcome to you, cheered Duryodhana not long ago with slogans of success. In fact Duryodhana was a benevolent ruler. He was an able administrator; the poor fellow lost the battle. You can occupy the vacant throne by exercising your right of conquest. The so-called popular will does not come into the picture at all. Let there be no pretences." But the heckler was hooted down. The crowd denounced him vehemently raising varied slogans "Down with the athiest." "Down, Down Non-conformist." "Down with the pseudo-rationalist."

Thousands of citizens, various representatives of several guilds and cultural associations garlanded Yudhisthira, his brothers and Sri Krishna. Virgins received Draupadi and Yudhisthira with the customary offerings of flowers and camphor lights. Ladies showered flower petals on the procession from their balconies. Dharmaputra was crowned king with all regal pomp and fanfare, amidst the chanting of sacred scriptures and sprinkling of holy waters.

ANUSASANIKA PARVA

137

The Instruction

Yudhisthira used to go to Bhishma every day, and receive instruction on various subjects. Anusasaniika Parva, the treatise on the ethical law is a continuation of the Santi Parva.

The fame attained by the Mahabharata as the fifth Veda is largely due to Santi and Anusasaniika treatises which form an encyclopaedia of ancient Indian learning on economics and ethics, politics and philosophy.

At the end of the instruction, Yudhisthira put a pertinent question to Bhishma, "Great soul, I have listened to several discourses and doctrines enunciated by you. Which is the best way for redemption."

Bhishma answered the question in his own inimitable way. "Dharmaputra, I am only a codifier. I have presented to you several perspectives. All these are relative concepts. It is for you to choose your own path, in the context of time, space and persons involved. There is no singular royal road to 'Self-realisation'. Some by asceticism, some by householdership, some by penance, some by renunciation, some by action, some by knowledge, some by sacrifices, some by selfless-service, some by charitable endowments and some others by devotion to God, attain emancipation. It is sheer stupidity and superstition to suppose that the way one threads is the only one or the best one for salvation. All rivers reach the ultimate ocean. Let no one forget that we all live in a world of relativity."

Bhishma the embodiment of encyclopaedic knowledge preferred the path of prayer and died as a devotee. Just before his death he was in a prayerful mood and uttered, "Lord, I have no wife; I have no children; I coveted nothing. You are my sole refuge; please accept my self-surrender and save me. I solicit your grace."

Bhishma attained heaven on the day when the sun turned north in the ecliptic; popularly known as uttarayana, the winter solstice.

Yudhisthira made all the arrangements for the funeral and obituary ceremonies with meticulous care in accordance with the sacred scriptures. After performing the ceremonies, Dharmaputra swooned on the sands of the Ganges. Bhima and his brothers rendered the first aid. Dhritarashtra said to Yudhisthira, "My dear son, you are a sensitive soul. You are blameless. Your duty is to rule the kingdom, assisted by your able brothers. I was a fool not to heed the wise words of Vidura. I have lost my sons; still I am living. Now you are my son, who will look after me and Gandhari, if you loose heart?"

Dharmaputra was happy at the words of solace uttered by Dhritarashtra and ruled over the kingdom with fairness and justice. He allotted the palaces of Duryodhana and Duhsasana to Bhima and Arjuna respectively. Nakula and Sahadeva were provided with equally good residences.

Dharmaputra ordered that Dhritarashtra should be treated with due respect. In fact, he announced that he was only a regent of the blind emperor. The ambassadors and visiting dignitaries were first introduced to him. Dhritarashtra was very much pleased with the conduct of Dharmaputra and his brothers with the exception of Bhima who respected the blind king publicly but insulted him privately. When he was in the company of Dhritarashtra alone, he used to say aloud holding out his right hand, "O, my dear right hand, you have killed ninety-nine Kaurava villains; my hearty congratulations, unfortunately one good Kaurava was also killed by you." He meant Vikarna by his reference to the one.

Dhritarashtra put up with the insolent affronts of Bhima, without reporting the matter to Dharmaputra. Kunti treated Gandhari with sisterly affection.

The kindness and courtesy showered by Dharmaputra and Kunti were sometimes more painful to Dhritarashtra who was suffering from a guilty conscience than the rudeness displayed by Bhima.

ASVAMEDHA PARVA

138

Sri Krishna's Exit

Sri Krishna told the Pandavas that it was high time for him to return to Dvaraka

Arjuna said to Sri Krishna. "Great soul, you have inspired me at the commencement of the great war with your words of wisdom, illuminating my mind. I am not able to recapitulate them in toto. I seek enlightenment once more." Sri Krishna smiled and said, "Those words were verily the epitome of the Vedas and the Upanishads, the sum and substance of all the sacred scriptures. The Gita sprang forth from the divine depths of my spiritual being, spurred by the need of the hour to expound the eternal verities of human existence with the proselytizing perspective. It was delivered in that momentous context within the back-ground of the brave battlefield of Kurukshetra, when the fate of human history hanged in the balance involving a most incredible stake which is bound to astound the world for ever. Now it is impossible for me to recapture those syllables or sentiments. All that I can give you at present is a prosaic paraphrase instead of the poetic philosophy."

Sri Krishna enumerated, "Brahmana Gitas," enunciating the spiritual wisdom acquired by ancient saints and savants, giving several illustrations and quoting from varied authorities. The dialogue between the human mind and the five senses, the nature of the soul, the conversations between the God of Death and the philosopher king Janaka, the nature of the ego, the concept of Truth were the subjects on which Sri Krishna gave instruction to Arjuna.

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Udanka

Sri Krishna took leave of the Pandavas and started on his journey to Dvaraka, with Satyaki and Subhadra. On the way he stopped at the hermitage of Udanka, his boyhood-friend. The

hermitage was situated in the midst of a barren desert, far removed from urban civilization. Udanka received Sri Krishna with the customary hospitalities. During the course of normal enquiries, Udanka asked Sri Krishna, "I hope your cousins, the Pandavas and Kauravas are prosperous, united by the usual bonds of brotherhood. Even if some differences arise, I am sure, you must have played a constructive role to patch up their disputes. I know your dynamic leadership and capacity for reconciliation." Sri Krishna was astounded at the question and was at a loss to devise a suitable reply. He kept quiet for a while in stunned silence.

Udanka was a brahmin recluse, living in a remote rural hermitage and he did not know anything about the Kurukshetra war. His innocent enquiries smacked sarcasm and Sri Krishna was placed in an embarrassing position. At last, Sri Krishna pulled himself up and politely told him what had happened. But Udanka was not convinced at the role Sri Krishna played. He said to Sri Krishna, "I am aghast at the tragedy. What were you doing? Shame on you! You did not stop the war; I do not believe that you lacked the capacity; you offered clandestine encouragement or enjoyed the fun. It is not merely the Kauravas and the Pandavas that fought. The whole continent of Bharatavarsha was involved in the tragedy. I want to curse you for your dereliction of duty."

Sri Krishna replied, "Impractical idealist, please listen to me. Why do you want to waste your accumulated penance in cursing me? You can do it after listening to my explanation if you still feel that I am the culprit."

"Then tell me what you did to avert the colossal catastrophe" thundered Udanka.

Sri Krishna told him, "Sensitive soul, I went to the Kaurava court as a mediator. I exhausted my powers of persuasion. Dharmaputra was not a war-monger. He loved peace. The Kauravas were adamant. I even exhibited my universal form to the Kauravas. What more proof do you want for my sincerity?"

Udanka was convinced and said, "Dear friend, how fortunate the Kauravas were! I request you to show me your universal form."

Sri Krishna exhibited his universal form to Udanka who was transported to ecstasy. He said, "Lord, I have mistaken you to be my friend; however I am fortunate. I am able to see your cosmic form which is beyond the compass of intellectual comprehension and the sphere of semantics."

Sri Krishna said, "Beloved friend, please ask any boon, I will give it. Udanka exclaimed, "What more boon do I want? Anyway as you are pleased to ask me, I request you to favour me with water whenever I desire."

Sri Krishna smiled and said, "Yes, you shall have it, God dare not appear before a desert dweller except in the form of water."

Sri Krishna took leave of Udanka and departed for Dvaraka.

One day, as the story goes, Udanka was very thirsty having wandered in the desert for a longtime and he longed for water. Then a barbarian Nishada came to him followed by hunting dogs, carrying a water bag made of camel skin over his shoulder. The Nishada offered water to Udanka, but he refused it, as the pious brahmin considered Nishada to be an untouchable. The Nishada pressed him to accept the water. Udanka replied in rage "Filthy brute, how do you expect me to partake of your dirty water."

The Nishada suddenly disappeared. Udanka realised that he failed in the test to which Sri Krishna put him. He thought of Sri Krishna who immediately manifested before him, and said, "Great sage, you are not able to utilise the boon conferred on you, because of your egotism. An intellectual and the untouchable are equal in the eye of a real brahmin. Your philosophy and penance have not stood by you at the crucial juncture. The so-called untouchables are drawers of water and hewers of wood for the society; you are the poorer, materially and spiritually, if you discard them. In fact, his water bag contains nectar. I wanted to give you amrita and asked Indra for it. He said that he would send it to you through the Nishada, to test your spiritual advancement. I accepted the proposition, fondly hoping that a realised soul like you, would not belittle a fellow human being."

Udanka hanged his head in shame and said, "Purushottama, I am an arrogant idiot; I am not yet a realised soul. I accept that I

do not deserve water, not to speak of nectar. I am glad I have your grace. The practical instruction you have given me in philosophy, is more valuable to me than the divine nectar.”

Sri Krishna disappeared and Udanka repaired to his hermitage.

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The Still-Born Child

Veda Vyasa came to Yudhishthira and exhorted him to perform the Asvamedha yaga. He said, “You need not fear that your exchequer is not full. An ancient emperor Marut has consigned his immense treasures, gold, silver and precious gems to the secret safe-vaults in the Himalayan recesses. You can excavate them and utilise them towards expenditure for the horse-sacrifice. I will follow you and locate them for you.”

Yudhishthira took the permission of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, Vidura and Kunti to perform the Horse-sacrifice. He appointed Yuyutsu and Vidura to guard the city and sent invitation to Sri Krishna to come and supervise the arrangements. The Pandavas started for the Himalayas in chariots together with Veda Vyasa followed by their army.

Sri Krishna came to Hastinapura alongwith the Yadava contingent consisting of Balarama, Satyaki, Kritavarma, Charudeshna, Samba and Vasudeva. Subhadra returned along with them. Dhritarashtra, followed by Yuyutsu and Vidura received the Yadava party at the city gates with the customary hospitalities. After a few days, Uttara gave birth to a child. The midwife shouted saying ‘Son, Son’. But the jubilation was short lived. It was a still-born child. Subhadra wept bitterly, saying “The dynasty of the Pandavas has come to an end”; Draupadi said to Sri Krishna, “Achyuta, obviously this is the effect of the invisible radiation of the Brahmasira missile, hurled by Asvatthama. Uttara has swooned and Kunti is speechless. You are our sole refuge.” Meanwhile, Uttara regained consciousness and placed the child into the hands of Sri Krishna, saying “You are our sole refuge.”

Sri Krishna, placed the child on his lap and said aloud sprinkling water over its body, “If I have acquired any virtue or

value by following assiduously the path of truth and integrity, I want this child to regain its life immediately." At once, signs of animation were visible in the child, and it cried. Paradoxically, the outcry of the child was the cause of all-round rejoicing. Uttara bowed to the feet of Sri Krishna who blessed her.

The Pandavas returned from the Himalayan expedition bringing along with them the immense treasures of Marut loaded on thousands of elephants and camels, chariots and horses.

Yudhisthira learnt that the child of Uttara was resuscitated to life by Sri Krishna in their absence and thanked him. Veda Vyasa gave the child, the name of Parikshit, meaning 'one who was protected'.

Yudhisthira requested Dhaumya and Veda Vyasa to initiate the arrangements for the Asvamedha Yaga.

The sacrificial horse was let loose and Arjuna was appointed guardian. Yudhisthira told Arjuna, "This is only a formal reassertion of our supreme sovereignty. I want you to be tactful and return victorious without shedding a single drop of blood. We have had enough war. 'Defeat but do not kill' must be our motto. I want victory without blood-shed. I do not want flowers; please bring me the fragrance."

Arjuna, followed the sacrificial horse to carry out the customary conquest.

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The Asvamedha

The sacrificial horse reached the Trigarta country. The ruler of the country, Suryavarma and his son Ketuvarma attacked Arjuna who vanquished them easily and invited them to the sacrifice. Afterwards, Arjuna was challenged by Vajradatta, the son of Bhagadatta and the king of Pragiyotisha. He said to Arjuna, "You have killed my old father. That is no credit to you. I am young and energetic and I am awaiting this opportunity to defeat you." Arjuna smiled and started the fight. Vajradatta was

defeated and he acknowledged the sovereignty of Yudhisthira. Likewise, the king of Magadha, the son of Sahadeva was subdued.

When the horse reached Sindh, the son of Jayadratha died of heart failure, as he learnt that Arjuna came on an expedition. Dussala, the daughter of Dhritarashtra, came to Arjuna holding her grandchild in her arms. She said to him "Great brother, please spare this child." Arjuna told her, "Beloved sister, a warrior's life is most wretched. I have killed your husband; your son died of shock. I am very sorry." Tears rolled down his cheeks as he spoke. He added "I wish your grandson long life, prosperity and peace."

Afterwards, Arjuna moved to Manipur along with the horse. Babhruvahana, the son of Arjuna by Chitrangada, came to the city gates to welcome his father. But Arjuna snubbed him saying, "Young man, I have come here with the sacrificial horse, not as your father, to receive welcome addresses; if you are a hero, stop the horse." Babhruvahana was nonplussed and repaired to his palace.

Uluchi, the Naga wife of Arjuna came to Manipur from the serpent land and told Babhruvahana, "My dear son; be a worthy son of the worthy father. Your great father naturally wants you to be a greater hero. Meek submission is unbecoming of you." His mother Chitrangada too exhorted him likewise. Encouraged by his mothers, he stopped the sacrificial horse and challenged Arjuna to a fight. He entered the battlefield, displaying the swan standard. The father and the son fought for a longwhile excelling each other and parrying each other's shafts successfully. Eventually, both Arjuna and Babhruvahana fell on the battlefield struck by shafts released simultaneously by each other.

Chitrangada came to the battlefield and swooned. Regaining consciousness after sometime, she wept bitterly. She said to Uluchi, "Sister, it is a pity that we lost the husband and the son at the same time. We are most unfortunate. We encouraged the fight. What a foolishness!"

However, Babhruvahana regained consciousness after some-time. But he was stricken with remorse. He said to his mother, "The disciples of Yajnavalkya, learned brahmins who are

following the sacrificial horse are here. How can I face them? It is sin to kill a good man, king or a hero. It is the worst sin to kill the father. I am guilty of all these crimes put together, as my father is a good man, a hero and a king. I have made up my mind to give up my life by fasting unto death."

Uluchi came forward with the gem called, "Sanjivani" and said to Chitrangada and Babhruvahana, "Don't be afraid; I can bring back Arjuna to life with the help of this gem."

Accordingly, Uluchi invoked the power of the gem by placing it on the heart of Arjuna who at once came to life. He said to Babhruvahana, "I wanted to test your heroism; but I am surprised to see Chitrangada and Uluchi here. What is the matter?" Uluchi replied, "My lord, the Ganges has cursed you; she was angry with you that you were responsible for the fall of Bhishma whom you attacked unjustly from behind Sikhandi. You have paid the penalty now. You are rid of the sin here and now on the earth and you have escaped hell."

Arjuna was pleased with the explanation. He invited all of them to come to Hastinapura for attending the Asvamedha Yaga which was to take place on the first fullmoon day in the ensuing spring. Babhruvahana requested him to stay with him in his palace, but Arjuna declined the invitation politely, saying, "My dear son, I am now dedicated to the sacred duty of guarding the sacrificial horse. I cannot enter the royal palace. All luxurious entertainments are tabooed by the scriptures."

Arjuna conquered the Gandharas and returned to Hastinapura along with the sacrificial horse. Earlier, Babhruvahana, Chitrangada and Uluchi arrived and they were welcomed affectionately by Yudhisthira. Kunti, Subhadra and Draupadi received them warmly.

Asvamedha Yaga was performed by Yudhisthira with all pomp and pageantry. It excelled the Rajasuya Yaga in splendour and expenditure. All the princes attended the sacrifice. The brahmins received bounteous gifts. The poor and the needy were amply rewarded. Sri Krishna complimented Dharmaputra saying, "Great soul, there will not be a beggar in India in our generation.

There is now no pauper in the land except yourself as you have exhausted your exchequer in toto."

The brothers of Dharmaputra were proud of their brother, who has gifted away all the wealth to the last pie. The learned brahmins exclaimed unanimously, "In the past, present or future, Dharmaputra is unrivalled as the greatest donor who has given away the greatest amount to the largest number."

The princes who attended the sacrifice were presented with elephants and horses; Babhruvahana was given gold and silver in addition to precious gems. He went back to Manipur while Chitrangada and Uluchi stayed at Hastinapura. Balarama, Sri Krishna and Satyaki were honoured specially. They ~~went~~ went back to Dwaraka taking leave of the Pandavas.

Janamejaya asked Vaisampayana, "Great scholar, you have given the traditional account of the Asvamedha Yaga. I am delighted at the noble example set by my great grandfather in emptying the exchequer, to the last pie towards charitable endowments. Please narrate to me in detail that which you consider to be the most noteworthy incident. I want your frank opinion. You are a great scholar. For you, Truth is God. Truth is beauty. Even the great intellectuals usually want to please the ruling sovereign, and pamper to his taste. I am happy, you have not portrayed Duryodhana and his party as mere villains of the piece. You have extolled their virtues as well. You have not failed to point out the foibles of the Pandavas. I have been thrilled all these days listening to your narration along with the enlightened audience gathered here on the occasion of this serpent sacrifice. I am sure, future generations will also be thrilled whenever they listen to this captivating story."

Vaisampayana replied, "Listen then, great king, to the following episode which will answer your enlightened enquiry." He then narrated the story of the golden weasel.

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Saktuprastha

During the Convocation of the Asvamedha Yaga, a strange weasel entered the pavilion, moved hither and thither, rolled in

the stray waters and created a lively scene. It had a golden head and half of its body was gold. Nakula rushed to catch it. But it said in human voice laughing aloud, "Stop, you need not catch me, I have not come to run away." Nakula was amazed and intrigued at its derisive laughter and its human voice.

He asked, "Who are you?"

The weasel put a counter question "Who are you?"

Nakula replied, "Don't you know, I am Nakula."

The weasel retorted, "Don't you know, I am also Nakula."

In the Sanskrit language, Nakula means weasel.

Everybody had a hearty laughter. The weasel too laughed derisively exploiting the discomfiture of Nakula, who exclaimed, "It is evident that you are not a mere weasel. This is a solemn occasion. Your cynical laughter is a sacrilege to the sacred atmosphere of this holy sacrifice acclaimed by the enlightened as the greatest in the history of mankind. Evidently you are an evil spirit, which has taken this strange shape. An evil genius can malign and mock at the most magnificent venture in the universe."

The weasel replied, "I have come to test the greatness of this sacrifice in my own humble way as I have tested innumerable sacrifices performed by the six emperors and the sixteen great kings of history.

"But none came up to my expectation. Earlier, in my first experience of a sacrifice, my head and half of my body turned into gold. Since then, I am testing every sacrifice so that my whole body turns gold. I am no evil spirit, I have come with the best of intentions."

Nakula said, "Then roll on, on this holy ground and the stray sacred waters. Your whole body, I am sure, will turn into pure gold."

The weasel rolled on the watery ground and nothing happened. It said "Great prince, I am sorry to remark that the Asvamedha of your noble brother has not come up to that standard of the sacrifice I have mentioned. I have great respect for

Dharmaputra. All the pomp and pageantry, show and splendour of your Asvamedha Yaga is not really a sacrifice in the strictest sense of the term. It is not envy that makes me utter these words. It is my esoteric experience which I gained from the sacred sacrifice of a poor brahmin family. I know that to be spiritually greater than this Asvamedha.”

Dharmaputra requested the weasel with folded hands to relate the story of the poor brahmin family. The weasel narrated the story.

“Once upon a time, long long before the great war, a poor brahmin Saktuprastha, by name lived in Kurukshetra. He was living with his wife, son and daughter-in-law. They took the vow of “Uncha Vritti.” Their disciplined life consisted of the following rules and regulations.

1. They should live by gleaning scattered grain from the cornfields.
2. They should eat to live and not live to eat.
3. They should only have one meal per day in the afternoon.
4. They should not acquire any private property.
5. No grain or flour or food should be hoarded for the next day.
6. They should not be parasites on society. Begging, borrowing, not to speak of stealing, were taboos.

They followed the strict discipline for many days. Sometimes they went without food and subsisted on water only.

After sometime, there was famine all over the land; they could not get sufficient grain to be gleaned, as the cornfields were left fallow due to drought. They used to glean some maize and pound it into flour, boil it in water and drink it.

One day in the afternoon when they were about to partake of the flour drink after saying the usual prayers to god, a guest arrived suddenly. The family received the guest, a learned brahmin with the usual hospitalities. Saktuprastha told the stranger, “An uninvited guest is verily equal to the almighty God Vishnu. It is our good fortune, that you have chosen to be our

guest to-day." The guest replied, "In these days of drought and famine, a guest is considered to be a veritable god of Death." Saktuprastha protested politely, "We sincerely welcome you. If welcome is the daintiest dish of a feast, then you can feast on our welcome, if not on our humble flour offering." So saying, Saktuprastha offered his share of the food to the guest. The guest ate the meagre food — the flour paste but he looked dissatisfied. The host felt helpless. But the wife of Saktuprastha said to him, "Please offer my share of the food to the hungry guest. As your partner in life, it is my duty to co-operate with you. We must sail or sink together, having been united in holy wedlock."

Saktuprastha exclaimed, "If I deprive you of your share, I will rank below the brute and the bird, who show greater regard and affection towards their female mates than man. I am mentally upset." The wife insisted saying, "My lord, if you do not accept my proposal, this food is poison for me. A wife who feeds herself while the husband is starving is worse than a devil. This food will go waste as I am not going to eat it. Instead it will be nectar to the hungry guest, please give it to him." Saktuprastha gave the food, the share of his wife, to the guest who ate it heartily. But even then he looked famished and hungry.

Saktuprastha's son asked his father to offer his share as well to the guest. But the father said to the son, "My dear child, the animals and the fowls feed their offspring affectionately. How can I take away your share?" But the son replied, "A son cannot call himself a son when he feasts while his father and mother fast.

"Being your son, I am not afraid of poverty, but I am afraid of impropriety. Anyway starvation is no sin as gluttony is. I am not going to touch my share which now rightly belongs to the revered guest.

Saktuprastha served his son's share of the food to the stranger who gulped it in haste. Still his hunger was not quenched.

Immediately the daughter-in-law of the house came forward to forego her share of the food; Saktuprastha nervously thought aloud, "Dear daughter, you have come to us from a different house. We have no right to deprive you of your share." But she

persisted saying, "You are the head of the household. I am an eye-witness to your idealism and nobility. I must follow the good example set by you." She did not stop for a reply and served her portion of the food to the guest saying, "Noble brahmin, I have the privilege to serve you now at the instance of my revered father-in-law." The guest ate the food to his heart's content and said "I am satisfied" and added pronouncing the traditional benediction, "May the host who has given the food be happy for ever." The satisfaction of the guest was reflected fourfold in the four faces of the members of the family. Starvation, as a result of altruism gives greater satisfaction than the most sumptuous feast.

With folded hands, Saktuprastha complimented the guest saying, "Revered Sir, 'God is everywhere', we are told but never could I see God anywhere all these days. But to-day I realise that one can see God in the eyes of a satisfied guest. You are not merely a guest. You are the harbinger of my self-realisation." "There you are" announced the guest, "I am not a mere guest. I am Yama, the god of righteousness, I have come to test you. There, see, the gods are looking at you. Brahma, the creator of the universe, has sent his aeroplane to take your family to him."

The aeroplane arrived. The family got into it escorted by the god of righteousness. There were showers of celestial flowers which rained over them as they emplaned to the accompaniment of divine drums."

There was loud applause from the learned brahmins who heard the story narrated by the weasel with reverent and rapt attention.

The weasel concluded, "Great soul, extravagant expenditure or donating ill-gotten wealth is no sacrifice. That which is acquired by the honest sweat of the brow must be donated. Selfless sacrifice is the soul of a gift. If you give away what is superfluous without which you can easily get on, is no sacrifice in the spiritual sense of the term. When I rolled in the scanty waters with which Saktuprastha washed the feet of his guest, my head and half my body was converted into gold. I hope, you will agree with me that the sacrifice of the poor brahmin is greater than all the Asvamedhas performed by the successive emperors in our history

up-to-date. Sacrificing the life of an animal is not a sacrifice at all. Fundamentally it is a sin. Sacrifice, if there must be, must be performed with the flour of the grain which are more than three years old.”

The brahmins nodded their heads in stunned silence and sublime approbation.

Yudhisthira said to the weasel with folded hands, “Great soul, you have knocked down my egotism and the arrogance of my brothers. I accept your verdict with all humility.”

The weasel suddenly disappeared. Vaisampayana explained to Janamejaya that the sage Jamadagni was born as the weasel. Janamejaya asked Vaisampayana to narrate the story of Jamadagni. Vaisampayana told the story.

One day Jamadagni was milking the cow. The god of anger came and broke the milk pot. But Jamadagni did not lose temper.

The god of anger fell at his feet and said, “Your dynasty is known for its anger. I wanted to test you but you have passed the test in flying colours.” The sage smiled and kept quiet. But the souls of his forefathers were angry and cursed him to be born as a weasel. Jamadagni begged for pardon. They said, “You will be redeemed when you can contradict and convince a learned body of great intellectuals that what they did was wrong at the height of their achievement and glory.” Jamadagni obtained redemption by delivering the de facto convocation address at the Asvamedha Yaga of Dharmaputra in the shape of the weasel.

ASRAMAVASA PARVA

143

Death of Dhritarashtra

Yudhisthira gained reputation as a noble and just king. He was very considerate towards Dhritarashtra. Draupadi used to serve Kunti and Gandhari bestowing on them her personal attention. After fifteen years, Dhritarashtra told Yudhisthira "My dear son, you have treated me with great affection. It is the tradition of great kings to repair to the forest in the evening of their lives. I want to follow the great tradition. Please permit me to go."

Dharmaputra argued with him vehemently and requested him to stay in the palace. But Dhritarashtra was adamant. He said, "I want to go to the forest, not because I am angry with you, but I must go there for self-realisation. I do not want to die here of paralysis. I wish to spend my last days in penance."

Veda Vyasa endorsed the idea of Dhritarashtra. At last, Dharmaputra gave his consent. Dhritarashtra though blind was physically strong. In his youthful days he was credited with the strength of a hundred elephants. But on the eve of his departure to the forest, he was almost a skeleton and leaned on the shoulder of Gandhari who in turn took the hand of Kunti for guidance. The citizens of Hastinapura gathered at the city gates to bid farewell to him. Sanjaya and Vidura followed him.

Kunti told Dharmaputra, "My dear son, you are a learned scholar with a noble character. I need not tell you anything. Please look after Karna's wife and family. Bestow your personal attention and special affection on Sahadeva. I am also going to the forest to seek spiritual solace."

The Pandavas did not expect Kunti to go to the forest. They requested Kunti to stay on. Dharmaputra said to Kunti, "Dear mother, we feel orphaned in your absence. You can daily perform religious rites and give charitable endowments while living in the palace."

Kunti replied, "I have decided to go to the forest and my mind is not on mundane luxuries."

The Pandavas took leave of Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Vidura, Sanjaya and Kunti after escorting them up to a distance and returned to Hastinapura.

Dhritarashtra set up a hermitage on the banks of the Bhagirathi in the Himalayan forests. After two years, the Pandavas paid a visit to the hermitage and enquired after their welfare. At that time, Vidura attained heaven by means of penance and his spiritual radiance merged itself with Dharmaputra's personality. The Pandavas returned to Hastinapura.

After sometime, one day when Dhritarashtra was offering his evening oblations, the forest caught fire. The wind blew and the flames were spreading. He told Sanjaya to save himself. He said, "I order you to go away. We are old enough and wish to offer ourselves to the god of fire."

Sanjaya escaped. Kunti, Gandhari and Dhritarashtra sat on the mats of holy grass facing east and calmly gave themselves up to flames chanting sacred hymns.

Sanjaya spent the rest of his life as a Sannyasi in the Himalayas; Yudhisthira who learnt about the fire accident after sometime performed the obituary rites for the departed souls in accordance with scriptural injunctions.

MAUSALA PARVA

144

The Drunken Debacle

Sri Krishna ruled over Dvaraka for thirty years after the great war. The Yadavas enjoyed uninterrupted peace, plenty and prosperity for over three decades. They faced no serious challenges. Lack of exercise and the need for discipline and unity drove the Bhojas and Vrishnis, subjects amongst the Yadavas to internal dissensions. All-round degeneration set in the Yadavas who became arrogant and indulged in unrestrained self-indulgence and luxury.

One day some sages came to Dvaraka to see Krishna. The frivolous Yadavas dressed up a youth Samba as a pregnant woman and took him to the rishis and said, "Great souls, you are credited with prophetic vision. We want to know whether this woman will give birth to a boy or a girl." The rishis were offended and said, "He will give birth to an iron mace which will provide the death knock to the Yadava race and their glory." After some months, Samba, to the consternation of his comrades, developed labour pains and gave birth to the iron mace.

They never expected that the practical joke they played on the rishis for fun and frolic would boomerang on them with fatal ferocity. They went to Sri Krishna and narrated the story. He said, "Liberty has degenerated into license in Dvaraka. I am sorry, you have offended the sages. Anyway, please grind the iron mace into fine powder and scatter it into the sea." They followed the advice of Sri Krishna and ground the mace into iron dust until a small cone remained. They threw the powder into the sea. The waves collected the dust on to the shore where sprang up a dense cluster of rushes. The cone was picked up by a hunter who used it as an arrowhead. Thus the Yadavas were satisfied that the dismal danger was averted. Afterwards, the Yadavas forgot all about the curse and the iron mace.

The Yadavas were fond of festivals. One day they organised a grand festival on the sea-shore. The people gathered there in large

numbers and they revelled in dance and drink. The great war of Kurukshetra formed a fond subject of recollection ever since wherever people gathered in large numbers all over India. Warriors who took part in it, were regarded as national champions and historic heroes. Even after thirty six years of its occurrence, the repercussions of the great war were felt in the Yadava Kingdom. Kritavarma fought on the Kaurava side, while Satyaki fought on the Pandava side. The war of the giants was over but the quarrels of the pigmies persisted. Some drunken Yadavas criticised Kritavarma for killing sleeping warriors. Satyaki unwittingly became their leader spokesman. At the outset, it started as a democratic debate, and a merry discussion. Soon the mischief of liquor was evident.

Satyaki said, "Kritavarma, no soldier will ever degrade himself to kill sleeping warriors. You were a coldblooded murderer. Yadavas are ashamed of you, and your barbarous behaviour."

Kritavarma retorted vehemently as he could not brooke public ridicule in the midst of the festive gathering. He retorted, "You are worse than a bloody butcher. You escaped death at the hands of Bhurisrava by the sheer grace of Arjuna. You killed Bhurisrava when he lost his right hand. Is it not cruel murder perpetrated in broad daylight shamelessly?"

Immediately Satyaki sprang upon Kritavarma and cut off his head with his sword. Kritavarma's followers attacked Satyaki. Soon, all the Yadavas were involved in the fight. The rushes which grew abundantly on the sea-shore came in handy. It was a 'free for all fight'. There was no question of a friend or a foe. The Yadavas perished in large numbers. Pradyumna who went to the rescue of Satyaki was attacked and they both lost their lives in the drunken brawl. Sri Krishna who saw his son killed in the conflict joined the fray and killed many indiscriminately. Every Yadava took part in the fighting following the example set by Sri Krishna, using the overgrown rushes in insane fury.

Balarama was overwhelmed with shame at the drunken debacle as he was a helpless spectator to the prophesied doom of the Yadava race. He sank to the ground in disgust and despair. He

fell into a trance and gave up his life. A stream of light emerged from his forehead in the shape of a silver serpent which flew to heaven.

Sri Krishna stretched himself on the beach in a meditative mood, amidst the shrubs. He was immersed in deep contemplation. His physical frame was attuning itself to the posture of transcendental trance from head to foot with the exception of his shaking toe. Exactly at that moment, the hunter who picked up the cone from the cursed iron mace shot a shaft at Sri Krishna's toe with the arrowhead, mistaking it to be a deer's horn. It struck his foot in the instep and pierced his body.

Thus the Avatar of Sri Krishna came to an end.

Daruka conveyed the news of the demise of Sri Krishna to the Pandavas. They were plunged into grief and gloom. Yudhisthira said to his brothers, "Our friend, philosopher and guide has gone. It is high time for us to go." He asked Arjuna to go to Dvaraka to console the consorts of Sri Krishna and console Vasudeva, his aged father.

Arjuna went to Dvaraka. Vasudeva received Arjuna affectionately in spite of his grief. Arjuna made arrangements to move Sri Krishna's queens and others out of Dvaraka, which was in imminent danger of being submerged into the ocean. Vasudeva died unable to bear the shock of bereavement. Arjuna performed the obituary rights for Vasudeva, Balarama and Sri Krishna. Immediately afterwards, the royal caravan started for Hastinapura from Dvaraka. It consisted of chariots and cavalry, camels and cows and included all the important personalities like Rukmini, Satyabhama, Jambavati and queens of Sri Krishna.

On the way the caravan was attacked by the barbarians. They looted the gold and jewellery. Arjuna tried to stop the bandits but they overpowered him. Arrows from the Gandiva could not deter them. They abducted some women. Some women did not resist the robbers and accompanied them willingly. With very great difficulty, Arjuna could salvage the important queens of Sri Krishna, like Rukmini, Satyabhama and Jambavati.

The Pandavas installed the son of Kritavarma as the king of Mrittikavarapura and the son of Satyaki as the king of Sarasvati.

Vajra, the grandson of Sri Krishna was crowned king of Indraprastha. The chariots, cavarly and elephants were equally divided amongst them.

Rukmini and Jambavati and some other consorts of Sri Krishna immolated themselves on holy pyre. Satyabhama and others repaired to the forest.

Vyasa came to the Pandavas and gave a lecture on the inexorable march of time. "Change he said, is the soul of time. The old order changes yielding place to new. The most up-to-date as well as the most archaic, the most natural and the most abiding in the universe is 'change'. If you understand the secret of time and change, you are a realised soul. Don't grieve over the death of Sri Krishna. But ponder over your future programme." Bhagavan Vyasa departed after exhorting the Pandavas to seek self-realisation.

Yudhisthira said to his brothers, "Sri Krishna is dead. The Kaliyuga has dawned. "Time" is mysterious, inscrutable and incomprehensible. Time can only be compared with Time. Time is infinite. Time leads everything in the universe to its culmination.

"Human life is a sublime sojourn on this planet; let us not overstay and outlive our purpose. It is time for us to understand the philosophic connotation of our lives and move voluntarily towards our destiny and destination." The Pandavas conferred amongst themselves and decided to undertake 'Mahaprasthan', the great journey.

MAHAPRASTHANIKA & SVARGAROHANA

PARVAS

145

The Mahaprasthanika

Parikshit, the son of Abhimanyu, was crowned king and placed on the throne of Hastinapura with all pomp and pageantry by the Pandavas. Kripacharya was appointed as the royal preceptor. Yudhisthira endowed Kripa with immense wealth and entrusted the prince to his especial care. Yuyutsu was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief.

Dharmaputra said to Subhadra, "Your grand son is the king of Hastinapura and your nephew, the grandson of your brother Sri Krishna, is the ruler of Indraprastha. Now, you are the ipso facto guardian of the Pandava and Yadava races. We expect you to stay on in the interests of the two states and the subjects."

The Pandavas gave innumerable gifts and endowments to Dhaumya and obtained his benediction. Yudhisthira, his brothers and Draupadi changed their royal robes to coarse clothing and started on their great journey as pilgrims in quest of spiritual peace. The citizens and Yuyutsu followed them up to the banks of the Ganges and bade them the traditional farewell. Chitrangada went back to her son, Babhravahana and Uluchi to the serpent world in accordance with the behest of Arjuna. The pilgrims visited all the holy places in the four corners of Bharatavarsha. When they reached the eastern ocean, the God of Fire appeared before them and told Arjuna, "You have renounced everything in this world excepting the Gandiva bow. Pilgrim's progress requires the giving up of the last vestiges of attachment." Arjuna threw away the Gandiva bow into the great ocean. As the bow was being submerged by the waves of the sea, the God of fire disappeared.

After completing the pilgrimage, the Pandavas reached the Himalayas and continued their journey towards mount Meru. Dharmaputra said, "Now, nothing is with us and we are not competent to take anything with us excepting righteousness.

Curiously, a dog is following us all these days, and I do not have the heart to forsake it." The dog wagged its tail and proceeded preceding the party. They continued their onward march.

Draupadi was the first to give up the mortal frame. Bhima said to Dharmaputra, "Noble soul, it is sad that this faultless lady fell a prey to death." Dharmaputra replied, "Nobody is perfect. Death is no catastrophe." Bhima said, "I am conscious of her virtues. Kindly tell me, if she has any blemish." Yudhishthira replied, "She was perfect in every way but she evinced secret partiality towards Arjuna." The pilgrim party moved on.

Next to fall was Sahadeva. Bhima put a similar question and Dharmaputra said, "Sahadeva was perfect in every way but he suffered from egotism. He thought too much of himself."

The party proceeded further. Next it was the turn of Nakula to give up his ghost. Bhima questioned again. Yudhishthira replied, "Nakula, no doubt was perfect, but he was conscious of his handsome personality." They moved on.

Next, Arjuna breathed his last. Yudhishthira replied to the question put by Bhima, "Arjuna was the nearest approximation to all-round perfection but for his fastidiousness. He never recognised anybody as his equal."

Yudhishthira and Bhima then moved on together with the dog. Bhima fell down asking the question, "Great Brother, what is wrong with me; please tell me before I die." Yudhishthira said, "My dear brother, you are perfect in every-thing but for your gluttony."

Then Dharmaputra alone marched forward together with the dog. When he reached the mount Meru, the lord of Svarga, Indra came to him. He said to Yudhishthira, "Great soul, I am Indra, I have come to welcome you and take you to paradise. Please get into the celestial aeroplane." Yudhishthira replied, "How can I come to paradise without my brothers and Draupadi"? Indra replied, "Your brothers and Draupadi are already there." Dharmaputra looked at the dog and said, "May I come with this guest, who has followed me throughout my journey." Indra said, "It is a strange proposition. The dog has no place in the svarga.

Dharmaputra replied, "Then I do not want any place there. I prefer to stay out. It is not right on my part to leave the dog in the lurch. Sorry, you can go."

Indra was pleased at the sense of righteousness evinced by Dharmaputra. He said, "Yama, the god of righteousness is following you in the shape of this dog. You can come." The dog vanished and Yama appeared in its place and congratulated Dharmaputra, who went to Svarga along with Indra.

Yudhisthira, as soon as he reached svarga saw a strange sight. He found Duryodhana seated on a golden throne, surrounded by his brothers and warriors who fought on his side in the Kurukshetra war. There was a magnificent halo around his head and his face bloomed with celestial radiance. Yudhisthira remarked, "I am surprised to see this war-monger here in svarga resplendent with this rare glow and glory." The divine sage Narada who was standing beside him smiled and said, "You cannot judge people here with the earthly yardsticks. Heaven has different values of its own. People ranked as saints on the earth may go to hell and the so-called sinners from earth may reach the paradise."

Yudhisthira exclaimed, "I want to see my beloved brothers, Draupadi, and my elder brother, Karna, Drupada, Virata, and others who gave up their lives for me."

The celestial sages replied, "Dharmaputra, we are deputed by Indra to look after you. If you want to go to your people, we will provide you with an escort. You can go. This angel will take you to them."

Yudhisthira followed the angel, who led him through a zigzag path, covered with blood and bones, filth and offal. As they proceeded, darkness together with foul smell engulfed them. Winged worms were wriggling everywhere and he could not proceed further. Yudhisthira asked the angel, "I am horrified by this stench and I hear grimmest groans. I have a mind to go back."

The angel replied, "If you so desire, you can go back; but this is the place where your brothers and your people are." At once he

heard familiar voices, in loud lamentations saying, "Dharmaputra, please do not go back. Noble soul, let us inhale the sweet fragrance emanating from your body at least for a few seconds."

Yudhisthira enquired in baffled anguish, "Who are you? Why are you lamenting"? Out came the tumultuous replies,

"I am Karna", "I am Bhima", "I am Arjuna", "I am Nakula", "I am Sahadeva", "I am Draupadi", "I am Drupada", "Stop", cried aloud Yudhisthira, "I cannot bear this torment any longer. He closed his ears with his fingers. He said to the angel, "Alas, is this the divine dispensation! I am aghast at the perversity of justice, practised in paradise. The angel replied, "This is no paradise, we have come to Hell."

However, Indra appeared at the spot, followed by the divine sages. Indra said, 'Great king, nobody who ruled over a kingdom, nobody who exercised authority and wielded power on the earth, can ever escape hell, the inevitable destination for them. Even you, are no exception. For you, however, this is only a transitory experience.

"I realise," Yudhisthira cried aloud, "I uttered a lie to kill my preceptor; I killed Karna my own brother. I deserve a thousand hells. I want to be here with my people."

Indra intervened to say, "Dharmaputra, this is only a psychological illusion I have created for the sake of catharsis. This is no hell. your people are enjoying heavenly comforts. Still the earthly residues are persisting in your psychology."

Then Yama appeared before Dharmaputra and said, "My dear son, three times I have put you to severe test, once as Yaksha, then as the dog, now the illusory hell. Every time you emerged in flying colours."

Indra and Yama suggested to Yudhisthira to take bath in the Mandakini, the heavenly counter-part of the Ganges to rid himself completely of earthly residues. Dharmaputra took a bath in the Mandakini, and came out of the holy waters relinquishing the mortal frame. He then became a god and a distinguished denizen of Heaven.

Vaisampayana, narrated the story to King Janamejaya, the son of Parikshit. The saints and scholars gathered at the serpent sacrifice congratulated Vaisampayana on his exquisite exposition.

The suta Ugrasrava, son of Romaharshana, retold the story of the Mahabharata to the saints of Naimisa forest, headed by Kulapati Saunaka during the Sattrayaga.

The Kulapati said, "We consider the Mahabharata, the greatest achievement of the Sattrayaga, as the most glorious landmark in the cultural history of mankind and as the greatest heritage that India can bequeath to the following generations. The Mahabharata has added the fourth dimension to everybody who is associated with this Sattrayaga here, all these twelve years; please accept our hearty thanks and sincere congratulations."

Suta bowed to the assembly and the audience gave him thunderous ovation. The Suta said, in his convocation address concluding the Sattrayaga,

The Mahabharata is an encyclopaedia which deals with every subject under the sun.

Anything elsewhere is an echo of what is here! What is not here, is nowhere else.

The earnest reader of the Mahabharata is twice blessed, because he can secure the best of both the worlds-the sceptre here and salvation in the next.

Even a casual reader who comprehends a single sentence or a solitary syllable will find the epic to be a sublime spiritual sanctuary to which one can return for refuge securing comfort and consolation, confidence and candour. Anybody who masters the epic, will become a practical philosopher who can rise above Life's perplexities and puzzles, doubts and dilemmas and face all challenges with courage and conviction, scaling summits of prosperity and peace, success and self-realisation.

**THE
MAHABHARATA
PART II
A STUDY IN PERSPECTIVE**

THE MAHABHARATA

A CHRONOLOGICAL STUDY

1

Authorship of The Mahabharata—Vedavyasa

Mahabharata is known as the “VAIYASIKI”—The work of Vyasa. Tradition is emphatic that Veda Vyasa is the author of the Mahabharata. It is in the fitness of things that the erudite editor of the Vedas has composed the fifth Veda. Mahabharata is not a literary supplement of the Vedas. It is in the nature of a colossal commentary, a poetic paraphrase, a vivid vindication of the Vedic literature. It is an independent treatise interpreting the esoteric intricacies of the Vedic literature to one and all.

The initiated few could understand the Vedic teachings which bristle with apparent contradictions. The personality of Veda Vyasa is symbolic of the unitary synthesis, the spiritual symphony of the Vedic literature. Tikkana, who rendered the Mahabharata into Telugu in the thirteenth century, says explicitly that Krishna Dvaipayana composed the Mahabharata to uphold the Philosophy of Dharma-Advaita ‘The unity of Dharma’ by resolving the apparent contradictions and controversies found in the Vedic literature.¹ “Unity in diversity”, the Keynote of Indian culture, was first enunciated by Veda Vyasa and it is being echoed by successive saints and sages, philosophers and poets across succeeding centuries.

Veda Vyasa was a contemporary of the Mahabharata war. C.V. Vaidya opines, “That there was really a rishi by name Vyasa Parasharya, we find from the Black Yajuh Kathaka. There is no reason to doubt that he wrote a history of the war between the Kurus and the Panchalas from personal knowledge. The work evidently bears the impress of a narration by one who had an intimate acquaintance with the events it describes. Characters and people are described with vivacity and truthfulness which can only belong to the evidence of an eyewitness. Names, such as Srinjayas

1. *Anāhira Mahabharata*—Introduction to the Virata Parva.

are often mentioned without any introduction or description much in the way of a contemporary narrator who is never struck with the necessity of such an introduction or description. It is generally admitted that actors in the Mahabharata strike us as real beings. This is so, it will be admitted, because there is a nucleus in the poem, which is the composition of one who knows and not one who imagines. Nay, you sometimes come across statements of facts and sentiments which, like fossils not yet obliterated, give a clue to a bygone age. In short we think that there is ample ground to believe that there was an original author who wrote from personal knowledge and there is no harm in believing that the author was Vyasaparasarya."²

The original title of the work composed by Veda Vyasa was 'JAYA', meaning Victory. Veda Vyasa who was an eyewitness to the great war of Kurukshetra wrote the poem 'Jaya' (commemoration of the Victory gained by the Pandavas). Macdonell remarks that the length of the poem of Vyasa is mentioned as 8800 slokas. C.V. Vaidya opines that this figure refers to the Kuta slokas, riddles, and not to the number of slokas of Jaya.³

The industrious Vyasa, it was stated in the poem itself, has taken three years, working day and night to compose Jaya. Taking into account the felicity with which the Anustup Slokas can be composed by a gifted poet and the time taken it may be presumed that Jaya was a fairly long poem. The very first invocation verse mentions the title as Jaya "Tato jayamudirayet." This title is repeated in the last Parva as well.⁴

But the actual length of this poem cannot be ascertained with exactitude. However, the number of Kuta Slokas by any computation cannot reach the figure of 8800, as the ratio approximately comes to 1:12 of the original text and it is untenable.

The Mahabharata is classified as "ITIHASA" in Sanskrit literature. Iti-ha-asa literally means "verily it is what actually was." The English equivalent for the Sanskrit word Itihasa is History. *Gatha-Akhyana Upakhyana* -or the *Purana* are the other categories known to the Mahabharata. *Purana* means ancient lore.

2. The Mahabharata—a Criticism

3. The Mahabharata—a Criticism

4. Jayo nametihaso'yam—*Svargarohana Parva*

*Sargasca pratisargasca vamso manvantarani ca,
vamsanucharitam ceti puranam panchalakshanam.*

The Purana has five traits; it treats of the topics of creation, destruction and recreation, genealogy of the gods, periods of Manus and history of Royal races. Almost the same subject matter is dealt with by the Itihasa as well. The same Vyasa is reputed to be the author of the eighteen Puranas. What then is the difference between the Itihasa and the Purana? Professor C. Kunhan Raja in his *Survey of Sanskrit Literature* clarifies the point. "Both the Itihasa and the Puranas contain the same material. In the Puranas we find that the main subject matter is the accumulated wisdom on the topics like religion, philosophy and sciences; here incidentally the stories of great heroes also come in, as introduced in a variety of contexts. What is main in the Itihasa becomes subsidiary in the Purana and what is subsidiary in the Itihasa becomes the main topic in the Puranas."

The metre employed in the works is the Vedic metre called the Anustubh with four lines in a verse, each line containing eight syllables. They are mainly in the form of poetry, prose and longer verses coming in very rarely.

Ramayana also is known as an epic. But mainly it is viewed as a Maha Kavya (great poem). So, Jaya, the original of the Mahabharata was regarded as an Itihasa, a historical composition.

2

Evolution of The Epic

Winternitz who did commendable research on the Mahabharata postulated the following viewpoints in his *History of Indian Literature*.

- (i) The Mahabharata is not the work of a single author.
- (ii) The material and the various episodes etc. of the Mahabharata do not pertain to a single period of time.
- (iii) It is not even the work of a single editor.
- (iv) It is a literary monster with disproportionate limbs, containing conflicting philosophies and contending

schools of thought, brought together by reckless interpolaters and scribes of mediocre merits.

- (v) However, this gigantic work contains countless gems of precious poetry and unparalleled heights of ancient wisdom. The internal evidence of the Mahabharata explicitly proclaims that the work has undergone three editions.
- (i) Jaya composed by Veda Vyasa is the First edition.
 - (ii) Bharata edited by Vaisampayana and recited at the Sarpayaga of Janamejaya is the second edition.
 - (iii) Mahabharata edited by Ugrasravas, son of Lomaharshana and recited at the Sattra Yaga performed by Saunaka in the Naimisa forest is the Third.

That the Mahabharata in its present form is the second amplification of an originally much smaller work nobody can consistently deny. We have the authority of the Mahabharata itself for the statement that Vyasa, the author of the original work taught it to five pupils, one of whom was Vaisampayana. Now in the Mahabharata as we have it — there are several questions asked by Janamejaya and Vaisampayana gives suitable answers. How can these questions and answers have formed part of the original epic composed by Veda Vyasa? We must hold that Vaisampayana or some one who heard the recitation and the dialogue amplified the original work. Then again this amplified Bharata was recited by Sauti before Saunaka at his twelve-years-sacrifice and certain questions are asked by Saunaka and answered by Sauti. These cannot have formed part of the original work of Vyasa or the amplified edition of Vaisampayana. We are therefore compelled to admit that Sauti or some one else who heard his recitation amplified the original work a second time.¹ Apart from this, there are several statements in different parts of the work still preserved owing to oversight or absence of any motive to expunge them which attest to the evolution of the Mahabharata into three editions.

Therefore there are three points at which the Mahabharata may actually be said to begin.

1. C.V. Vaidya—*Mahabharata, a Criticism*.

*Manvadi bharatam kecit astikadi tathapare,
tathoparicaradyanye vipras samyagadhiyire"*

Brahmanas have studied the Bharata sedulously, some from the chapter about Manu, others from the chapter about Astika, yet others from the chapter about Uparicaravasu. The episode of Astika, a contemporary of Janamejaya, must belong to the later edition than the original Jaya. In the 63rd chapter which begins with the story of Uparicharavasu² a praise of the Mahabharata and some facts about its composition are given afresh. So, Vyasa's composition may be presumed to begin from Uparichara." Vaisampayana begins the narration with the story of Astika. There is no sloka beginning with Manu in the Adiparva, but the commentator clarifies that it is identical with Vaivasvata Manu.

However, Madhvacharya, the founder of the *Dvaita* system of Philosophy has interpreted the sloka thus:

"The meaning of the Bharata in so far as it is a relation of the facts and events of which Sri Krishna and Pandavas are connected, is called Astikadi-(Historical). That interpretation by which we learn lessons on Dharma, Bhakti and other ten qualities Sruta (sacred study) and righteous practices, character and training, on Brahma and the other gods is called Manvadi (Religious and moral). Thirdly, the interpretation by which every sentence, word or syllable is shown to be the significant name or to be the declaration of the glories of the Almighty, ruler of the universe, is called Uparicara (transcendental). It is obvious that VAISAMPAYANA is responsible for the insertion of the episode of Astika. Asvalayana, the author of Grihya Sutra, mentions SUMANTU-JAIMINI-PAILA AND SUKA in addition to VAISAMPAYANA as the five Bharata Acharyas. All these five were the direct disciples of Veda Vyasa and all of them composed their own versions of the Bharata. Only the Asvamedha Parva of Jaimini is now preserved to us in addition to the version of Vaisampayana. It is quite probable that all the five Bharata versions were extant at the time of Asvalayana. Vaisampayana's version contained 24,000 slokas divided into one hundred parvas. The parvas are subdivided into Adhyayas. The hundred parvas of Vaisampayana included the *Harivamsa*, which is styled as the Khila Purana or the supplement

2. *Mahabharata*—Adi Parva 63-11-52 Raja Uparicharo nama.

to the Mahabharata. The contribution of Vaisampayana to the evolution of the great epic must have been substantial and significant. The direct disciple of Veda Vyasa, a contemporary of Arjuna, Vaisampayana lived long to recite his Bharata version to Janamejaya, the great-grandson of Arjuna.

The 'Sarpa Yaga' of Janamejaya was one of the most outstanding landmarks in the ancient history of the Indian Nation. Any 'Yajna' was not merely a religious function. It was also a cultural festival. Vaisampayana was one of the leading lights of the Sarpa Yaga. Then he was the grandest old man of the contemporary literary world and the greatest exponent of the Bharata Itihasa in which the king or the commoner was equally interested. Ultimately, the Bharata of Vaisampayana eclipsed the other versions of his colleagues.

Vaisampayana's version enjoyed the royal patronage as well as the popular esteem. It was authoritative history retold by an eminent personality who had access to first hand sources of the story. It might have contained pro-Pandava tinges or twists. The role of Abhimanyu, the grandfather of Janamejaya and the story of the *Padma Vyuha* most probably gained importance in the version of Vaisampayana. The character of KRISHNA, the friend, philosopher and guide of the Pandavas has assumed divine dimensions in the Mahabharata. There are instances where he is portrayed as a mere human character. Sauti, took up the version of Vaisampayana for elaboration without royal compulsion, obviously due to its popularity. At the time of Vaisampayana, the Krishna legend gained importance. During the times of the Brahmanas, the predominant position was given to VISHNU.³ Veda Vyasa in the very first sloka identifies Sri Krishna with Narayana and Arjuna with Nara. Vaisampayana continued the tradition of Veda Vyasa. Bhagavad Gita, the most precious book in the non-vedic literature contains the philosophy of Sri Krishna couched in the metrical language of Veda Vyasa. The Bhagavad Gita was amplified by Vaisampayana along with the Bharata. The language of the Bhagavad Gita is akin to the Upanishads. The language of Vishnusahasranama (one thousand names of Vishnu) appears more antique.

3. Aitareya Brahmana says that Vishnu was the first and Agni was the last among the Gods.

C.V. Vaidya says that Vishnusahasranama may be attributed to Vaisampayana.⁴ Vaisampayana is the worthy disciple of the worthy preceptor, Veda Vyasa and he propagated the Mahabharata at the historic snake sacrifice of Janamejaya with the missionary zeal of an apostle. Narada propagated the Mahabharata to gods, Devala to the Pitrs; Suka to the Gandharvas and Vaisampayana was the apostle chosen to propagate it amongst the mortals and he justified the choice.

3

Ugrasravas and the Sattra yaga of Saunaka

The Sattra Yaga performed by Kulapati Saunaka was the greatest cultural festival in the history of ancient India unparalleled in the annals of civilization anywhere in the world. The duration of the yaga was twelve years. 'Kulapati' was the appellation given in ancient India to the head of an Ashram that has the capacity to give free food and education to six thousand pupils. Saunaka's hermitage in the Naimisha forest naturally attracted hundreds of scholars of those times from all over India. To put it in modern parlance, it was an All India Oriental Conference attended by hundreds of scholarly delegates of various schools of thought and it lasted for twelve years. It was the longest and perhaps the greatest yajna on record. There is a dictum that one should attend the Yajna, uninvited. It was the etiquette of the Ashram to receive the uninvited guest as a representative of God. It can be safely assumed that the Naimisha forest attracted hundreds and thousands of pilgrims everyday in addition to the regular delegates. Kulapati Saunaka was a competent host. The project chosen for the long Sattra Yaga was the Mahabharata. Ugrasravas, the son of the reputed Pauranika Lomaharshana was chosen as the editor-in-chief. He was called SUTA, signifying a Pauranika. It is quite obvious that Suta was not a contemporary of Veda Vyasa like Vaisampayana. He explicitly proclaims "Know ye rishis, I have recited the Bharata in one hundred thousand verses, Vaisampayana being the first reciter in this human world."¹

4. *Mahabharata—a Criticism* by C.V. Vaidya.

1. Asminstumanushe loke vaisampayana uktavan ekam satahsram tu mayoktam vai nibodhata. *Mahabharata—Adi Parva* 1-107.

The present printed edition of Mahabharata contains about 96,000 slokas. Nannaya, the author of Telugu Mahabharata has enumerated 100018 slokas as the total number in the Mahabharata. In certain manuscripts there are more than one lakh slokas.

The number one lakh may be taken as an approximation. The modern edition of Mahabharata has come down to us from Sauti.

Sauti or Suta was the narrator who edited the Bharata. The present edition of the Mahabharata is in the nature of the proceedings of the conference and perhaps some anonymous delegate has prepared the minutes incorporating the narration of Suta. So, we find Suta uvacha or Sauti uvacha—(Thus spake Suta or Sauti.) The Mahabharata is in the nature of the dialogue and we find verses put into the mouth of the characters directly as Sanjaya uvacha or Dhritarashtra uvacha. The third edition of the Mahabharata consisting of eighteen parvas and containing one lakh slokas was prepared by Sauti. Perhaps it was Veda Vyasa who divided the poem into parvas, (the natural division found on the sugar cane), suggesting that the work to be as sweet as the sugar cane. Vaisampayana's amplification contained one hundred parvas. Sauti compressed them into eighteen but retained Vaisampayana's enumeration. Thus, we have the anomalous conglomeration of parvas, eighteen main parvas and a hundred & add sub-parvas. The number eighteen seems to have acquired some esoteric connotation in the Mahabharata. It is divided into 18 parvas. The war lasted for 18 days. The Bhagavadgita contains 18 chapters. The total number of divisions of the combatants was 18. Perhaps, original Jaya consisted of 18 Parvas and Sauti re-introduced the number of parvas in spite of the glaring anomaly.

At the time of the Sattra Yaga, there was a chaotic growth of Bharata literature. Five different versions were in the field. In addition innumerable authors belonging to various generations must have written various treatises on the subject matter and characters of Bharata. There was a need for preparing an authoritative version. After Veda Vyasa, various systems of philosophy, several schools of thought in literature and other disciplines sprang up. There was obvious need for co-ordination. It was not an easy task. It was a national duty. The responsibility was undertaken by the sages of Naimisha forest, headed by Kulapati

Saunaka and the project of preparing the Mahabharata incorporating all the contemporary knowledge into a gigantic work was undertaken consciously.

The personality of Veda Vyasa provided the needed inspiration. He was a great co-ordinator with a synthetic vision. Once again, the spirit of Veda Vyasa was revived. Mahabharata, the fifth Veda, incorporating all the existing literature on the subject matter together with all the available material, representing all the disciplines was a grand idea conceived by the missionary band of sages headed by Kulapati Saunaka. Sauti who undertook this great ambitious venture proclaims in the Epilogue to the Mahabharata.

"Yadihasti tadanyatra, yannehasti na tat kvacit."

"What ever is (present) here (in the Mahabharata) may be found elsewhere, what is not (present here) cannot be found anywhere else."²

Now it may appear to be a tall claim to the moderner but the claim was true enough when it was made. However, it is very clear that the Mahabharata was conceived as an encyclopaedia of contemporary knowledge. The claim was accepted as substantially true by successive generations of poets and scholars across centuries of time. Nannaya, the author of the Mahabharata in Telugu in the eleventh century, composed a verse in reverent adoration of the Mahabharata.

"The votaries of righteousness regard it as a treatise on Dharma, the philosophers look upon it as a systematised philosophy, law-givers consider it as a standard work of ethics, the poets view it as a poem, historians value it as history, the scholars of grammar, prosody and poetics look to it, as a repository of examples of vindication. The learned, well-versed in the ancient lore, consider it as a comprehensive compendium of past wisdom. Mahabharata, the versatile composition by the foremost seer Veda Vyasa, the son of Parasara and verily the incarnation of Vishnu, commands universal approbation."³

2. *Mahabharata*—18-56-33.

3. *Andhra Mahabharata*—Adiparva - Introduction.

Sauti has made a conscious and consistent effort to make the Mahabharata an encyclopaedia. The exile of the Pandavas in the forest provided an excellent opportunity for Sauti to insert many famous stories of his times into the epic. The rishis who visited the Pandavas could very conveniently and aptly narrate to Dharma Raja so many stories, the story of Damayanti, Savitri etc. Even the Ramayana found a place in the Vana Parva.

With the object of making the epic as comprehensive as possible, informative material was inserted at places where they are least expected. At the nick of the great war, Dhritarashtra asks Sanjaya to give him a detailed description of the earth for which incessant battles are fought by kings. Sanjaya who is expected to give war news, instead gives a graphic description of the geography of India and the world⁴. Another instance is the narration of the places of pilgrimages on the river Sarasvati just at the time when Duryodhana and Bhima were expected to begin the Gada Yuddha (mace duel). The digression is very informative and is extremely important to research scholars. The Sarasvati, which was a living river of the Mahabharata times is extinct now. It is a remarkable change in the geography of India. Balarama has returned from his pilgrimage and that very slight pretext provided enough ground for the digression.

There are many instances of abrupt interruptions which cannot be justified on grounds of poetic propriety. For Mahabharata, the loss is in the nature of a minor lapse of propriety but the gain is great to its stature as an encyclopaedia.

Vyasa's *Jaya* was a poem. Vaisampayana's *Bharata* was an Itihasa. Sauti's Mahabharata is an encyclopaedia. The evolution of the epic is from aesthetics to omniscience.

Sauti was inspired by the personality and philosophy of Veda Vyasa who was a symbol of synthesis and the concept of unity in diversity. Sauti's edition, in spite of the innumerable additions of Upakhyanas, parables, fables, and documentary jumbles, retains the unity of plot, unity of purpose and unity of action. Most probably it was Sauti who stabilised the parity and balance amongst the contending schools of thought and conflicting creeds

4. *Mahabharata*—Bhisma Parva.

which found their place in the cyclopaedic range of the great epic. The elevation of the role of Sri Krishna in the early phases of the epic was counter-balanced by the importance given to Siva elsewhere in the story. In the Anusasana Parva, the story of Upamanyu highlights the greatness of Siva; and the beauty of it is that the story is narrated by Sri Krishna himself. Sauti has inherited the gift of synthesis from Veda Vyasa. In the Drona Parva Krishna advises Arjuna to worship Siva to obtain the Pasupata Astra afresh. Arjuna worships Siva. It was a pleasant surprise for him to find the garland, which he gave to Sri Krishna, adorning the neck of Siva. Sri Krishna discloses his identity with Siva to Arjuna.⁵ "It is this aspect of the work as it exists to-day that it has made it dear to all Hindus and all creeds claim it alike as their sacred book. It is this unifying spirit which is the charm of this vast work from a philosophic point of view."⁶ Adorations of Durga (consort of Siva), Surya (sun), Kartikeya and other gods find their appropriate places in different parts of the epic.

Some critics have pointed out certain discrepancies in the Mahabharata. It is very rarely that we come across discrepancies or breaks in the context. In the Bhishma Parva, where Dharma Raja once more asks Salya to discourage Karna as and when he drives his chariot, without forgetting the promise he made in Udyoga; How can Dharma Raja refer to the Udyoga Parva?

In the Asvamedha Parva, Kunti requests Sri Krishna to carry out the promise made by him in Astika (a previous parva) to resuscitate the child of Uttara if born dead. Characters of the story referring to the chapters of the book is rather incongruous, but nobody can attribute such mistakes to Veda Vyasa, Vaisampayana or Sauti. Obviously, these are the conscious errors committed by the scribes to facilitate ready reference at the time of recitation. It is a clumsy shorthand device employed for later elaboration. These are like printing mistakes found in modern publications and can easily be ignored. The equanimity with which the Mahabharata has presented the theme, deserves particular mention. The other side of the question was invariably presented. The episode of *Ekalavya* the philonthropy of *Karna*, the impartiality of *Vikarna*, the helpless defeat of *Arjuna* at the hands of barbarians when he

5. *Drona Parva* Chapters 90 & 91.

6. C.V. Vaidya.

was escorting the widows of Krishna to Hastinapura from Dvaraka are some of the instances that can be cited.

The falsehood uttered by Dharma Raja was recorded with the transparent detachment of a historian. When Duryodhana fell, mortally wounded in the course of the mace duel with Bhima, there is the description of the showers of celestial flowers from heaven falling on Duryodhana in approbation of the bravery and heroic conduct, which he exhibited in the face of death.

Veda Vyasa, Vaisampayana and Sauti maintained through out the Mahabharata, a sense of strict neutrality which has given the halo of sublimity to the epic.

The name Mahabharata has been significantly explained in the introductory chapter of the epic.

"Mahatvad bharatvacca mahabharatamuchyate"

It is known as Mahabharata because of its greatness, enormous size and import, implying that the work outweighs the Vedas.

"All the Gods came together and weighed the Bharata in the balance against the four Vedas. As the Bharata outweighed the Vedas and all the secrets they contained from that time forward, it has been known in this world as Mahabharata for its being esteemed superior both in substance and gravity of import."⁷

When Veda Vyasa conceived the work, he was considering how best to transmit the same to his disciples. Brahma manifested himself before him. Then the great glorious Vyasa addressing Brahma Paramesthi said, "O divine Brahma, a poem hath been composed by me and it is greatly respected. The mystery of Veda and other subjects have been explained by me, the various rituals of Upanishads with the Angas; the compilation of Puranas formed by me and named after three divisions of time—past, present and future, the determination of the nature of decay, death, fear, disease, existence and non-existence; a description of creeds and the various modes of life; rules for the four castes and the importance of all the Puranas, an account of asceticism and of the

7. M. Krishnamacharya—*History of Classical Sanskrit Literature*.

duties of a religious student, the dimensions of the sun and moon, the planets, constellations and stars together with the duration of the four ages, the Rik, Sama and Yajur Vedas; also the Adhyatma, the sciences called Nyaya, Orthoepey and treatment of disease, charity, and Pasupata, birth, celestial and human for particular purposes, also a description of pilgrimage and other holy places of rivers and mountains, the different kinds of nations and languages, the nature of the manners of the people and the all pervading spirit, all these have been represented. But after all no scribe for this work is to be found on the earth." Brahma said, "I esteem thee for thy knowledge of divine mysteries before the whole body of celebrated sages, distinguished for the sanctity of their lives. I know, thou hast revealed the divine word even from its first utterance in the language of truth. Thou hast called thy present work a poem, wherefore it shall be a poem. There shall be no poets whose works may equal the description of this poem, even as the other modes called Asramas are ever unequal in merit to the domestic Asrama. Let Ganesha be thought of 'O' Muni, for the purpose of writing the poem."

Sauti said, "Brahma having thus spoken to Vyasa retired to his own abode." Then Vyasa began to call to mind Ganesha, obviator of obstacle, ready to fulfil the desires of his votaries, was no sooner thought of than he repaired to the place where Vyasa was seated. And when he had been saluted and was seated, Vyasa addressed him thus, 'O, guide of the Ganas, be thou the scribe of the Bharata which I have formed in my imagination and which I am about to repeat.' Ganapati accepted the assignment on one condition and said that Vyasa must dictate without pause or hesitation so that his pen might not stop while he was writing. Vyasa was pleased that the great Ganapati graciously accepted to be his scribe and readily agreed to the condition stipulated by Ganapati, however guarding himself with a counter stipulation. "Be it so, but you must first grasp the meaning of what I dictate before you write down." Ganapati smiled and agreed to the condition. Vyasa dictated the Mahabharata to Ganapati extempore. Whenever Vyasa needed some respite for thought, he used to compose some complex riddles to gain time as Ganapati would pause for a while to understand its implications. So goes the story. In ancient times lithography was a comparatively late innovation

and good scribes were very rare. Veda Vyasa's stipulation that the scribe should understand what he writes is prophetic enough. Incompetent scribes, who could not understand the meaning of the verses they copied, have wrought havoc in later times while preparing the manuscripts of the Mahabharata. This has led to interpolations on a large scale. Sri Madhvacharya deplored, "In some places we find interpolations. In other cases texts are altogether lost. In some others they have changed the character of the text either by mistake or on purpose. Even those that might be said to be extant are in a state of utter confusion."

The Mahabharata, because of its cyclopaedic range proved to be a very easy access for interpolations. In the case of Mahabharata, the interpolations perhaps never suffered from the pangs of scrupulous as they could easily imagine themselves to be Vaisampayanans or Sautis in miniature. The interpolations are no doubt veritable headaches to the research scholars. For others, they are a part of the game. And all the interpolations are not necessarily spurious and bad. Sri C. Rajagopalachari who has rendered the Mahabharata stories into English says, "But generations of gifted reciters have added to Vyasa's original a great mass of material. All the floating material that was thought to be worth preserving, historical, geographical, legendary, political, theological and philosophical of nearly thirty centuries found a place in it. In those days when there was no printing, interpolation in a recognised classic seemed to correspond to inclusion in the National Library..... We should be thankful to those who preserved for us these many centuries old epics in spite of all the vicissitudes through which our nation has passed since Vyasa and Valmiki. Even the poets who wrote these epics in the original did not create but built out of the inherited bricks of national memory prior to their own time."⁸

The interpolations, by and large are in tune with the main theme and some of them are the composition of gifted writers who were inspired by Veda Vyasa. Vyasa Ghattas or the riddle slokas provided the forum for the expert interpolator. Kuta slokas, where there is a play on the word 'go' in its different meanings, supposed

8. *Mahabharata*—C. Rajagopalachari, Preface to the Second Edition.

to be one of the Vyasa Ghattas from the Karna Parva, can be cited as a typical example.⁹

'Nagarairiva Sarasvati' —The last word is explained as a landscape with a lake. 'Kamayanamiva striyah tyajanti'. Kamayanam is explained as kamatah ayanam yasya sah (i.e.) he who wanders at pleasure – M.B. Adi Parva.

4

Repetitions

A student of the Mahabharata has to face the problem of repetitions along with the interpolations. During the course of the narrations, Janamejaya or Saunaka to whom the great story was told, sought clarification on some points and the occasions were utilised for elucidation, elaboration and repetition of the episodes or incidents already described. This repetition sometimes pertains to whole episodes including exact slokas. In the Adi Parva, the episode of Astika was given twice, the second only after a few chapters of the first. As the second is more detailed than the first, so it can be presumed that the two were the versions of Vaisampayana and Sauti respectively. In the same way, the places of pilgrimage were twice narrated in the Vana Parva, the second time containing greater details than the first. India was more extensively known in the days of Sauti who found it necessary to make a second enumeration of the holy places of India. The legend of the sixteen great kings found repetition at places widely separated. It was first told by Vyasa to Dharmaraja in Drona Parva, after the death of Abhimanyu. It was repeated in Santi Parva next time by Krishna to Dharmaraja.

The story of Garuda is found in the Adi Parva and again it is repeated in the Anusasana Parva. But the two narrations differ in details and also in the conclusions. The episodes of Kasyapa and

9. A typical riddle sloka which bears unmistakable marks of later interpolation is cited below:

*Gokarna sumukhikritena ishuna goputrasampreshita
Gosabdatmajabhushanam suvihitam suvyakta go, suprabham
Dristva go gatakam jahara mukutam goshabdagopuri vai
Gokarnasanamardanascha na yayavaprapya mriyovorvasam.*

Mahabharata—Karna Parva 90.42; C.V. Vaidya— *Op. cit* p.146

Takshaka, Yayati, Animandavya, names of Dhritarashtra's sons, the stories of Pandu killing the deer, syena and kapotavritta, the three cities, Parasurama destroying the kings Bali and Indra etc., are some of the glaring repetitions. Some of the repetitions differ in details. The story of Uttanka in Adi Parva differs from the story narrated in Asvamedha Parva.

5

Recensions

Different regions of India have developed different recensions of Mahabharata. These recensions differ very widely in their contents. The Northern recension and the Southern recension are the two names which can be used for purposes of broad classification. Again, the Northern recension consists of the Sarada or Kashmir, Nepal, Maithili, Bengal and Devanagari subdivisions. Likewise, the Southern recension can be subdivided into the Telugu, Grantha and Malayali versions. The manuscripts were never alike in any region. The Bombay edition contains 95826 slokas including the 1285 of Harivamsa. The Telugu version printed at Vavilla Ramaswamy & Co., of Madras contained 84220 excluding the Harivamsa. According to the enumeration given by Narayana, the Sanskrit Mahabharata contained 100078 slokas in his days '11th century'. In the Northern recension, the name of Bhima while he was living incognito in the service of Virata was VALALA in the Southern recension and Vallava in the Northern recension. The chapter *Durga* adoration which is, in the Virata Parva in the Northern recension finds no place at all anywhere in the Southern recension. The story of Garuda which is found in the Anusasanika Parva in the Southern recension does not find a place in the Northern counterpart. The differences are innumerable. To sum up, the inescapable conclusion is that all these and varied recensions must have sprung up from one and the same distant original. Winternitz who has studied the subject in depth has pronounced his judgement thus: "Every endeavour to reconstruct the ancient Indian National epic itself in its original shape will always be attended with so great an element of arbitrariness that it can only be of a purely subjective value."

6

Commentaries

Known commentaries on Mahabharata are many and the number of unknown commentaries cannot, of course be assessed. Nilakantha,¹ Arjuna Misra,² Sarvajna Narayana,³ Vaisampayana,⁴ Srinandana,⁵ Yajnanarayana,⁶ Vimalabodha and Vadiraja.

Sarvajna Narayana appears to be the earliest commentator. His work is available in fragments only. Nilakantha's commentary is very famous. The commentary of Vadiraja, the Madhva scholar and saint who lived in the second half of the 15th century is very comprehensive. Sridharacharya wrote a commentary on the Mokshadharma Parva.

Sridhara was the son of Lakshmanacharya. He had the title - Mahabharata Bhattacharya.

The great apostle of the *Dvaita* system of philosophy of the 12th century Madhvacharya has written "*Mahabharata tatparya nirnaya.*" Inanananda Bhatta, Varada Raja, Vadi Raja, Vitthalacharya and Vyasa - Tirtha have written commentaries on

- 1&6. *Triennial Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in Oriental Mss. Library, Madras.*
2. *Catalogue of Sanskrit Manuscripts in Central Provinces*, edited by Keilhorn, Nagpur.
3. *A Classified Index to the Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Palace at Tanjore*, A.C. Burnell, London.
4. *Aufrecht's Catalogus Catalogorum*, Leipzig.
5. *Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit of Manuscripts in Oriental Mss. Library, Madras.*

Aufrecht gives the names of the following commentators:-

1. Anandapurna 2. Vidyasagara 3. Caturbhuj 4. Nandikesvara 5. Devabodha 6. Nandanacharya 7. Paramananda Bhattacharya 8. Ratnagarbha 9. Rama Krishna 10. Lakshmana Bhatta 11. Srinivasacharya.

Besides *Bharata Tippani*, *Nigudhapadabodhini* two anonymous commentaries *Bharata Vyakhya* by Kavindra and *Lakshana Shlokalankara* by Vadiraja are in the Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras.

Arjuna Misra has mentioned Devabodha, Vimalabodha, and Sarvajna Narayana. Nilakantha has mentioned Sandilya Madhava.

Nilakantha lived at Kurpara in Maharashtra probably in the 16th Century. Kavindra lived in Orissa around 1600.

Madhva's work. Varada Raja who lived about 1500 A.D. has written a book entitled *Bharatatatparyanirnaya*.

Mahabharata has entered into the Jain literature on an extensive scale. *Pandava Purana* in 18 Cantos - describing the story of the Mahabharata as current among the Jains was written by Vadicaandra at Ghanangha in the Pusha month of Samvat 654.

The Buddhist literature was quite conversant with the Mahabharata tradition. There are many references to the Kuru Janapada in the Buddhist literature. The Kuru dhamma Jataka extols the virtuous conduct of the inhabitants of Kuru.⁷

Kuruvattadhamma has been highly praised in the Majjhima Nikaya Tika.⁸ Draupadi's marriage with the Pandava's has been alluded to in Naya dhamma katha.⁹

Devaprabhasuri, the Jain monk wrote *Pandavacarita*. Jaina *Harivamsa* is a long poem of historical value by Jinasena who lived in the eighth century A.D. Mahabharata has been translated into all the important regional languages of India. Perundevanar, known as Bharata padiar, composed the classical work, Mahabharata in Tamil about the beginning of the Christian era. A 'Sangam' work on Mahabharata was undertaken in the eighth century under the patronage of the Pallava King and the third was composed in the reign of Kulottunga in the 13th century. Innumerable authors in Sanskrit and other languages in India including Bhasa and Kalidasa have drawn their inspiration from the Mahabharata for writing their memorable works. Even to-day, the influence of the Mahabharata on Indian life and literature is as strong as ever.

7

The Mahabharata—A Chronological Study

According to the ancient Indian notation of Time, 360 lunar or human years constitute one divine year. Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali, a cycle of these four yugas consisting of 12,000 divine years or 4,320,000 human years constitute one *Mahayuga*. 1000

7. Jataka (Vol III) No.276

8. 1.125

9. 16.679-82

Mahayugas constitute one day of Brahma or one *Kalpa*. An equal number of years is reckoned as one night of Brahma. Thirty such days and nights make a month of Brahma and 12 such months, his year and 100 such years make the full period of Brahma's life; the two halves of his life are called Purva and Uttara parardhas. The first or Purva parardha has expired: the second or Dvitiya parardha has commenced with our present or Varaha Kalpa. At the beginning of the first parardha, Brahma or the present cosmos was born. At the end of the first parardha, was Padma kalpa when the (Lotus of Lokas, Lotus of the world) appeared at the navel of Vishnu. The first Kalpa of the Dvitiya parardha which is the present kalpa is called Varaha Kalpa when Vishnu incarnated as Varaha or the Divine Boar. We are now in the FIRST day of the fiftyfirst year of Brahma called SVETA; each of the months of Brahma are designated by separate names like i) Sveta ii) Nilalohita iii) Vamadeva iv) Rathantara v) Raurava and so on. So, the present Kalpa called the "Sveta Varaha Kalpa" forms the 18,001st Kalpa of the Brahma - a day and night of Brahma being calculated here as one Kalpa.

14 Manus reign during the day of Brahma, each MANU reigning for $71\frac{3}{4}$ Mahayugas (i.e.) 337,142,657½ human years, and such a span of time is called a Manvantara. The present Manvantara is the seventh of Varaha Kalpa. The first six Manvantaras are known after the names of the respective Manus as i) Svayambhuva, ii) Svarochisha, iii) Auttama, iv) Tamasa v) Raivata and vi) Chakshusha.

The Present (seventh) is called the Vaivasvata manvantara. The present Kaliyuga is the fourth or the last quarter of the 28th Mahayuga of this Vaivasvata Manvantara and 5081 years of this Kaliyuga have expired by 4-4-1981.

The four yugas which comprise one Mahayuga have the following periods:

Krita Yuga	:	17,28,000	human years
Treta Yuga	:	12,96,000	human years
Dvapara Yuga	:	8,64,000	human years
Kali Yuga	:	4,32,000	human years

Kaliyuga has begun from midnight of 17th century (expired) on February 3102 B.C. So, 3,893,081 human years have elapsed since the beginning of creation after the *Pralaya* (Universal destruction) up to 1981 A.D.

Most civilizations of the world have preserved the memory of a *deluge* which resulted in universal destruction after which life has started afresh on earth. According to the ancient Indian Tradition, God VISHNU, incarnating in the form of a fish (*Matsya Avatara*) saved the Vedas from the clutches of Somakasura, out of the great ocean. The mythological story postulates that at the beginning of the present *Kalpa* commencing with the present Mahayuga, the rishis through their penance reproduced in substance, if not in form, the ante-diluvian Vedas which they carried in their memory by the favour of God. This view finds corroboration in the historical theories of modern scholars like Bala Gangadhara Tilak. He states that Vedic or Aryan religion can be proved to be inter-glacial but its ultimate origin is still lost in geological antiquity; the Aryan religion and culture were destroyed during the last glacial period that invaded the Arctic Aryan home; the Vedic hymns were sung in post-glacial times by poets who had inherited the knowledge or contents therein of an unbroken tradition from their ante-diluvian forefathers. B.G. Tilak in his *Arctic Home in the Vedas*, divides the whole period from the commencement of the post-glacial era corresponding to the beginning of our Krita yuga of the present Mahayuga to the birth of Gautama Buddha thus:

(i) 10,000–8,000 B.C.

The destruction of the original Arctic home of the Aryans by the last Ice age and the commencement of post-glacial period.

(ii) 8,000–5,000 B.C.

The age of the migration from the original Arctic home. The survivors of the Aryan race roamed over the northern parts of Europe and Asia in search of lands suitable for new settlements. The vernal equinox was then in the constellation of Punarvasu and as Aditi is the presiding deity of Punarvasu according to the terminology adopted by me in *Orion* this may therefore be called the Aditi or pre-Orion period.

(iii) 5,000-3,000 B.C.

The *Orion* period when the vernal equinox was in Orion. Many Vedic hymns can be traced to the early part of this period and bards of the race seem to have not yet forgotten the real import or significance or the traditions of the Arctic Home inherited by them. It was at this time that the first attempts to reform the calendar and the sacrificial system appear to have been systematically made.

(iv) 3,000-1,400 B.C.

The *Krittika* period when the vernal equinox was in the *pleiades*. The *Aitareya Samhita* and the *Brahmanas* which begin the series of *Nakshatras* with the *Krittikas* are evidently the productions of this period. The compilations of the hymns into *Samhitas* also appears to be a work of the early part of this period. The traditions about the original Arctic Home had grown dim by this time and very often misunderstood making the Vedic hymns more unintelligible. The sacrificial system and the numerous details thereof found in the *Brahmanas* seem to be developed during this time. It was at the end of this period that the *Vedanga Jyotisha* was originally composed or at any rate the position of the equinoxes mentioned therein, observed and ascertained.

(v) 1,400-500 B.C.

The pre-Buddhistic period when the *sutras* and the philosophical systems made their appearance. Prof. Jacobi of Bonn has endorsed the views of Tilak and in his opinion the antiquity of the Vedic period goes back at least to 4,000 B.C.

The chronological disinterestedness of the Indians has been emphasized time and again by the western orientalist, who have made significant contributions to indological researches. India is indebted to them. In fact they have enabled the renascent India to rediscover the great ancient heritage and culture. The observations of Arthur A. Macdonell are typical: "History is the one weak spot in Indian literature. It is in fact non-existent. The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this defeat, suffering as it does from the entire absence of exact chronology." This is a sweeping generalisation and rather a hasty conclusion. He

adds, "The chronology of the Vedic period is altogether conjectural being based entirely on internal evidence. Three main literary strata can be clearly distinguished in it by differences in language and style as well as in religious and social views. For the development of each of these strata, a reasonable length of time must be allowed but all we can hope here to do so, is to approximate to the truth by centuries. The lower limit of the second Vedic stratum cannot however be fixed later than 500 B.C. because its latest doctrines are presupposed by Buddhism and the date of the death of Buddha has been with a high degree of probability calculated from the recorded dates of the various Buddhist councils to be 480 B.C. Prof. Max Muller's earlier estimate of 1,200 B.C. appears to be much nearer the mark." It is true that ancient Indian Chronology is a knotty problem. No useful purpose is ever served by the worker who complains about tools. Determining the date of the Mahabharata war, however baffling the problem may be, is the task on hand. It is still a controversial topic which has eluded unanimity and consensus. The well-known inscription at Boghaz Keeri (B.C. 1360) discovered in west central Asia records the names of Aryan deities like Indra, Mitra, Varuna etc., attests to the antiquity of the Vedic civilization. The Vedic literature mentions a number of rulers of the Bharata-Puru-Kuru dynasty who were described in the Mahabharata as ancestors of the Pandavas. Rig Veda mentions Pururavas Aila¹ Ayu² Yayati Nahusha³ and Puru⁴. Satapatha Brahmana has referred to the Asvamedha performed by Bharata, son of Dushyanta⁵ Ajamidha⁶ Riksa⁷ Samvarna⁸ were mentioned in the Rig Veda. Atharvaveda refers to Pratipa⁹ Bahlika, son of Pratipa is mentioned in the Satapatha Brahmana¹⁰. There is reference to Santanu in the Rig Veda¹¹, Dhritarashtra, son of

1. X-95-2-18 *Satapatha Brahmana* Br XI.5.1.1

2. Rg. Veda 1-53-10

3. *ibid.* 1-31-17 X 63-1

4. *ibid.* VII-4

5. XIII-5-4 *Aitareya Brahmana*

6. Rg. Veda IV-44-6

7. *ibid.* VIII-68-15

8. *ibid.* 51-1

9. XX-129-2

10. XII-9-3-3

11. X 98

Vichitravirya is mentioned in the Kathaka Samhita¹⁴ Chandogya Upanishad has referred to Krishna, son of Devaki¹³ and Sikhandi Yajnasena figures in Kaushitaki Brahmana¹⁴. Parasara, the father of the sage Veda Vyasa, was a Vedic rishi who composed some hymns¹⁵. Thus, the Vedic literature serves as a veritable foundation for the Mahabharata tradition. Sankhayana Sruta Sutra mentions the Mahabharata war. Sankhayana was a contemporary of Asvalayana, the author of the Grihya Sutras. Asvalayana's reference to the epic is quite specific. Prachinaviti - Sumantur Jaimini Vaisampayana Paila Suka Bharata Mahabharata Dharmacharyaah; Grihya Sutra III-4.

Panini refers to Vasudeva and Arjuna and their devotees Vasudevarjunabhyam vun. Ashtadhayayi - IV-3-98

He mentions the names of Bhima, Bhisma, Yudhisthira, Kunti and Kurus—names connected with the Mahabharata story though in a different context.¹⁶ Kautilya attributes the destruction of Duryodhana to his usurpation of another's kingdom.

That Panini knew the war of Bharatas has been rendered highly probable by Professor Lassen (Ind. Alterthumskunde 1.691.837). The words which called forth Panini's special rule (IV-2-56) can scarcely be imagined to have been different from those in the Mahabhashya viz., Bharata sangramah, Saubhadrah samgramah. These necessarily formed part of the traditional grammatical literature long before the great commentary was written and are therefore of much higher historical value than is commonly supposed. The coincidences between the examples of the Pratisakhya and those in Panini show that these examples were by no means selected at random but that they had long formed part of the traditional teaching. The word Mahabharata occurs in Panini VI-2-38 but not as the title of the poem. There are many references to the Mahabharata war and the story in Jain and Buddhist literatures. There is a Jain tradition that Krishna was a contemporary of the 22nd Tirthankara. The Ambattha Sutta of

12. X.6

13. III-17-6 Weber, *Indian Literature* p 169

14. VII-4

15. *Survey of Sanskrit Literature* - C.K. Raja

16. Panini knows that Vaisampayana—a redactor of the Bharata—V.V. Mirashi, *Mahabharata, Myth & Reality* p.181

Digha Nikaya refers to Itihasa Pancama, meaning Mahabharata. Post Vedic literature of ancient India as well contains many references to the epic and its characters.

The traditional view: Immemorial tradition sanctified by the faith of hundreds of generations of people in India assigns the Mahabharata war to the end of the Dvapara yuga i.e. the year 3139 B.C. The Puranas and the astronomical Siddhantas accept the tradition as incontrovertible history and as the starting point of Indian chronology¹⁷. Sri Krishna, contemporary of the Mahabharata war heroes died on the last day of Dvaparayuga.

*Yasmin Krishno divam yatas
Tasminneva tathahani
Pratipannam kaliyugam.* —*Vayu purana* V.37¹⁸

It is explicitly stated in the Mahabharata that the great war took place in the intervening period of Kali and Dvapara Yugas:

*Antaram caiva samprapte kalidvaparayorabhut,
Syamantapancake yuddham kurupandavasenayoh.*
—*Mahabharata Adi 2-13 (Poona)*

Internal evidence in the Mahabharata proclaims that Yudhishthira ruled for 36 years after the Great War and resolved on the Mahaprasthanasana or the great journey to Heaven when he heard the news of the death of Krishna and the advent of Kaliyuga.¹⁹

The year 3139 B.C. for the Mahabharata war is arrived at as follows:

Beginning of Kaliyuga 3102 B.C.

Yudhishthira's regnal period 36 years 3138 years completed.

Mahabharata war took place in the year 3139 B.C.

Sankara was acquainted with the tradition that Krishna Dvaipayana flourished in between Kali and Dvapara yugas.²⁰

17. *History of Sanskrit Literature* by M. Krishnamacharya

18. The same tradition is voiced in *Bhagavata purana* VII.II 26-32

19. *Mausala Parva* 2-2

20. *Brahma Sutra Bhasya*—on sutra III iii 32

Aryabhatta the famous—astronomer, mathematician, in his *Siddhantasiromani* gives the difference of Kali and Saka eras as Nandadrindugunastha Sakanripasyante kalervatsare, Nanda—9 Adri—7 Indu—1 Gunah—3, (i.e.) 3179.²¹

Salivahana Saka era begins in A.D 78. So the initial year of Kaliyuga according to Aryabhatta is 3101 B.C.²²

Therefore it is clear that the date assigned by the hoary tradition for the Mahabharata war is 3139 B.C. However, Varahamihira has quoted a sloka of Vriddha Garga which has led to some confusion in ancient Indian chronology.

“*Asan maghasu munayah sasati
prithvim yudhisthire nripatau
shad dvika pancha dviyutah
Saka kalah tasya rajnascheha*”.

This is translated as follows:-

The Munis (Sapta Rishis) were in the constellation Magha when King Yudhisthira ruled the earth, when 2526 years are added to Sakakala, is the date of the king. As per this reckoning, the time of Yudhisthira comes to -2448 B.C., a date later by 653 years—

As Garga flourished long before the Salivahana Saka era was inaugurated, the Sakakala in the oft quoted verse cannot refer to Salivahana Saka. Garga lived about 154 B.C.²³ The verse, if it is not to be brushed aside as an interpolation, is still an unsolved riddle. Kalhana, the author of *Rajatarangini*, quoted this verse in his work as he was confronted with reconciling the accepted chronology of the kings of Kashmir with the belief that Gonand, the first king was a contemporary of the Mahabharata heroes for the total of the years, for all the kings did not run up to the traditionally accepted date of the Great War. This sloka of Garga came to the rescue of Kalhana. He postulated on the authority of this sloka that the Great War took place 653 years after the Kaliyuga has begun. However, Kalhana says, “Misled by the

21. Ankanam vamato gatih—the numbers have to be counted to the left, according to the Indian mathematical notation.

22. The date of *Siddhanta Siromani* is 499 A.D.

23. *Mahabharata, A Criticism* by C.V. Vaidya.

tradition that the Bharata war took place at the end of Dvapara, some have doubted the truth of the number of years (assigned to kings of Kashmir)." However, it cannot be asserted that Gonand was a contemporary of the Pandavas or Sri Krishna. Nowhere, either in the Mahabharata or Harivamsa, the name of Gonand has been mentioned. Anyway, the stray sloka attributed to Garga is not to be found in the Garga Samhita.

India is celebrating from immemorial times Sri Krishna Jayanti. According to the traditional accounts, Sri Krishna was born in 320 B.C. in the year Vijaya Sravana Krishna Astami, Tuesday in the constellation of Rohini, Vrishabhalagna.²⁴

In the Satapatha Brahmana, second Kanda, it is said

"Eta ha vai prachyai diso na chyavante, Sarva hi ha va anyani nakshatrani prachyai disas chyavanti."

"These (the Krittikas) do not swerve from the east while all other nakshatras do". This clearly proves that in the days of Satapatha Brahmana— Kanda II, the Krittikas rose exactly in the east and therefore must have been on the celestial equator. This phenomenon must pertain according to Dixit, about 3000 years or more before the Christian era some portions in the Mahabharata which refer to the constellation beginning with Krittikas. This internal astronomical evidence corroborates the traditional view. According to the internal astronomical evidence, the closing epoch of Vedic literature synchronises with the beginnings of the Mahabharata epoch. Veda Vyasa's Jaya proved to be the epilogue for the Vedic literatures and provided the prologue for the advent of the classical literature.

Historical corroboration is not lacking for upholding the traditional viewpoints that the Mahabharata war was fought around 3000 B.C. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandra Gupta had said "from the time of Dionysos to Sandrokottos, the Indians counted 153 kings and a period of 6042 years. But among these a republic was thrice established. The Indians also tell us that Dionysos was earlier than Heracles by 15 generations."²⁵

24. Krishna's horoscope: Jupiter in Aries; Rahu in Gemini; Mars & Mercury in Cancer; Sun & Saturn in Leo; Venus in Virgo and Moon in Taurus.

25. *Ancient India*—McCridle.

It is not easy to identify Dionysos of Indian History. But Heracles was no other than Hari Krishna. "This Heracles is held special honour by the Sauraseni Indian tribe which possess two large cities Mathura and Cleisobora. It is further said that Heracles had numerous wives. From this account Heracles and Sandrokottos were separated by 138 generations. Taking 20 years as the average for a reign, there is a period of 2760 years separating them. Taking Chandragupta's time as 312 B.C., the date of Heracles comes to 3072 B.C. The evidence from the Greek historian very nearly confirms the traditional date of the Mahabharata war. The average of 20 years for each generation is a modest figure. If allowance is made for the time taken by the three republics, the average may be even less so that the evidence of Megasthenes is in favour of the traditional viewpoint.

8

Geographical Evidence

In the Mahabharata there are many references to the *Sarasvati*, the river par excellence of the Rig Veda. The influence which the river Sarasvati exercised over the ancient Aryan life and literature, history and civilization along with the Ganga and Yamuna was significant enough. The confluence of the Sarasvati with the Ganga and the Yamuna at Prayag (Modern Allahabad) the *Triveni*¹ Sangam, was acclaimed as the Tirtharaja. Tradition has preserved the memory of ancient geography in tact up-to-date and moderners are reconciled to the idea of Sarasvati as an *Antarvahini* (the underground current). The disappearance of the *Sarasvati* from the map of India is one of the geographical wonders of the world.

In an illuminating article on the "Indus Valley Culture" published in 'Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania' Vol VI No.2 July 1971 pp.177-189,² Sri Gurdip Singh has shown that North west India including Rajasthan, parts of Haryana and west U.P. became arid. (C14 date 1800 B.C. which comes to 2100 B.C. when Masca correction is applied) and the Sarasvati disappeared from the map of India. The dried bed of the Sarasvati can still be located. Thus, it is reasonable to hold that the Sarasvati

1. *Triveni*—literally means the confluence of the three.
2. Extract published in *Puratatva* No.IV-1970-71 pp:68-76.

dried up in the period 2100-2000 B.C. This geographical process must have taken some centuries. The Mahabharata story which took place when the Sarasvati was a living river must pertain to a sufficiently early period, say at least a few centuries earlier. The geographical evidence as well supports the traditional date of the Mahabharata war around 3000 B.C.³

P.C. Sen has shown that the solar eclipse in Rig Veda V-40-5-9 took place on July 26, 3928 B.C.⁴ The argument that Indo-European unity lasted till 2000 B.C. which used to be urged by some scholars for dating the Vedic literature earlier than 1500 B.C. is no longer valid since J. Mellerart⁵ (*Cambridge Ancient History*, revised edition 1971 Vol I, Pt 2 pp.406 – 7) has equated the extensive destruction in Anatolia in the 29th century B.C. to the advent of Luwian speaking of Indo-Europeans. Sir Leonard Woolley⁶ has shown that the ancestors of the Indo-European Hittite rulers moved from southern Caucasus in the period 4000-3000 B.C. Homer L. Thomas has stated that the Greek-speaking Indo-Europeans reached Central Greece in 2300-2200 B.C. Greek began as a dialect of the Indo-European parent language probably in east central Europe in the third millennium B.C.⁷ Brandenstein in his book (*Die erste Indo-Germanische Wanderung—Wien 1936*) has demonstrated on the basis of linguistic semasiology that the Indo-Iranians were the first to break away from the parent Indo-Europeans as the Indo-Iranian reveals an older stage of semasiological evolution than all the other dialects of the parent language put together and also that the speakers of these other dialects continued to live together after the departure of Indo-Iranians. Thus, the latter must have separated before 4000 B.C.

3. The river Sarasvati figures very often in the story proper of the Mahabharata. There is a vivid description of the encampment of the Pandavas on the banks of the Sarasvati in Virat and Udyoga Parvas. A chapter is devoted to the description of the holy places connected with the Sarasvati in the Gada Parva.
4. *Ancient Indian Chronology* pp 60-155.
5. *Forgotten Kingdom*, Penguin, pp 31-37.
6. *Chronologies in World Archaeology*.
7. *Companion to Homer* by A.J. Beattie.

9

Evidences of Sutra Literature

It is unanimously accepted that the Sutra literature followed the Vedic literature. Asvalayana, author of the Grihya Sutras, referred to Bharata and Mahabharata Dharmacharyas—Paila, Sumantu, Jaimini, and Vaisampayana. Sankhyayana in his Sruta sutras has mentioned that owing to a sacrificial error, the Kauravas were driven away from the Kurukshetra.¹ Hence, if the dates of the Sutra literature and its authors could be found, it can be asserted with confidence that the Mahabharata war was anterior.

Jyotisha Vedanga was composed in 1270 B.C. according to S.B. Roy.² The margin of error was given as one tithi (i.e.) or 72 years. Asvalayana observed a pole star K-Draconie³ and mentioned it in the Grihyasutra in the marriage ritual. Colebrooke has shown that this phenomenon occurred in 1326 B.C.⁴ It has been shown from the Teachers' lists that Asvalayana was born in 1388 B.C.⁵ Sankhyayana was a contemporary of Asvalayana.⁶ Baudhayana is an important name in Sutra chronology because he is known to be the earliest among the Sutrakaras. His date is computed as 1333 B.C. by S.B. Roy. In other words, the Sutra literature belongs to the period 1400–1200 B.C. It can be asserted with confidence that the Mahabharata war took place earlier (i.e.) before 1400 B.C.

As Asvalayana explicitly mentions Bharata and Mahabharata and mentions the names of Vaisampayana and his colleagues, the reference pertains to the epic and not to the great war. The epic was recited by Vaisampayana during the time of Janamejaya. Therefore there must be a gap of some generations between the Mahabharata and Asvalayana who pays transparently reverential homage to the authors of the great epic which has already become a classic. They were treated on par with the hoary Vedic rishis.

1. Cited by B.K. Ghosh in the *Vedic-age*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Vol.1 p.215 ff
2. S.B. Roy—*Ancient India—a Chronological Study*.
3. Grihya Sutra 1-7-22
4. On the Indian & Arabic divisions of the Zodiac, *J.R.A.S. LX* pp. 323-329.
5. Sankhyayana's teacher Kabola was honoured by Asvalayana, H.A. Phadke *Mahabharata, Myth & Reality* p.182
6. S.B. Roy *Ancient Indian Chronology* pp. 7-63.

The specific mention of Mahabharata by Asvalayana must be taken note of. By the time of Asvalayana in the second millennium B.C. Mahabharata has already become a classic. Asvalayana attests to the antiquity of the Mahabharata tradition.

10

Astronomical References

There are innumerable references to astronomical details throughout the Mahabharata. In fact the progress in the development of astronomical knowledge of ancient India was reflected in the Mahabharata. The different stages through which the epic evolved can be traced by these astronomical statements.

Three distinct stages are discernible: I. the notation of Nakshatras beginning with the *Krittikas*. Lokamanya B.G. Tilak has assigned this period to 3000 to 1500 B.C. when the later Vedic literature developed. References pertaining to this period in the Mahabharata are reminiscent of the times of Veda Vyasa and the composition of the Jaya. II. There is a passage in the Mahabharata where it was stated specifically that the *Krittika* period under the system of 27 Nakshatra-Zodiac came to end but as the people wanted its continuance i.e. the Vernal Equinox should continue to be associated with the *Krittikas* (Pleiades) the problem was solved by the inclusion of Abhijit in the system thus making the number of Nakshatras 28.¹

*Abhijit spardhamāna tu rohinya kanyasī svasā,
 Icchantī Jyeshthātam devī tapastaptum vanam gatā
 Tatra mūdhosmi bhadram te nakṣatram gaganāccyutam,
 Kalam tvimam param skanda brahmanā saha cintayā
 Dhanishṭhadistadā kalo brahmanā parinirmitaḥ,*

1. When the Vernal Equinox was in the first point of Krittika (under the 27 nakshatra scheme) the winter solstice was at the end of the first quarter Dhanistha. The longitude of the first point of Dhanista in A.D. 499 (Aryabhatta's time) $295^{\circ}29' + 3^{\circ}20'$ ($\frac{1}{4}$ of a nakshatra) Total $298^{\circ} 49'$. The longitude of the winter solstice of 499 A.D. was -270° precession of equinoxes up to 499 A.D. was $298^{\circ} 49' - 270^{\circ} 28^{\circ} 49'$ thus the interval up to 499 A.D. was (the precession rate being $49.7124''$ per annum) $28^{\circ} 49' / 49.7124'' = 2087$ years. Hence the equinox was at the beginning of Krittika in $(499 - 2087) = 1588$ i.e. 1589 B.C. B.C. 1589 was the time when the Abhijit arrangement was made. K.C. Varma, *Mahabharata & Astronomy*.

*Rohinyādyo' bhavat purvamevam samkhyā samābhavat.
Evamukte tu sakreṇa tridivam krittikā gatah,
Nakṣatram sakaṭākāram bhāti tadvahni daivatam.*²

Mahabharata 3. 219 – 8 – 12; Critical Edition IV Page 778

The Vedanga Jyotisha refers to the time when the winter solstice took place in Dhanistha.³

III. There is a reference to the time when the winter solstice fell in *Sravana* and the counting of the Nakshatras beginning from *Sravana*. This new arrangement, it was narrated, was introduced by Visvamitra, “who created another world of his own and made the Nakshatras begin with *Sravana*.”⁴ According to the calculation of Dixit, this phenomenon pertains to about 450 B.C. So, the final version of the *Mahabharata* edited by Sauti must have come into existence some time after 450 B.C.

Rhetor Dion Chrysostom, the Greek orator who visited India in the middle of the first century A.D. has stated that the Indians possess an *Iliad* of 100000 verses.⁵

So, it can be stated without any fear of contradiction that the final version of the *Mahabharata* edited by Sauti was composed before the advent of the Christian era. Though *Mahabharata* was mentioned by Asvalayana in the 14th century B.C. it can be inferred that it referred to the edition of Vaisampayana who was acclaimed as *Mahabharatacharya* as his edition obviously gained outstanding popularity by that time. (Jaya) by Veda Vyasa was the original composition. The version of Suka was narrated to

2. This arrangement continued for 242 years as Krittikas' association with Vernal Equinox was extended by $3\frac{1}{3}^\circ$. It takes 72 Years for the equinox to move one degree. This extension came to its final end in 1347 B.C. (1589-242) as this method of expansion could not be applied when the Vernal Equinox crossed over to the limiting position of the third quarter of *Bharani* of the older system of Nakshatras in 1347 B.C. To prevent confusion the first point of Dhanistha was kept identical in both the 27 and 28 Nakshatra systems. Hence to the statement Dhanisthadi tada kalo brahmana parikalpitah. K.C. Varma. *Mahabharata & Astronomy*.
3. C.V. Vaidya—quotes from Dixit who calculated on this basis that the Vedanga Jyotisha pertains to about 1400 B.C.
4. *Adi parva*—Chapter 71 and *Asvamedha parva*—Chapter 44.
5. Noticed by Weber. For his life, see *Encyclopaedia Britannica* XI Ed. Vol.VIII p.279.

Parikshit. All the five versions of the Bharata obviously were in vogue in 14th century B.C. From the Asvamedha Parva of Jaimini, it is clear, that the five versions differed substantially in content though not in the main story. Vaisampayana's Bharata which eclipsed the other versions of his colleagues was perhaps considered authoritative as it enjoyed the royal patronage of Janamejaya, the direct descendant of the Pandava hero, Arjuna. Some scholars have said that the astronomical statements in the Vedic Literature, the Puranas and the epics are back-calculations inserted after Aryabhata. In the opinion of K.C. Varma, they are based on observational astronomy. He says that "It has been proved beyond doubt that before the discoveries of Newton, Leibnitz, Laplace, La Grange etc. back-calculations could not have been made. The observations of John Playfair, well-known astronomer, physicist and mathematician deserve to be quoted in this context.⁶ While writing about the tables of star positions connected with *Kaliyuga Era* he says that the equation of the Sun's centre is an element in the Indian astronomy which has a more unequivocal appearance of belonging to an earlier period than Calyougham (Kaliyuga). Regarding the mean place of the moon at 3102 B.C. he says that the difference between the modern computations (e.g. Mayer's tables) and the ancient Indian is less than two thirds of a degree which for so remote an age and considering the acceleration of the moon's motion for which no allowance can be made in an Indian calculation, is a degree of accuracy that nothing but actual observation could have produced. He cited another instance Aldebaran (Rohini was placed at 53-20' distant from the Zodiac) in 3102 B.C. by the Indian Astronomy. So it was 40' distant from the Vernal Equinox. But the same star by the best modern observations was in the year 1750 in the longitudes 2S 6°-17'-47" and had it gone forward according to the present rate of precession of the equinoxes 50 $\frac{1}{3}$ ' annually it must have been at the era of Calyougham 1°3" before the equinox. But this result is to be corrected in consequence of the inequality of precession discovered by N.D.C. La Grange by the addition of 1°45'22" to the longitude of 13' from the vernal equinox at the time of Calyougham agreeing within 53' with the determination of the Indian astronomy. The Brahmanas by their own rules for

6. *Edinburgh Review* 1970, Reproduced by Dharmapal—*Indian Science and India*, Delhi 1971 pp 6-99.

computing the motion of the fixed stars could not have assigned this place to Aldebaran for the beginning of the Calyougham, had they calculated from modern observation. For, they make the motion of the fixed stars too great by more than 3" annually i.e. the precession rate of 54" adopted by Indians as against the highly incorrect 36" of Hipparchus. If they had calculated backward from 1491 they would have placed the fixed stars less advanced by 4° – or 5° at their ancient epoch. At the same time, this shows, how difficult it is to back even for a lesser period than that of 3000 years in an astronomical computation. It affords a proof, altogether a demonstration, that the Indian astronomy is not derived from that of Ptolemy. He fixes the origin of Indian Astronomy 1000 or 1200 years earlier to Kaliyuga i.e. 4300 years before the Christian era.

The astronomical references found in the Mahabharata can be relied upon and will be of immense value in determining the date of the Mahabharata war as well as the evolution of the epic.

11

Vidura Seva Ashram Seminar

The Vidura Seva Ashram near Bijnoor in Uttar Pradesh organised a three-day Seminar on the Mahabharata from 19th to 21st October, 1975. The Seminar centred round the date of the Great War. Many Vedic and Sanskrit scholars and Astronomers participated in the Seminar. Most of the scholars relied on the astronomical references found in the epic to determine the date of the Mahabharata. The president of the conference Swamy Bon Maharaj fixed the date of the Great War on Paushya Amavasya day in February, 3136 B.C. Prof. Raja, a participant in the Vidura Seva Ashrama Seminar is of the opinion that the Mahabharata war commenced on November 22, 3067 B.C. Prof. Raja's thesis is as follows:

(i) Yudhisthira performed the Rajasuya Yajna on the new moon day with Jyestha and Mula Nakshatras, the Sun was at 240.2°. Just before the commencement of the war with Amavasya and Nakshatra, the Sun's position was 224°.75". After three lunations, the sun was at 312°.06 in the Zodiac. The position of the Sun on the Sukla Ashtami in the month of Magha was 318°.6 and the moon was at a distance of 90° from the Sun. (i.e.) in the Rohini.

This was the day when Bhishma died. on the Ratha Saptami day, when the sun turned north. the position of the sun being $316^{\circ}.5$. So, the Vernal Equinox was at $46^{\circ}.5$. In 1975 the Vernal Equinox was at minus $23^{\circ}.4$. Hence the equinox has receded by $69^{\circ}.9$. The precession of the equinox is $72^{\circ}.5$ years per degree approximately. Calculation of the interval between 1975 and the Great War on this basis comes to $69.9 \times 72.5 = 5068$ or 3093 B.C. This is the nearest approximation to the actual year.

The other astronomical features have to be taken into account. In the Udyoga Parva it is mentioned that on the Jyestha day, Jupiter and Saturn were in the constellation of Rohini. while Sun, Moon and Rahu were in Jyestha causing the Solar eclipse. This was October 13, 3067 B.C., and this was the date of the war. Sarad Ritu began on this day when the sun was at $224^{\circ}.75$. The succeeding new moon comes in the month of Margasirsha. It is therefore on the Sukla Ekadasi of this month that the war actually commenced. Sukla Ekadasi, with Krittika Nakshatra falls on Friday, the November 22, 3067 B.C.

T.S. Narayanaswami has shown that the Mahabharata war commenced on Tuesday corresponding to the last day of the month of Karttika on Amavasya, in the constellation of Jyestha in 3140 B.C.

“Yudhishthira observes the change in the course of the sun, collects all the materials for the cremation of Bhishma and goes to him with all the relations on the morning of Magha Sukla Ashtami and Bhishma breathes his last just at noon at about 15 Ghatikas after the sun-rise on the same day, in the constellation of Rohini. It is stated that by the death of Bhishma himself that three fourths of the month still remained unexpired.”¹ It follows from this, that at the time of Bhishma’s death which took place immediately thereafter $7\frac{1}{2}$ Tithis, out of a total number of 30 have already passed away. In other words, Bhishma died just at the middle of Ashtami. Now it is also stated that the time of his death according to the calculation of Varahur Sundaesvara Srauti, the Rohini on that day should have ended at about 32 Ghatikas after sun-rise. A perusal of the exact moment when the constellation of Jyestha commences on Karttika Amavasya of the coming year of

1. *Mahabharata Anusasanika Parva* 167, 20-27.

Kalayukti and of the precise moment when the constellation of Rohini ends on Magha Sukla Ashtami of the same year, which we have chosen as a typical year for purposes of comparison, will show at a rough glance that the constellation of Rohini could not have lasted for more than 32 Ghatikas on that particular Magha sukla Ashtami when the great Bhishma of the Mahabharata cast off his body. By the time of passing away of Bhishma who died just at midday as 15 Ghatikas expired, the Rohini Nakshatra lasted only for 17 Ghatikas more after midday noon, the moon, more definitely speaking, was in the third quarter of Rohini at the time when Bhishma actually passed away to heaven and even in this third quarter which consists of 15 Ghatikas. 13 Ghatikas had already passed away so that there remained only 2 Ghatikas in the third quarter of Rohini, when Bhishma actually breathed his last. The third quarter of Rohini commences at $46^{\circ}-40'$ of the ecliptic and ends with 50° . So, at the exact moment of Bhishma's death the moon must have been at $46^{\circ}-40'$ plus $13/15$ ($3^{\circ}-20'$ or $46^{\circ}-40'$ plus $2^{\circ}-53'-20''$ equal to $49^{\circ}-33'-20''$.

As the distance between the sun and the moon at the moment was separated by $7\frac{1}{2}$ Tithis or $7\frac{1}{2}$ times 12° or 90° the sun must have been at the moment of Bhishma's death at $49^{\circ}-33'-20''$ minus 90° or $319^{\circ}-33'-20''$ or in other words, in the fourth quarter of Satabhisha. As the winter solstice or Uttarayana had already commenced with Ratha Saptami which must have ended at about the midnight on the previous day, there will be a difference of $1\frac{1}{2}$ degree between the actual commencement of Uttarayana and the actual moment of Bhishma's death with the result that the Uttarayana in Bhishma's time or soon after the close of the Mahabharata war must have commenced when the sun was in $319^{\circ}-33'-20''$ minus $1^{\circ}-30'-0''$ or in $318^{\circ}-3'-20''$ or in other words, at about the middle of the fourth pada of Satabhisha. Now the Uttarayana in 1917 commenced in the first part of the third pada of Mula in $248^{\circ}-28'$. There is a difference of $318^{\circ}-3'-20''$ minus $247^{\circ}-28'$ or $75^{\circ}-35'-20''$ or $254120''$.

We thus find that since the time of Bhishma's death, the date of the winter solstice or Uttarayana has been thrown back by $254120''$ on account of the precession of the equinoxes.

What is the period of time within which so much change in the date of the winter solstice may take place? If we take the rate of precession at $50'-26''$ of angle in a year $254120''$ will take a period of $\{ 254120 \times \frac{100}{5026}$ or $5056 \times \frac{544}{5026}$ years or in round figures 5056 years as the measure of time needed for the change. In other words, Bhishma must have died in the year 5056-1917 A.D. or in the year 3139 B.C.

Just 37 years before the commencement of the Kaliyuga, the Mahabharata war must have commenced on Tuesday, corresponding to the last day of the month of Karttika on Amavasya in the constellation of Jyestha of the year corresponding to 3140 B.C.²

T. Bhattacharya has discussed the problem at length taking the astronomical data furnished in the epic.³

The statement of Sri Krishna and Bhishma imply—

(a) That the tithi on the first day of the war was Amavasya, the sun was in the Nakshatra Jyestha-Rohini. Bhishma died on the southern winter solstice day at the beginning of the solar month of Magha, three fourths of the lunar month was over and hence the Tithi was sukla eighth and the war began 67 days before Bhishma died and he fell on the evening of the 10th day of the battle.

(b) This implies that the sun required 67 days to move from Nakshatras Jyestha (Rohini) to the southern solstice-67°

(c) The Nakshatra Jyestha (Rohini) is fixed in the sky and is to the west of the southern solstice, which gradually and slowly changes at the rate of 1 in 72 Years (precession of equinoxes) and it moves towards the west. In the days of the Bharata war it took 67days= 67° for the sun to pass from Jyestha to the then winter solstice. In 499 A.D. the same distance required 40.2 days i.e. 40.2 degrees. In 1900 the journey was covered in 20.8 days thus in the interval between the Bharata war and 1900 A.D. the sun required $67-20.8=46.2$ days=46.2 degrees and the interval between 499 A.D. & 1900 A.D. it took $40.2-20.8=19.4$ days. If D is put for the date of the Bharata war $1960-D/1401$ (i.e.1900-491)-46.2/

2. Quoted by M. Krishnamacharya in his *History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* pp. 61-62.

3. *Journal of Ganganath Jha Research Institute* Vol.VIII 1950 pp. 1.

$$19.4 = 1900 - D = 46.2 / 19.4 \times 1401 = 3335.$$

$$\text{Thus } D = 1900 - 3335 = -1435 - 1436$$

In other words, if 72 Years are required to effect a shift of 1° , the number of years required for shifting $46.2 - 46.2 \times 72 = 3327$ years. The shift was produced in 1900 years. Thus $1900 - D = 3327$ or 1428 B.C. But by a more precise calculation Bhattacharya showed that the first day of the war was October 27, 1432 B.C. S.B. Roy gives the following calculations:—

“On the day the battle commenced, the Sun was at Antares 249.30° . Uttarayana took place 68 days thereafter i.e. at 317.

Uttarayana to-day (base year 1970) = 270 Hence the precession = 47.

Rate of precession = 72 years per degree. Hence the time lapsed = 3384 Yrs.

Epoch of the battle $1970 - 3384 = 1414$ B.C. This is the first approximation.

Epoch of the battle $1970 - 3384 \approx 1414$ B.C. This is the first approximation.

Lower limit: Bhishma clearly stated that the month of Magha had begun. The Jyotisa Vedanga begins with the Solstice at the junction of Pausa and Magha (i.e.) on the first day of Magha. The epoch is 1270 B.C. Hence, this is the lowest possible astronomical date of the battle because Bhishma said that Magha has already begun when he died.

Upper limit: Bhishma's injunction. ‘Bhishma said that it ought to be (Bhavitam ashati) $\frac{3}{4}$ of the bright fortnight of Magha at the Solstice. This gives the epoch 1486 - 1414 B.C. Thus 1270 B.C. and 1484 are the lower and upper limits for the date of the war with the inner range of 1424-1414 B.C.”.

Epigraphical evidence

No direct epigraphical evidence to fix the date of the Mahabharata war has yet come to light. However, there are two inscriptions which throw some light on the date of the Great War.

I. The Hissa Borala inscription of Vakataka king Deva Sena of the 5th century A.D. records the construction of the Sudarsana lake near Washim (ancient Vatsagulma) in Akola district of Maharashtra. The inscription records the date of the construction of the lake. Sri Kotle has translated it thus [Siddham tasya vrittasya to saptarshyuttarasu "in the year 380 when the seven sages⁴ were in the asterism Uttara, having progressed up to $\frac{1}{6}$ th part of it (or for SIX years) i.e. $\frac{1}{6}$ th part of 360.⁵]

As a matter of fact there is no mention of the Bharata war at all in this inscription. However, Brihat Samhita as well as the Puranas say that the Saptarshi constellation was in Magha at the time of Yudhisthira. But this inscription has given rise to a lot of controversy around the year 380, as well as the constellation of Uttara. Some scholars have taken it to Uttara Phalguni. Vakataka inscriptions were dated in the Salivahana Saka and the date of the inscription has to be taken as $380 - 78 = 458$ A.D. As Vakataka Deva Sena flourished in the 5th century, the year 380 can be identified with the Saka era. According to the Puranas, the Saptarshi constellation moves from one Nakshatra to another in 100 Yrs. in a retrograde direction. Uttara can be taken as Uttara-Ashadha; in the case the Saptarshis will be in Uttarashadha in 1800 B.C. and come to Magha in 1300 B.C. The Hissa Borala inscription has not added anything new to the subject. It has just reiterated the age old tradition that the constellation of the Saptarshi was in Magha at the time of the great war. The evidence of Hissa Borala inscription cannot be construed as concrete and conclusive in whichever way the year 380 or Uttara are interpreted.

II. There is a specific mention of the Mahabharata war in the Aihole inscription of Pulakesi II

*trisatsu trisahasresu bharatahavaditah,
saptabdasatayuktasu gateshvabdesu pancasu.
panca satsu kalau kala satsu panca satasu ca,
samasu samatitasu sakanamapi bhuhujam.*

4. The Constellation of Ursa Major.

5. Dr. Mirashi Felicitation Volume p. 381.

The date of the inscription according to these verses is 3735 years after the Kali era calculated after the *Bharata War*. (Bharatahavaditah and 556 years after *Saka* era. That means the inscription is dated 634 A.D. beyond the shadow of least doubt. This inscription categorically gives the equation of Kaliyuga era with that of the Saka era. As per this inscription, the date of the Mahabharata war is $3735-634 = 3101$ B.C. Thus the Aihole inscription corroborates in unambiguous language the traditional date of the "bharatahava" or the Bharata war.

III. The Nasik cave inscription of Vasistiputra Pulomavi alluding to the valour of Kesava, Arjuna and Bhima, Yayati and Nahusha, the heroes of the Mahabharata story, attests to the wide popularity of the epic. The date of the inscription is assigned by historians to the middle of the second century A.D. The representation of Krishna can however be found on the coins of Agathacles belonging to the 2nd century B.C.⁶ Another depiction of Krishna bearing Brahmi alphabets at the ashrama of Sandipana on a terracotta find from SUGH (Haryana) has been assigned to the second century B.C.⁷

12

Objections Against The Traditional Theory

The traditional theory that the Mahabharata war was fought in 3100 B.C. is not accepted by most of the modern historians. The traditional date is assailed on the following grounds:—

I. The date 3100 B.C. for the Great War is primarily the view of scholars of Sanskrit literature and arm chair historians.¹

There has never been one opinion regarding the date of the war among historians and astronomers and different dates have been arrived at by different scholars. This confirms the belief that the people had originally little knowledge about the Bharata war

6. Dr P Benerjee quoted by V.P. Dwivedi in his article on *Mahabharata and Indian Art*.

7. B.C. Chopra "Sugh terracotta with Brahmi Barakhade" *Bulletine National Museum* New Delhi, No 2 pp.14-16.

1. K.S. Ramchandran & S.P. Gupta—*Mahabharata Myth & Reality*.

but they entertained various ideas about its date, only after its story has attained considerable popularity.²

II. Acceptance of the traditional date disturbs the accepted chronological equilibrium.

(a) If this is so between 3138 B.C. and Chandragupta Maurya 328 – 27 B.C. 2800 would have elapsed during which 32 Brihadrathas and 12 Sisunagas would have ruled. The average works out to 67 regnal years for each king. This average is not found anywhere in the world, since 3500 B.C. when the first king of the first Dynasty of Egypt began to rule.

(b) This raises another difficulty also. In this case not only the history of our country but also of others need have to be recast taking the date of Asoka back to 1474 B.C., Chandra Gupta Maurya to 136 B.C., and the Buddha to 1800 B.C. Further we would be confronted with the problem of not accepting the well established Egyptian chronology, worked out on the basis of contemporary inscriptions since the beginning of the fifth dynasty. This dynasty cannot be earlier than 2800 B.C.

(c) Again the date for the Mahabharata war contradicts the chronologies in Greek history. Herodotus avers that the Greeks obtained their alphabet from the Phoenicians some time in the first quarter of the first millennium B.C. The Khandhar inscription of Ashoka in Greek contains the Greek letters "ita'XI Pti" and omega. These letters were incorporated in the Greek alphabet system in about 400 B.C. If we assume that the Mahabharata war was fought in 3138 B.C., then, it would mean that these Greek letters were incorporated in the Greek alphabet in circa 2900 B.C. In that case Asoka's inscription found at Khandhar should belong to 1602 B.C. and the GUPTA era would commence in 32 B.C. The last date is in direct contradiction with Fleet's date 319 A.D. for the beginning of the Gupta era. But this date 319 A.D. is confirmed by several inscriptions (*Sen Gupta-Ancient Indian Chronology*)

(d) Dating the Mahabharata war in the fourth millennium B.C. also affects the chronology of the historical events in Sri

2. D.C. Sircar *Ibid* p.14.

Lanka which since 841 B.C. is well established for it has been based on their contact with ancient China whose chronology is indisputable on the basis of the dated inscription (398 A.D.) of King Upatissa (360-410 A.D.) Parana vitana places the beginning of the Buddha era of Sri Lanka in 544 B.C. Hence 3138 as the date for the Mahabharata war is not acceptable.³

III. Puranic Evidence

Sri Kailas Chandra Varma basing his calculations on the evidence of the Puranas fixes the time of the Mahabharata war in the fifteenth century B.C. "The dates 3102 or 3138 or 2449 B.C. are prima facie impossible as the Puranas state that these were between the war and 600 B.C. (Buddha 624-544 B.C.) 25 kings and they could not have averaged $2500/25 = 100$ years each. Similarly the interval between 2449 and 600 would give an average of another impossible $1850/25 = 74$ Years. In a similar manner, the interval 1500, between the war and the beginning of the Nanda dynasty in 413 (or 409) B.C. is inadmissible as 22 Brihadratha kings and 12 Sisunagas (34 Kings) could not have ruled 45.3 years each. Thus we are left with the figure 1050 and 1015 years as the interval between the war and the commencement of the Nanda dynasty in 409 B.C., the date of the war works out to be $409-423 + 1015 = 1424$ or 1428 B.C. or reckoning from Mahapadmananda it would be $378 (324) \text{ B.C.} + 1050 = 1428$ or 1424 B.C.

Another set of data confirms this. Buddhist and Jain literatures assure us that Buddha, Bimbisara (Vedisara in the Puranas), Canda, Pradyota of Avanti, Prasenajit of Kosala, Udayana of Kausambi were contemporaries and according to Puranas, there were 25 kings between the war and Udayana. Thus (taking 33 years for generation) $25 \times 33 + 2624 = 1449$ B.C. for the war. A third set of figures is derived from the rulers of Magadha Somapi to Ripunjaya: 22 kings 700 years + 362 years for 12 Sisunagas = 1062 years + 378 for Mahapadmananda gives 1440 B.C. for the war. Thus the historical date in the Puranas give a date between 1450 and 1410 B.C. Perhaps a mean date between say 1432 and 1415 B.C. would be nearer the mark. K.P. Jayaswal on the basis of the puranic observations computed the date of the Mahabharata battle at 1424 B.C. He concluded that there were ten

3. K.S. Ramachandran & S.P. Gupta: *Mahabharata, Myth & Reality* p.16.

missing names in the Puranas whose reign periods were included in those of others.

IV. Geographical Horizon

According to Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray, the geographical horizon of the Bharata epic was limited to what is roughly the entire sub-continent of India, north of the Vindhyas and the Vindhyan Plateau extending from Bahlikam (Balkh), Kamboja and Gandhara in the extreme north west, Sindhu Sauvira and the Yadava Country in the south west and Mahismati and Avanti in the west, to Vanga, Kalinga and Pragjyotisapura (Kamarupa) in the east. But one may take into account that King Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisapura who ruled over the kiratas was an *Asura* which presumably means that the region at the time of the Kurukshetra war still outside the then Aryandom. In so far Vanga and Kalinga are concerned, one cannot help feeling that these two regions were also similarly placed and were later insertions for rhyming with Anga, the Anga-Kalinga-Vanga triad being a later phraseological currency. For all practical purposes, therefore, the Geographical horizon of the Bharata war was limited in the east to the South Bihar, in other words Anga and Magadha. This was more or less exactly the geographical horizon of the Aryan language speaking peoples of India at the time of the Buddha (C. 600 B.C.) as well but for the fact that the list of the sixteenth Maha janapadas of the early Pali tradition includes Asoka and Mulaka and that early Buddhism knows of a city called Pattithanapura which means that by about 600 B.C. the then Aryandom came to include a couple of Janapadas or so lying to the south of the Vindhyas. One may therefore locate in time the geographical horizon of the Bharata war, say a hundred or couple of hundred years earlier than 600 B.C. i.e. C 800 B.C."⁴ He adds that "Altogether well-nigh thirty Janapadas or Janas seem to have been involved in the war. It is well-known that there were sixteen Mahajanapadas in more or less the same geographical area, two alone lying to the south outside of this area. It is known further that these sixteen Mahajanapadas were by about 400 B.C. reduced to four and by about 324 B.C. to only one which was the great and sprawling Maurya empire.

However, the well-nigh thirty big and small Janapadas of the Bharata war list to sixteen of the early Buddhist list must have taken quite a few generations spanning a period of say two hundred years or so, on a rough computation. On this consideration too, the Kurukshetra war can be located in time which should be sometime C. 800 B.C.⁵

13

Archaeology

The Script of the Indus valley civilization has not yet been deciphered. Even if it is deciphered, no written records are available. However, the contribution of Archaeology to Indian history is significant. The archaeological excavations at Harappa, Mohenjodaro and other places have extended the historical horizons of India.

After the Harappans till Mauryan times, there are no written records available at all, unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt which have a chronology extending up to the third millennium B.C. In India we have no definite means of dating even in this historical period. So, it is very sad that much of Indian history still belongs to the realms of proto-history. Chronology is the pulse of history. Much of the so-called proto-history in India can be brought back to pulsating life from its present state of hibernation, if a dynamic system of chronology is established.

Willard F. Libby discovered the method of Radiocarbon dating and he was awarded the Nobel prize in 1960 in recognition of the value of the method and the theoretical perception behind it. Radiocarbon dating has revolutionised the doubtful dating methods hitherto adopted by archaeology, all the world over. About five hundred C 14 dates of Indian archaeological sites are available to-day as a result of the extensive dating programme launched earlier by the Radiocarbon Laboratory of the Tata Fundamental Research Institute and later by the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad. The importance of chronology in pre-historic archaeology in India where the first definite date is as late as 326 B.C. marked by Alexander's invasion needs no special

5. Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray.

emphasis. Radiocarbon dating which is still in its infancy may be able to elevate the apparent proto-history of India to the position of established history in the near future.

It may however be mentioned that the Radioactive decay does not take place at a uniform rate but is a random process and is therefore governed by the laws of statistical probability. Generally, the errors quoted on dates are of one standard deviation, the level of confidence for which is 68.3%. For errors of 1.5, 2.3 and 3.5 times for the standard deviation, the possibilities of the observed date being correct within the given errors are 86.6, 95.5, 99.7, and 99.9% respectively.

In recent years with growing sophistication in techniques of radio-activity detection it has been found that there is some discrepancy between the C14 dates of tree-ring material and its dendro-chronological ages. These discrepancies could reflect changes in the C 14/C 12 in the past. But if these variations are genuine and their magnitude as large as shown by dendro-chronological samples there is no concordance amongst the samples dated by archaeology, varve chronology etc.

In fact our unpublished studies indicate that archaeologically well dated samples show less than plus or minus 4% variation in the third millennium B.C. and less than plus or minus 2% the second millennium B.C.¹ But let it be clearly understood that experiments in correcting the errors of C-14 are still going on at several places by the scientists of several disciplines and all of them have not accepted the validity of MASCA corrections based on tree-ring dating method called dendrochronology. In India, however, not many serious attempts have been made by archaeologists to throw light on the historicity of the Mahabharata story. Nevertheless the one attempt made by Prof B.B. Lal is noteworthy. His views may be summarized as follows:

(a) There is no direct archaeological evidence to prove the historicity of the story of the Mahabharata. However, there is some circumstantial evidence which suggests that in all likelihood there was a basis for the story which as time passed got inflated out of all proportions to the original.

1. D.P. Agrawal and Sheila Kusumgar.

(b) As regards the date of the Mahabharata war, the question is no less difficult to answer while dates varying from 310 B.C to the 9th century B.C have been suggested by different scholars. There seems to be greater possibility of the latter date being nearer the mark.

(c) Amongst the principal sites associated with the Mahabharata story, mention may be made of Hastinapura (Meerut District) U.P, which was the capital of the Kauravas, Barnawa (ancient Varnavatta, Meerut Dt, U.P.) where the Kauravas attempted to burn the Pandavas in a lac-House, Birata (ancient Viratanagara Jaipur Dt; Rajasthan) where the Pandavas lived in exile at Panipat, ancient Paniprastha, Haryana, Baghput (ancient Vrikaprastha, Meerut Dt. U.P.), Indraprastha-modern Delhi, Purana Quila etc. Kurukshetra-Haryana where the battle was fought, Mathura (UP), where from Krishna hailed and so on.

Explorations and excavations have revealed an identical material culture in the Lowest levels of all these sites, the salient features of which are as follows:

(a) The economy was essentially agricultural and to some extent hunting, besides the domestic animals like cattle, buffalo, sheep, and pig and particularly the horse.

(b) The houses were made of mud, use of mud bricks being rare and kiln burnt bricks rarer.

(c) It was use of iron that distinguished it from the previous ones namely the Indus valley civilization copper hoard culture etc.

(d) Among the other noteworthy objects associated with this culture are glass bangles, oblong dice bearing 1,2,3 and 4 marks on them and plane convex gamesmen both indicating that the game of the 'Chaupara' was played by these people.

(e) The utensils were essentially earthenware 'thali; katora; lota'. This pottery is fine grained and has a grey colour. The painted motifs executed in black pigment show a variety of linear and curvilinear designs. Prof B.B. Lal called this culture as painted grey ware culture and identified it with the Kuru-Pandava times as the same material has been found in all the sites.

In the excavation made, Hastinapura has yielded some evidence of still greater significance. When about 2.5 metres of occupational deposits had accumulated at the site, a great flood occurred in the Ganga. It washed away a considerable portion of the settlement. Ample evidence of the erosion is found. More noteworthy than this is the fact that a part of the washed away material was found by means of borings in the river bed itself at a depth of nearly 15 metres below the water level. The destruction of the painted grey ware settlement at Hastinapura by means of flood in the Ganga is thus established beyond the shadow of least doubt, the Puranas have clearly mentioned that, "Gangayapahrite tasmin nagare nagahvayam tyaktva nicakshur nagaram kausambyam nivatsyati." "When the city named after the elephant (Hastinapura) is carried away by the Ganga, Nicakshu will abandon it and dwell in Kausambi."

Prof: Lal says that Kausambi painted grey ware represents a continuation of the Hastinapura type with minor evolutionary differences. According to the genealogy given in the Puranas, Nicakshu is the fifth from Parikshit (the grandson of Arjuna) who came to the throne after Yudhisthira. The 25th ruler from Parikshit is Udayana (both inclusive) who is a contemporary of the Buddha. Prof.Lal gives 14 years as the average for each reign and comes to the total of $24 \times 14/336$ years for the 24 Kings. If we add this figure to 500 B.C. when Udayana was on the throne, we arrive at the figure of 836 B.C. This is of course not to say that the Mahabharata battle was fought in 836 B.C. Far from it. The figure only gives an approximate idea of when it is likely to have taken place. Broadly speaking, therefore, the middle of the 9th century B.C. may not be an unreasonable estimate for the occurrence of the event. On the basis of C 14 dates together with the corrections of C 14 by the centre for Archaeology, University of Pennsylvania, U S A, the painted grey ware culture in the upper Ganga-Yamuna valley would be ascribable broadly to circa 1100-600 B.C. In the opinion of Prof. B.B.Lal, the present text as available to us now refers not only to the Persians, the Greeks, Romans and Parthians but also to the Hunas. The present text therefore is unlikely to be earlier than the 4th century A.D. If Krishna was a historical figure, he is unlikely to have been later than the Buddha who lived in the Sixth century B.C. for, the history after the Buddha is well-known

that there is hardly any scope to accommodate Krishna and the Mahabharata in it. According to Prof. Lal a clear time gap of at least a thousand years exists between the event and the available text.

The sequence of cultures which archaeology is able to discover in the locale of the Mahabharata story, the region between the ancient Sarasvati and the Drishadvati basin in Haryana and Rajasthan and the Ganga-Yamuna basin before the Mauryan times is as follows:-

Approximate Date + or - 100 Yrs BC	Name assigned to the culture	Stage
600-400	Northern Black Polished ware (NBP) Culture	Iron
1000-400	Painted Grey Ware (P.G.W.) Culture	
1800-1000	Ochre coloured pottery (O.C.P) Culture	
2500-1700	Indus Valley Harappa Mohenjodaro Culture	Copper Bronze
3000-2000	Proto-Harappa sometimes called "Sothi kot Difi complex of the pre-Harappan origin"	

"Stone age Culture"

Indus Valley civilization and the Mahabharata culture seem different and no serious attempt is made to correlate the two.

(a) No major Harappan site is discovered within the bounds of the locale of the Mahabharata story from Kurukshetra to Mathura.

(b) None of the excavations in the Mahabharata story region did yield the remains of the Indus Valley civilization. There are scholars like M.C.Joshi, J.P.Joshi and U. Thakur who hold that the evidence of "flood at Hastinapura excavations" by Prof Lal need not be connected with the puranic account for the desertion of Hastinapur. There might have been many floods during several centuries. But Dr S.P. Gupta says that the P.G.Ware settlement was found badly destroyed by the flood in the Ganga when the culture had not shown any phenomenal signs of decay is amply clear from the archaeological remains. The deserted place was re-occupied by a new set of people and they were the users of the Northern Black Polished ware though the PG Ware culture continued at the site in a different form. That the Puranas preserved the oral tradition of the Mahabharata and later history is amply proved from several genealogical tables they offer.

There is archaeological confirmation of the puranic tradition. However, Amarendra Nath is of the opinion that the O.C.P. complex (Ochre coloured pottery culture), the remains of which were found in plenty in the Indo-Gangetic divide may be the culture of Mahabharata people. Dr S.P. Gupta's conclusion is that these difficulties cannot be fully resolved at the present stage of our knowledge. Archaeology on its own can neither decide of the Mahabharata war nor prove the authenticity of several other incidents occurring in the Mahabharata. If iron was used in the Mahabharata war, as appears to be the case, then the war is likely to have been fought within the time bracket plus or minus 100 Years 1200-1000 B.C.

Archaeologically we may not be able to say more than this at present. "The beginnings of the Iron Age" in India has become a controversial topic. Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray, while commenting upon John Irwin's lectures on Asokan pillars has said that heavy and sophisticated tools and implements of iron could not have made their appearance felt in the Ganga Yamuna Valley or the Ganga Basin before the fourth century B.C. indeed not before 326 B.C.² However, recent excavations at P.G.W. sites present an altogether different picture by which the antiquity of Iron industry

2. *Hindustan Times* 25-1-1976.

is pushed back by several centuries earlier in the Ganga Yamuna valley. At Atranjikhhera, iron objects have been found practically at all the layers suggesting that the use of Iron was common through out the P.G.W period³

Ayas (iron) was mentioned in the Rig Veda but Prof B.B. Lal says that the meaning of the word Ayas during the Rig Veda period was copper. But there is a reference to shyama Ayas (the black iron) in the Yajur Veda. The Rig Veda speaks of Ayasi puras, forts of Iron. It tells us how the Asvins have replaced Vispal's leg by that of iron. The Rig Veda speaks of "Pura-Carisnu" interpreted as a machine to demolish forts. The Taittiriya Samhita refers to *Sataghni*, which seems to have been a kind of cannon. Satapatha Brahmana mentions iron vessels.⁴ Archaeology has its native limitations. What nature could not preserve, archaeology cannot be expected to produce. The pre-Mauryan palaces were built of wood. One cannot say what is being missed by the archaeological spade. If Marshall—in these days of Horizontal excavation-spree might have stopped with obtaining cultural sequence by striking (by-chance) at the workers quarters at Mohenjodaro, how poor would have been the picture of town planning and monumental architecture of the Harappa culture. The limited vertical designs and diggings in the few epic sites might not have touched the actual palace sites or even a noble's or warrior's house. The ruling classes must have reserved iron for weapons. Moreover iron in the soil of the Ganga plains rusts and corrodes fast. So, its limited discovery in the epic strata need not make us think that the Mahabharata heroes must have lived in mesolithic times. It is known that the Hittites exploited iron around the 13th century B.C. In view of the Boghaz Kuei record, there should have been acceptable links between Hittite area and Aryavarta. Certain aspects of Iron Age, stages of Ahar are now being averred as likely to be placed in C 1700 B.C. on the basis of data recorded by the excavators themselves.⁵

It is admitted generally that the Mahabharata war belongs to the period when the use of Iron was prevalent. The beginnings of

3. R.C. Gaur, *Mahabharata & Archaeology, Mahabharata Myth & Reality* p.70.
4. B.P. Sinha p.260.
5. Sri K.V.S. Rajan refers to the Chandigarh Seminar of Indian Prehistoric Society, December 1975-*Mahabharata Myth & Reality* p.210.

the Iron Age in India can be traced to the antiquity of the Vedic times. "If Iron weapons of this period have not been encountered in good number, it is because of the inadequacy of our excavations and not because of their non-existence."⁶ Amarendranath's views are in diametrically opposite direction to the opinions of DR. B.B. Lal. "The excavations at Ambkheri by M.N. Deshpande have clearly shown that at one stage or the other, the late Harappa culture met and co-existed with the O.C.P. culture. In fact it appears that the late Harappa culture whose remains have been unearthed at Kurukshetra by Dr.U.V. Singh at Mithal, by Dr. Suraj and at Bhagwan Pura by Sri J.P. Joshi, is coeval with O.C.P. Culture. Although the P.G.W. and late Harappa and O.C.P. cultures partly differ in their geographical distribution, yet they overlap at some sites in Haryana, Punjab and Western U.P. Archaeologically, the date of the late Harappa culture cum O.C.P. culture coincides with the date of the Mahabharata war. Therefore we feel that late Harappan and O.C.P. people are the rightful claimants of the Mahabharata period.⁷ Except for the absence of iron, the cultures are similar in economy and structures-and in domestication of animals and plants."

The C 14 dates for the present have their own limitations. However, better accuracy can be evolved in the near future. Already the MASCA correction proposed by Elizabeth Ralph and her colleagues is a commendable improvement in this direction. Sir Max Mallowan has been constrained to deny the reliability of the latest C-14 dates which would begin the early dynasty of Egypt in 2200 B.C. as the evidence of the Egyptian astronomy and epigraphy cannot be jettisoned.⁸ Dr V.C. Pandey says that the internal evidence of the Rig Veda and the Puranas suggests the contemporaneity of the pre-Harappan and Harappan cultures with Aryan culture for centuries. A.S. Altekar's view that the Harappans had participated in the Rig Vedic battle of Ten Kings deserves serious consideration.⁹

The evidence of the puranic literature for the reconstruction of the ancient history of India is very valuable. The historical

6. Ajayamitra Shastri *Ibid* p.198.

7. *Mahabharata Myth & Reality* p.162.

8. *Cambridge Ancient History* (Revised 1971) Vol. I pt 2 pp.242-3.

9. *Mahabharata Myth & Reality*. p.186

accounts found in the Puranas are invariably corroborated by the epigraphical and numismatic evidences. The genealogical tables preserved by the Puranas are authentic. They are not "pious frauds." The Puranas were composed by genuine idealists with a missionary zeal. However, the Puranas were never conceived by their authors to be "historical documents" as we understand the term in modern times. There are apparent gaps and contradictions. But the authors had no ulterior motives or vested interests. If the historians are not unanimous in evaluating their evidence, it is not the fault of the Puranas which are intended for the spiritual enlightenment of man. Several historians have taken different spans for a generation 12, 19, 33 years etc. Exactitude is not possible with the averages. Puranas, as they are, can be utilised as corroborative but not conclusive evidence.

With regard to the geographical horizons of proto-historic India, even Dakshina Patha is known to Rig Veda and the whole of India was Aryanised by the time of the Mahabharata war. Till now, Archaeology or Astronomy could not conclusively disprove the traditional date of the Mahabharata nor could they assign an unimpeachable date.

14

Mahabharata—Myth and Reality

The Mahabharata has classified itself as an *Itihasa*. In the English language the word *History* is the nearest approximation to the Sanskrit *Itihasa*: According to the internal evidence of the Mahabharata, *Jaya* meaning *Victory* which provided the original foundation for the story was composed by Veda Vyasa, a contemporary of the heroes of the poem. According to the hoary tradition, the Mahabharata, at least the kernel of the epic is *History*.

C.V.Vaidya in the chapter, "The Mahabharata as History", in his book *The Mahabharata—A Criticism* (1904), says, "The Mahabharata war or rather battle is the first authentic event in the ancient history of India. The authenticity of the fight of Rama with the Rakshasa king of Lanka has been questioned by many: but nobody has doubted the truth of the event of the terrible battle on

the plains of Kurukshetra." In 1975 several newspapers in India published the U.N.I. report in which Dr.D.C Sircar has expressed his views on the Mahabharata. His contentions are summarized below—

1. The Mahabharata war was not a very big event; in a sense it is a Myth.
2. The Mahabharata war must have been originally a petty family or tribal feud which formed the theme of a battle song. This war song was gradually embellished and magnified through the centuries by different poets and minstrels so much so that the core can hardly be made out.
3. As and when the story gained immense popularity among the masses, assignment of a date was considered necessary and several chronological postulates came to be advanced.
4. The Bharata war has not been mentioned in the Vedic literature or in literature prior to 4th century B.C. or in the eighteen Puranas.
5. As regards the magnitude of the war described in the Mahabharata, the participation of the southern or eastern rulers, king Bhagadatta in particular, cannot be much earlier than the 4th century.

Professor H.D. Sankalia supports that Bharata war was (i) a family feud and belonged to a time when the result of the battle depended primarily on individual strength and prowess. He observes that this was the case in ancient Greece and Troy.

(ii) He adds, " Indus valley civilization has pushed back the history of India to the third or fourth millennia B.C. A people who had given the whole western and north western India, a well planned and administered city and civilization and that too well-nigh thousand years, used comparatively simple tools and weapons of stone and copper bronze. The most prolific of their weapons was a terra cotta sling ball found stored in huge quantities behind a defensive mud brick wall at Mohenjodaro and arrow-heads of copper-bronze and bone, possibly tipped with poison." If the date of the Mahabharata war accepted as 3000 or 1400 BC., even then it would follow that the epic heroes like Bhima, Arjuna, Krishna and others fought with insignificantly looking microliths,

small mace heads, sling balls of stone and terra-cotta (not more than 3 inches in diameter and 12 ounces in weight). The Mahabharata refers to weapons made of iron which incidentally were not in regular use before the sixth century B.C. and definitely unknown before eleven hundred B.C.

(iii) "Archaeology has conclusively proved that the critical editions of the epic are not older than the fourth or fifth century B.C.

Another point made out by the opponents of tradition is that the Kurukshetra could not have accommodated the rival armies numbering 18 Akshauhinis. An Akshauhini consisted of 21,870 chariots, equal number of elephants, 65,610 horsemen and 109,350 foot soldiers. That must be taken as the maximum desirable or ideal strength. In the Udyoga Parva of Mahabharata, the strength of the Akshauhini was given differently. Even in the Bhishma Parva several kings are described as having brought armies or Akshauhinis with them. If we add all of them, the number exceeds the total given as eighteen. The Kaurava army was placed under 11 generals and the Pandava army under 7 generals. A general was competent to command an Akshauhini or a battalion of those days. The battalion rarely reached the full strength allowed. Nonetheless it was an Akshauhini. Obviously these are inflated figures. The poetic hyperbole is conventionally accepted as an integral part of epic narration. All the points raised by Professor Sircar and Dr. Sankalia, the geographical horizons, the use of iron, the chronological postulates, have already been discussed in the section *Mahabharata, A Chronological Study* in this book. These are controversial topics on which several scholars are entitled to hold different views. It is therefore true that the Mahabharata war has not been mentioned in the Vedic literature. According to well established tradition, the great war was fought before 3000 B.C. just at the time when the Vedas were edited by Veda Vyasa. As the Vedas were composed prior to the event, it is natural that there was no mention of it in Vedic literature. However, later Vedic literature is fully conversant with all the important characters of the epic.

The origins of *Itihasa* can be traced to the Vedic literature—Gatha Narasamsis—Metrical compositions in praise of mortal man

describing the heroic exploits of warriors and princes, quite distinct from gods. Winternitz, a German by birth who did dedicated research on the Mahabharata observed very rightly:

“These songs in praise of men probably soon developed into epic poems of considerable length (i.e.) heroic songs and into entire cycles of epic songs centering round one hero or one great event, for the only two national epics which have come down to us, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana represent but the last remnants of a long, past period of epic poetry. Many other heroes and great events in other royal houses also must have been sung. These old heroic songs whose existence we must take for granted have not at all vanished without leaving trace in remains and fragments. Some of them have been preserved in our two epics.”¹

The next question that arises is how far these heroic personages are historical? So far as the Mahabharata is concerned, we are in a much better position to answer this question than we are in the Ramayana, for we have external evidences regarding the existence of persons mentioned in the epic such as are not available in the case of the Ramayana.²

The heroic ballads since the Vedic times have a historical tradition and as such the Itihasa was quite distinct from the Purana. Epic poetry all the world over has its own literary conventions, dilectic dictions, and supranatural idioms. However, *Truth* is the soul of the *Itihasa* but poetry is the mortal frame it has chosen to don when reflected through the poetic frame. Truth appears in the form of Myth. The supra-natural hyperbole depicting the myth of the miracle is the conventional shorthand code employed by poetic fancy which can be very easily deciphered by any kindred heart. Let us take a concrete example. When Bhishma took the vow of life-long celibacy for the sake of his father, no language is rich enough to depict the indescribable sacrifice. The epic poet takes the easy recourse to the concoction of a transparent myth. The poet says, “There were showers of celestial flowers to the accompaniment of spontaneous sounds emanating from the Divine Drums.” There is an implicit under-

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1. *Geschichte der Indischen Literatur* Vol.IV p.261-262 English translation by Mrs S. Ketkar p.314.
 2. Prof. R.C. Mujumdar *Mahabharata Myth & Reality* p.177.

standing between the poet and the prospective—reader. The blatant absurdity viewed from the terrestrial plane is at once metamorphosed into a sublime spiritual reality of transcendental experience. The myth is the autograph of the epic and the precious legacy is preserved by successive generations of sensitive souls as the national heritage. The hyper-critical rationalism is a non-conductor of the epic ecstasy. The supra-naturalism of the myth and rationalism are parallel lines which meet nowhere.

Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray has put it in his own inimitable way. Myth is not *mithya*, neither fictional nor illusory, a myth is not a legend or a fable or a mere tale. In actuality, it is a true story of the life of any society, the essence extracted out of the very process of human life of a given time and space. A myth is an extremely complex cultural reality, the foremost function of which is to reveal the exemplary models of all significant human activities in a given society from birth to death. Indeed, myths are the most proud and meaningful possessions of early pre-industrial revolution societies, since these deep rooted traditions provide living entities in the sense that they supply models of human behaviour and by doing so, give meaning and value to the blowing current of life in a given social situation. A myth is a socio-psychological phenomenon and hence a reality which historians can hardly afford to ignore. But there are myths and myths, and there are many manifestations of mythical realities. Avowedly the myth is born blind and lame. But it is the strange paradox that myths, without heads and tails, hands or feet, are popular invariably as Globe trotters, as people invariably carry them from place to place in a golden palanquin with all royal honours. Some myths are transparent, some myths are opaque. Let us take a translucent myth, the episode of *Takshaka*. "The story of Parikshit's death may be thus simplified. *Takshaka*, the leader of the Nagas was the hereditary enemy of Parikshit, evidently a minor at the time of his accession to the throne. The Nagas had been destroyed in the Khandava forest by Arjuna and *Takshaka* was one of those who escaped from the conflagration.³ *Takshaka* probably founded a small kingdom in *Takshaka Sila* which was named after the *Takshaka* people. He appears to have fought against the Pandavas

3. Khandava was one of the boundaries of Aryavarta in the Mahabharata times. Burning was one of the processes adopted by the Aryans for reclamation.

in the Great War and aided Karna for Karna is said in the Mahabharata to have used Takshaka as an arrow against Arjuna unsuccessfully. Having missed his aim, Karna refused to use Takshaka again. Failing to take vengeance while Arjuna was alive, Takshaka appears to have waited for his opportunity against his grandson. Parikshit, having been cursed by a rishi to be bitten by a serpent, confined himself in a water palace to which no access was allowed to anybody. A brahmin once presented a fruit to Parikshit and from one of these a worm emanated. Verily the worm grew into Takshaka himself who bit him and flew away to the sky. The story in the Mahabharata probably means nothing more than that Parikshit was invested in his own city Hastinapura, and was eventually assassinated by Takshaka in his own place to which he gained access in the dress of a brahmin. The ministers of Parikshit made a firm stand and repulsed the attack of Takshaka. Janamejaya, the young son of Parikshit was placed on the throne of Hastinapura and grew up into a daring resolute monarch. When he heard how his father had been murdered by Takshaka, he resolved to take a signal vengeance on him. The story of Sarpa Sattra, given in the Mahabharata Adiparva, is only a mythological transformation of the deadly way of extermination which he waged against Takshaka and his people. He attacked Takshaka's lair and reduced it to submission. Every NAGA or serpent was hunted out and sacrificed in the Sarpa Sattra which was not an ordinary sacrifice prescribed in the Vedic ritual but specially ordained for Janamejaya. Serpent after serpent was sacrificed or put to death and in terror Takshaka ran to Indra for shelter. A brahmin now saved Takshaka in the person of Astika who was born of a serpent mother. He appeared before the king having pleased him by his praises and learning, and asked a boon of him which he granted. "Spare the lives of those serpents", he said, "Who are yet alive" and the king said, "'Amen' and granted amnesty to the survivors."

When we consider these with strictly functional reference to divinities and other topics in the pre-Buddhistic or pre-Mahavira period, as in Panini, we find that what had been totemistic groups in earlier periods had been visualised in blatantly non-human and superhuman concepts in later periods. Panini had a brother Vyali who had also contributed his mite to the commentaries on the early Vedic and Brahminical literature. The name became

virtually an art motif in later times and came to stay in a different form than the Naga clan to which Panini and Vyali belonged. Thus, it is obvious that the miraculous picturisation of a basically mundane form or event had been a superimposition because in a later period the myth as well as the literary label had been integrated and adopted as the final story.⁴

'Metaphor' is the mother-tongue of the "Myth." The question is some times put 'Why not the epic poets prefer the straight delineation instead of choosing the myth'? Nature chooses its self-fulfilment in various ways. Nature does not provide the gold to man, putting it on a plate. Gold is derived after a most strenuous mining process. The myth is very often the poetic reincarnation of history; truth, the soul, ever remains the same.

One of the charming myths of ancient Indian tradition pertains to the division of the Kshatriyas into two dynasties "The Solar" and "The Lunar", tracing their descent from the Sun and Moon respectively. The heroes of the Mahabharata belong to the Lunar race while the heroes of the Ramayana belong to the Solar race. It is a grand conception which provided the needed psychological inspiration and dignity to the descendant kings while the subjects looked upon them with respect and admiration. Subsequent royal dynasties in Indian history which traced their descent from the Sun or the Moon regarded the heroes of the two epics as their venerable ancestors and patronised the epics with a sense of family pride.

The curse or the prophetic utterances ordaining a future occurrence has been a common feature of Indian mythology. The modern psychologist may explain it as an intelligent anticipation of an inevitable happening. There are instances of many curses which defy this oversimplification. The rishis, by a process of prolonged austerities called 'Tapas', acquired the power to curse and the exercise of this power leads to its exhaustion. Advisedly the power was rarely exercised. When the victim repented and implored pardon, the curse sometimes was suitably amended.

The glaring instance of the use of myth in the Mahabharata is the description of the ASTRAS, the Vayavya, the Agneya or the

4. C.V. Vaidya—*Mahabharata, a Criticism*.

Brahma or the Narayana Astras. Moderners will be surprised that the ancients could anticipate the atmospheric warfare yet to come into vogue. The *Sammohana* Astra was used by Arjuna in the northern battle for the cattle and all the combatants in the opposite camp were under the spell of unconsciousness for sometime. *Sammohana* Astra, to use modern terminology, was the warhead of explosive anaesthetic rays. *Vayavya* Astra was a warhead which could induce the cyclonic gales. The *Varuna* Astra, the antidote to the *Agneya*, the fire missile, was capable of artificial rain, the *Brahma* Astra was a missile capable of universal destruction and acted as a sort of death ray. There was the description of the death ray penetrating into the foetus in the womb of Uttara. It was Sri Krishna who could save it from the effects of the radiation of the *Brahma* Astra and the resultant baby was named *Parikshit*.

Are all the vivid descriptions of these missiles mere poetic fancies of the epic poets? If it is so, the imaginative heights attained by the epic poets of India were unparalleled in the whole range of world literature. The ancient lore of India was quite conversant with the concept of time as the fourth dimension in their own way. There is a theory that these cannot be mere fancies as they are beyond the compass of human comprehension at the time of their composition and thus are the imaginative fossils of an antediluvian civilization preserved in the Indian epics of antiquity.

Many a myth of the Mahabharata can thus be deciphered easily as historical truths. An intelligent person, utilising the inherent intellectual X-ray vision, can take the photo of naked truth out of the supposed myth. "The mythological story of the transference of the old age of Yayati may thus be simplified historically. Yayati, though advanced in age did not share the royal power with his grown-up sons by Devayani who might be believed to have inherited her rashness. They wanted him to resign that power and finding the old man still in vigour and still obstinate rebelled against him. They were thus expelled by Yayati who was supported in this action by his son Puru. Eventually, Puru succeeded to the chieftainship of the clan by his filial conduct."

Many myths centre round the character of Sri Krishna in the Mahabharata. The myths and miracles attributed to him are quite

in tune with the concept of his character as the incarnation of God Vishnu on the earth. Even devoid of the divine halo, the personality of Sri Krishna, the practical prophet of the pragmatic idealism illustrates the supreme statesmanship with ever victorious dynamism. All the myths need not be resolved. Myths are captivating stories and have their own charms. In the Mahabharata, we come across the story of Divine Ganga taking fancy for the King Pratipa, assuming the human form and coming to him. What a lovely poetic imagery! The deification of natural phenomena is one of the conventional characteristics. Indian poetic imagery, poetry, epic poetry in particular has its own hypotheses and literary postulates. Even geometry, an exact science, is built on certain hypotheses which are accepted universally. Even the most hypercritical rationalist can enjoy epic poetry with all the supposed myths and blatant hyperboles when the popular postulates and provisions, common conventions and concepts are accepted as convenient rules and regulations of the game. Mahabharata is a veritable mine of myths. In the story of Sakuntala, Akasavani or the heavenly voice was introduced. When Sakuntala, an incarnation of innocence, whom king Dushyanta married in the secret solitude of the hermitage in the absence of the venerable sage Kanva, presented herself with her son and pleaded her case, the cumulative conscience of the Royal court was already convinced of the veracity of her statement though the king denounced her. Here the epic poet described that a celestial voice from the Void attested the truth of her statement. Akasavani is a device adopted by the poet to make the inaudible verdict of the communal conscience, vocal and the king gladly accepted the unimpeachable judgement. Myths form the inalienable flesh and blood of the epic. However, in spite of the transcendental myths and the terrific hyperboles, the main story of the Mahabharata pulsates with the natural ebb and tide of human realism. However, the remarks of Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray are significant. "Ethnologists and sociologists have been recognising for long, the importance and significance of myths in the understanding and appreciation of early and medieval human societies. It is time that historians too did the same. So long as we take into account that a myth is as real as what is considered as a fact of history, we should be less likely to be caught in the snare of the illogical and irrelevant argument of either true or false. The Mahabharata is too precious a document of Indian life to be lightly pushed aside as unhistorical. Here is

perhaps an instance of a historical fact being mythicized and then the myth itself becoming part of history." The above quoted words are not the sentiments of a protagonist of traditionalism. The question whether the epic is in any degree historical, seems to me answerable though not without doubt and I cannot refrain from expressing an opinion on the point so important. As I have remarked above, there is no reflex of Pandu glory in Brahmanic literature before the third or fourth century. It is further impossible to suppose that during the triumph of Buddhism such a poem could have been composed for the general public for which it was intended. The metre of the poem shows that its present form is later than the epic form of Patanjali's epic verses but this indicates simply a recasting, so that a Pandu Mahabharata might have existed previously as implied by Panini. But while a Buddhist emperor was alive no such Brahmanic, as that of the epic could have existed, no such attacks on Buddhism as are in the epic, could have been made and the epic of to-day could not have existed before the Greeks were personally familiar. In other words, granted a history, that history must have been composed at least as late as history was possible. Panini's allusions and those of Buddhistic writers show that the Pandus were known as heroes. It is further improbable that the compilers who made the poem represent Pandu virtues and victories would have chosen them for this position had they been mythical. In their reassertion of Brahmanism they would have chosen rather the well-known ancient Brahmanic heroes of the older tale Bharati Katha; yet to appeal to the people something near and real was necessary. In so far then as we may discern a historical germ in the midst of poetic extravagance, it would seem that the poem represents an actual legend of a real tribe, and in so far as that legend persists in its adherence to polyandry as an essential part of the legend, a tribe, which like so many in India, had been brahmanized and perhaps become allied by marriage to the old Bharata tribe whose legends were thus united with its own. ⁵

The historicity of the Mahabharata war was never questioned and even by the followers of non-Vedic religious systems like Buddhism and Jainism, who often levelled sharp criticisms against the Brahmanical tradition. Dr Pandey observes that in a country like India where the Kautsas and the Charvakas who denounced

5. Hopkins—*The Great Epic of India* pp.397-400

Vedas and god respectively, the historicity of the Mahabharata war would not have gone uncontested if it were a Myth.

If the Mahabharata war was a petty family feud, it is beyond the compass of comprehension why this particular feud was selected for glorification throughout the length and breadth of India. There is an unbroken tradition connecting the war with Kurukshetra where there are no less than 360 sacred sites connected with all the important events of the epic. Amin situated, at a distance of 9 kilometers from Kurukshetra, has derived its name from Abhimanyu and it is identified with the places where the Padma Vyuh was thrown into disarray by him. "Safidan" preserves the memory of the Sarpa Yaga performed by king Janamejaya. Padmasaras visited by Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima on their way to the kingdom of Jarasandha can still be seen at a distance of 182 kilometers from Kurukshetra. The persistent tradition was preserved up to the days of Hieun T'sang, the Chinese traveller who came to India in the 7th century A.D. He stated that he paid a visit to Kurukshetra where a terrible fight had taken place in remote times and that the entire area was covered with bones which were still visible to him. In the Puranas there is a reference to Asthipura the city of bones. Cunningham has identified it as the site where the cremation of those slain in the Great War took place.⁶

Large scale excavations vertical as well as horizontal must be undertaken in all the sites connected with the Mahabharata story if conclusive evidence is to be adduced. Prof H.D. Sankalia, the eminent field archaeologist has struck the needed note, when he says, "Verily, the Mahabharata is a myth, but it does contain a kernel of truth which archaeology alone can reveal."

It is significant to note that he has not maintained that archaeology has already revealed the truth.

True, it was archaeology that has revealed the historicity of the Trojan war. In Europe there were many scholars who entertained grave doubts about the historicity of the Homeric poems. Karl Lachmann (1793-1851), Robert Wood, F.A. Wolf, Gilbert Murray, George Grote. U von Wilamovitz - Moellendoff

6. Archaeological Survey of India Report—XIV. 1970 p.94.

(1848-1931) declared that the Trojan war was a Myth. In 1664, a French scholar who rebelled against the "French Academy" delivered a lecture attacking the Homeric poems for their inconsistencies and absurdities and concluded that there never had been such a person as Homer and that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were the patch work creations of a late and incompetent editor. George Grote, author of the history of Greece, is typical of the prevalent scepticism. He says, "Of such events, the genuine Trojan war of the old epic was for the most part composed. Though literally believed, reverentially cherished and numbered among the gigantic phenomena of the past by the Grecian public, it is in the eyes of modern enquiry, essentially a legend and nothing more. If we are asked whether it be not a legend embodying portions of historical matter and raised upon a basis of truth, whether there might not have really occurred at the foot of the hill of Ilium, a war purely human and political without gods, without heroes, without Helen, without Amazons, without Ethiopians, without the wooden horse, without the characteristic and expressive features of the old epical war like the mutilated trunk of Deiphobus in the underworld if we are asked whether there was not really some such historical Trojan war as this, our answer must be that as the possibility of it cannot be denied, so neither can the reality of it be affirmed."

However Greece has been fortunate. The German Merchant prince Schliemann who made huge fortunes resolved himself in the end to dedicate the rest of his life to the rehabilitation of Homer. His mission was a phenomenal success. It can best be described in the words of J.B. Bury, "The sceptical attitude towards literary tradition about Homer which prevailed through out the last century was generally accompanied by scepticism as to the historical traditions about early Greece and the Trojan war which underlie the epics and had formerly been supposed to be substantially historical. Few accepted the Trojan war as a fact. There was incredulity as to the existence of Troy. This scepticism was not principally due to the Homeric controversy it reflected the opinion of the age. A great deal of the epic story is obviously mythical. The excavations in Greece and Troy and then in Crete rendered this attitude untenable."⁷

7. *Companion to Homer* pp.325-329.

The World of Homer by A. Lang (1910)

There is now hardly any western classical scholar or Archaeologist who doubts the historicity of the Trojan war.⁸

Shall we in India wait endlessly for the advent of a Schliemann? It is a question of our national heritage. Let the government of India take the initiative and organize an inter-disciplinary effort in which the archaeologists, astronomers, Indologists and university professors take part. This controversy in spite of the unprecedented importance accorded by the press and public, has not brought forth anything new or tangible. However, it has roused the whole nation and demonstrated the abiding interest evinced by the public in our classics. It is the inalienable right of research and innovation to doubt the veracity of age old tradition, for doubt is the embryonic beginning of all knowledge. The moderners who hence questioned the veracity of the traditional views, on the date of the Mahabharata war have done a signal service to the cause of cultural renaissance: considerable research had been done during the past two centuries, both by Indian and foreign scholars. Now the time is ripe for a reappraisal of all the different viewpoints. Truth is holier than the hoary tradition. Truth is more important than innovative modernism. Truth is self-luminous and can come to full life even after centuries of hybernation. Truth is born immortal and like Markandeya of our Puranic lore, outlives the Deluge.

Whether the Mahabharata was the composition of a single poet or the compilation of plural editors, whether the great war was fought in 3100 B.C. or 1500 B.C., or 950 B.C., whether it was a family feud or ferocious war, it is the biggest classic ever composed by humanity—six times the bulk of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer put together. The Mahabharata has universal relevance in this twentieth century. The Mahabharata is being translated into the Russian language in the land of socialism. Any work may loose its relevance but the accredited fifth Veda the Mahabharata will never. Mahabharata is the Saga of Mankind, the Mahaprasthanana of the homo sapiens. Let us hope, as the poet proclaimed, that the message of the Mahabharata to mankind will retain its relevance as long as the Sun and the Moon shine and the stars twinkle, because it mirrors the eternal drama of human existence.

8. K.C. Verma *Mahabharata Myth and Reality* p.96

GLOSSARY

Acharya:—	Venerable preceptor
Achyuta:—	One of the names of Krishna
Adwaita:—	Monism (Non-dualism)
Ajata Satru:—	A Person born without an enemy — epithet of Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pandava brothers
Akshayapatra:-	The inexhaustible bowl
Akshauhini:—	Technical name of a division of the army in ancient India consisting of 21,870 chariots, equal number of elephants, 6,610 horses, 1,09,350 infantry.
Amavasya:	The Newmoon Day
Amrita:—	The elixir of immortality
Anga:—	The auxiliary appendix
Arani:—	The wooden contrivance by which the sacrificial fire is produced by friction
Artha:—	Wealth; Economics. One of the Purusharthas of life, other three being Dharma - Kama - Moksha.
Asrama:—	1) Hermitage of a sage 2) One of the four stages of life: the four being Brahmacharya(ce-libacy). Garhastya(Householdership - Married life) Vanaprastha (Dwelling in the forest) Sannyasa (life of a recluse)
Astami:—	The eighth day of the fortnight
Asthipura:—	The township of bones
Astra:—	A divine missile charged with the spiritual incantation called the MANTRA: it is different from Sastra - the mundane weapon
Asura:—	A demon. Rakshasa; Dānuja; Danava
Aswamedha:—	The horse sacrifice, signifying emperorship.
Avatar:—	Literally meaning the descent of Divinity; incarnation of God.
Brahma:—	The creator of the universe.
Brahmachari:—	The celibate pupil
Brahmacharya:—	The celibate stage of life; celibacy

Brahman:—	The Supreme Reality
Brahmana:—	One belonging to the first of the four castes—the learned (the other three being Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra)
Chandala:—	Member of the outcast society
Charvaka:—	The materialist
Daitya, Danava, Danuja:—	Demon; Member of the Rakshasa clan
Deva:—	Member of the celestial clan
Devavrata:—	Bhisma.
Dharma:—	Righteousness
Dhananjaya:—	Epithet of Arjuna (Conqueror of wealth)
Dharmaputra:—	Son of Dharma (God Yama). the eldest of the Pandava brothers.
Dharma Raja:—	—do—
Dhartarastra:—	Son of Dhritarashtra
Digvijaya:—	The ceremonial conquest of the lands lying in the four directions.
Dvaita:—	Dualism. The Philosophy that propounds. Jivatma (Soul) and Paramatma (God) are different
Ganapathi:—	Son of Siva; God. Vighneswara, the presiding deity of obstacles.
Gandharva:—	One of the demigods.
Ganga:—	The holy river Ganges
Gangeya:—	Son of Ganges — Bhisma
Garhastya:—	One of the four stages of life (Asrama)
Gopala:—	One of the names of Sri Krishna
Grihasta:—	Householder
Grihya Sutras:—	Rules prescribing the duties of the householder
Guru:—	Venerable preceptor, Acharya.
Guru Dakshina:—	The homage or remuneration paid to the preceptor by the dutiful disciple in token of gratitude. It was a popular practice and a sacred custom in ancient India.
Halayudha:—	One who wields the plough as the weapon— Balarama, the elder brother of Sri Krishna.
Hari:—	One of the names of Sri Krishna
Indra:—	Lord of Heaven;

- Indrastra:—** Astra of Indra: the divine missile of the Lord of Heaven.
- Janardana:—** One of the names of Sri Krishna
- Jaya:—** The original name of the Mahabharata
- Jivanmukta:—** A realised soul while still living
- Jnana:—** Knowledge.
- Kaliyuga:—** One of the four Ages, the three other being Krita, Treta and Dwapara
- Kalpa Vriksha:—** The celestial tree
- Kamadhenu:—** The celestial cow
- Kaunteya:—** Son of Kunti
- Kiriti:—** One who wears a crown (Arjuna)
- King of Anga:—** Karna
- King of Madra:—** Salya
- Kritayuga:—** One of the four Ages.
- Kshatriya:—** A member of the warrior class: second of the four castes.
- Kulapati:—** The head of the hermitage
- Kumbha Sambhava:—** A person born in a pot — Drona
- Kuta Sloka:—** A riddle verse, difficult to comprehend.
Goddess of wealth; consort of God Vishnu
- Madhava, Madhusudana:—** One of the names of the Sri Krishna
- Maagadha:—** A herald of the royal court.
- Mahaprasthan:—** The great journey
- Mantra:—** An incantation charged with spiritual force
- Margasira:—** One of the months of Hindu calendar
- Moksha:—** Freedom from mundane existence.
- Muralidhara:—** One of the names of Sri Krishna, wielder of the Flute.
- Murari:—** One of the names of Sri Krishna: the enemy of the demon Mura.
- Nakshatra:—** Star; constellation
- Nara:—** Man; Name of Rishi; Arjuna
- Narayana:—** Name of a Rishi - Sri Krishna-Vishnu
Butea Frondosa - The tree usually called "the flame of the forest", because of its crimson coloured flowers. In the rainy season, the tree is full of blossoms entirely devoid of foliage.
- Son of Pandu**

Paramatma:—	The Supreme Reality
Partha:—	Arjuna
Pitamaha:—	The grandfather - Epithet of Bhishma
Pitri:—	Belonging to the manes
Pralaya:—	The universal dissolution
Prasthanā:—	The Departure
Pravara:—	The Patronymic Connotation
Punarvasu:—	One of the 27 Constellations
Purana:—	Ancient lore
Purohita:—	The family priest
Purushartha:—	One of the four fundamental aims of life (Dharma - Artha - Kama - Moksha)
Purusottama:—	Sri Krishna, referred as Lord par excellence
Radheya:—	Son of Radha - Karna
Rakshasa:—	A Demon
Raurava:—	One of the terrific hells
Rohini:—	One of the 27 constellations-Birth star of Sri Krishna
Rishi:—	Holy sage
Ritu:—	Season
Sairamdhri:—	A respected maid employee of the royal household
Sakti:—	Force
Samhita:—	The collection of religious hymns in Veda
Sanyasa:—	Last of the four Ashramas, incorporating renunciation of the world.
Sanyasi:—	The recluse
Santi:—	The son of Suta - the charioteer or the puranic reciter
Saradritu:—	One of the six seasons the season after the rains - when the kings started the military expeditions.
Sarpamukha	
Astra:—	The missile in the face of the serpent
Savyasachi:—	The Ambidexter: Arjuna
Saubhadra	Son of Subhadra.Abhimanyu
Siddhanta:—	An established theory.
Simhanada:—	The lion-roar made by the warriors signifying their exultant mood.
Siva:—	One of the Hindu trinity-Presiding deity of Destruction (Brahma the creator, Vishnu, maintainer) being the other two.

Sloka:—	Sanskrit verse
Sudra:—	Member of the fourth caste
Suklapaksha:—	The bright fortnight of the lunar month
Suta:—	Member of the charioteer clan; the reciter of the ancient lore.
Surya:—	Son god.
Svarga:—	The Heaven, The Paradise.
Svayamvara:—	The royal function when the princess chose her husband
Vaisya:—	A member of the trading caste.
Vanaprastha:—	One of the four asramas or stages of life
Vandi:—	The reciter of royal glory, a companion of Maagadha heralding the arrival of the king.
Vasudeva:—	One of the names of Sri Krishna—Son of Vasudeva
Vedas:—	The sacred texts of the Hindu religion—four in number Rik, Yajus, Sama and Atharva.
Vishnu:—	The second of the Hindu trinity, other two being Brahma and Siva.
Visvarupa:—	The universal manifestation of God
Vrikodara:—	Bhima, the Wolf-bellied—epithet of Bhima, signifying his satiable hunger.
Vyuha:—	Battle array
Yadava:—	The race in which Sri Krishna was born.
Yaga—Yagna:—	Sacrifice.
Yaksha:—	A demi-God
Yojana:—	About two miles.
Yoga:—	Harmony attained after meditation and concentration
Yogi:—	One who was attained Yoga.
Yuga:—	Age
Tapas:—	Asceticism; penance
Tirthankara:—	Jain Acharya
Tithi:—	Lunar Day of the Indian Calendar
Tretayuga:—	The second of the four ages. (Other three Krita, Dwapara, Kali)
Unchavritti:—	The method of living by gleaning stray grains of paddy.

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