

Shivaji Sawant

# Srikrishna

The Lord Of The Universe



Mehta Publishing House

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SHIVAJI SAWANT

Translated by  
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Co-Translator  
Madhura Phadke



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By the grace of Bhagvan Srikrishna  
The Lord of the Universe!  
In loving memory of my illustrious father.  
Late Shri. Shivaji Sawant!  
In gratitude of my determined mother  
Ms. Mrinalini Sawant!  
From the bottom of the heart  
To the Divinity within and without!

# Translator's Preface

The epic of Mahabharata has been an integral part of the Indian ethos for ages. With his versatile, multifaceted character, Lord Srikrishna, the protagonist of the great war of Mahabharata has been appealing to and inspiring the Indian psyche since long, and still continues to do so. The character of Srikrishna has been the subject matter of many a great literature in India as well as abroad. No wonder, my father, late Shri. Shivaji Sawant was fascinated by this great personality and chose it as the subject matter for his Marathi novel '*Yugandhar*'.

The intent of this translation, is not only to convey the story of Srikrishna's phenomenal life but also his profound, insightful teachings in the Bhagvadgita, to the young generation and give them a glimpse of the unique life and culture of ancient India.

The translation process has been a challenging one indeed, for me and my co-translator Madhura Phadke, but we enjoyed every moment of it. Translating a novel from one language to another, is also a process of imparting the spirit of one era to another, one culture to another. There are obvious limitations while translating the values and traditions of the ancient Indian culture to the English language of the modern era. We have tried our best to keep the rendering close to the original book. Certain untranslatable words with strong cultural roots have been left as is with an explanation included in the glossary, for example – Aachaman, *Arghya*, *Gurudakshina*, and so on. While spelling the male and female names with identical pronunciations the letter 'a' has been added to the end of the female name to differentiate between the genders, such as Krishna (male) and Krishnaa (female), Uttara (male) and Uttaraa (female). To convey the familial relationships, in the Indian context as closely as possible we have retained the original Marathi words describing such relationships, for example, *kaka*, *mama*, *bhacha* and so on. Special names of trees such as *Ashwattha*, *Audumbara*, *Kadamba* and flowers like *Jaswanda*, *Champaka* etc. have been retained.

We sincerely urge the readers to refer to the glossary to enhance their reading experience while relishing the joy of reading.

# Acknowledgements

Translating my father's novel has been an incredible journey for me. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the people who provided support to me throughout this journey.

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And of course, my mother, Mrinalini Sawant, brother, Amitabh Sawant, *vahini*, Soha Sawant, thank you so much for being there for me every step of the way.

My husband, Parag Dharap, mother-in-law, Alka Dharap, father-in-law, Mahadeo Dharap, thank you for your kind encouragement. It means a lot to me.

Above all, I would like to thank the readers of this book. Hope you all like it.

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**Srikrishna**

**I** must bare my heart today! You seem surprised? Don't be so surprised! You know me very well as a 'mediator', and a dexterous negotiator blessed with excellent oratory skills. But I am not here for any kind of mediation today, and I am certainly not going to give any clever explanation. Why then am I going to speak at all? How and for what reason?

You have been listening to my 'Gita' for ages, and have perused my 'Uddhavagita' for years. But there is another 'Gita' – the 'Krishnagita' – the story of my life, and I want to share it with someone; with everyone in fact. Alas, no one has ever recognized that desire of mine.

"There never was a time when you and I did not exist; there will be no such time in the future ever." These were my words to my dear friend Arjuna in the Gita! Today again I assert that my words were intended not only for Arjuna, but for every 'species', male and female, and these words hold true, eternally. I exist as a part of every manifestation of life for eternity.

This is the age of 'science' for you and for me as well; not that of mere information but that of authentic knowledge of the material world. Science claims today that 'time' is infinite. There is neither a beginning nor an end to it.

I have clearly stated in the Gita ages ago, that I Myself AM the Kala! Then is it not obvious that I have the right to communicate freely with you today as I did in the past and will continue to do in the future too? Just give it a careful thought, and you will certainly agree with me.

So, the material and vibrant world around us constantly keeps changing with Time infinite. Undulation is its nature. So, what is this theory of undulation after all? It holds that the entire life on earth including mankind gradually reaches the summit of evolution and in the course of time hits rock bottom. However, this vibrant life pervaded by weightless energy, is eternal and boundless . It is infinite and inexhaustible, characterized by growth and development. Shouldn't we, therefore, alter our approach today to comprehend the dynamic life around us?

In the tenth chapter of the Gita I have elucidated the principle of 'Srikrishna' within me by giving numerous illustrations. The present world requires a different language to comprehend it. Don't you agree? So, I am going to communicate with you today in that new language.

However, in exactly what capacity am I going to speak to you today? Am I going to speak as a man with powers of miracles, who effortlessly eliminated



many *Asuras* and *Rakshasas* disguised in various shapes and sizes, even in his childhood? Or as a ‘naughty imp’, who inexcusably stole the clothes of gopis engrossed in bathing? Am I going to speak as the warrior, who started as the leader of the gopas and went on to become the leader of the entire Yadav community? Or as the ‘little devil’, who, despite the abundance of curd, milk, butter and such at his home, stole the same from the homes of gopis? As the sorcerer, who envelops himself with lovely epithet of an ‘Avatar’? Or as the conjurer, who miraculously saved Draupadi’s honour by providing her vesture at the precise moment? As the axis around which the epic *saga* of Mahabharata revolves? Or as the capricious playful maniac, who initiated the unwarranted, apocalyptic war of millions of valiant warriors? Am I speaking as the sole protagonist of that *saga*?

That is why I want to protest as I frankly engage in this conversation today. Till today, you have astutely kept me at a distance from yourselves. You have turned me into a mere idol of a deity placed in a shrine; just to be worshiped.

You have no qualms in accepting me to be an ‘incarnation of Lord Vishnu’. You didn’t doubt it then, you do not doubt it now, and you wouldn’t doubt it in future as well! For hundreds of years I have been asserting that I exist inside each one of you but you just refuse to understand and accept that!

Now, let’s be honest! Don’t you think this conversation between you and me is in fact your dialogue with yourself? Please, don’t consider me as the ‘Vaasudeva’ – ‘The Supreme Being’ in a distant shrine; who is inaccessible to you. Instead think of me as the ‘Achyuta’ – the unwavering spirit of divinity – in the shrine of your heart, chatting with you.

It has been ages since we had a heart-to-heart talk. More than almost five thousand years! It is high time we should speak openly and freely. I am intent on speaking and you are all agog to hear me. The main problem I face is – how to go about it?

The story of my life is teeming with thrilling adventures. My life was like a sprawling *Audumbara* tree, full of branches loaded with clusters of raw, green, and florid, ripened fruits! That’s what my life was like; and not like an *Ashwattha* tree. Literally thousands of male-female characters ran their course around it. Oh, so many branches laden with clusters of countless events!

The journey of my life hasn’t been an easy and straight one. Many wise sages and ascetics decorated it with the figment of their imagination and beautified it to their taste.

The *saga* of my life has been enshrouded in many layers accumulated over the last five thousand years. I am determined today to scrape off, as much as I can, all these layers concealing my true identity. People have endowed me with those layers unintentionally, and due to sentimental reasons. I have decided to be forthright and speak the bare truth. Veracity is my congenital habit. For that, first come many fundamental questions posed to you as well as to myself, and then comes seeking their logical and perfect answers. Now you tell me, what else is there in my Gita? Doesn't it contain the most difficult questions and their simple, interesting answers?

For thousands of years I have been answering various questions posed by all of you. You considered me to be a great, ingenious philosopher only because my answers convinced you. That may be alright. But you have unwittingly converted this philosopher into a holy Avatar! Let me ask you one question, only one question to each one of you, as the master of that philosophy. Will I get a plausible answer to that? At least today?

What have all of you done to the *saga* of my life in the course of the last thousands of years? My ardent devotees as well as my staunch rivals – all of you have tarnished my reputation. Innocent devotees deemed me as 'God' for their own convenience and rivals disposed of me by calling me names like 'deceitful' and 'crafty'.

That is why, today, I have to deliberately remove all the murky layers accumulated on the clear blue lake of my life over thousands of years. I will do it with my own hands. Only for my own peace of mind. Therefore, I am not going to tell you the traditional and bookish 'Life story of Srikrishna' that you have been reading and memorizing for generations! Being reticent without sharing my life story as it actually happened is no longer in my control. What could happen at the most is that a trivial incident may be completely excluded, or the sequence of events may get jumbled. Maybe a small reference could be omitted altogether. That hardly matters anyway.

At present I am lying here under a huge, ancient *Ashwattha* tree sprawling with abundant branches in the precincts of 'Bhalaka tirtha' in Saurashtra. Why did I come here? Till date I used to personally groom my beloved four snow-white, robust horses – Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Shaibya and Sugriva. It was not merely 'karmayoga'— my most favourite chore, but also 'premayoga'— innate affection for my most favourite swift animal. I have just collected thorny wild creepers from the forest for grooming them. I am tightly holding the thorny bunch in my right fist which is adorned with a

topaz ring. Caressing this topaz are the eternal young rays of the blazing sun. Each and every cell in my blood is thoroughly familiar with these rays; ever since before my birth!

It is summer time. The melodious susurrus of the *Ashwattha* leaves is permeating through the forest. I can hear it clearly. I am leisurely resting my head in the shade of the tree trunk. My tall, dusky blue complexioned figure which is more than a century old – hundred and nineteen years to be exact – is serenely resting here. Oh, so much has this bluish body of mine seen, experienced, created, confronted and inculcated! Was it just my body that did all this? No, it was actually the manifestation of the universal, immortal principle called ‘Sri’. The eternal principle called ‘Vaasudeva’ within the body!

The fresh ‘Vaijayanti’ garland woven with white flowers, artistically twined with bunched lush green leaves is resting around my neck. Along with it many pearl necklaces bedecked with divine ‘Kaustubh’ beads and numerous golden ornaments are resting on my chest. Underneath is the gold-plated iron armour that I have deliberately worn after quite a long time. My beloved divine white conch ‘Paanchajanya’, which I have blown many times with all my might and which is usually tied in the blue shawl around my waist is also resting leisurely on the ground now. I clearly feel the warm trickle of sweat running down along the golden armlets fastened on both my arms. Some stray rays of the sun, sneaking through the *Ashwattha* foliage are leisurely spread over my yellow silk dhoti. A few bold wild-grass blades are glued to the blue silken shawl wrapped around my waist. I can clearly see my left leg covered with the yellow silk dhoti, resting horizontally on the partially bent right knee. Also visible is the rosy sole of my left foot. Yes! I can even see the Suchi arrow pierced deep in the tirelessly itinerant imperial sole of my foot which has just been shot by the hunter ‘Jara’! I am deeply aware of the touch of warm drops of blood dripping down my sole, streaming along the yellow silk dhoti. I can clearly see the pool of my hot, unique blood accumulated around my right heel resting on the ground.

At this moment, the blood gushing from my sole has opened up the cocoon of my childhood memories. Streams of memories, full of intense vibrant energy! Just like the streams of blood! A myriad of streams of countless memories! The first gushing stream of blood I can see is touching the tender, fragrant memory in the deepest recesses of my heart, connected straight to Gokul!

My beloved Gokul! What was it like? There were about seventeen-eighteen more Gokuls located in the land of Vraja. Mine was the prominent one amongst those. It was free of any kind of pollution whatsoever, fresh and full of natural beauty. This land was not occupied only by the gopa community. It was in fact a small bustling town located in the Brahmavarta basin of rivers Ganga and Yamuna, in Aaryavarta. During those times Aaryavarta had an enormous expanse from Dandakaranya to Gandhara. A multitude of professionals like farmers, goldsmiths, woodcutters, plasterers, washer-men, fishermen, potters, ironsmiths, cobblers etc. lived harmoniously in Gokul. Even they were considered a part of the ‘gopa’ clan.

My dear Gokul was spread over a sizable stretch of about three-four *yojanas*. The crescent-shaped holy river Yamuna with abundant water coursed around it in a semicircle. The entire Gokul was girded by a robust protective fence of bamboo canes and teakwood sticks — a precautionary measure to protect our cattle from the wild beasts like tigers, lions, wolves, foxes and hyenas. Besides, the watchdogs provided additional protection to the cattle. Diligent gopas had toiled tirelessly to tame the various breeds of these wild canines. Some of them had a reddish and dusky complexion with an elongated body and narrow waist, and a few others were greyish. A long, deep trench was located beyond the fence on the southern side. It was dug by our forefathers long back and then itself they had it plastered with burnt limestone and clay. Every morning and evening the cow dung, cow urine and hay was dumped in it. This trench was covered with broad wooden lids that had strong wooden handles for opening and closing them.

The main fortified fence had two sturdy, towering wooden gates on the east and west ends. Made from the durable, solid wood of the Kikar tree, these gates were about eighteen feet tall. Both gates were very thick and quite broad. Our seasoned carpenters had engraved captivating emblems of the gopas on these gates. The images of two intoxicated, plump, young bulls with their tails erect, nostrils flared, copiously slobbering from their snouts, sprinting eagerly to head slam with their rival. Their plump, fleshy humps were tilted on their right side. Their rumped, flabby dewlaps, drooping close to the ground clearly boasted their haughtiness. They looked as if any moment they were going to pull up their dewlaps and fill the surroundings with their thunderous bellows.

Positioned at the very top of the gate was a full moon image; one half of which was engraved on the left door and the other half on the right door. It

was the emblem of the ‘Abhirbhanu’ family of the gopas, a symbol of the *Chandravansha*. Every evening when the gatekeepers shut both the doors the full moon image would form automatically. The two galloping young bulls would join their heads and get ready to protect the populace inside. Both gates had two huge, cylindrical lead bolts. A small wicket gate was used for nightly transit. Even now I can hear the squeaking of those huge gates that I have heard many times before. Many of my memories are especially associated with the squeak of the eastern gate!

Every day, hundreds of our cows would leave Gokul for grazing from the eastern gate, mooing happily. My beloved Gokul would blossom nonchalantly and come alive in the wake of their ebullient mooing, and begin the daily chores in the name of goddess ‘Ida’. The Western gate was closer to the bed of Yamuna. In the evening, the cows content after grazing would quench their thirst with Yamuna’s water and return hastily through the western gate, cantering and wagging their tails, eager to meet their calves. The dusky clouds of dust rising in the twilight would gently settle down on the western gate. Every fortnight, the gatekeepers would wash the gates with Yamuna’s clean water and scrape them using stone chips.

Adjacent to the main fortification wall, corrals with similar but smaller fences were erected. Between two of these corrals tall, square, wooden platforms were hung mid-air to guard them from termites; piles of hay for the cattle were stacked on them and these were covered by a roof of wild grass. Neat stone water pits stood in front of each corral. They were always filled

with Yamuna’s crystal clear, blue water. These corrals accommodated the cattle belonging to the eighteen clans of gopas and other castes. The bulls as well as the calves had separate corrals. Adjacent to the eastern gate was the largest, spacious corral containing hundreds of cows and cattle. It belonged to my father, Nanda. My father was the leader of all the gopas in Gokul. Everyone reverently called him ‘Nandababa’. Other Gokuls within Vraja would identify our Gokul as ‘Nandagram’, by my father’s name.

Located in the heart of Gokul was a well-planned colony, abound with alleys. These alleys were connected by small but clean footpaths laid out in a neat grid pattern. Drainage trenches ran on both sides of the footpaths. All gopas had simple, clean and tiled houses, made of mud. Their walls were smeared with red ochre mud. Using limestone, they were decorated with pictures of plump cows; calves wagging their tails and running around freely; plump bulls bellowing and snorting; herds of cows resting under a huge

banyan tree and ruminating leisurely. The gopas belonged to the 'Abhirbhanu' family line. Being under the rule of the Yadavas the gopas adopted the family deity of the Yadavas, Goddess Ida as their own. Various manifestations of the goddess were also drawn. Portraits of Abhirbhanu – the founder of the gopa family and many other gopa kings were also drawn as accurately as possible.

It was customary for every house to have a minimum of seven-eight slings to store curds and butter. There also used to be tall, pointed churning sticks fastened with ropes next to the big earthen jars which were used for churning buttermilk. An array of storage bins full of grains like barley, vetch, rice, and wheat would be arranged in the veranda.

In the heart of the colony was my father's huge, spacious house built in stone. A huge courtyard in front of it was known as the gopas' assembly yard. If at all there arose a need to hold a gopa assembly, it was held here. A small, dome-shaped temple of Lord Shiva built in stone was located at some distance to the east. A *Shivapindi* made of *Shaligrama* stone from river Gandaki was placed in the inner sanctum. It would get drenched in the waters of Yamuna trickling over it day and night from the ceremonial vessel. In the front yard a statue of a seated *Nandi*– Lord Shiva's mount – was placed with its back facing the entrance. Our founder Maharaja Abhirbhanu's consort was like a mother to us. She was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva. Due to her, we gopas also became devotees of Lord Shiva. To the west of the house, a wrestling ground was located a few yards

away. It contained a spacious gymnasium, fully equipped with wooden and iron clubs as well as the polished wooden '*Mallakhamba*'.

Such was Gokul – like a dotting dimple on the cheek of the land of Vraja! Like a dream of Mother Nature witnessed at the crack of dawn! But my reverie was full of vibrant young and old people. All of them belonged to the initial period of the second stage of evolution. Hence, they were very natural and simply primitive in their expressions. All their emotions – anger, greed, passion, temptation, jealousy – were as raw and pure as their blood; simple and natural. And indeed, just as deep, and naturally beautiful was their pure, untainted love! No pretensions in their behaviour at all! They possessed only one natural instinct – 'premayoga' – Love for the sake of Love! Pure Love!

Each person here was like a luscious bulbous root, full of pure love; replete with emotions. That's why it is impossible for me to forget these men and women even if I wanted to. So many people – with so many emotions, and so

many dispositions!

My father, Nandababa was the leader of the gopas. He belonged to the mercantile class. Short of stature, he had a hefty body frame, wheatish complexion and round face. My mother, Yashodamata was healthy, a bit taller than my father, fair, with a face as round as the full moon faced and always smiling. I had eight kakas – Sunanda, Upnanda, Mahananda, Nandana, Kulnandana, Bandhunanda, Kelinanda, and PraNananda. All of them looked more or less like Nandababa and the age difference between them was not much. We used to recognize their wives – our kakus – by the names of their husbands and also used to address them as such – like Sunandakaku, Nandanakaku, Kelinandakaku and so on. Each one of my kakas possessed expertise in some skill or the other. One uncle could unerringly identify the seasonal disorders of the cows and treat them with effective medicinal herbs. Another could effectively handle my father’s job in his absence just as skilfully as him. Another possessed mastery of the seven musical notes and practised a variety of melodious ragas for hours. Yet another could give wonderful discourses based on the religious scriptures - *Upanishadas*. Kelinandakaka was especially proficient in sports like *Hututu, Lagori, Kho-Kho, Aatyapatya*, swimming, wrestling and many more. That’s why he was my most favourite *kaka*. I also had a step-mother, Rohinimata, mother of my elder brother, Balaramadada. She was a bit taller than Yashodamata, fair and slim.

Balaramadada! Chubby and ruddy fair complexioned. A little older than me. He had very thick hair. He was short-tempered, but would also calm down quickly. We were half-brothers. To show respect to our mothers, we both called Yashodamata ‘Thorali’– the elder mother. Naturally, Rohinimata had become ‘Dhakali’– the younger mother!

Both of us had a younger sister, Ekananga, born to Thorali, a few years after my birth. We affectionately nicknamed her Eka! She was the apple of our eyes.

At this moment, more than anyone else, I remember my dearest old grandfather, Chitrasena! Nandababa’s father! Chitrasena aajoba had a thick, white, mushroom-shaped mustache. Even his thick eyebrows were completely white. He used to keep a roll of betel leaves in his mouth, and would keep chewing it for hours.

He usually carried a small pouch decorated with tiny bells, to store the betel leaves. A man of robust physique, he always donned a twisted, brick-red-

coloured turban. A prominent sandalwood mark adorned his forehead. He draped his coarse, woollen blanket loosely around both his shoulders, on top of the special *Barabandi dress* that he wore. His black-bordered dhoti dyed in red ochre was tightly tucked around his knees. A dazzling silver bracelet, the symbol of our family, hung loose in his hand. A beaded, golden earring dangled in his right ear. Hunchbacked due to old age, he always uttered the name of Goddess Ida, while getting up with the support of his sturdy cane adorned with tiny bells.

This grandfather in Gokul was the one who had explained to me my life's Gita in numerous ways in the local language of gopas. I can never forget grandfather Chitrasena, just as a person cannot be separated from his shadow.

My childhood consisted of the emotional trio of myself, Balaramadada, and our sister Ekananga, who was born when we both were about five to six years old. Our beloved Eka! The three of us were very close to each other.

At home, our trio would always hang around grandfather. Father, Thorali, and Dhakali, all our kakas and kakus, our cousins – our family was full of bustle with plenty of relatives. It was indeed Gokul – a joyous place in and out.

As Thorali always mentioned, I was a very chubby baby; constantly giggling, energetic and naughty. I was so chubby and charming that Thorali, Dhakali, their female friends and all other gopis would never let me go from their hands, and be on my own. One day while churning buttermilk Thorali did something very funny. Not on purpose, it just happened inadvertently! Dhakali was also churning buttermilk with her while humming a tune. Both of us – myself and dada stood holding onto the sides of the jar, impatiently waiting for the butter to surface, so we could quickly gobble it up. Both of us were naked, with only a silk cord tied around our waist and silver anklets on our feet.

Thorali had this peculiar quirk of inadvertently closing her eyes while churning buttermilk and humming gopa songs, losing herself in the tune. That day, I was fed up of the wait for the blob of butter. Crawling and stumbling I went towards her and stood behind her. After some time while humming a tune Thorali dipped her hand in the pot and gently pulled out a fresh blob of butter, dripping in buttermilk. She was looking for me behind the jar. When she couldn't find me there, she got confused. Muttering to herself, 'Where did he go?' she started looking for me in the whole chamber.

I was standing right behind her holding the edge of her dress for support.



Momentarily, I moved along with her in a circle. Soon, she realized that I was right behind her holding the edge of her dress. Picking me up with her hands full of butter, she started kissing me hysterically, especially the dimple on my cheek. Stifled, I started wailing loudly. Immediately, she stuffed a pat of fresh butter in my wide open mouth. Obviously, it muffled my cries. All my tears froze. She pulled a fresh, iridescent peacock feather from a bunch kept in a niche. Oh, it glowed with such a medley of iridescent colours – blue, purple, greenish, and golden. She quickly stuck it in my thick, curly hair. Since then the peacock feather got stuck to me forever. Later, it became a significant symbol of my life. However, my elder brother Balarama was never bestowed with one in his life.

Watching everything from a distance, he was lingering near Dhakali alongside her jar of buttermilk. Suddenly he began approaching us. Slithering at first, then crawling and toddling, he clung to Thorali in a flash. Tugging at her dress aggressively he motioned her to put me down and pick him up. What a big ruckus he made to grab her attention! He started flailing his arms and legs hysterically. Engrossed in me, Thorali initially did not realize it. He went completely berserk at that. With a scowl on his face he moved to the centre of the room, and started kicking around wildly while wailing so hard that it could have blown the roof off. Thorali instantly put me down; Dhakali left her churning halfway and both scurried to him. They tried so hard to console him, but to no avail. When both of them tried to hold him, he kept screaming, kicking and grumbling. By this time, he was almost out of breath. Finally, he lay down in the centre of the room, motionless. I toddled towards him one step at a time. There he was, lying motionless with his eyes closed. I tousled his thick hair with brotherly love. He opened his eyes and saw me, but did not respond at all. Then I also got upset, turned my back to him and started moving away from him. Seeing me walk away he crawled and toddled towards me and grabbed me. He was laughing now, loudly and freely! I also put my arms around his neck and joined in his laughter. Both mothers saw our reconciliation and rushed towards us leaving their churning sticks behind. Both of them picked us in their arms, and kissed us irresistibly. I was in the arms of Dhakali, Rohinimata, and Balaramadada was in the arms of Thorali, Yashodamata!

One memory that Yashodamata shared with me, is always going to remain with me – just like the hairy calf-shaped birthmark on my chest.

When I was a little older, one evening I returned from the pasture after

grazing the cows. Music was the love of my life! That day, herding the cattle on my way back, I was lost in a very unique tune of Raga Asavari that I was playing on my flute. In the clouds of dust rising along the hooves of the cattle, Stokakrishna, Sridama, Damana, Varuthapa, Rudrasena, Bhadrasena and Pendya, my friends and I were barely visible to each other. With the rays of the setting sun lingering on our backs, all of us entered Gokul along with our cattle from the western gate. The cows returned to their own corrals out of habit. With the help of our attendants dada and I tethered our cows, put fodder in front of them and went inside our home. Dada went to Dhakali's room to meet her.

I washed my feet and entered Thorali's room as usual. I hung the coarse blanket from my shoulder on the wall peg, put my belled staff carefully in a corner. I put my flute and lunch bag in the alcove. As usual I bent down to pay my obeisance, and put my head on Thorali's feet, who was standing in front of me. She quickly held my shoulders and pulled me up. For a moment she gazed deep into my eyes. Her face had a very peculiar look today! The corners of her eyes were visibly moist. It shocked me to see her like this. Holding both her hands affectionately in mine I hastily asked her, "What is it Thorali aai? Why do you look so strange today? As if you are here, but your mind is wandering far away in the jungle somewhere."

"Were you playing the flute just now?" she asked. I nodded in affirmation. "Oh, this peculiar tune of yours, has left my heart aching! I regret the apprehension about you that I harboured on the night you were born. The night of Abhijeet constellation, the eighth night of the dark fortnight in the month of Shravana! The whole world had blossomed with such vibrant energy on that thunderous, stormy night!"

"An apprehension? What was it?" I asked shaking her hands fiercely. "Come now, sit." She made me sit next to her and said, "I had lost consciousness due to agonizing contractions on the night you were born. A thunderous, destructive storm had hit that night. Many giant, ancient trees of Gokul collapsed with a loud crashing noise. The cool, fragrant breeze of Shravana coming from river Yamuna awoke me sometime in the wee hours. You were right there – by my side; new-born, fresh, wailing ravenously. I gathered you in my arms to nurse you. But the moment I touched you, a dreadful suspicion engulfed my heart, 'This baby is not mine'! I kept gaping at you in disbelief. You were still wailing and kicking. The moment you ravenously started suckling at my bare bosom a profound feeling of

motherhood rushed all over me like a flash of lightning. I had never experienced such emotion before. The first touch of your lips completely transformed my awareness. As if you were silently reassuring me - 'I am the apple of your eyes, your dear son, and you are indeed my mother'.

That memory lying deep down in the recesses of my mind resurfaced today after hearing the peculiar tune of your flute. Krishna, my dear son, please forgive me for the doubt that I harboured in the past.

I simply smiled at that time. Sometimes in the jungle I would hold the bushy tail of my favourite cow and stroke it over my face. Likewise, I held both her rosy palms and gently stroking them over my cheeks I said to her, "Now now, don't be so silly! Am I even worthy of forgiving you?"

As I turned to go inside, she held my hands and said anxiously, "Kanhaiya, please don't go to the Yamuna so frequently!" For some reason she was probably thinking that Yamuna was going to abduct me.

This memory she shared with me was of a much later period. She had often described my naming ceremony with complete engrossment. I still remember it as vividly as she told me.

For my naming ceremony, all gopas and gopis of Gokul had decorated the entire town on the previous day itself. The corral attendants had beautified the horns of all cows, bulls and calves with varied colours. Their necks were adorned with garlands of jingling bells. All animals had their foreheads smeared with vermilion. All the houses, streets, palaces, temples, gymnasiums, and gates in Gokul were festooned with garlands of assorted fragrant flowers woven with mango leaves. Since early morning men, women, girls and boys in festive outfits were joyously bustling around in their well-manicured front yards. On the central open-air proclamation platform, kettle drums and trumpets were reverberating since before dawn.

The inner sanctum of our house was festooned with garlands of *Ananta*, *Champaka*, *Jaswanda* and assorted wild flowers. At the centre of the hall a magnificent cradle made from rosewood; engraved with delicate tracery patterns was swaying on wooden crossbars. It was also bedecked with assorted garlands of flowers, pearls and beads. The hall resonated with the chatter of zealous gopis in festive attires. Wrapped in a rich, soft fabric with a tiny dot of *Kajal* on my forehead I was dressed up in a golden flowered cape. Thorali gently put me in the decorated cradle. At the auspicious moment recommended by the royal priest she gently whispered my name in my ears - 'Krishna'. The people of Gokul were full of fervent enthusiasm that could not

be contained in their hearts. They were joyously hugging and telling each other, “Our Nandababa’s precious son, an answer to his prayers, is named, ‘Kri...shna...! Ki...sh...an!’

Krishna – Krishna! The one who attracts like a magnet – attractive! The one who mesmerizes everyone – charming Krishna! Dhakali gave an affectionate push to the cradle with her back.

Gokul was resonating with the sounds of various musical instruments. On every street of Gokul, and in every yard, euphoric gopas and gopis got engaged in various games. Caught up in the joy of the moment they forgot themselves.

People of all castes and creeds feasted at our house that day. My father was content that he was graced with a firstborn son as an answer to his prayers of all these years.

My mother was content to have me as her son! Rohinimata felt blessed that her son Balarama got a brother and a playmate!

More than six hours had passed by. An urgent council was held in the veranda of our home. For this particular purpose, yesterday itself Gargamuni had arrived from Mathura. No one knew who had sent him. As a matter of fact, he was the royal priest of the Yadavas of the Shoorsena kingdom in Mathura, but he was intentionally present for the naming ceremony of the son of Nanda gopa from the Abhirbhanu dynasty. Last night in the seclusion of the secret chamber he had discussed something with father for quite some time.

My eight middle-aged kakas, their wives and children, and Chitrasena aajoba revered by all gopas also attended this council. Gargamuni’s ascetic, serene eyes glanced at Nandababa, who was sitting on his right with a few selected gopas, and the priest of Gokul, Abhirananda.

Gargamuni had a radiant and calm face! He wore *Rudraksha* armlets around his upper arms streaked with holy ash and had matted hair! The ingenious architect of the Yadavas! The prophetic astrologer of the royal Yadav family! He began speaking with his eyes closed, as if he had reached beyond his subconscious mind; and was clearly visualizing something. His profound words poured deep into the ears of the eager gopas as if they were coming from an unknown territory, “Oh goparaja Chitrasena and Nandaraja, please listen. All gopas, Listen carefully to the forecast of your dear, new-born son according to the Holy Scriptures.”

He will live up to his name ‘Krishna’. With his physical beauty and

enchancing mind he will fascinate and mesmerize one and all. He will found an unprecedented, novel way of life full of love called 'Premayoga'. All of us spend our lives trying to understand the purpose of our existence, and observe religious practices and penance for the same. But this child is already aware of his identity, since his birth. Just as clearly as you can see your multi-coloured cows daily, he can perceive the Absolute Truth – from every angle. Just as you can recognize your cows in a herd of multi-coloured cows even from a distance, he can easily recognize every person that comes in front of him, inside out, with an open mind.

He will shower his unconditional, pure affection on all of you in such abundance that you will never be able to forget him. He will silently preach the divinity of Love. But...but he won't stay in Gokul for a long time. You won't experience his endearing, affectionate company for long.

Gargamuni fell silent for a moment. His eyes were still closed. He took a deep breath. His wonderstruck disciple recording the remarkable forecast on a leaf kept gazing at him. All assembled gopas gasped in astonishment.

Gargamuni was still meditative. He had reached far beyond in the terrain of the unknown. His clear words echoed again leaving even the stone walls of the spacious assembly hall in an excited state.

“He will act as the guardian of Nyaya - Justice and *Dharma* - Duty throughout his life. He will offer his unconditional support to a banished valiant royal family which had to suffer extreme injustice despite being righteous. To make sure they get the justice they deserve he will initiate a humongous, unprecedented war that will rock the world. Like precious gems emerging after a laborious process of production many principles of life will re-emerge from this war, to be protected and cherished by mankind. The invaluable guidance given by him will prove exemplary to the entire human race. It will be held in the highest esteem for ages. It will prove to be eternal.

Time and again, he will reincarnate on this earth. He will uproot many unscrupulous kings and their kingdoms – destroying them completely. He will release the life force of Aaryavarta and let it flow unhindered for years to come. Yet, he himself will never claim any authority over any kingdom. His conduct will prove inspirational and will guide the future generations of humanity for ages to come. He will have profound understanding of the essence of femininity and exhibit the same in his own conduct. He will honour every woman in his life as an integral part of Nature.

He will be instrumental in the migration and well-planned rehabilitation of

a powerful royal family on the west coast. After witnessing the same royal family forsaking the path of truth and becoming insolent and rude, he himself will destroy them with absolute detachment. The fourteen skills which are often unattainable for a common man will dance at his fingertips. An artist struggles tenaciously throughout his life to master a single art out of the sixty-four art forms, but he will be the sovereign master of all of them. The mellifluous music of Samaveda will always reflect in his personality. In fact, he himself will be music incarnate. He will be recognized by the names of his gurus and his mothers for ages to come. In fact, by being his educators and caretakers both his gurus and mothers will attain immortality and experience a sense of fulfilment. He will spectacularly exhibit a perfect manifestation of manly charm surpassing all criteria of physical beauty. Befitting his charm will be his celestial speech as melodious and irradiant as the sound of his flute. Occasionally, it will be as intense and unendurable as lightning bursting through the skies. At an appropriate time he will also erect an unparalleled golden city on the shores of the western ocean which will be worthy of his ethereal beauty. There he will spend an ideal family life, full of love and affection with his eight virtuous wives, children and grandchildren which will prove inspirational to future generations!

Dear gopas, don't be blinded by his miraculous acts and never make a mistake to judge his character by that. That he lives physically amongst you, is in itself a miracle of miracles! He will spend most of his life near water bodies. He is also the Jalapurusha – the Lord of Water which is one of the five essential elements of the universe.

Just as water never stagnates in one place and courses further to create and develop life, this 'Jalapurusha' will be a world traveller throughout his life. He will be a '*Chakravarti*'- the ideal universal ruler. A glorious epoch-maker!

He is not only the majestic 'Jalapurusha' who knows the Truth, but also a *Yogi* – a proficient practitioner of Yoga. The Greatest *Yogi* of all!"

While concluding his forecast of the exceptional horoscope Gargamuni looked like he had transcended his own body and reached the realm beyond. There was a resplendent glow on his face. Everyone was gazing at him. The ambrosial final words describing that incredible horoscope made the assembled gopas feel blessed.

"Oh dear gopas, through the power of vigorous meditation, we sages try to understand 'Ishwar', the god, but so far none of us has been able to explain

what ‘Ishwar’ is; and I doubt anyone ever will be able to do it in future. Don’t you think that Ishwar, God, Almighty, and Incarnation are all false ideas that beguile the mind and make it go astray? Even I can’t tell for sure if He exists at all. But this virtuous son of yours is undeniably the greatest *Yogi* of all – a complete ‘*Yogayogeshwara*’, a superhuman in the true sense of the word. He is the great ‘Purnapurusha’ – the ‘Perfect Man’. Never forget that there is no one else like him at all. He is unmatched and incomparable. You should be rest assured and undoubtedly offer all your ideas of divinity at his feet. Just as ‘Premayoga’ or Love is innate in his nature, so is renunciation and detachment. He will never get attached to his own karmas; he will be free from the fruits of his actions; and hence he will never get entangled in the consequences of his actions. Like a lotus he will remain pure, untainted, and free from the sinful desires of the human mind! That is precisely why you will find him a divine conjurer.

He will attain the highest epithet of ‘Vaasudeva – The Supreme Being’. He will teach millions in an easy and simple manner what life is; how to live it; and demonstrate the same in his daily life.

He took the first breath of his life in the confines of Nanda’s house, but this ‘Vaasudeva’ will breathe his last of his own accord, under the open sky, in a desolate thick forest, in the shadow of an *Ashwattha* tree, in a very banal manner and in complete solitude. With this I conclude the forecast. May all be well!” Gargamuni fell silent as if he was watching something splendid, glorious, larger than life right in front of his eyes. He was completely lost in himself. Bringing both his palms together he touched them to his forehead and whispered gently - ‘Krishnarpanamastu!’ - I submit to you Oh, Lord Krishna!

Thoroughly content, the spellbound gopas left our house chanting the name ‘Kisna, Krishna’. But I – ‘Krishna Kanhaiya’ of Thorali – was fast asleep in the cradle.

Soon, the innocent days of crawling, running, and messing around were over. The days of getting spanked by the elders for our pranks were also past us. Dada and I had grown up a bit, about eight-ten years old. And that special day in my life dawned – the day of my initiation as a ‘gopa’!

Today dada and I had to graze our cattle in the lush pastures on the outskirts of Gokul, near the banks of Yamuna. Nandababa had chosen the *Muhurta* for the initiation ceremony. Every year, to pay the levy he would make one trip to Mathura, the royal capital of the Shursena kingdom of the

Yadavas located on the other side of Yamuna. This year from the traders' market of Mathura he had bought fine silk dhotis for both of us. Such fluorescent colours they had! A bright yellow for me and a deep blue for Balaramadada. Such an accurate selection by father – the yellow colour suited my complexion and the pure blue colour enhanced the crimson fairness of dada's skin. How was my complexion? One day I visited my dear friend Varuthapa's father's smithy. There, for the first time I got to see a shade coming pretty close to my complexion.

That day Varuthapa's father was profusely sweating while working on the bellows. Using his pincers, he swiftly pulled a hot blazing iron-rod from the pile of the glowing, hot embers in the bellows, put it on the anvil and in quick succession struck blows on it with the sledgehammer. Sparks flew all over. Instantly both ends of the iron-rod welded together perfectly. He splashed some water from a wooden pot nearby on that red-hot iron-rod. With a low whirring sound, a reddish, bluish shade like the clear sky with a golden border, congealed on the edge of the iron-rod. I kept gazing at it fixedly. Indeed, my complexion was exactly like this! Red like a *Jamun* about to ripen on the tree!

Despite all this description of my complexion Thorali and Dhakali would inadvertently call me Shyam, meaning absolutely dark! To be exact my colour was dusky dark. Yes, indeed I was dusky in complexion. Like an evening of Shravana, drenched in sentiments! Let me assure you that I was and still am indeed proud of my dusky complexion! I loved my name – Shyam – from the bottom of my heart. It was a different story for dada. He was fair and everybody called him so. Dhakali would lovingly call him 'Sankarshana'; occasionally shortening it to 'Sanku'. So, at times I also called him 'Sankudada'.

So, this was the day of our initiation ceremony. Both Balaramadada and I got ready, dressed up in the special gopa attire. Grandfather Chitrasena had tied brick red-coloured, twisted turbans around our heads. The soft, shiny golden-bordered blue and yellow dhotis that father had recently bought for us were fastened neatly around our waists. To handle the upcoming chores in the forest, for our convenience, we had pulled the front pleats of our dhotis from between our legs and tightly tucked them in the back. Our shoulders were covered with woollen blankets made from the soft wool of the local sheep.

We carried our refreshments bundled in a cloth in the folds of our blankets. It contained seven-eight rotis with mouth-watering garlic chutney and thick



curds in an earthen pot capped at its mouth with a *Palash* leaf tied with a small piece of cloth. There were also some freshly plucked spring onions.

In the early morning, today, I had also kept a small sharp sickle in the folds of my blanket.

The rituals of our initiation ceremony began. Our family priest Abhirananda began intoning melodious Sanskrit verses. Dada and I sat on square wooden stools carved with tracery designs. Colourful decorative rangoli designs had been drawn around them. This room in our house was designated as the shrine for the family deities. At the end of the ceremony our family priest Abhirananda sprinkled sacred water from the golden vessels on us. Chitrasena aajoba, Nandababa and both our mothers were standing in front of us. Today this room was packed with all our kakas and kakus. Even Ekananga who was about two years old, was toddling around nearby. Once all the rituals were over, first Thorali and then Dhakali blessed us with *Aukshan* by oil lamps. They fed us some delicious sweets made from cow's milk, sprinkled with saffron and dry ginger. After them Nandababa came forward. Gathering up the blanket on his shoulders, he also blessed us in the same way. He gently removed the octagonal silver medal – the emblem of the Abhirbhanu dynasty hanging on his chest and held it in his palms. He touched it to his forehead and mumbled something to himself. The next moment he put the medal around my neck, pulled me closer with deep affection and said to me, “Krishna, now you have formally become a gopa, my true heir! So far, I have looked after all young and old gopas to the best of my ability. From today onwards it is the duty of you and your elder brother to carry forward my legacy. Not only should you take care of all gopas but also more particularly guard the cows and the cattle of Gokul.

I looked at Balaramadada, sitting next to me. He was smiling while caressing a similar medal that grandfather had put around his neck earlier. In an instant, we spoke a thousand words through that glance we exchanged.

We got up from our seats and paid obeisance to the family deity, Goddess ‘Ida’. Thereafter, we also sought the blessings

of Chitrasena aajoba, Nandababa, both mothers and the family priest, Abhirananda. They all hugged us with affection. We touched the feet of all kakas and their wives too. Then we got ready to leave the family deity room for the forest of Gokul.

We picked up our staves from a corner of the veranda. They were a foot taller than us, carved with tracery and decorated with tiny jingling bells. They

were going to protect us in various ways. We were going to use them to our advantage every now and then.

Both mothers were already present at the eastern entrance of our house. They put blobs of thick curd on our palms. I put it in my mouth and closed my eyes for a moment to savour its taste. Even today I feel the lingering sweetness of that curd on my tongue. We had to catch up with our friends standing outside. So, I started to turn and stopped. Two tiny arms had embraced my feet. It was young Ekananga who called me 'Kutnadada'. My beloved sister Eka. During the bustle of the ceremony, nobody paid attention to her but she had not forgotten me. She gave me such a sweet, innocent smile that I could not resist picking her up instantly. I kissed her on her chubby cheeks; ruffled her thick hair and passed her on to dada.

In front of our house about fifteen-twenty of our coeval friends had gathered in the courtyard. Seeing us they all got excited and made a din shouting our names, "Here comes our Kisna - Kanhoba! Krishna- Kanhaiya! Balaramadada - Balidada!"

First, we embraced each one of them tightly, then immediately our flock turned towards the corrals. We unleashed the cows from their tethers. Within a few moments, a huge herd of zealous colourful cows was on its way, brushing against each other, clattering their horns and bellowing freely to their hearts' content. They exited from the eastern gates of Gokul. Holding the blankets on our shoulders and raising our jingling staves we drove the herd towards the rich meadows on the banks of Yamuna. In hundreds, the cows then dispersed on the meadows. The bells tied around their necks made a sweet, rhythmic tinkling sound. Slowly, birds like *Salunki*, *Kotwala*, *Partin*, *Rankirave*, *Ranakak*, and *Bochurade* started landing on their backs. The lush green grass swayed gently on the cool breeze coming from Yamuna. Grasshoppers were hopping around in the verdure. Herds of grazing cows were wagging their tails around to shoo away the insects and birds trying to settle on their backs. They began grazing to the melodious rhythm of the bells jingling around their necks. Balaramadada and I were now free to roam around and play various games with our friends.

The vast expanse of Yamuna's shining, blue water was now visible to us. Leaving behind the cows, all my friends and even Balaramadada, I impulsively ran towards Yamuna. As if something was pulling me towards her unknowingly. For some reason, ever since the first time I had laid my eyes on the waters of Yamuna I had felt a mysterious turmoil in my heart. A

flurry of questions would arise in my mind –Madhupuri - Mathura– the capital city of the Shursena kingdom of the Yadavas! What kind of a place was that faraway city? Who must be the king of that city? Father, grandfather and others have such lengthy discussions about that city! I hear so many names – Maharaja Ugrasena, Maharani Padmawati, general Satyaki, Anadhrishti, Kanka – the minister, Akrura, charioteer Daruka, royal counsellor Vipruthu, Vasudeva in captivity, and his helpless wife Devaki. Devi Devaki! For no apparent reason, just hearing all that made my young heart throb in unknown, unbearable pain. The heartless, diabolical, vicious son of Maharaja Ugrasena, Kansa who imprisoned his own father to confiscate the kingdom – what kind of a person would he be? What kind of people would be the Yadavas of Mathura?

The rippling waves of Yamuna constantly kept coming and cooling the shores while merging silently in the gritty ocean waters. Prananandakaka, a pundit of the Shastras, was indeed right when he said that Jalamata Yamuna was unrestrained, just like an ocean! Glancing from left to right I feasted my eyes on her and preserved her vivacious, rushing flow in my mind. Unwittingly my palms joined in prayer and I touched them to my forehead to pay respects to her. I felt more at peace now!

Along with my meal I put my black blanket on the gritty floor and placed my turban on top of it. I laid my staff next to the blanket. I carefully removed and kept my yellow silk dhoti on the blanket; undressing down to the loincloth. Raising

her countless rippling wave arms, mother Yamuna had been calling me for a long time now. Many birds of different shapes and sizes were gliding freely on her waters. The infinite azure skies had spread overhead, meeting Yamuna far away at the horizon. Squashing the wet sand under my feet, dressed only in my loincloth I ran impulsively and entered mother Yamuna's arms with a passionate yearning. I got instant shivers all over my body!

Plunging in the water I started swimming to my heart's content. Sometimes in a straight line swiftly moving my arms forward and sometimes on my back, throwing my arms backward. Soaking myself in the affectionate caress of Yamuna's warm waters I started reminiscing about many invaluable conversations that I had had with grandfather, father and both mothers. Especially the ambrosial talk of Prananandakaka who, was learned in the 'Shastras' started swaying in the lake of my mind like the blooming bud of *Brahmakamala*. His voice echoed in my ears and mind, "Krishna, my dear

child, always remember the deeper meaning of the word ‘Jala’. Dear son, ‘Jala’ is one of the five fundamental elements from which life blossoms and eventually merges in it. It is the most important and powerful element of life. Reiterating the meaning of Jala in my mind, floating on my back, I started basking in the dazzling light of the shining sun. I had completely forgotten myself.

For quite some time, I didn’t even realize that along with Balaramadada our friends had followed me and were swimming leisurely in Yamuna. I became aware of the surroundings with their shouts – ‘Krishna, Kisna, Kanhaiya, and Gopala’. Catching up with them I swiftly splattered chill sprays of water, stifling them. Laughing and giggling we played in the water for a long time. The ascending sun was almost above our heads now. I stepped out of the water first. Dada and our friends followed me. We dried ourselves in the sun, got dressed and started moving towards a big pasture near which there was a sprawling *Kadamba tree* loaded with fresh, fragrant flowers and foliage. On our way, we came across a plantation of green and yellow striped bamboos. I chose a rather longish bamboo cane neither very tender nor very hard, cut it with the small sickle I had in my blanket and carried it along.

Our flock arrived under the *Kadamba tree*. The intoxicating fragrance of the flowers and the buzz of the hovering bees and beetles filled the air. Everyone carefully took out their meal packs. Spreading their blankets on the ground all of them sat in a circle along with dada. My blanket was spread inside the circle. Spreading long, wild banana and *Palash* leaves on my blanket, Sridamana and Bhadrasena gathered all victuals to make ‘*gopalakala*’. A pile of rotis was stacked on one side and a big ball of chutney sat next to it with a bunch of spring onions. On the other side sat a big mound of soft rice mixed with curds. Black and sand-coloured clay pots of curds encircled the pile of food. Thus, our ‘*gopabhoga*’ was ready.

I was sitting at a distance under the *Kadamba tree*, resting my back against the tree trunk. By this time, stretching my neck, using the sickle I had pared the colourful bamboo cane into a beautiful new flute, and had brushed away all the shavings from my yellow silk dhoti. The sun was ablaze overhead. I had barely begun to practice a tune on my flute, when my friends started calling me raising their hands high. Still standing in a circle they were shouting my name at the top of their lungs, ‘Krishna, Kisna, come on, our meal is ready’.

We finished our meal, laughing, giggling, and cracking jokes about each

other. Stokakrishna said to me, “Come on Krishna, tell me which things are your most favourite?” Smiling at him I responded, “Stoka, among flowers *Parijata* is my most favourite; especially the one drenched in dewdrops in the early morning autumn breeze. Its sweet scent is simply matchless and its tiny orange-coloured stem looks so pretty! Isn’t it? Mango is my most favourite among the fruits, especially the one about to ripen, scarlet coloured. In birds, the peacock dancing tumultuously to the tune of the first shower of rain, unfolding its rainbow-coloured, iridescent plumage, fascinates me the most. My most favourite drink is of course the ‘gorus’ – cow’s milk – the favourite drink of all Gopas. Now Sankudada will tell you what is my most favourite food. Seizing the opportunity, I astutely put the responsibility of answering that question on dada’s shoulder. Dada patted heavily on Stoka’s back, and laughing loudly, throwing his head back he announced, “Stoka, you are so silly. Don’t you know by now that soft cooked rice mixed with curds with a pinch of salt is his most favourite food!

All our friends went to the banks of Yamuna to quench their thirst. Somebody fetched two pots of water for me while coming back. Standing under the *Kadamba tree* dada picked up the newly made flute in his hands and asked me in astonishment, “Hey, how do you do all this? Not just this, but everything else that you do.” I simply smiled.

I spread my blanket over a tall boulder, and lay down. It automatically shielded my head from the sun rays sneaking through the *Kadamba* foliage. I spoke in a loud voice, “Stoka, Varuthapa, Damana and friends, now listen to my most favourite musical instrument!” Closing my eyes, engrossed in myself I began playing melodious tune after tune on my flute. All my friends relaxed wherever they could, spreading their blankets under the shades of various trees like *Aamra*, *Anjan*, *Khair*, *Jamun*, and *Shisam*. Closing their eyes, all engrossed in themselves they started listening to my ‘Sangitayoga’, melody of music. It was their most favourite ‘Vishramayoga’- repose, unbeknown to their own innocent self!

The sun had descended a little further and the third quarter of the day had begun. By this time the warm gusts of wind flowing from the Yamuna had considerably cooled down. Their cool touch snapped me out of my musical reverie. I opened my eyes slowly. At once I sat up on my blanket as I glanced around. All the cows which had scattered far away in the meadows and all my Gopa friends – Stokakrishna, Varuthapa, Goparama, Sridamana, Bhadrasena, Sudama, Pendya – who had been resting around leisurely had

huddled around me. I smiled. I got up and shaking the dust off my blanket I started planning for the next activity – a variety of exciting, mind-refreshing games!

All of us gathered on the wide sandy banks of Yamuna. I divided my friends into two equal teams selecting them as per my judgment and selected two healthy boys from amongst them as the leaders of each team. As he was hefty and well-built Balaramadada himself became one of the leaders. Everyone was urging me to be the leader of the other team. Giving many excuses, somehow, I managed to convince them otherwise and made Stokakrishna leader of the other team. Balaramadada immediately questioned, “Then what are you going to do, Dhakalya?”

“Me? I am going to be the referee!” I smiled.

To this, everybody shouted in affirmative commotion, “Yes, yes, let our Kanhaiya-Kanhoba be the referee. He will be an impartial judge for sure.”

We got engrossed in playing *Hututu* on the banks of Yamuna. *Hututu* was a tricky game. A game where one was supposed to capture the opponent off guard while keeping an eye on the boundaries of the play area. Was it not a symbol of life, not only of us Gopas, but life in general? A game of continuously holding on to breath, in the confines of a limited territory!

After *Hututu* we played *Aatyapatya*. Then we played *Lagori*. Finally, when all were exhausted, we started playing ‘blind man’s bluff’.

By this time evening was approaching. Wild parrots, hawks, cranes, larks, herons, many birds were returning to their nests creating a cacophony of weird chirping sounds. Our cows returned mooing, content after grazing to their fullest and quenching their thirst with Yamuna’s water. The refulgent crimson platter of the setting sun was gently touching the surface of Yamuna.

I shouted with an impulsive urge, “I have formally become a gopa today. Therefore, I am going to teach you a new game. I am sure you will like it, but for that each one of you will have to finish the tasks that I am going to assign you, as soon as possible.”

“Yes, yes, tell us Krishna, what do we have to do?” all of them shouted together in approval.

Balaramadada and I will stay here. Vadaja, Sudama, Rudrasena, Bhadrasena and a few others will carry pitchers and fetch as much water from Yamuna as we need. Some of you will collect fresh white flowers and fresh *Bela* leaves from the woods nearby. A few others will collect fresh warm milk in pitchers. The rest will stay with us. Come on. Hurry up now! Get to

work fast!”

All of them scattered around to complete the tasks I had assigned them. Dada and I chose a clean place on the bank of Yamuna. We started working on the soft, blackish, wet sand of Yamuna. We removed big stones and pebbles and briskly we started collecting fine, soft sand and kneading it with water. Whatever we were about to build, was going to last for the night. With the help of our friends, soon Balaramadada and I erected a waist-high ‘*Shivapindi*’ – a symbol of Lord Shiva along with the majestic *Nandi*! The ‘*Shalunka*’ base of the ‘*Shivapindi*’ was shaped like a kettle-drum and its tapering end pointed towards the north. Oh, how neat and elegant it looked!

In the presence of the sun lingering on the western horizon I told dada to perform the ritual of *Abhishek* by pouring the fresh milk slowly on the *Shivapindi*. Following him all our friends and I also did the same. After that we poured water on the *Shivapindi*. As per my instructions all my friends offered white flowers and the *Bela* leaves on the idol. We all closed our eyes and brought our palms together in prayer. We began singing the hymn of lord Shiva in unison.

The sun immersed completely on the western horizon. After some time, I opened my eyes before everybody else and glanced at the *Shivapindi*. Only its edges were barely visible now. I said to all, “Dada and friends, the gopas of Abhirbhanu family line have been the worshippers of Lord Shiva since ancient times. The ‘*Shalunka*’ base of the *Shivapindi* symbolizes the female Yoni and the Lingam represents the male potency. Shiva also known as Shankara is the one that tranquilizes the turbulent mind. If needed, for the sake of peace, he performs his ‘*Tandava*’ dance at times to destroy the evil. Lord Shiva is the God of Destruction, the destruction of wrong and evil.” Everybody kept listening to me in awe. I had only reiterated the words I had heard some time back from the family priest Abhirananda. Not a single word of my own!

Contented, we quickly picked up our blankets. We dispersed and gathered the scattered cows back in a herd. Dada and I left for the western gates of Gokul along with our friends. On our way back I pulled out my flute from the folds of the blanket and completely engrossed, I began playing various tunes spontaneously. As the warble in my tunes hit the climax, someone came rushing towards me and held my hand effusively. My flute stopped automatically. I opened my partially closed eyes completely. Standing in front of me was a gopa woman – young, healthy, fair and innocent. She was

older than me, tall, and had sharp features. An incredibly beautiful woman! I asked my friends curiously, “Who is she?”

Somebody replied, “She is Radha, wife of gopa Rayana! She has come to Gokul from Arishtagram, her mama’s town.”

By this time Radha had stroked my cheeks with her fingers and cracking her knuckles on her temples as a gesture to avert all evil she exclaimed, “Oh Kanhaiya, such heart-rending tunes you play! It makes me yearn for more. For a long time, holding the flute in my hands I stood still as if I was not among my friends! Her very first touch was full of affection like both my mothers and of innocence like my younger sister Ekananga. But there was so much more in it that I couldn’t put in words, and so I will never be able to describe it.

She looked at Balaramadada and just smiled, but didn’t speak anything as such with him. Putting her hand on my shoulder she started walking along with all of us towards the incline leading to the western gates of Gokul. While walking, she said to me, “Kanhaiya, every time I hear your flute, I feel like becoming one myself!”

The moment she had touched me, I had realized that she was a part of my body! Unknowingly I put my own hand in her warm, chubby palm. She held it with such intense passion, as if she was going to lead me! Today I was initiated as a gopa and today itself I had met her. She was also going to initiate me in another way. With her one-of-a-kind relation with me she was going to impart the knowledge of the essence of womanhood as an element of nature.

Our cattle had already entered Gokul through the western gates. Along with Balaramadada and friends I also entered Gokul, with Radha. I let go of her moist palm that I was holding so far. She patted gently on my shoulders and left for her colony. Looking at her fading figure I recollected the meaning of the word “Dha”. Pranandakaka had explained it’s meaning to me some time back. “Dha” means “Moksha” – freedom from the circle of life and death. I racked my brains to recollect the meaning of the word “Ra”, but it simply kept eluding me. We tethered the cows, and washed our feet. Then we entered our house through the wicket gate, changed our clothes and put our gopa dresses in their proper place.

As soon as I entered, I shared two things with Thorali smilingly, “We erected a huge *Shivapindi* on the shore of Yamuna today with wet sand. And just now I met Radha. Her voice is as sweet as honey.”



As usual Thorali gave me a pleasant smile. While arranging our dinner plates in the dining room she said to me, “Oh silly Krishna, how long is the sand *Shivapindi* going to last? And the woman Radha you are talking about - she is gopa Rayana’s wife. No wonder she was enchanted by your flute. Sometimes I also get carried away by the sound of it! But you better stay away from Radha as far as possible – her husband Rayana is very short-tempered!

We sat down for dinner and offered *Chitrahuti* around our plates. Our plates were filled with rotis, curds, milk, and chutney along with some sweetmeats. Father and all our kakas had already dined. They were sitting in the veranda. After dinner, we washed our hands and came to the veranda. We bowed to pay our respects to all the elders and sat on the grass mats on the floor. The music maestro Mahanandakaka sang a few gopa songs to the rhythmic beats of gopa instruments. Chitrasena aajoba shared a few thrilling tales of our victorious ancestors.

To listen to those tales Thorali, Dhakali and all our kakus were sitting behind the doors of the veranda. Our cousins were also sitting there with their mothers. Young Eka came walking briskly and sat in my lap. Finally, I asked Prananandkaka a question that had been nagging me for quite some time, “Pranakaka, what does “Ra” mean in Sanskrit?” He was sitting right next to me. He patted lovingly on my shoulder and said with a smile, “Kanhaiya, you are usually the giver; you give everything to everybody, especially joy. How come today you are asking about gaining something? ‘Ra’ means to get, to obtain, and to achieve!”

A melodious tune of flute flashed through my mind - ‘Ra’ means to obtain. ‘Dha’ means ‘Moksha’. ‘Radha’ means a being desperately longing for ‘Moksha’! Almost two hours had passed by. On the proclamation platform for official announcements in Gokul the timekeeper gave time with tolls on the iron disk. The *Karanjel* oil lamps burning in the tiny houses of Gokul were snuffed out. Their acrid smoke made the elders in the houses cough a couple of times, and then they surrendered to sleep. The entire Gokul was sleepy!

Our family priest chanted ‘ॐ’ (AUM) in a high pitch and joined his palms in prayer. Following grandfather all the youngsters joined their palms in prayer and closed their eyes. Eka was sitting in my lap; I covered her palms with mine joining them in prayer and closed my eyes. Imitating the others, Eka closed her eyes. In the council room of our house the traditional

collective prayer of the Abhirbhanu family began in unison.

“Aum Ishavasyamidam sarvam yatkinch jagatyanjagat ITyen tyakten bhunjitha ma grudha kasyaswidadhanam ll”

This universe is God’s home. He resides in everything in this world. Therefore, enjoy whatever God gives to you. Don’t let greed possess you. A verse from Rigveda proclaiming the Truth followed –

“Aum HiraNamayena PatreN Satyasyapihitam Mukham ITatvam PushannapavruNu Satyadharmay Drishtaye ll”

The visage of Brahma is veiled by a vessel as brilliant as gold. I am a sincere devotee of Brahma. Therefore, to help me get to Brahma, Oh Sun god, please remove this veil and let me behold the TRUTH, The Brahma, with my own eyes.

Outside, on the time disk of Gokul, tolls continued to follow one after the other. The jingling bells continued to resonate in the cow pens.

There was only one word lingering in my mind when I rested my back on the bed. ‘Ra ... Dha ...’ - a being eagerly yearning for ‘Moksha’!

The very next day Kelinandakaka awakened dada, me, and all our cousins well before dawn. We performed our morning ablutions. After having plenty of fresh milk, we gathered in the central courtyard of our house, as *kaka* had asked us to. He gave all of us some instructions — more so to dada and me. That was always the case. Chitrasena aajoba, Nandababa, family priest Abhirananda, both mothers, all our kakas and kakus always gave both of us special treatment. Why did they do it? I never got any satisfactory answers to that question. I would get quite upset by this and such other questions that flooded my mind.

Balaramadada has crimson fair complexion. Why am I the only one with bluish, dark complexion? Why am I the only one who yearns for Yamuna? What is the connection between Gokul and Mathura? Who is Maharaja Ugrasena of Mathura? Why has his son Kansa imprisoned his own father? And why do I have a frequent intense urge to visit Vasudeva and Devakidevi detained in Kansa’s prison? My mind irresistibly longs to visit Mathura. Why? None of my questions were ever answered. What is my association with Mathura? How come Radha who met me only yesterday has such intense yearning for me? Does Balaramadada also face such questions like I do? Nobody was ever going to answer that question either. Finally, I would just smile and answer my own questions. And when my answers turned out to be true, I would smile to myself.

Today Kelinandakaka drove us cousins out through the wicket gate well before dawn. It was just like how we used to drive our cattle out of the eastern gate of Gokul. He brought us directly to Gokul's gymnasium. Gokul was not yet awake. The breeze coming from the Yamuna was pleasantly cool and fragrant.

Near the entrance of the gymnasium stood a neat, spacious stone tank, filled with Yamuna's water to wash the dust-smearred, sweaty bodies after heavy exercise. In the four corners of the gymnasium, attendants had placed flaming *Karanjel* oil torches in the alcoves. The entire gymnasium was glowing in the dim yellow light of the torches. A deep, large, circular wrestling pit was dug right in the centre. The red soil in the pit was glistening. It was exclusively prepared by the gopa wrestlers. Using their hoes, they had kneaded it with a touch of *Karanjel* oil and pots of buttermilk. Every day they would turn the soil over with their hoes. They called it 'digging the pit'. Big iron basins were located all around the wrestling pit. They were filled with sacred ash that father had collected by dispatching his attendants to yajnas performed at various places. This ash was used to dry the sweaty bodies of the wrestlers, after their duels in the pit. As this ash contained selected herbal plants used in the Yajnas it had medicinal qualities.

Inside the gymnasium an idol of the family goddess 'Ida' carved in a *Shaligrama* stone was placed in a small shrine facing east. As per *kaka's* instructions we all kneeled down before Goddess 'Ida' first. We also bowed to Kelinandakaka and began our workout. The grunting sounds of push-ups and pull-ups started echoing. The swirling Mrudgalas, the chuck-chuck sounds of the *Mallakhamba* poles produced by athletes moving up and down, and the thudding sounds of huge stones when they were dropped down—the gymnasium walls echoed with the thunderous sounds of heavy exercises. Our bodies

were really warmed up, and suddenly, *kaka* pushed dada and me in the wrestling pit. He himself also got in. Following him other friends also joined us. We tightened our brick-red dhotis and prepared ourselves for the duels by 'Kakshabandhana'. Now many pairs jumped into the pit and thumping their thighs and arms everyone started grappling with each other competitively.

*Kaka* put his arm around my neck and gave me a big jerk. I tumbled face down in the sand right at his feet! *Kaka* hit dada in the same manner and knocked him down. Wiping the soil off our mouths and noses, we were

barely standing up, when Kelinandakaka slapped me really hard near my ears! That intense blow made me shut my eyes! Instantly the stars in the sky shone brightly in front of my eyes like sparks of fire! The whole world spun around me. This was indeed a totally different experience. Quite unforgettable!

Shaking my neck left and right I was barely standing when *kaka* sneaked upon me from behind and kicked my calf hard with his heavy foot. I fell on my knees with excruciating pain! After some time *kaka* came near me. He patted my shoulders affectionately, pulled me up, ruffled my curly, thick hair and said lovingly, “Kanhoba, nobody even realized when and how you learnt to swim on your own, rushing into the Yamuna. That strategy won’t work here though. This is wrestling. If one wants to swim in this river of soil, the swimmer needs to conquer his fear first, and make his heart strong. That is why to give you an idea, I gave hard blows in the beginning. You will have to face these types of strikes every single day. Only when you will learn to easily land such hard blows on your opponent will you become a true wrestler – a proficient wrestler. Think about it and tell me, are you ready for this?”

He pressed my hand even more affectionately. I smiled and said to him, “Of course, Kelikaka, I am ready.” *Kaka* picked up a handful of soil and handed it to me and *dada* as a gesture of challenge. We thumped our arms loudly and challenged each other to a duel.

Thumping his own arm *kaka* gave us a cue with his eyes. We also thumped our arms. We were neither brothers nor related to anybody now. We were just two rivals in a wrestling match! Our friends also thumped their arms. The entire gymnasium reverberated with the deafening sounds of the wrestlers loudly thumping their arms and thighs to challenge each other. Instantaneously clashing our heads against each other, biting our lips, and gritting our teeth, *dada* and I started fighting with each other vehemently. *Kaka* would stop us from time to time to explain the subtleties of various wrestling manoeuvres—*Abhyakarsha*, *Keelvajranipata*, *Avarodha*, and *Bahukantaka* and so on.

We had lost track of time. Eventually both of us got all drenched in streams of sweat. Some of our friends brought the sacred ash from the iron basin and spread it on our backs. I was already dark complexioned. Now with the layer of white ash on my body I was looking like a ghost wandering in the darkness of the night! If *Yashodamata* had seen me like this, she would have screamed

with horror!

After about half an hour Kelinandakaka thumped his arms loudly, declaring the end of the session. Dada, my exhausted cousins and friends who were all doused in sweat, lay strewn in the wrestling pit. I also lay flat on my stomach, in the centre of the pit. We didn't even realize when Kelinandakaka gently spread the fine and soft soil on our sweaty bodies. The warmth of the blanket of soil was so comfortable that we didn't want to get out of it. Yamuna had made me realize the meaning of 'Jala' or water while I swam in her waters to my heart's content. Gazing at the sun while afloat, I realized the meaning of 'Teja' or splendour. Today the sacred soil in the wrestling pit was silently whispering the meaning of 'Prithvi' or earth in my ears.

Now our days in Gokul expanded like the grand plumage of a peacock. A single feather had multiple eyes and there were so many feathers with so many eyes!

There wasn't a single house in Gokul that we didn't know! There was not a single dairy storage room in these houses that had escaped from the secret raids of our close friends, Balaramadada, and me. Why did we steal from others in Gokul when there was abundance of milk, curds and butter at our own house? It was because, for us the entire Gokul was one big, spacious house – our own house! I had a strong desire to make others feel the same. It was my intense wish that they shared everything without being possessive about anything. Not a single gopa couple was unknown to me. For dada and me all the gopa children were like our own cousins, our Eka.

The more we got acquainted with Gokul the more we enjoyed a variety of thrilling games and mischief that we played inside and outside Gokul. There was no limit to our antics. If I were to share all these stories with you it will be almost like an epic! Still, I should share at least one such antic with you, just to give you an idea.

During the sunny season, sometimes a couple would be sleeping on two separate beds outside their house under the starlit night. Balaramadada and I would sneak upon them and discreetly tie a tight knot of the husband's long beard with the wife's long hair. Then just as smoothly a few of our friends would pick up both their beds, carry them near the western gate and leave them there.

The entire Gokul was quite annoyed with our pranks. Every single day an increasing number of married, unmarried, young, old and middle-aged gopis

began turning up in groups at our residence. They would start clamouring to complain about us, “Yashoda, Rohini, should we live in Gokul or not? Or should we just go someplace else? Are you going to control your children at all? Your spoilt, insolent brats have become a nuisance!”

Both our mothers would get weary pleading with and trying to pacify them. Finally, they would wield their ultimate weapon saying, “Alright then, we will banish Krishna-Balarama from Gokul and send them to another Gokul far away! We are also fed up of their antics!”

These words would do the trick. All gopis would immediately lower their voices and whisper amongst themselves, “That’s not what we want. But the children should stay within their limits. That’s all.”

Then our mothers would offer them milk and buttermilk. They would go on chatting about something else and laugh heartily. Eventually they would leave our house whispering amongst themselves about us. We would watch them, hiding behind the doors of the room. They looked so pure and innocent to us, exactly like our cows leaving from the eastern gates of Gokul!

The footprints of dada and me were now imprinted on each and every grain of sand on the banks of the Yamuna. We were also closely acquainted with every blade of grass from all the meadows spread on the outskirts of Gokul. What a variety of games we played under the open skies in the open space near the banks of the Yamuna! There was no limit, no end to it! Dada and I used to run madly in the sand near Yamuna to catch the illusory, fleeting shadows of the soaring birds. We would tease the monkeys jumping from tree to tree by baring our teeth at them. In summer, we had mimicked the escalating cooing sounds of the male cuckoo hidden in the dense trees – “Ku...hoo! Ku...hoo! How long are you going to coo, and for who? Are you calling your beloved?

Nowadays though, our Gokul was facing one crisis after another. Once a hideous wild donkey suddenly charged from the woods into the meadows where our cows were grazing. His deafening brays scared the hell out of the gently swaying grass in the meadows! Seeing him charging at them with flared nostrils the poor animals got terrified. In panic they started running helter-skelter raising their tails high. Our gopa friends began calling out to us in desperation, raising their staves in the air, “Krishna ..., Balidada ..., Run, Kanhaiya ..., Sankudada ... hurry, hurry, run faster!”

We ran as fast as we could from wherever we were, and together we attacked that bulky animal with all our might using all our expertise. Fighting

him off ferociously for a while we brought him down. Happy and excited, the gopas hailed our names in victory and carried us to Gokul on their shoulders with pomp and clatter.

The account of that incident spread among other Gokuls in the land of Vraja. Jubilant gopas from other Gokuls started visiting our Gokul in flocks to share their joy and to shower us with their affection. They would ask many questions about us to grandfather Chitrasena, father, and all our kakas. Some of them would even come directly to the meadows to meet us. Meanwhile, one day we heard of an enormous serpent living in the deepest part of the Yamuna, tormenting the gopas and their cows all the time. It was as long as a gigantic python. A mere look at this hissing serpent would scare the hell out of anybody. Sometimes he would seek refuge in the thick meadows, and at other times he would simply hide underwater in the deep parts of Yamuna. We secretly kept an eye on him to get familiarized with his movements.

One day I went alone near that part of the Yamuna to keep an eye on the serpent. It was glaring noon. The serpent came out of the water and crawled into the thick meadows. He must have found a prey there. He gobbled it up and lingered sluggishly. This was a perfect opportunity. I pulled out two flat, rounded flint-stones tied in the yellow silk dhoti around my waist. I scraped the flint stone in my right hand against the one in my left hand. It produced tiny sparks, enough to set the dry meadows aflame. The grass flared up instantly with flames leaping high into the sky. In the glaring heat of the day this inferno raged. Watching the billowing smoke, all the gopas along with their children began running towards the Yamuna. By this time the terrifying snake came out of the meadows, scorched by the flames, writhing and hissing. Crawling towards the banks of the Yamuna, he lay dead there, tongue dangling loose out of his mouth.

Thorali came running, panting, beating her chest. Seeing me safe and unharmed she embraced me tightly. Kissing me uncontrollably she kept muttering to herself, “Death to that serpent! He is dead anyway. Come Kanha, let’s go home first.” My friends lifted me up on their shoulders. Along with Balaramadada they started marching towards Gokul with much hullabaloo. Somebody hailed thunderously, “Victory to Krishna, the king of gopas”. Others followed “Victory to Krishna Kanhaiya – Nandanandana!”

We all were living happily in Gokul. But this joy did not last for very long. Gokul faced double trouble this time—the attacks of wild animals along with natural calamities. In broad daylight, wild beasts like tigers, wolves and

hyenas from surrounding woods started attacking our cows grazing in the meadows on the outskirts. Sometimes they wandered outside the fences with wide open jaws in search of prey. Our trained guard dogs would bark loudly at them but they were least bothered by it.

Once in a while a tiger would suddenly seize a stray calf by the neck and drag it to the forest. As soon as the gopas guarding the cattle saw it they would run and report it to father promptly. Then my fearless father would quickly grab a javelin from a corner of the veranda. Without waiting for anyone he would dart outside. Other gopas would just leave everything and rush after him.

Father would aim and unerringly strike the speeding tiger with the javelin, forcing him to let go of the wailing, frightened calf. He would then gently carry the half-dead calf in his arms, bring it inside our home and apply medicinal herbs to its wounds. He would gently pat and stroke it with affection. Watching all this my heart would swell with pride.

But all his efforts to protect our cattle fell short eventually. The tigers, wolves and hyenas continuously kept harassing Gokul. To top that, now there was shortage of fodder for our cattle in the nearby meadows. At least for a whole year we would have to leave the meadows untouched. Yes, we had to leave our beloved Gokul behind to find another place. We had to set up another Gokul someplace else. Our usual abode was to be abandoned for the time being. This was the first instance in my life to leave a place very dear to my heart.

For that purpose, a meeting was called under father's leadership. The matter was discussed from all angles. A plan to take care of the people, assets and houses to be left behind was decided upon. For an entire week, a few knowledgeable adults surveyed some places and finalized a location for new settlement. Everybody asked me to suggest a nice, suitable name for the new place. This area was packed with small forests or 'vanas'. It was like a team of forests. So, I named it 'Vrindavana'. They all loved it. A few adults went ahead to build a wooden protective fence around Vrindavana. On an auspicious day chosen by the priests a caravan of bullock carts left for Vrindavana from the eastern gates of Gokul. The carts were packed with earthen pots, jars, stone mortars, tethers, slings, baskets for the cocks and hens, *lezim*, bundles of clothes and chests.

As the clan leader's family our family left after everybody else. I was about twelve years old, and dada was probably a year older than me. Thorali



lovingly held my left hand, and Dhakali held dada's. Our eldest kaku carried young 'Eka'. Behind us were Nandababa who was supporting grandfather, all our kakas who were always ready to help him, our kakus, cousins, and the family priest. We, the gopas of the Abhirbhanu family were leaving for a new place, towards new life, from Gokul to Vrindavan!

Vrindavana! Doesn't everyone cherish their own Vrindavana of sentiments in their heart? But this Vrindavana of mine was special and unique. How should I describe it? It was one of a kind. The houses, streets, our residence — everything here was an exact replica of Gokul. Our residence had four large sections covered with a wild-grass roof. Even here, there was a temple of Lord Shiva and a gymnasium. Madhubana, a thick forest full of flora and fauna was located on the western side of Vrindavana. There were many smaller forests, Aamravana, Ketakavana, Kinkaravana, Champakavana and others near it. Even here thick, lush green meadows were located right outside the main protective fence, surrounded by the graceful crescent-shaped Yamuna.

Vrindavana was like a jade embedded in the lap of natural beauty. Many orchards of Champak, *Jamun*, *Audumbara*, *Aamra*, *Saga* and *Kadamba* had spread around here. These resonated with the chirping of various birds like *Bharadwaja*, *Chataka*, *Chandola*, *Kokila* and *Mayura*. In some places, wild springs with crystal clear water flowed gently and in other places torrents of small and big waterfalls collapsed with cascading water. Dada and I learnt how to stay afloat in one place with our heads above water, right under the pouring torrents of the waterfalls. This practice made us realize the intensity of the force of water. The sky above was cerulean, tinged with peacock feather colours.

The most beautiful gift of nature bestowed on Vrindavana was located on the eastern side. There was an enormous Banyan tree near the meadows on the other side of the protective fence. It had hundreds of lush green branches sprawling around. It had such a huge trunk that even if seven-eight gopas tried to hug it holding each other's hands it wouldn't fit in their embrace.

Even before our arrival in Vrindavana this tree was known as '*Bhandirvriksha*' to the populace of Vrajabhumi. Its renown had spread all over the eighteen colonies of gopas. It looked like an eminent personality or a guardian angel. The Gopas of Vraja always talked about it with great respect. They considered it like an elderly founding father of the family. A towering mountain with its sky-scraping peaks spread out horizontally beyond that

tree. All Gokuls of Vrajabhumi called it 'Indraparvata', Indra's mountain. A huge image of Indra was erected in a grand, elevated stone temple, located on the highest peak of the mountain. Huge stones were carved in shapes of clouds at his feet to show his authority as the Lord of the sky. Every year before the monsoon a big festival, 'Indrotsava', was organized on that mountain. Nobody had ever actually seen Indra, who stayed somewhere on the mountain. But everybody was in awe of him, only because of the deep-rooted notion held by generations together.

This year also a council was held before the onset of monsoon to discuss the preparations for the festival on the Indraparvat. It lasted for a long time. Father, grandfather, all kakas, and some elderly gopas of Vrindavana, all expressed their views. Everybody was on the same page, discussing how well dressed all should be for the festival, and how many decorated earthen pots of milk, curds, and ghee should be offered as a levy to Indra. I heard all the opinions quietly and spoke in the end. It was the first difficult time in my life to oppose all the elders vehemently. I declared firmly, "No one is going to pay any levy to Indra henceforth! Who is this Indra? Why should we live in his dread? We are not going to celebrate this festival any more. I am going to make this mountain open to all the gopas of Vrajabhumi. If you all want to go, go without me. Go ahead, and ignore me. But I am not coming, no matter what."

My blood seemed to rush in a frenzy. I was filled with indomitable self-confidence. My breathing intensified. This was a unique experience! Deep down I felt that the one who spoke was not Krishna of the gopas at all. It was somebody else! The gopa assembly had never seen me like this before. They were all speechless. All kept staring at me in shock. So far only Balaramadada had developed the capacity to read my mind. He backed me determinedly saying, "I completely agree with Krishna. We as well as other gopas of Vraja will never be happy and satisfied if we live in the fear of somebody."

"I will discontinue the festival of Indra. I want to liberate the mountain from Indra's clutches. Do I have your support?" I immediately asked them, barely giving them any time to ponder over it. I knew very well by now that given a chance to think too much, people would surely will split their hair over imaginary obstacles. Not only strangers but even our dear ones would be no exception to this.

Nandababa also had developed an eye to discern my thoughts. He

concluded the council meeting with determined declaration, “Everything will happen as and only as Krishna says. Not just today, but in the future too!”

The day after the meeting, however, Vrindavana faced a disaster that will never be forgotten. The sun had barely set when the deep blue sky was flooded with huge elephant-sized black clouds rumbling loudly. Suddenly there was lightning and thunder. Torrential rain deluged Gokul, as if the sky had gone berserk. Huge trees started crashing loudly in the furious, windy storm. It rained violently throughout the night.

As Vrindavana was flooding with water, covering themselves with cloaks and blankets everybody, including father, all gopas with their wives and children, Radha with her husband Rayana, left their houses, calling and reassuring each other. The lightning bolts still flashed with thunder. The torrential rain continued. The trees were turning and twisting in the turbulent winds. Some got uprooted and crashed with deafening sounds. The dreadful *Tandava* dance of wind and water continued for two whole days. Meanwhile Balaramadada said to me, “Krishna, only the melodious music of your flute will give us some comfort in this disastrous situation!” I smiled. I had forgotten my flute back in Vrindavana.

Shivering in the cold and gritting their teeth, everybody upheld dada’s proposal, “Yes, yes, please play your flute, Kanhaiya.” But I was helpless. I had no flute with me!

My beloved friend Radha had come into my life to support and love me the way no one could comprehend. Shivering in the cold she came forward. She had covered herself with my blanket. Holding my flute in front of me she said with authority, “Play your divine flute, Kanhaiya and give us hope!”

Looking at her affectionately and glancing at dada and other gopas I smiled again. The lightning was still flashing; the wind was still roaring and it was still pouring. I played a completely unfamiliar tune on my flute. Soaking completely in the pouring rain, the melody disseminated in the atmosphere of Vrindavana and the Indraparvata. Wet, cold, shivering, frightened for their lives, terrified of the destructive storm, our family and all young and old gopas felt reassured and refreshed. Someone hollered loudly giving tremors to the pouring rain, “The Saviour of Vrindavana, The Maestro of the Flute, The Guardian of Gopas—Victory to Krishna!” All gopas responded in unison, “Victory to Krishna!” Listening to the victorious cries the rain eased off. The storm abated. Maybe Indra just got washed away in the storm of the night!

The next day the gopas of Vrindavana gathered together to wrench off the

protective fence around Indraparvata. While yanking out the first post of the fence I intuitively declared, “This mountain will be known as ‘Mount Govardhana’ from today onwards. Henceforth, the festival will be celebrated in honour of Mount Govardhana. The cattle of all people of Vraja will graze freely here. They will breed and procreate here.” All the gopas agreed and finalized the new name of the mountain—‘Govardhana! Mount Govardhana!’

The heat of summer got exhausted while trying to smoulder the thick verdure of Vrindavana. The parching summer passed by. Gray, aqueous clouds started rumbling in the blue skies of Vrindavana, marking the onset of monsoon. Elated peacocks spread their plumage and danced rhythmically, giving out joyous cries.

One day, in the forest of Madhuvana, my beloved friend Radha dragged me away from my friends, and took me under a tree. It was the *Kadamba tree*, our favourite tree, proudly displaying its branches loaded with clusters of scarlet-coloured blooms. Their intoxicating fragrance diffused in the air.

Radha wanted to gift me something. She had taken extra efforts to conceal it in the fold of her dress. I sat down on a big rock. She stood by my side and said, “Manamohanaa, today I am going to offer you an exclusive gift. That is why I have brought you here, away from others. Mukundaa, you will like my gift, for sure.” She took out the gift carefully hidden in the fold of her dress, and held it in front of me. It was a crown made of tiny, lush green leaves of wild creepers. An iridescent peacock feather tucked in it was enriching its beauty. Awestruck, I kept staring at the beautiful crown bedecked with the peacock feather. Then with some thought, I wore the crown on my head smiling and glancing at her.

Her eyes sparkled with tears. Lost in deep emotion she instantly closed her fish shaped eyes and stood still for quite some time. Mesmerized, I intently kept looking at her remarkably serene beauty. The evening had slowly crept over the forest of Madhuvana. We both returned to Vrindavana

along with our friends, bearing the dusty twilight clouds on our backs.

I had deliberately accepted and worn the peacock-feathered crown gifted by Radha today. The peacock feather was a delicate and befitting symbol of something healthy and perpetual. It was a symbol of the fertile Yoni – the supremely sacred virtue of womanhood. I had honoured it deliberately with a clean and clear mind at the beginning of my life’s journey.

Radha was indeed my first female Guru. The one who introduced me to the different emotions and moods of a woman – sometimes loquaciously, other

times silently. She had initiated me into a lust less, incomparable premayoga full of deep affection, pure love and complete devotion. Radhika was my soul mate, my first female Guru!

Soon the silvery, full moon night of *Kojagiri* descended gently on Vrindavana. Shining brightly in the night sky the platter-sized moon began pouring its silver light on Vrindavana and Madhuvana. We gopas of the *Chandravansha*, had a sentimental tradition followed by generations, that of the *Rasa* dance! Under the bright light of the full moon of *Kojagiri*, men and women would indulge in the *Rasa* dance throughout the night. No other places in Aaryavarta followed such a tradition except for the eighteen Gokuls of Vrajabhumi.

The entire Vrindavana gathered in Madhuvana today. Dressed fancifully, everyone assembled on the banks of Neel sarovar full of blue, orange and white-coloured lotuses. During the first part of the night all gopa children and elderly couples were going to play *Rasa* while merrily singing and dancing.

Of course, as the eldest of the family, Chitrasena aajoba had the rightful privilege to commence the *Rasa*. Securing a big turban on his head, with a trembling neck he tossed a fistful of vermillion in the air hailing 'Victory to Goddess Ida'. On that cue, all the instruments and the dancing feet of the gopas commenced the *Rasa*. They were not going to stop through the night.

The *típrya* began clattering now. The first batch of children and the elderly got exhausted after dancing for quite some time. Madhuvana was getting exhilarated by the silvery moonlight. Innumerable tunes blossomed with the escalating rhythm under the starlit sky. A huge cauldron was placed on a fireplace near the lake. It was brimming with a nourishing blend of milk, saffron, honey and sugar. The saffron-coloured drink was dancing on the cool breeze of Yamuna putting the shining stars in the sky to shame!

It was midnight now. Chitrasena aajoba raised his jingling staff high in the air and stomped it on the ground. On his cue, all the big and small gopas and gopis consumed the sweet milk from the huge cauldron hailing the Goddess Ida. Children devoured the creamy layer on top of the milk in no time. The moon witnessed the gopas gulping down pots of milk. Finally, we - Balaramadada, myself, both mothers, grandfather, father, all kakas and kakus, and yes Radha too with her husband Rayana - relished the delicious milk. The full moon of *Kojagiri* had descended by a few degrees by now.

The main team of *Rasa* dancers entered the dancing ring now. It seemed as if Radha was determined to keep the memory of our love alive forever.

Today also she had brought me a precious gem, hiding it in the folds of her dress. As soon as Balaramadada, Radha, our friends and cousins, and I gathered in the dancing ring, holding my hands in her moist palms Radha gently pulled me in the centre of the circle.

Fair, moon-faced, smiling Radha affectionately pressed my cupped hands tightly with her palms and said, “Kanhaiya, please accept the gift that I am going to give you today as a gift from my heart. Never separate it from yourself, even for a moment. It should be always with you in the same form that it is now. Will you fulfil this wish of this sentimental friend of yours? Please! Promise me!” She presented her right palm to me. Now I held her cupped hand in mine and pressed it lovingly for a moment. Putting my right palm on hers I said to her, “Certainly, I will fulfil your wish. I give you my word.”

From the folds of her dress she pulled out a thick white garland of fresh flowers artistically intertwined with lush green leaves. Putting it around my neck she whispered, “This garland – my Vajrayanti garland – you should wear every day, woven with new, fresh flowers. Kanhaiya, remember its name, VAIJAYANTI !”

The brilliance of the full moon of *Kojagiri* that shone in her eyes blended with the moonlight in my eyes. I lifted the garland so full of sentiments and inhaled deeply to fill my chest with its fragrance. I caressed the knee length garland with both hands. Just like grandfather had done, I tossed a fistful of vermilion in the sky.

To commence the main *Rasa*, I pulled out my flute tied in the scarf around my waist, and played an indicative tune. The *típrya* clattered. The kettle-drums echoed. I tucked my flute back in the scarf. As the moon engrossed in *Rasa* started ascending in the sky the *Rasa* dance on the ground intensified.

Dancing without a break, Radha got exhausted. Beads of perspiration gathered on her forehead. We all got lost in the rhythm of the dance. We had completely lost the sense of our bodies. Radha, the gopa-gopis, and I, we had totally lost consciousness in the rhythm of dancing. Radha was not a woman anymore and I, not a man! Radha-Krishna were not two separate entities. We had become one wick of the life-lamp flickering to the beat of *Rasa*; one entity, one existence!

We had not realized that now all the elders and children sitting around us watching the *Rasa* were totally engrossed in it. Clapping their hands with closed eyes they were rhythmically chanting, ‘Radha-Krishna, Radha-

Govinda, Radhe-Krishna, Radhe-Govinda! Radhe-Govinda, Radhe-Krishna' Listening to their chanting I felt particularly satisfied about one thing, they had honoured a woman, my friend Radha, chanting her name before mine.

The enchanted days in Vrindavana were soon over. Our original Gokul was lush green again. So, father announced our return to the original Gokul. It was time to say goodbye to Vrindavana, where every place carried sentimental memories of Radha and me. Apparently, I was used to saying goodbyes like this since my birth. It was my destiny. Various melodies of my flute had blossomed and resonated in the ambience of Vrindavana, Madhuvana, and Govardhana. The fresh natural beauty around had given me so much during my stay in Vrindavana. But my beloved friend Radha had given me much more than that.

Whatever Radha taught me — sometimes by speaking continuously for hours together, sometimes through silence, sometimes just through the touch of her hand, and at times simply through her communicative eyes — was invaluable. She introduced a woman to me as the Creator's most positive, virtuous work of art that is full of pure love.

A farewell to Vrindavana was a farewell to the matchless and pure emotional love of Radha-Krishna. With heavy hearts, both of us bade farewell to Vrindavana. As we were departing I told Radha, "From today onwards you are the Queen of Vrindavana. Wherever men and women will have a Vrindavana of pure affection devoid of lust and lechery, Radha will always exist there for sure." Radha, dada, and I returned to our original Gokul, along with all gopas. These were the days of approaching youth. Youth! The phase of life that steers the chariot of horses of Imagination aspiring for the sky; that harbours the ambition to explore the world to the best of its ability. Youth, that expels the word 'impossible' from the mind, just like the rising water of the ocean throws out the incoming water at first.

From Gokul to Vrindavana and back to Gokul – the healthy, life-giving air in the land of Vraja had made us mentally fearless and physically powerful. Our bodies were well built and toned by the rigorous exercise under the meticulous supervision of Kelinandakaka and Prananandakaka. Our bodies became lustrous as a result of devouring pots of freshly drawn milk. Dada was already looking all grown up like a tough and hefty wrestler. A glistening mustache had just started growing above our lips indicating the arrival of youth.

Nowadays my pestering questions to grandfather, father, both mothers, our

kakas and kakus had considerably increased. I incessantly asked them questions like, “How come Maharaja Ugrasena of Mathura has been imprisoned by his own son Kansa? How come nobody has ever tried to liberate Devakimata and Maharaja Vasudeva from the clutches of Kansa? What were the various clans and hundreds and thousands of Yadavas belonging to them doing at that time? Why do I have the incessant urge to go and meet them? Why does my heart revolt to free them from the clutches of Kansa?” My incessant questions would leave all of them nonplussed. As dada was more experienced than me, sometimes I would tightly hold his muscular arms and ask “Balaramadada, dear Sankudada, at least you tell me why do I have this irresistible urge to go to Mathura? Why do I want to visit the imprisoned Maharaja Vasudeva and Maharani Devakidevi at least once? Don’t you ever feel the same urge? Why not?” Dada would just stare at me and reply, “If you can’t find an answer to these questions, how can I Dhakalya?”

I couldn’t find a satisfying answer to a single question. The days and nights kept tagging each other like players of *Aatyapatya* and time kept moving on. Day by day the pressure on the mind of Krishna – an adolescent boy standing on the verge of adulthood – kept building.

Finally, that day dawned on Gokul! As usual dada, our friends, and I returned in the evening along with our cattle. That day we saw an unusual sight — an embellished royal chariot yoked with five strong, shiny, pure black horses stood near the western entrance. Dada and I were startled when we saw the chariot, as it was vacant. Dada ran frantically towards Gokul. But some kind of fascination drew me to the chariot. I feasted my eyes on the beautiful horses, and started stroking the lustrous black creatures while discerning their vivacity. They responded with their neighing and snorting. I liked those animals very much. In a short while dada returned with father. Nandababa who was always cheerful irrespective of any number of calamities, looked dejected today. He looked worried. Hastily he said to me, “Krishna, come immediately. The royal minister has summoned you. He is resting at our house.”

The three of us rushed to Gokul. I was ahead of dada, and father. Just as we entered our house I saw a tall, hefty, bearded man in royal attire, wearing a crown on his head. Upon seeing him, my pace increased unknowingly. Dada was behind me. For the first time in our lives we were meeting a Yadava warrior in person.



I moved forward and bowed down to pay respects to him. He instantly pulled me up and embraced me. Father introduced him to me, “This is Akrura, Maharaja Kansa’s minister! He has arrived to invite you to the ‘Dhanuryaga’ – a *Yajna* along with an archery contest. Balarama is invited too.” Father stuttered while speaking. His words were broken and voice was shaky. But the royal minister Akrura kept observing me for quite a while. After some time, he gathered his thoughts and addressed us, “Maharaja Kansa desires to see your valour. He wants to see both of you to his heart’s content. He has dispatched me as his envoy to invite both of you to the ‘Dhanuryaga’.”

“First, tell me Akrurakaka, how did you bring this huge royal chariot from Mathura across river Yamuna?” I asked him a precise question.

“Brilliant! You are so observant! I liked your question. One spacious boat carried our chariot and the charioteer. I disembarked in Gokul from another boat on the banks of Yamuna. Both the boats are still anchored in river Yamuna.” Akrura told us smiling gently. He put his hand on my shoulder and entered the inner chamber.

Supper was done. Today even Akrura who was our guest sat with our family for the evening family prayer.

His sudden arrival had left all the family members restless. Possessed with innumerable doubts they were tossing and turning in their beds. The torches in father’s bed chamber were burning for a long time too. Balaramadada and I were also wide awake lying next to each other with the thought of going to Mathura the next day. Thorali and Dhakali– both were sitting on their beds, whispering to each other and sobbing at times.

We thought that Akrurakaka must be sound asleep as he was exhausted due to the long journey. Apparently, that wasn’t the case though. As the midnight toll rang, holding a lantern in his hand Akrurakaka came out of his chamber and stood in front of father, “Nandaraja, I need to speak to you about something very crucial, in private. So please come to my room alone. We will talk first and later I will summon both your sons. Come now, let’s go.”

The unexpected invitation, the hearsay about Kansa’s tyranny...father was already disturbed. His words confused father even more, but he followed the royal minister to his chamber.

Akrurakaka closed the door first. Then in a low, whispering voice he shared the evil plan of his vicious king Kansa under the pretext of the ‘Dhanuryaga’. He said, “Oh gopa king Nandadeva, the invitation for ‘Dhanuryaga’ is a

deception, an utter lie. A diabolical scheme to slaughter both your sons has been cunningly cooked up in the royal palace of Mathura. Huge intoxicated elephants and wrestlers will attack your sons without any warning at all. They will be killed either under the feet of huge elephants or in the duel with the wrestlers. They need to be cautioned about this today. Go and fetch both of them.”

Father came to our room. He was scared to death. We were half asleep. He woke us up and took us to Akrurakaka. Akrurakaka looked me in the eyes and started speaking.

The very first Yadava we had seen so far started speaking in a deep voice. His words flew like sparks of fire. I had never experienced such emotional turmoil before in my life, which I experienced in that one night. All my questions were being answered rapidly, but they were disclosing a very strange and twisted truth! “Krishna and Balarama, listen carefully and calmly to what I tell you. Both of you are the sons of the venerable Yadava Maharaja Vasudeva and Maharani Devakidevi! Under the pretext of Dhanuryaga you will have to face fatal assaults tomorrow. Though you are invited to this *Yajna* as a Yadava, it is not as an ally, but as an enemy!

“Krishna! Son, he has even imprisoned his own parents to seek control of the kingdom. He got terrified and went berserk when he heard the divine utterance from heaven during your mother’s wedding ceremony. He is the one who has also held your parents captive. Krishna, dear son, he has murdered your six new-born brothers born to Devakidevi by smashing their heads on a big boulder! His gruesome slaying of the new-borns has put the entire Yadava clan to shame. Balarama, son, you are the only one who miraculously escaped from his evil clutches. Krishna is your real brother.

“Nandaraja who is a vassal of Vasudeva, assumed this crucial responsibility of caring for the both of you, only after discussing it with him. Nandaraja knows your origin very well, right since your birth!

“Nandaraja, bid farewell to them tomorrow as your duty calls for you to do so. They have served the Abhirbhanu dynasty so far. I am confident that they will serve the Yadu dynasty similarly in future.”

Overcome with emotions he pulled both of us closer to him. His first embrace made me sense many things. His concluding words helped Nandababa to compose himself. We paid our respects to him and said goodbye.

Everyone else in the house was fast asleep that night. Not Nandababa, but

Vasudevababa is my real father. He has been held captive in Kansa's prison for all these years. Kansa is my mother's *chulat bandhu* – my mama – and yet he gruesomely murdered my six new-born brothers, right in front of my mother. In fact, any mama should love his *bhacha*. It is only natural. Then, in spite of being our mama, why was he hell bent on destroying us? One reason was the chilling divine utterance from Heaven that he had heard – 'The eighth born son of Devaki will destroy you!' The other reason was simply greed for the royal throne. He imprisoned his own parents, the King and Queen of the Yadavas, and banished the eighteen families of the Yadava clan from the kingdom for the same purpose. I am also a Yadava! Kansa – the evil, unjust king of Mathura is my mama. What kind of mama is he? He is mighty and arrogant due to his power. He has invited us to Mathura only to assassinate us. Why is he afraid of us? Just because of the divine utterance he heard from Heaven! He has taken it into his head that I, the eighth son of Devaki, Kanhaiya of the gopas, Krishna of the Yadavas is going to be responsible for his death. I am going to kill him.

How do they look — my father Vasudevababa, Devakimata, Maharaja Ugrasena, the king of Yadavas, his queen Padmavatidevi?

Tomorrow, we have to leave for Mathura. Kansa is going to attack us in the pandal of the 'Dhanuryaga', with intoxicated elephants and wrestlers. Should I surrender? Or should I be the victim like the six before? Nooo! Never!! I – I am the Murlidhar of the gopas, the Krishna of the Yadavas, the one who never deters from his word – I will never stop, until I destroy Kansa. Kansa? Let me see what kind of a man he is. What kind of a toxic creeper is this?

'Aum HiraNmayen Patren I Satyasyapihitam Mukham'.... The inspirational prayer from Rigveda, zipped through my subconscious mind. Instantly my breath calmed down, found its rhythm. It was now abounding with unyielding self-confidence. I fell fast asleep.

The next day dawned. It was the most important day of my life! The day of bidding farewell to Gokul, probably for good! The day to go to Mathura and live there...probably, forever! It was the biggest and most significant turning point of my life.

As usual dada and I got up and performed our morning ablutions. Somehow, last night itself the news of our departure for Mathura for the 'Dhanuryaga' had spread like wildfire in Gokul. The people of Gokul crowded our house in the early morning itself. Pin drop silence prevailed in spite of the crowd. Their faces were drained of colour. From wherever they

were, they tried to catch the slightest glimpse of us. I had forewarned dada right after waking up, “Don’t get emotional Balidada, and shed no tears at all! Remember, this is the beginning of a new life. Be with me like my shadow. I desperately need you.”

As per father and grandfather’s instructions we prayed and bowed in front of all the deities of the Abhirbhanu dynasty including Goddess Ida. We were wearing our regular outfits, the yellow and blue silk dhotis. I wore a peacock-feather crown on my head. The new, fresh, thick Vaijayanti garland that

Radha had given me hung around my neck. I did not take my coarse blanket today, just went where it was kept, stroked it gently and cast an affectionate glance on it. I picked up my jingling staff momentarily, and tapped it on the floor to hear an earful of the delicate jingling sound of the tiny bells. Then I gently put it back in the corner. I pulled my flute out from the folds of the blanket and tucked it in the scarf tied around my waist.

Tall and hefty, dada walked ahead. I followed him. Thorali and Dhakali, who would usually come forward to put curds on our palms whenever we left the house, were nowhere to be seen. Both kept weeping in their chamber throughout the night. Their faces were drawn and eyes swollen. They couldn’t even bring themselves out to bid farewell to us. Even Eka who would usually be lingering around us, was not to be seen. Somebody put curds on our palms. Then we ourselves entered our mothers’ room with determination. How much their faces had changed in just one night! Thorali gave out a heart-wrenching cry the moment she saw me, “Krishna..., Kanhaiya... please don’t go to Mathura, the invitation of that devious king is not worth it! Once he grabs you into his clutches...I will never be able to see you again in my life! Finally, Yamuna did succeed in her evil scheme? Kanhaiya, the day you were born I doubted just for a moment that you were not my child. Is that why you are punishing me so severely? Please don’t desert me Kanha!”

She put her arms around my neck and sobbed inconsolably, so much so, that she could barely breathe. My dearest Thorali mata simply kept trembling helplessly, like a delicate creeper trembling in a turbulent storm. I consoled her, patting her on the back, “Shush... Thorale, be calm! Get hold of yourself! Dada was also trying his best to pacify Dhakali. Finally, they both calmed down and regained their composure.

We bowed down and paid respects to both of them. Sobbing Eka stood alone, far in a corner, facing the wall. I calmed her down and handed her over

to Thorali. All our kakas, kakus, father and grandfather had gathered outside the room. We bowed down and paid respects to all our kakas and kakus. Everybody was sobbing. We embraced our cousins with love and looked at them for the last time.

In the end we laid ourselves prostrate at the feet of Chitrasena aajoba. The old *Kadamba tree* of Gokul, more than a hundred years old, trembled from head to toe. He pulled out the silver bracelet from his right hand and put it around my right wrist. Without saying a word, he held me in a tight embrace. With lips surrounded by a bushy mustache he kissed me on my forehead and said in a rough, hoarse voice, “Krishna, son, I have full confidence in Gargamuni. No harm will come to you! I am quite sure that you will grow old, your hair

will also turn gray just like mine! But son, never forget this old man!”

Then we prostrated at the feet of Nandababa and stood erect in front of him with a determined mind and an unwavering spirit. Even at this moment my dear Nandababa was just as strong as I had always surmised. First, he pulled both of us close and held us in an eager embrace. Then he put his hands on our heads, and while blessing us with moist eyes he said, “Dear sons, I wouldn’t mind it if you forget me, but never forget the gopas and gopis here, and the cows that provided you with plenty of milk. As a gift from the gopa clan I am going to present both of you with two weapons. Always take good care of them. May you always succeed in life, and make both Abhirbhanu and Yadu dynasties proud by bringing greatest acclaim to them!” A gopa attendant stood next to him, holding a tray in his hands. Father picked up a sword from the tray, touched it to his head and gave it to me saying, “This is my ‘Nandaka’ sword for you, Krishna.” Another attendant was holding a tall, black, polished pestle of rosewood in his hands. Giving it to dada father said, “May this pestle of the gopas protect the Yadavas! It is called ‘Saunand’. Balarama, this is for you.” Accepting the weapons, we both touched them to our heads and gave them back to the attendants. Those were then dispatched to the chariot of Akrurakaka.

In the meeting square of our home Akrurakaka was waiting for us. The entire square was packed with a crowd of sentimental gopa-gopis. Glancing disdainfully at Akrurakaka quite a few people whispered amongst themselves, “He doesn’t look like ‘Akrura’— the Merciful – in the least. Looks like the most merciless, vile creature!” Even the courtyard of our residence was over crowded. As soon as Akrurakaka, our despondent family,

Balaramadada, and I came outside, muffled sounds of suppressed sobs filled the atmosphere from all sides.

I turned back to take a final look at the ancient structure of the Abhirbhanu dynasty. I brought my palms together in prayer and paid obeisance to it.

I turned to go towards Yamuna. She was standing right in front of me, my beloved *sakhi* Radha! Radha, the soul yearning for Moksha! She stood still like a statue, but tears started streaming down her face. She looked totally lost and her eyes were devoid of emotions. And yes, her husband Rayana also stood behind her, sobbing, and completely shaken.

Captivated, I stood in front of Radha. Lifting up the Vaijayanti garland slightly I said to her, “Radha, I will never forget this loving gift of yours! I am also going to give you a gift of my love today. You will never be able to forget it. Here, take this.” I pulled out my favourite flute from the shawl around my waist and held it in front of her. The same flute that was so dear to my heart, the melody of which resonated in the atmosphere of Gokul and Vrindavan. Taking it in her hands, as she put it on her lips, her body trembled and she started sobbing. While she was sobbing, ‘Kanhaiya, Kanhaiya’, I gently patted Rayana’s shoulders and went forward. Following Akrurakaka, we advanced towards Yamuna, breaking the circles of sobbing gopa-gopis who were falling at our feet. But now the crowd of disheartened, grieving, young and old gopas and gopis started following us. They cried out loud, ‘Oh Krishna-Rama..., Kanhaiya-Balarama ...please don’t leave Gokul, don’t leave us! If you go now we will never be able to see you again! Dear ones, please don’t be so indifferent. Krishna-Balarama, please don’t go.’

We came out of the western gates of Gokul. Akrurakaka’s charioteer Ashwadamana had kept the chariot ready. First, Akrurakaka boarded the chariot, then dada and finally, I climbed in. As the charioteer cracked his whip, the alert, dark black horses harnessed to the chariot lifted up their front hooves, sprinted forward, and neighed. The life-chariot of two gopas started its journey towards Mathura, the Yadava capital.

I glanced back. Near the western gates of Gokul Yashodama had passed out and Nandababa was trying to revive her, while trying to regain his own composure. A lot of gopas and gopis were wailing loudly, throwing their hands skywards and beating their chests. All my grown-up friends – Bhadrasena, Rudrasena, Sridama, Stokakrishna, Damana, Pendya, and Varuthapa were among them. My eight kakas and kakus, and my cousins were also there. All the gopa men and women with whom I had some kind of

loving relation, all of them were there. Not having heard the melody of my flute since morning many disconcerted cows were mooing and wandering around them. Even they were shedding tears today. The chariot kept trotting towards Yamuna, leaving so much behind! Only a keen observer could have noticed that the two intoxicated bulls on the wooden gates, ready to attack each other, also seemed to be leaning on each other and shedding tears as the gates closed.

I turned my back with a strong resolve. Gokul was being left behind. Vrindavan, Madhuvan, and Govardhan, everything was left further behind. Our home, along with aajoba, baba, both matas and our *chulat bandhu*, bhaginis – all was left behind. All the gopas along with the cattle were left behind. And yes, all my aliases such as Murlidhara, Shyam, Mohana, Govinda, Damodara, Gopala, Madhava, and Milinda were also left behind. Krishna, the Yadava leader was now going to enter the *Rasa*-arena of real life.

I stepped on the land of Mathura, the capital city of the Shursena kingdom, along with dada, with Akurakaka leading us. On the other side of Yamuna only one Yadava was waiting to welcome me with a thick garland of fresh, fully blossomed, scarlet-coloured *Kadamba* flowers. He was a bit younger to me. The moment he saw me, he excitedly ran towards me crunching the sand under his feet. With sparkling eyes, he promptly put the *Kadamba* garland around my neck. Kneeling in the sand he rested his head on my feet with utter devoutness and said effusively, “Dada, do you recognize this young brother of yours?” Holding both his shoulders I tenderly pulled him up. I gazed deep into his loving, clear eyes as Akurakaka introduced him, “Krishna, this is Uddhava, your cousin! He is the son of Vasudeva’s brother Devabhaga and Kansadevi! He has two more brothers, Chitraketu and Brihadbala.” We had already recognized each other – right when our eyes met, like we knew each other from our previous lives and we were going to know each other for many more lives to come. Ut - Dhava - means the holy fire of a *Yajna* – the flame of life that always keeps rising.

I called to him, “Uddhava...! Udho!! Dear brother!!!” and embraced him tight, close to my chest. Now onwards my life was going to be full of inexplicable emotional ties with Udho! He was going to be the keeper of my sentiments, my confidant. Dada and I started walking on the sands of Yamuna along with him. Every single step of ours was leading to the desert of an unknown future.

I had already decided to go on foot to the embellished arena of Dhanuryaga today. Thinking about something I stopped for a moment. Tenderly patting Uddhava's shoulder I said, "Uddhava, would you do me a favour? Nobody else is suitable for this particular task. You go to Gokul right away, and console Yashodamata, Rohinimata and all the gopas-gopikas suffering the anguish of separation from me. Comfort Radha and Eka just like I would."

Uddhava looked at me delightedly with bright eyes. Instantly he exclaimed, "As you wish!"

I embraced him. He hesitated momentarily as he walked towards the boat. He was delighted that I had showed such faith in him in our very first meeting by assigning him an important task, but he was also worried for me! I had just seen the pure, selfless love for me in his eyes.

Soon the Yadava capital Madhupuri – Mathura came into sight. The towering gates of the temples of Mathura and the domes of the royal palaces came into sight. As we entered the city, first we came across a flower market. Baskets full of colourful flowers and lot of shops decorated with long colourful garlands could be seen. Bees were fearlessly buzzing around the garlands in search of honey. We moved forward enjoying the displays around us. A florist named 'Gunaka' came forward and offered us many garlands and flowers.

Just like the news of Akrurakaka's arrival had spread in Gokul, the news that Krishna and Balarama from Gokul had arrived in Mathura spread very fast. Thousands of young Yadava warriors marched on the streets with whatever weapons they could get hold of – swords, spears, hatchets, pestles and maces along with flower garlands in their hands. It was no longer possible for Akrurakaka to hold them back. Dada and I were definitely not going to hold them back. We had already decided so last night, back in Gokul itself.

Within moments a torrential crowd of Mathura's Yadava warriors gathered behind us like the roaring high tide of the sea. They were innocent people, who, for years had been ruthlessly exploited under the unrestrained, tyrannical rule of Kansa. Whatever I had experienced in the last one night, they had suffered their whole lives. Their wrath that had been suppressed so far had erupted today. It was uncontrollable. Hundreds and thousands of oppressed, infuriated Yadavas started shouting at the top of their lungs, "Hail Krishna, Balarama...victory to them...victory!"

Our very first procession in Mathura left the alleys and narrow lanes behind



and arrived on the wide royal highway. As dada and I turned back we saw the ocean of roaring, determined, excited Yadava warriors following us. Their foreheads were smeared with vermilion. It looked like a whirlwind of blood-red ocean waves rising behind us. By this time both of us were fully doused in vermilion. Even our mothers wouldn't have been able to tell our original skin tones now! Our bodies did not look like bodies anymore... they were like two blood-red sceptres smeared in vermilion!

Dada and I were full of confidence when we left Gokul. Looking at the thunderous ocean of thousands of Yadavas oscillating behind us our confidence knew no bounds. Our bodies became as light as peacock feathers. Our minds were full of only courage and indomitable resolve!

With both of us leading, the roaring ocean of infuriated Yadavas collided with the royal palace – the foundation of Kansa's evil regime. Dada and I had just entered the hall of the Dhanuryaga with indignation, when an uncontrollable and inebriated giant elephant goaded by his mahout 'Mahamatra' attacked us at once. Since morning he had been fed the alcohol called 'Maireyaka' to intoxicate him. His name was 'Kuvayapida'. He gave an awful, terrifying cry – Chiii...chiiii... A few Yadavas, who had somehow managed to enter with us shuddered at the sight of the fiery red eyes of the elephant. They scattered in fear. Dada and I instantly removed the flower garlands around our necks and threw them away. Only the vermilion-smeared Vijayanti garland remained on my chest. Nobody realized when we tucked our dhotis and got ready to attack. On the other side of the arena, Kansa – the heartless, diabolical, arrogant king of Mathura, our mama, was vaguely visible sitting on the elevated royal seat. Surrounding him were the members of his ministry and other honourable Yadavas. Among them were his eight brothers – Nyagrodha, Kanka, Shanku, Suhu, Rashtrapala, Srishti, Sunama and Tushtimana. Also present were his wives Asti and Prapti, and his sisters Kansavati, Kanka, Shurabhu, Rashtrapalika and Kansa.

As we quickly dodged the first attack of the elephant a round of applause followed. Dada instantly moved towards the straight, tiny tail of that enormous beast. I scurried towards his trunk. Like two lightning bolts we emphatically collided with that intoxicated, haughty and powerful elephant. Hurling his big neck in jerky motions and lashing his trunk around, the huge elephant consistently let out terrifying, deafening cries of chiii chiii... Everybody around us just kept staring, dumbfounded.

We had unwittingly divided the elephant into two parts and took charge of

each. With a nimble move I dodged the trunk of the elephant and went underneath his belly. Holding his tail like a rope Dada leaped onto his back. Within moments he reached the musth elephant's temples and attacked his mahout. Within a few moments of tussle mighty Dada picked up the mahout along with his goad and hurled him down.

I slipped through the gap of the bulky animal's front legs and stood directly in front of his trunk. Predicting his impending movements unmistakably by a direct look into his fiery red, crazy eyes, I began dodging his movements with agility. I provoked him with challenging gestures. Now the elephant was completely under our control. By this time dada landed on the ground and picked up the goad. The frightened mahout had already fled. Dada constantly pricked the elephant with the goad from behind and I dodged him from the front making him spin around himself. This thrilling game of gyrations went on for quite some time. It was our most favourite wrestling manoeuvre, 'Abhyakarsha', mastered under Pranakaka's guidance.

Now the elephant couldn't figure out which way to turn. The Maireyaka drink coupled with the constant circular motion went right to the elephant's head. The elephant gradually got dizzier and collapsed. His terrifying shrieks were sending clouds of dust in the air. Immediately, I moved closer to his trunk and with a single jerk, wrenched out his arm-long, curvy, white tusk, shouting 'Victory to goddess Ida'. Streams of blood spurted out. The silver bracelet that grandfather had put on my wrist, got doused in elephant blood. My vermilion-smeared yellow dhoti also got drenched in the elephant's blood. Using his tusk like a sharp weapon I briskly kept striking blow after blow on his musth temples. Meanwhile dada did not leave a single spot on his body that was not pricked with the goad. Both of us were completely drenched in sweat and blood.

The first assailant sent by Kansa, the royal elephant Kuvalayapida, finally died in despair, shrilling and sissing with his legs stretched out. One powerful centre of energy was wiped out. The suppressed, benumbed Yadavas around us hurled their turbans in the air. With continuous applause, they fearlessly shouted spontaneous slogans of victory, "Down with Kuvalayapida, he is dead! Victory to Krishna-Balarama...victory... victory!" Hearing the electrifying slogans, the Yadava crowd waiting outside became uncontrollable and ferociously broke in through the huge gates of the royal palace like a torrent of water.

Near the royal altar located at a distance, Kansa, the king of Mathura rose

from the royal throne at once and stood erect. His body was trembling in rage, his bushy eyebrows were twisted weirdly and his eyes were breathing fire. He loudly roared, “Minister! Present those boorish gopas for the Dhanuryaga! Bring them into the pit.”

Right in front of his royal altar was the spacious wrestling pit with red soil, fenced with thick ropes tied to Kikar wood pillars. A bow garlanded with flowers was placed in the centre, on a soft, shiny brocade fabric with designs of vines and creepers.

Kansa’s minister Vipruthu came closer to us and commanded in a rowdy voice, “Come on now, and show us your archery skills!” Thumping our arms Balaramadada and I entered the wrestling pit.

Dada was credulous. He went closer to the bow and started examining it intently! But I stood right next to him, cautiously keeping a close watch all around us. I knew well that the Dhanuryaga was merely a deception. Suddenly we heard a loud thumping of arms around us. Two hefty, muscular royal wrestlers descended in the wrestling pit with their dhotis tucked in.

One of them was Chanura, and the other was Mushtika! Thumping on their thighs loudly, raising both their arms while dancing they shouted loudly, “Hail Maharaja Kansa, the king of Mathura, the invincible great wrestler, victory to him!” A mere look at them spread chilling terror.

Dada was also ready now. Chanura picked up the fabric in the centre of the pit, along with the bow. Glancing viciously at me, he let out a dreadful laugh and simply tossed it out of the pit. Hurling fistfuls of soil on us Chanura collided with me and Mushtika approached dada. The royal kettle-drums strategically kept in various places in the big hall started booming now. Frightening commotion prevailed in the arena.

Chanura struck me near my ear. That first punch itself made sparks fly in front of my eyes. At that moment Kelinandakaka’s wrestling tips flashed in my mind. His words echoed, “The moment you hit your rival with such a powerful blow you will become a true wrestler!” Instantly my blood flared like corn grains on burning embers.

Now the wrestler in front of me seemed like the earlier elephant, just like a trifling pile of flesh! In a moment, a lustrous brilliance circled around my body. My rival couldn’t figure out where I was standing; in front of him, behind him or on his side! Was I striking him on his cheek or on his back! I used a variety of wrestling manoeuvres and kept throwing him down, toppling him like rolling a big rock over with a small crowbar. Exhausted, he fell on

his back. Planting my knee on his thick neck I crushed him with all my might. As my rival lay exhausted I pulled out my final weapon– the ‘Bahukantaka’ maneuver. Putting my arm tightly around his throat, I clasped his neck in my firm grip. His tongue out of his mouth, his eyes circling frantically, vomiting blood, he struggled violently to get rid of my grasp. I wasn’t going to give him that chance. It was the ultimate life-threatening maneuver of wrestling – the ‘Bahukantaka’! Bahukantaka was like the thorny hold of Death itself, fastened tightly around the neck of your rival!

The more he struggled to free himself the tighter my hold became around his neck. Unable to free himself from my clutches, ultimately his body went limp and Kansa’s giant wrestler succumbed to death. There dada had also killed Mushtika in the same manner.

Now the ecstatic Yadavas were beside themselves. Applauding continuously and tossing their shawls and turbans in the air, they shouted continuously, “Hail Krishna-Balarama... victory...victory!” and rushed into the wrestling pit. Kansa, who was standing on the royal altar shaking frantically with anger, roared loudly, “What are you looking at? Minister ..., commander ..., Anadhrishti ... let Toshalaka and Kuta deal with those boorish gopas! Send Shala and Kaushala too.” His brother, Sunama tried to console him, “Let me get rid of that elder gopa.”

Immediately Toshalaka and Kuta from one side and Sunama, Shala and Kaushala from the other entered the wrestling pit to attack us! The armed attendants drove the crowd out of the pit. The walls of the hall echoed with the loud sounds of the wrestlers thumping on their thighs. Without giving us a chance to take a breather, the next lot of hefty, vigorous wrestlers fell upon us at once. Toshalaka and Kuta clashed with me; Sunama, Shala and Kaushala tussled with dada. The royal servants had already removed the dead bodies of Chanura and Mushtika from the wrestling pit.

Compared to the massive wrestlers like Toshalaka and Kuta I was like an insignificant, tiny hill standing in front of the twin peaks of Mount Govardhan. Sunama, who was fighting with dada was in fact Kansa’s dear brother, a royal wrestler. He was accompanied by Shala and Kaushala. Yet, we both didn’t feel any pressure of the size or the number of wrestlers standing in front of us. Our bodies were no longer human; they had in fact transformed into vivacious flames of energy touching the sky!

As a customary practice, we offered the red soil in the pit to each other. Then I fought alternately with Toshalaka and Kuta. I quickly started grabbing

their thick, heavy necks in my tight grip with agility. On the other hand, dada was also ferociously wrestling alone, with the other three.

Only one person was cautiously staring at us, standing on the royal altar, watching our every move carefully. The tyrant king of the Yadavas – my mama – insolent Kansa!

Though dada and I were sweating profusely, our agility was not at all affected. We astutely used the slippery sweat to our advantage to dodge our rival's moves and make them bite the dust. Though massive in size Toshalaka, Sunama and their companions could not deal with our deceptive, agile moves and rapidly collapsed. Seeing their downfall, the exuberant Yadavas started throwing spontaneous encouragements our way, "Pull that vile man under your thighs, don't let go of him!" Ear-splitting, spontaneous, ecstatic cries resonated in the air.

Our final neck to neck struggle lasted for a good half an hour. Finally, dada and I pulled out our ultimate weapon – the Bahukantaka maneuver! I used it on Toshalaka and Kuta, and dada on Sunama, Shala and Kaushala. We eliminated the five of them one by one.

The Yadavas started shouting unceasing, ear-splitting slogans of victory now, "Krishna, Rama victory...victory, Rama, Krishna victory...victory." In all the commotion, someone let out a provocative cry, "To hell with the devil Kansa! Get rid of the devil, get rid of him!"

By that time I had leapt from the wrestling pit and stood erect in front of the royal altar of Kansa, the self-declared, all-powerful, unjust and tyrant king of the Shursena kingdom. Thousands of Yadavas of Mathura were still condemning him, shouting at the top of their lungs. Even the stone walls were thrilled to hear the ear-splitting slogans.

My eyes, with the power to destroy sin, burn evil, and shatter lies directly met the eyes of Kansa – my tall, hefty mama trembling in front of the royal altar. I recognized the fear in his eyes. He realized that he was facing his death. This time he was trembling, not with anger but with fear for his life! In a moment, his fiery red eyes turned dark with fear. This was the moment to uproot injustice! The Moment to emancipate innumerable repressed lives and give them a chance to breathe freely!

A completely novel, unknown calling of my own spirit resonated in my ears; it was calling to me, "Krishna! Go ahead, proceed! You were born for this purpose only. To crush injustice under your feet! To uphold justice on your shoulders. Always remember that growth and progress are the only

signs of life. Remove this obstacle which is hindering the progressive flow of life.

You cannot afford to consider blood relations now. Neither are you Kansa's *bhacha* nor is he your mama. Kansa is not at all related to you. Don't get carried away by blood relations at this moment. Uprooting injustice and upholding the cause of justice is the only mission of your life!"

The epitome of injustice belonging to the Yadoo dynasty and the massive Sin incarnate of the Shursena kingdom stood in front of the royal altar – trembling with fear for his life.

With a heart full of tremendous confidence and a spine so strong that it could bear the weight of the sky, I briskly climbed the stairs of the royal altar in front of me. In a single leap, I directly collided with Kansa. Fear-struck, he gawked at me with his eyes wide open, totally terrified, lustreless, and weak. I gave his hand such a strong jerk that he instantly rolled down the stairs and landed on his back. His golden crown tumbled down the stairs and rolled away with a clank. His thick, rough hair got dishevelled.

His cruel, muscular, hairy arms that had crushed my six new-born brothers on a boulder, why were they so feeble today? The reason was obvious. A mighty powerful Sin when it faces its own end, becomes fragile. It automatically loses its character.

From the altar I leaped on him like a lightning bolt and mounted myself on his insolent, plump chest; as if a cheetah had mounted on the chest of Kunalayapida's master. Clutching his thick, rough hair tightly in my left fist, I pulled his impudent neck up and slammed it rapidly on the stairs seven-eight times. After that, my eyes enlarged with rage, I shouted, "Take this, you traitor of the Yadava dynasty", and punched a heavy blow on his chest with my right fist, adorned with the silver bracelet.

Repeatedly slamming his head I struck him with heavy blows. With each strike, words spilled out of my mouth inadvertently, "This one is for killing my first brother – hail goddess Idamata – this for the second – this one for the third – hail Devakimata – this one for the ruthless torture you inflicted on my mother – this one for insulting my father – this one for driving the Yadava families out of Mathura. Hail Idamata... victory to her!" Strike after strike – a fountain of his vicious blood was spurting out with each powerful strike! My yellow dhoti was getting doused in his blood! His audacious, helpless chest was being torn apart!

The hysterical Yadavas of Mathura started shouting encouragements

rhythmically, “First one, second one” with passionate gestures in the air as if they themselves were sitting on Kansa’s chest, and were killing the vicious, unjust king of Mathura.

Kansa was struggling hard to kick and overthrow me. The grip of my thighs got tighter, like an alligator’s grip! My arms and fists had become incredibly strong. Kansa’s forehead was all sweaty now, his thick eyebrows were stretched weirdly. Vomiting blood he whimpered continuously. Finally, he met a gruesome death and lay motionless. An unjust, vicious, ferocious royal storm whirling in Mathura in the form of his rule for so many years had finally abated.

Kansa’s eight brothers were hesitant at first, but soon rushed towards me with frenzied fury. Dada confronted them even before they could reach me and held them captive with the aid of the enraged Yadavas.

The Dhanuryaga ceremony orchestrated by Kansa and his counsellors was over. Hearts overflowing with success and love, the jubilant Yadavas picked up dada and me on their shoulders. With loud gestures, they proclaimed at the top of their lungs, “Hail the king of Yadavas, Krishna-Balarama – victory to them.” Giving out joyous cries they carried us closer to the royal altar. Raising both my hands I addressed them, “Calm down, my dear Yadava brothers of Mathura!” Their clamour going on for more than an hour ceased instantaneously. In that moment, I realized intensely that a divine voice resided deep down in my throat. Whenever it manifested hundreds and thousands were compelled to listen in silence. I had found the purpose of my life!

Standing near the royal altar, on dada’s right side, I glanced around and said slowly, “Mathura is liberated from Kansa’s clutches today. She is free and independent now. The Shursena kingdom is free. With your continued support, much more will be rescued and freed. With your blessings, I am going to visit my parents at their mansion and free them from years of captivity. I am going to visit the royal prison right now and release Maharaja Ugrasena and Maharani Padmawati also.

Citizens of Mathura, be rest assured that only Maharaja Ugrasena will ascend the royal throne of Mathura again. The royal Chief Minister of Mathura, please present yourself to me immediately.”

My determined words got the assembled Yadavas whispering among themselves. Moving aside, the crowd presented a middle-aged, round-faced, sharp-nosed, bearded, well-built, wheat-complexioned Yadava to me.

He approached fearfully with palms joined in prayer. He was petrified that I was going to order his execution as he had been Kansa's ally during his reign.

"Your name?" I asked him.

"Vi ... Vipruthu!" he stuttered in fear again.

"Don't be scared, minister. I am not going to penalize you. Be rest assured. You are not at fault in any way. You acted only as an obedient servant of the king, as a minister always should. Discern from this moment that, Kansa's reign here is over. Soon the reign of the Yadava commander Maharaja Ugrasena will commence for the wellbeing of the people. Therefore, make the necessary arrangements for his coronation in accordance with the Shastras."

Terrified Vipruthu was relieved by this unexpected impunity. He composed himself and said, "As you wish, Lord! I will never forget that you have spared my life. Any other task for me?"

"Minister, many families of the Yadava dynasty – the Vrishnis, the Andhakas, the Bhojas, the Dasharnas, the Kukuras and the Satvatas – had fled Mathura during Kansa's tyrannical reign. Invite all of them back to Mathura immediately, with due respect. Assist in their rehabilitation, and reinstate their wealth and land confiscated by Kansa, with precise assessment."

"As you wish, my Lord!" the minister responded.

"Vipruthu, henceforth I am going to need your assistance in all respects. Get the royal priest to perform the formal cremation of the wasted 'arrows' of today's Dhanuryaga and Toshalaka, Mushtika, Sunama, Chanura and Kuta. And don't forget to cremate the royal elephant Kuvalayapida formally beside them.

Give Kansa a formal cremation with the rituals befitting a member of the royal family, on a sandalwood funeral pyre near the banks of Yamuna. As our ancient adage goes, enmity is over with death. Tell me the name of the commander of the army here, and get him here immediately."

"As you wish. The Yadava commander is Anadhrishti. He is your *kaka*." The royal minister beckoned Anadhrishti towards the royal altar. Hefty, broad-shouldered, tall, dark, long-faced, bearded, sharp-nosed, dauntless Anadhrishti came forward. He was wearing an iron armour. I asked him, "What should I call you? Anadhrishtikaka or commander?"

"All Yadavas call me 'Yadavashreshtha'. I would appreciate if you call me the same." He replied fearlessly.



“It is a mission of major responsibility. Your courage as well as expertise will be required! You are to cautiously dispatch both wives of Kansa – my mamis – Astidevi and Praptidevi to Girivraja, the capital of Magadha, their father’s country. Take a troop of armed riders with you for assistance. Leave immediately after the final rites are performed. Both of them are not safe here, amongst the foes that their husband has created during his lifetime.

I couldn’t wait even for a moment now. Kansa’s Dhanuryaga was over. My life’s *Yajna* was commencing from this moment. It should not fall short of anything at all.

I held Balaramadada’s hand and affectionately said to him, “Come on, we have to release our parents and obtain their blessings!”

After getting rid of Kansa we left from the grand hall of Dhanuryaga for our parent’s residence, to our birthplace! Vipruthu, Anadhrishti, Satyaki, Akrura, Kritavarma, Devabhaga, Vikadru, Aahuka, Prabhanjana and many more Yadava leaders followed us even though we had not asked them to do so.

The place where I was born came into view. All the guards and servants who had kept an eagle-eyed watch on my parents, Vasudeva and Devaki, to keep them imprisoned for years, had deserted the place as soon as they had heard the news of Kansa’s execution. The vast place was completely empty now, not a single person was in sight. We reached the room where our father and mother were placed under arrest. A big iron lock was hanging on the iron gate. Our aged, feeble, agonized parents who were eager to meet us were imprisoned behind the iron bars!

One of the Yadavas came forward and with a single strike of his mace broke the lock open which had stifled our tender relations so far. With a creaking sound the huge iron gate opened up – after so many years, actually ages! Balaramadada and I met our mother with tears in our eyes! Embracing both of us at the same time, for a long time, she stood trembling and sobbing, our mother, Devakimata! Bearded Vasudevababa also sobbed when he embraced us. For the first time the veranda of the prison saw so many people together – as if the prison also felt free for the first time.

Along with Vasudevababa, Devakimata and a few chosen Yadavas we left for the main prison to rescue Maharaja Ugrasena.

When we went to the main prison of Mathura and commanded the attendants to break the iron handcuffs to free the aged Maharaja Ugrasena and Queen Padmawatidevi, the old couple wept openly. In the darkness of the

prison cell and the dim light of the torches burning in the corners, we and the Yadavas accompanying us couldn't even see their tears.

The citizens of Mathura had not seen Maharaja Ugrasena and Maharani Padmawatidevi for years due to their imprisonment. The sight of their Maharaja and Maharani made them feel happier than the feeling of relief when they were liberated from the vicious clutches of insolent Kansa. The chapter of Kansa, the first chapter of my life story, was over!

Minister Vipruthu consulted Gargamuni, the royal priest of the Yadavas to choose an auspicious day for the coronation of Maharaja Ugrasena. The coronation ceremony took place in the grand royal palace of the Yadavas in Mathura. As per the persistent appeal of the convened Yadavas I placed the sacred golden coronet made holy with ablutions, on Maharaja Ugrasena's head.

As Maharaja Ugrasena ascended the throne, he glanced at the council with gratitude and said, "Actually the right to ascend this throne goes to Krishna, Vasudeva's son! If for whatever reason he renounces it, it should be automatically transferred to his elder brother Balarama! I cannot comprehend why in this old age he has handed me the responsibility to look after the Shursena kingdom. I bless him from the bottom of my heart and request him to confer his invaluable guidance on the Yadavas who have come together in this royal council of the Shursena kingdom, in such large numbers after so many years."

I stood up and took in all the present young and old Yadavas. I struck a cord, connecting my heart with theirs and said, "My dear Yadava brothers! The tyrant Kansa who was way out of control, was also a Yadava! I had to execute him even though he was my mama. The biggest calamity that is going to befall Mathura now is the onslaught of Kansa's father-in-law Jarasandha, the emperor of Magadha who will not sit quiet once he comes to know about the execution of Kansa. In fact, by now he must be burning with the fire of vengeance. He has imprisoned more than eighty kings in Girivraja to carry out his resolution of sacrificing one hundred kings for 'Shataraj sheersha yajna'. He has taken many feeble kings around his kingdom under the guise of friendship. Rather than remembering that Kansa is gone now, in my opinion, you should never forget that Jarasandha is going to attack for sure. Therefore, you should always stay united and be prepared and take the advantage of the experience of Maharaja Ugrasena. Always obey him.

"I can see Maharaja Ugrasena as the only reverent senior whose word will

be honoured equally by the young and old Yadavas. That is why, I have requested him to take up this responsibility. It is very difficult for the Yadavas to unite as they are hot-blooded, short-tempered and pugnacious by nature. To stay united is even harder. Therefore, on your behalf I request experienced Maharaja Ugrasena to assume your leadership. The royal priest Gargamuni should bless him.

I leaned forward and smiled at Gargamuni. The royal priest stood up. Gathering his soft, silky upper garment he said, “All Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom, as the royal priest I give my blessings to Maharaja Ugrasena and the Maharani from the bottom of my heart and more than that I tell you this with utmost sincerity –

“I had read the horoscope and predicted the future of Vasudeva’s son Krishna, in Gokul at the time of his birth. I see that it is coming true. My dear Yadavas, based on the essence of my studies of the Shastras so far, the penance, meditation and contemplation that I have been engaged in, with utmost humility I am going to pronounce a meaningful title for the first time. I believe you will also find it most appropriate. A single syllable ‘Sri’, like the sacred syllable ‘AUM’ has been regarded the most prestigious of all the titles, from the Vedas to the *Upanishadas*. It is most appropriate to confer it only on a supreme personality and only at the right time.

‘Sri’ is power, Sri is beauty, Sri means vast reserves of wealth, and Sri is pure intellect. ‘Sri’ has many more meanings; incredible success is also one of them. Is it not evident that this Krishna, the youthful son of Vasudeva, is the bearer of the wealth of all such supreme qualities? I can see it very clearly.

At this time of the most significant religious and political ceremony of the Yadava clan, after the execution of Kansa, wouldn’t it be appropriate that you honour him with the title of ‘Srikrishna’ in the presence of all Yadavas?

Tomorrow, in this royal palace itself I am going to perform the ‘*Upanayana*’ ceremony of Krishna with the sacred rituals. I will perform the necessary rituals to remove the so-called curse on the Yadavas of having lost the Kshatriya *Dharma* since your forefather Maharaja Yadu.

Krishna will become a legitimate Kshatriya after the *Upanayana* ceremony. He will become ‘Srikrishna’. Do you all agree with me? Do you give your consent happily?” Gargamuni’s sharp glance moved around the hall briskly. Instead of answering his question, the Yadavas full of youth and vigour cheered in unison, “Hail Yadava king Srikrishna...victory to him!” The very

next day, under the guidance of Gargamuni my *Upanayana* ceremony was performed at an auspicious time. On this occasion of celebrations, the city of Mathura was drenched in the fountain of joy for eight days. From 'Krishna' I became the unanimously acclaimed 'Srikrishna'! At last a legitimate Kshatriya! As my *Upanayana* ceremony took place, it was considered my second birth, a 'Dwija'. But was I merely a 'Dwija' or a Kshatriya?

There in Girivraja, the royal capital of Magadha, Emperor Jarasandha's royal council had reached a final decision after a long hour of deliberation – that of an armed attack on Mathura with full force! To accomplish this task, Dantavakra, the king of Karusha, Shaibya, the king of Sauvira, Shishupala, the son of the Chedi king Damaghosha, Bhishmaka, the king of Vidarbha and his son Rukmi pledged collective alliance with Jarasandha in front of their family deities.

Two professional wrestlers, Hansa and Dimbhaka, warfare experts, were the commanders of Jarasandha's army. The Magadha Empire was mighty, opulent, and ready with well-equipped military forces. It had a strong hold on the entire Aaryavarta.

As our informants had informed us, soon the enormous army of Jarasandha led by Hansa and Dimbhaka fell upon Mathura with full force.

Hundreds of ships carried their armed soldiers across Yamuna. Our naval ships showered arrows on them to prevent them from crossing over. Yet the enemy found ways to cross the vast Yamuna. Numbered in thousands and lakhs the rival army eventually surrounded Mathura.

Fortunately, Mathura was surrounded by a wide trench, flooded with water and full of obstacles. All borders of Mathura had robust gates, which were secured with sharp, upended nails installed on them. Our Yadava army had extraordinary warriors like Anadhrishti, Satyaki, Avagaha, Kritavarma, Prithu, Shatadyumna, Kanka, Shini, and Babhru. Jarasandha spared no efforts to cross the trenches, and burst open the eastern and western gates by dispatching huge elephants to break them open.

Not just a day or two, it was for a good twenty-seven days that this cut-throat war lasted. The Magadha army fought to no avail. They bombarded fireballs beyond the fortification of Mathura and launched a deluge of rocky stones through Shataghni rockets. Eventually they got exhausted. The Yadava soldiers also got fatigued, seizing every opportunity to attack the enemy through the wicket gates.

On the twenty-seventh day Jarasandha sent his royal envoy holding a white

flag in front of the eastern gate of Mathura. As per my orders he was taken in. He carried a very deceptive and astute message, “Let one of the Yadava wrestlers, equivalent to Magadha commanders Hansa and Dimbhaka play a conclusive wrestling bout with either one of them, and the winner’s side will be declared victorious in the war!” The war was going to be concluded based on the result of the wrestling bout.

I recognized Jarasandha’s cunning strategy. He wanted to see a Yadava warrior defeated in the wrestling bout. Taking advantage of the commotion after the bout he wanted to infiltrate a few of his diehard soldiers through the wicket gate of the main gates of Mathura to break them open from inside. He wanted to force Mathura into a bloody war within the impenetrable fortification walls. Once the gates were opened the Yadavas wouldn’t stand a chance against the colossal army of Magadha.

I glanced at Dada after listening to the message of the royal envoy. He got up and declared directly that he accepted the challenge. I looked at him and simply smiled. The royal envoy returned with our message.

We selected expert professional wrestlers to accompany Dada. The wrestling bout was going to take place in a big wrestling pit on the open grounds in front of the main gates of Mathura. Dada chose to wrestle with Dimbhaka.

Balaramadada and Dimbhak a began the fight at the fixed time, surrounded by the tumultuous Magadha and Yadava crowd. Vipruthu himself was conveying all the minute details of the fight outside, to me. I didn’t want to be seen by the Magadha soldiers yet, at least not till the right time.

I spread the rumours through my informers beyond the fortification wall of Mathura, “There will be no war now. The wrestling bout will settle the conflict between the Magadhas and the Yadavas for good. Hansa believed the rumours. As he was fully confident of Dimbhaka’s victory he boarded the ships with a few chosen soldiers to return to Girivraja. He started sailing on Yamuna’s waters, alone.

Here in the wrestling pit dada and Dimbhaka were fighting vehemently, using various strategies to take each other down. In the process both perspired heavily. For the first time, today the Yadavas got an opportunity to watch dada, who had turned red, with his muscles protruded, and engaged in the wrestling match. He looked exceptionally handsome today. Encircling the wrestling pit Magadha and Yadava soldiers made a ruckus to watch the intense fight. Not just Dimbhaka, even if Jarasandha himself would have

faced dada today, he would have definitely been defeated. Within half an hour he lifted Dimbhaka high up and then threw him down on the floor, and immediately clasped his throat in the invincible Bahukantaka hold. All the spectators held their breath with eyes dilated with fear, thinking ‘Dimbhaka is going to die now’.

As instructed, Vipruthu immediately conveyed the situation to me. I sent him back with instructions to spread the rumour amongst both armies that Dimbhaka was killed by Balarama during the bout. I also instructed him to follow Hansa in a boat and to make sure that Hansa received the same news promptly.

He left to implement my instructions. Within a short time, accompanied by Satyaki on my left and Anadhrishti on my right, I stepped outside. As soon as they saw me, a buzz of whispers spread among the Yadavas and the Magadhas, “He is here! He has come! Make way for him. Move back!” The wrestling bout had reached its climax now. Balaramadada was not going to let Dimbhaka slip out of his grip. He would have kept tightening his hold on Dimbhaka’s throat until he died. It was imperative to stop him.

I rushed to the wrestling pit. I leaned down and patted on dada’s wet back. Droplets of sweat flew from his flushed wet back. I said to him, “Let him go. Even though the wrestling rules say that a bout should end in the death of the defeated, don’t forget that a victor also has the right to spare the life of the loser!”

Dimbhaka was on the verge of dying. His tongue was hanging loose from his mouth and eyes had turned upward. I signalled to him to raise his fist with his thumb up to indicate his surrender. He instantly did so out of fear for his life.

A very upset dada, who was ember-red by now finally loosened his grip of Bahukantaka, looking at me helplessly. Dimbhaka’s life was spared. He instantly struggled to stand up. As they saw Dimbhaka standing up the Magadha soldiers started shouting delightedly, “Hail the Magadha emperor Maharaja Jarasandha, victory to him!” Their words made me laugh.

On Yamuna’s waters, when Hansa heard the unbearably dire news that his dear friend Dimbhaka had been killed, he just sat down in shock. Then with an immense cry of despair, beating his chest, in an insane fit of sadness he plunged into the Yamuna to meet his dear friend Dimbhaka!

The soldiers accompanying him searched for him to the best of their ability. Later they returned to Mathura announcing the bleak news, ‘Commander

Hansa drowned in the river Yamuna!’ Though Dimbhaka’s life had been spared in the wrestling match, when he heard the news of his dear friend’s death he flew into a rage. He immediately boarded a boat and set sail on the Yamuna in search of his dear friend. With a wail, he too plunged into Yamuna, at the same spot where Hansa had jumped in. Yamuna was indeed a bysmal!

While I was thinking about Yamuna, the Magadha army was returning to Magadha sailing on her waters, after losing both their invaluable war-expert commanders, and completely losing the battle after full twenty-seven days!

In this very first fierce attack of the Magadhas which lasted for twenty-seven days, our farmlands suffered the most. During the war lakhs of cavalrymen, thousands of elephant troops and innumerable soldiers ran over our farms, completely destroying our fully cultivated crops. Now our granary had barely enough food to last for about a year. The critical issue was how to make the Yadavas who were exhausted after war, survive without enough food? How to revive our farms?

I gave prompt instructions. Hailing goddess Ida, all the hands which had carried heavy weapons during the war came forward to pick up farming tools like the plough, spade, and hoe. Squads of vigorous youth, descendants of the eighteen families of Yadavas started working with the waters of Yamuna. Leading their laborious army were both of us – Balaramadada carrying the massive, graceful plough named ‘Samvartaka’ made of Kikar wood on his shoulders and I, holding the whip for the bullocks in my hands!

While the victorious cries hailing Maharaja Yadu and Kroshtu reverberated in the sky, I set the whip down and tucked the yellow dhoti up at my waist tightly. Dada did the same. Hailing goddess Ida, I struck the first blow of the spade on the damp shores of the Yamuna. Following me, dada also put his plough down and struck a blow of the spade. Hundreds of young Yadavas followed us and hundreds of spades collided with the shores of Yamuna. Our endeavour was to dig an extended channel to lead Yamuna’s waters to our farmland. Something like this had never been tried before. By noon we had dug a considerable distance directing Yamuna to our farmland. A colossal, project was under way.

By evening we had successfully channelled the life-sustaining waters of Yamuna towards our farmland. Yamuna had taken a turn for the sake of the Yadavas and to affirm that ‘Sri’ meant immeasurable wealth. We contained the boundless Yamuna in the confines of the channel for the sake of our

future.

Dada carried his huge plough on his shoulders and placed it in a large farm. Then he harnessed it to the muscular shoulders of two big bulls with elegant horns. I nudged one of the bulls by poking him with the whip in my hand. The chapter of animals and the whip had begun in my life. Following us, many pairs of bulls, responding to the calls of Yadava farmers, began ploughing the fields of the Shursena kingdom to create life and cultivate it.

That evening dada and I returned to the western gates of Mathura, followed by groups of young Yadavas. Dada carried his huge plough on his shoulders, and I held the whip in my hands. Just like we used to do in Gokul, bearing the dusty clouds of the evening on our backs, we returned to Mathura; not as the cowherds of Gokul, but as the Yadava farmers. I said to dada cheerfully, “From now on I am going to call you ‘Haladhara’ as you are carrying the plough or ‘Hala’ on your shoulders. I hope you won’t mind. Dada answered, “Oh, not at all! Don’t worry, go ahead. I will always agree with everything that you do and say!

The Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom had just barely settled. Yet they had to face Magadha’s attacks four times in four years. We fought them off with determination. During this time dada was blessed with two brothers. Dhakali gave birth to two sons. In a ceremonial function, they were named Gada and Sarana. Gada was two years older than Sarana. Dada himself had named him Gada after his favourite weapon Gadaa, the mace.

Gargamuni had sent his men to various kingdoms. They returned to Mathura after collecting necessary information from all the kingdoms. The information sent by King Drupada of Panchala was of utmost significance. Drupada was a close friend of Vasudevababa. He had highly commended Acharya Sandipani from Avanti, who used to visit his kingdom from time to time.

Sandipani! A great sage of Varanasi, born in the Kashyapa lineage who had established many aashramas of his own throughout Aaryavarta. Chosen unanimously by Vasudevababa, Maharaja Ugrasena, and Gargamuni, he was Balaramadada’s and my prospective mentor – Gurudeva Sandipani.

Word was that somewhere far away in the south, he had established an aashrama named ‘Ankapada’ in the forests of Avanti. ‘Anka’ means to reach. ‘Pada’ means sublime feet that

are worthy of worship. ‘Ankapada’ means a place to reach the honourable Acharya’s sublime feet. The name was so relevant that I liked it the moment



I heard it. We had never heard the name of the city or the name of the Acharya. When I heard his name, I had the same inexplicable feeling that I had when I first met Uddhava. His name had a rich rhythm to it – San - di - pa - ni!

The royal council of Mathura, our family heads, and Gargamuni took a decision for the Shursena kingdom – Balarama and Srikrishna will leave for Avanti. They will go to Acharya Sandipani’s Ankapada aashrama to acquire knowledge of all the aspects of life. Uddhava, the son of the revered Yadava Devabhaga will accompany them. Royal charioteer Daruka will return after safely dropping them off. One day Daruka who was sent to me by minister Vipruthu stood in front of me.

Humbly joining his palms together, he approached me and stood in front of me. I went closer to him, held his shoulders tightly and looking deeply in his eyes I said, “Daruka, the horse is my most favourite animal. I love its speed competing with the wind. I have seen you many times tackling four, even seven horses easily. That is why I like you as much as the horses. Would you like to be my attendant? And for the rest of my life if required?”

Without a word, he sat down on his knees and put his head directly on my feet. Instantly pulling him up to my chest I held him in a deep embrace just like I had held Uddhava.

The auspicious day recommended by Gargamuni for our departure to Avanti dawned. Daruka brought a chariot with four hefty horses of different colours – reddish, black, almond and gray, in front of the royal palace. Dada and I took the blessings of Vasudevababa, Devakimata, Rohinimata, Gargamuni and all the members of the royal council and bid farewell to them. Uddhava said his good-byes to his parents, brothers and sisters. All of us started for Avanti, towards the ‘Ankapada’ aashrama of Acharya Sandipani after bidding farewell to the Yadavas of Mathura. The moment we mounted the chariot I whispered in Daruka’s ears, “Dear friend, I liked all your horses, but not their different colours. When you come again to fetch me after the completion of my education in the aashrama, bring a chariot harnessed with four well-built, tall, and well-behaved snow-white horses from different regions! Snow white and only four horses! Will you remember?”

Apart from Gokul and Mathura this was the first long journey in my life. Crossing many rivers in spacious boats, we continued our journey along with Daruka’s chariot. I was feasting my eyes on the beautiful nature around us, which was transforming every few *yojanas*. We crossed many milestones.

Daruka and Uddhava promptly and affectionately performed all the chores like cooking food for us from the rations we had carried, collecting fruits from the woods, and spreading rugs under an Ashoka or mango tree for dada and me. After a full month, we reached the forest of Avanti – dense, rich with fauna, resonating with the sounds of various animals and birds.

After crossing many big and small rivers we finally reached the shores of the famous river Kshipra. Kshipra! Kshipra means unobstructed, expeditious. One more precious memory that dwells in my heart! Expansive and wide, she was filled with crystal clear water. Compared to Yamuna though, she was way too small and narrow. I had noted a specific peculiarity about this forest of Avanti, it was full of many big and small lakes along river Kshipra. These lakes were always full of blue, red ochre, white and blood red lotuses. What a magnificent and captivating sight!

We crossed Kshipra along with the chariot in an enormous boat. And then came into view the gigantic wooden fence around the Ankapada aashrama of Acharya Sandipani, which was located in the city of Avanti and was renowned through Aaryavarta. I instructed Daruka to stop the chariot. Removing all our belongings from the chariot we placed them on the ground. I embraced Daruka tightly and bade farewell. He went back from that point. Now we carried our belongings on our shoulders and backs and started walking barefoot as the obedient disciples of the aashrama, leaving everything – the royal council of the Yadavas, the palaces of Mathura, our family customs, all the riches of Mathura – behind on the banks of Kshipra.

The three of us stood right in front of the entrance named ‘Kashyapa’ on the eastern side of the aashrama. It had just dawned and the aashrama was glistening in the golden rays of the morning sun. This world was unique – a world of ‘Dnyanayoga’, knowledge and that of penance. Before entering the aashrama the three of us touched the ground with our hands and touched it to our forehead, and paid obeisance to the auspicious land.

The two disciples sent by Acharya welcomed us earnestly. We embraced them. Standing there I glanced around, taking in the surroundings of the aashrama. So, this also was a Gokul – a Gokul of penance, knowledge, and Sanskaras!

Even here a large region was encircled by a strong, wooden, protective fence to protect the cows in the aashrama from wild beasts. Closed kennels of guard dogs were located on the right and left of the main gate. One could see rows of huts all around on the inside. Inside the huts there were wooden

platforms to store the fodder. The row near the fence was for the former senior disciples who were always in the service of the Guru. The middle row was for the pupils of the aashrama. These were occupied by hundreds of pupils coming from the eastern countries of Kalinga, Anga, Vanga, Magadha, Kamarupa; southern countries of Pandya Vanavasi, Ashmaka, Vidarbha, Kosala, Maharatta, Pundra; western countries of Aanarta, Saurashtra, Sauvira, and northern countries of Panchanada, Kashmir, Kurujangal, Panchala, Vatsa and Chedi. The last row was for the assistant educators having expertise in various disciplines. The huts of young pupils were in the centre of the aashrama so that the elders could keep a watchful eye on them.

The towering and spacious 'Aacharya kuti', Aacharya's cottage, was also located in the centre with a triangular white pennant fluttering a top. A thatched storehouse with multiple rooms was located on the left of the main cottage. All food-grains, clothes, weaponry, medicinal herbs, wooden logs and other aashrama necessities were stored here. The extended corrals for the aashrama cows were located on the right.

We followed the disciples of Aacharya – Balaramadada in the middle, me on his right and Uddhava on his left. Amongst the descendants of the eighteen families of Yadavas we were the very first youths of the Vrishni and Andhaka clans to come to Aacharya's aashrama. In my mind, I thanked Drupada whom I had never seen before from the bottom of my heart for bringing this unique opportunity in our lives. I walked along with dada, wondering about Aacharya's appearance and how he would treat us.

We entered the heart of the aashrama, Aacharya's cottage. Aacharya was sitting on a wide, elevated seat in the centre of the cottage, on a deerskin mat placed on a grass rug. Even at this moment he was in deep meditation; his right hand holding the rosary was in the air, his wrist resting on the meditation staff. Mesmerized, we kept staring at Aacharya. My gaze settled on a spot between his eyebrows on his fair, luminous forehead above his nose that looked as beautiful as a *Champaka* bud. I had already noted that Aacharya was unique amongst all the men I had seen so far. He had fair skin with a reddish hue, bright as the core of a banana plant. He was slender and his matted hair was tied together with the *Rudraksha* string. On his forehead, there were horizontal stripes of sandalwood paste. So effulgent, pious and serene his meditating face looked! Like the bud of a *Champaka flower* just about to bloom! Like a pure white, elongated, shining conch shell in the hands of goddess Lakshmi just emerging out of the churning ocean! Just as

clean and pure!

So far, I had experienced that many people were attracted to me by some force. However, today the exact opposite happened. I automatically moved forward in his direction as if magnetized, even before he looked at me. He sat in the Padmasana posture. I bowed down and touched his barely visible right foot with my head and laid myself prostrate at his feet. He felt my touch and still keeping his eyes closed he said in a clear voice, “Come, Yadava prince Srikrishna, the saviour of Vrishnis and Andhakas, I have been waiting for you since long! Welcome!” Then he gradually opened his fish-shaped eyes like the opening petals of a lotus flower. We gazed at each other for the first time, and instantly we knew that we recognized each other from ages. I smiled. He reciprocated with a smile and said, “Enough of the prostrations. Now sit.”

Balaramadada and Uddhava too paid obeisance by lying prostrate at his feet. There were many deerskin mats around Acharya’s seat, but at this time all of them were empty. We seated ourselves on some of them.

Acharya spoke slowly while explaining the daily routine of the aashrama. Deep down I felt that his voice was just as sweet, full of soul and heavenly as the flute that I had entrusted to Radha when I left Gokul! The voice that is most desirable and pleasant to hear.

He said, “Balarama, Srikrishna, Uddhava remove your royal attire, place it properly folded into a cane casket and deposit it in the aashrama storehouse. Submit your golden crowns to the chief acharya there, and wear the aashrama robes that he will give you. Keep in mind that your life as an aashrama disciple will begin from tomorrow. This is the most significant phase in the *Yajna* of life— ‘Bhramacharyashram’, bachelorhood.

As per my plan it will last for exactly sixty-four days. Others may find it to be insufficient, but you have already been born with such virtues that I feel it will perfectly suffice for you. You will not be treated as the royal princes here! Hundreds of students like you are already learning here. The three of you are also regular disciples of the aashrama like the others. From now on you should sincerely immerse your royal protocol in the river Kshipra. For me you are simply a disciple of the aashrama just like ‘my own son’.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. I could clearly see an inexplicable pain briefly flashing on his face.

He continued further, “You will learn all aspects of life here from the Vedas, the holy scriptures to Vaadas, the debates. Many expert and

experienced aacharyas from various cities have volunteered to offer their guidance; they are all as knowledgeable as me. Never forget to treat them as respectfully as you would treat me. Get yourself acquainted with the daily routine of the aashrama life. Follow it precisely. Never refrain from it. You may leave now.” Like the setting sun gently enters the coolness of the evening, Aacharya Sandipani closed his eyes and entered the calm meditative state.

The main coordinator described the daily routine to us with elaborate details.

The day here begins with rising before dawn and by chanting of the ‘*Savitru*’ mantra composed in the Gayatri meter. After that Aacharya himself delivers his invaluable discourses for the pupils. Then everyone performs the assigned chores as per their capacity. After meditation, lunch and rest pupils revise all the subjects taught during the day. All pupils join in the evening prayer. The praise of God is sung at night. Then off to bed, ruminating the lessons taught during the day.

On the first night, while sleeping on the dry grass bed, I strongly remembered everybody from Gokul – my aajoba, Nandababa, Thorali, Dhakali, dear Eka, all kakas and kakus, the gopa-gopis, all my friends, and yes especially Radha who was taking care of my flute! Subsequently, I also remembered the people of Mathura – Devaki mata, father, Gargamuni, Maharaaj Ugrasena, Satyaki, Anadhrishti, Vipruthu, Devabhagakaka, and even the Magadha emperor Jarasandha. How strangely our minds work! Who can tell when and what it will remember? I laughed to myself. So soon I had forgotten Aacharya’s advice given earlier today! Determinedly, I immersed the memories of Gokul-Mathura in the waters of the Kshipra. I fell asleep.

At early dawn, some aashrama disciples blew their conches rhythmically one after the other. The cows woke up in their corrals and the jingling of the bells tied around their necks resounded through the aashrama. Various birds started chirping collectively. Rhythmic sounds of the signalling conches filled the air. The Aashrama which arose to their melodious rhythm got moving. Everybody began their ‘Karmayoga’– performing their chores. Smoke from the sacred fires – Agnihotra – started reaching the sky. The rhythmic intonations of the austere morning prayers were vaguely audible.

I got up and sat on the grass rug. First, I held both my palms in front of me and looked at them for a moment. Before stepping on the earth, I prayed to her asking for her forgiveness as I was going to step on her. It was still dark.

The contours of the aashrama huts and trees were not yet visible. A soiled, whitish by way leading to the river was the only thing barely visible. Dada, Uddhava and I left together for river Kshipra. We entered the warm waters of Kshipra after washing our faces. After bathing in the river, we returned to the aashrama.

First, we went to Acharya's cottage and observed him respectfully from a distance. He had awakened long before and was already meditating after finishing the morning rituals. The sacred fire, Agnihotra, was burning by his side. His wife was busy in the household chores. Then we went to the cow pens to see the cows, drank pots of freshly drawn warm milk, and wiped the white lines above our lips with the back of our fists.

Now it was time for Acharya's discourse. To announce that, a unique tune of the conch echoed in the aashrama. Following the cue, all pupils came out of their huts in different groups, and started approaching Acharya's cottage, holding their grass mats under their arms. The vaguely visible contours of the aashrama were clearly visible by now. A pleasant morning blossomed in the Ankapada aashrama. Acharya's cottage was fully occupied with pupils and in total silence with our eyes closed we all started saying the prayer for the Guru.

All eyes were focused on Acharya's face. All ears were eager to listen to his divine speech. Acharya Sandipani glanced affectionately at all his pupils and gave a gentle, sweet smile. It was like the newly blossomed *Brahmakamala* buds on Manasa sarovar on an early autumn morning. Then in his deep, flute-like melodious voice he started talking slowly.

“Dear disciples of the aashrama, there are fourteen Vidyas which each one of you is required to be proficient in. I am going to talk about them in detail today. Listen carefully.” The entire cottage fell silent.

“The four Vedas – Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda are considered as fundamental, independent vidyas. The word ‘Vid’ means to know. Veda means sharing knowledge. The Vedas originated on the ‘Malyavata’ mountain in the far away country of Gandhara. Many unknown, wise sages spontaneously composed them verbally. For generations, they never even mentioned their own names as the composers of the Vedas. That is why Vedas are called ‘Apaurusheya’ or authorless. The first one is the Rigveda... replete with praises of Usha and Varuna, in incredibly rich lyrical hymns. The second is Yajurveda, composed with hymns of absolute surrender to the Supreme Soul. It has two clear branches – Shukla Yajurveda

and Krishna Yajurveda. The third is Samaveda, adorned by comprehensive melodies of musical notes. The fourth is Atharvaveda, manifested in effective hymns of prayers for the destruction of the enemy and self-protection. They also contain an ardent call of the soul, to ward off approaching calamities. The Vedas are actually ‘Literature’ in its authentic form. They are the very first spontaneous, coherent and opulent lore manifested in the world through pure ‘Speech’.

The Vedas have six subsections. The first subsection is ‘Shiksha’. It is the study of flawless and melodious pronunciations of the words of the Vedas. The strength of the Vedas lies in the proper and clear pronunciation of the words. These articulations of speech or Vanis are categorized into four types – Paraa, Pashyanti, Madhyama and Vaikhari.

Vaikhari is the simplest form of Vani, used regularly and inadvertently in the daily routine. Vaikhari is the Vani that easily comes out of the throat with the assistance of the tongue, palate and lips. This kind of speech may not relate to the mind, the heart, the reason or the soul. Many people use this kind of superficial language frequently in the daily routine.

Madhyama is the second Vani that comes from the heart after proper deliberation. The third Vani is Pashyanti which originates from the navel, and is characterized by love and a variety of emotions. The Paraavani originates from the core of the being, the Mooladhar chakra. Only the power of self-realization after penance and introspection automatically gives birth to Paraavani. It is the supreme form of Vani which cannot be explained to anyone. It is so self-sufficient and powerful that all living beings feel it unwittingly by themselves. ‘Paraa’ means that which belongs to somebody else. Paraavani is the speech that is not of the one who pronounces it – it belongs to something or somebody else, it is phenomenal.

Acharya took a momentary break glancing at the stunned faces of all the pupils. He focused his eyes on me and asked, “Srikrishna, did you understand? Which of the four Vanis do you like?”

I thought for a moment and answered, “I would like all four! But isn’t there a fifth Vani that exists beyond these Acharya?” I questioned with a smile.

“No, at least according to the scriptures there are only these four.” Acharya smiled deliberately, a mysteriously sweet, soft smile. Then we kept on staring at each other. Others kept looking at us. Acharya had recognized the silent Vani hidden behind our exchange of gaze. I recognized it too. It was the speech of the supreme soul, the speech of pure love that could not be

contained within any part of the physical body. It had neither beginning nor end!

The second subsection of the Vedas is 'Chhanda'. Acharya continued, "Chhanda is the study of the principles of musical notes, rhythm and tempo." Acharya was completely absorbed in the discourse now.

"The third subsection is 'Vyakarana' or grammar. It contains the complete set of linguistic rules for perfect comprehension.

The Vedas are spontaneous inspirations; hence they are open to various interpretations. The fourth subsection is 'Nirukta' or the lucid yet relevant elucidation of the Vedas.

The fifth subsection 'Jyotish' or astrology discusses the measurement of time, the planets, the constellations and palmistry.

The sixth subsection is 'Kalpa' in which the religious rites and rituals are discussed thoroughly. Unimaginable pomp and show can infiltrate 'Kalpa' any time. One should be very cautious about this, as this can very easily transform into superstition. The one who abolishes such superstitions with determined prowess proves to be a 'Yugapurusha', a prophet, and 'Yogayogeshwara', the greatest ascetic of all. 'Ava' means down and 'tar' means to rescue. The one who descends to rescue mankind is called the Avatar, an incarnation. The one who descends to rescue the superstitious people around him, from ignorance befits to be a prophet, the greatest ascetic, an epoch-maker." Acharya paused for a moment. Looking at me he asked pointedly, "Did you understand, Srikrishna?"

"I clearly understood the part about how the religious pretensions transform into superstitions, but Acharya, I didn't quite get what you were talking about the Avatar, the incarnation!" I made a curious face.

"Didn't get it! That's okay. You will get it eventually, at the right time!" We both laughed so loudly that tears filled Acharya's eyes. Baffled, and wonder struck all the pupils kept staring at both of us. Acharya wiped the tears with his forefinger and composed himself. Glancing around he said, "So, dear disciples, the four Vedas and the six subsections together constitute the ten vidyas."

Acharya's speech had a divine lustre now. "The remaining four vidyas are – Mimansa, Tarka, Puranas and *Dharma*. Mimansa means critical investigation of a topic of discussion from all angles, analyzing and examining it as thoroughly and carefully as possible. There are two types of Mimansa, one is Purva and the other is Uttara. Tarkavidya is the science of



Logic and Reasoning.

“The next vidya is the Mahapuranas. The first amongst these is the Brahmapurana and the last one is the Brahmandapurana. Brahma, Padma, Vishnu, Shiva, Bhagvata, Narada, Markandeya, and Agni are the major Mahapuranas. Shivapurana is also known as Vayupurana. Along with these including the Bhavishya, Brahmavaivarta, Linga, Varaha, Skanda, Vamana, Kurma, Matsya, Garuda and Brahmanda, there are a total of eighteen Mahapuranas. Each one deals with a different aspect of life.

But the Puranas carry more description of the rituals rather than meaningful discourse. That’s why they have remained away from the majority of the populace.

Now listen about the last and the most significant vidya. It is called ‘*Dharma*’. Try to understand and comprehend its meaning thoroughly, and ponder over it; contemplate about it. The wise men of the society have considered four types of Purusharthas to be the founding pillars. They are – *Dharma*-Duty, Artha-Wealth, Kama-Desire, and Moksha-Salvation. *Dharma* is that which inculcates the Sanskaras in the living being for its complete development.

Never forget, to practice the true *Dharma* in daily life, all four Purusharthas are indispensable. *Dharma* does not mean performing rituals. Even *Dharma* can sometimes experience decay. *Dharma* which is about to perish due to the predominance of Adharma, that is irreligiosity, needs to be revived with sheer determination.

It is the foremost duty of the Kshatriyas to protect *Dharma*. To fulfil that duty, in my opinion, the most important vidya is ‘Yuddhavidya’– the art of warfare. This vidya has two main divisions: Shastra and Astra. Among the Astras Varuna, Vayu, Agni, Pashupata, Parjanya, Praswapa, Narayana, and Brahmastra are the major astras. I will teach you the transmission of the astras with the recitation of their mantras and their obstruction too. Among the Shastras or the weaponry, sword, iron club, mace, Bhalla, Bhrushundi, pestle, Shataghnee, Parigha, Agnikankana, Chakra, the bow-arrow, etc. are the major weapons. The science of archery is also called ‘*Dhanurvidya*’. Some learned critics have regarded it as one of the Vedas, considering the tremendous velocity and exactness involved in it. Remember that *Dhanurvidya* is called the fifth Veda. *Dhanurveda* has four subsections: Diksha, Sangraha, Siddhi and Prayoga.

Diksha is paying respect to the bow before using it by incanting a mantra.

Then it should be held in the left hand exactly at the midpoint to balance it. To locate the exact midpoint of the bow the bottom of the bow needs to be rested on the ground first and then raised a little bit. Immediately the bottom of the bow should be rested on the ground again and the left hand should be moved towards the top edge of the bow. With the same hand the bow should be bent and with the right hand the bow string should be tied instantly. Then the bow string should be twanged a couple of times to confirm the quality of the bow. While focusing on the target, the preferred arrow such as Jidma, Suchi, Suvarnapankha, Chandramukhi, Naraacha, Bastika, etc. should be pulled out of the quiver on the back, identifying it only by touch. This complete process is called Diksha.

‘Sangraha’ means touching the arrow to the forehead, remembering the Guru and with closed eyes silently intoning the mantra of launching the arrow and mounting the arrow on the bowstring. To achieve ‘Sangraha’ take aim at the target, with tip and the tail of the arrow near the ear in line with an archer’s vision with one eye closed.

Siddhi is the Yoga part in it. In the shooting posture one should breathe in a chest full of air, assessing the direction of the flowing wind. The posture should be steady. This is how the archer gets ready to use the bow.

Prayoga is the actual act of shooting the arrow. Once the posture is ready, the arrow should be shot instantly to hit the target unerringly. Exhaling the air, the chest should be emptied.” His solemn words intensified the silence in the cottage.

Just as there are fourteen vidyas, there are sixty-four kalaas (fine arts) that enhance the beauty of life in all aspects and make it complete. I will explain mostly all those to you in detail. Music is the first and foremost of all the art forms. It consists of seven eternal notes – Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, and Ni. *Kharja*, Pancham and *Saptak* are the Gatis or the tones in which the seven notes are sung. The seven basic notes efficiently formulate into innumerable ragas and sub-ragas such as Bhoop, Malhar, Yaman, Malkans, Kanada, Aasavari, Bhairavi, etc.

Why is music the most significant among the fine arts? The reason is that it can directly touch the heart of the audience without the aid of an agent. A single ‘aalap’ or melodic improvisation of notes conveys even more than an entire chapter of an epic. Yet music is not regarded as a vidya. Don’t forget that it has been regarded as a kalaa, an art form.”

His deep and sharp ambrosial speech was now plucking and tossing the

starlets in the vast skies of knowledge, “The world is what is visible to our sight. What is beyond the world is the infinite universe. In this limitless world, our earth is bound by the rules of many basic elements. Prithvi – the Earth, Aap – Water, Teja – Fire, Vayu – Air, and Aakash – Ether are the five major elements amongst those.

Be cautious, understand the clear difference between the Aakash – Sky and Avakash – Space. The sky is clearly visible to us in blue colour. Space exists beyond it. Endless and limitless, it is black – the colour of Krishna!” Balarama, do you understand?” He suddenly asked dada. Dada instantly replied, “That which is Krishna is infinite and endless!” Both Acharya and I looked at him and smiled at the implied meaning of his answer. But his face was just as innocent and curious as before.

Acharya continued, “The Prana element which is a vivacious energy in the form of light impacts the space. Only then the creation of the inanimate and animate universe begins. The universe is expanding gradually. It will reach a climax of expansion; and after that will begin its contraction, reaching its lowest point. Then the process will start all over again – the impact of the Prana, the expansion and the contraction. This cycle has been running for millions of years and will continue for millions more.

To comprehend this truth of life duly, you must also clearly understand one more concept – the concept of ‘Kala’, Time. We measure Time with the units of day, night, month, year, a Tapa and a Yuga. A Tapa is a period of twelve years. A Yuga consists of a thousand Tapas. A single day of Brahma consists of a thousand Yugas like this. Many such days of Brahma make a ‘Kalpa’. In short a ‘Kalpa’ is made up of four hundred thirty-two million years!”

Leaving all disciples baffled by the complicated calculations involved in Time measurements, Acharya took a breather and smiled to himself. He posed a question and answering it himself he said, “So is it possible for anybody any time to measure the limitless Time in its totality? No. Therefore, Time is infinite. It has neither beginning nor end. Similarly, Life is also limitless, unending and eternal. The one who knows this truth is a true visionary. And the one who proclaims with full responsibility that ‘I am Kala myself’ and ‘I am Life itself’ is the greatest visionary of all times. Who knows, maybe such a visionary exists amongst you!”

Suddenly Acharya stopped talking and opening his eyes wide, said in a clear, loud voice, “Srikrishna, what do you say?”

Looking at me he gave a meaningful smile. I silently responded with a

smile that reflected his. All the aashrama pupils merely kept staring at both of us again.

Changing the topic completely, Acharya said, “The Ego is that which encumbers the total spiritual progress of one’s soul. It is multifarious and multifaceted. The pride of one’s own authority, power, wealth, beauty, fame never lets a person move forward towards progress.

“Balarama, could you tell us which is the most dangerous pride of all?” Acharya suddenly put dada in a dilemma. He answered instantly again, “The pride of power, Acharya!”

“No Balarama, the pride of knowledge! The pride of the knowledge of spiritual realization is the most dangerous of all. A wise, learned person, who is a realized soul, should always be humble like a mango tree leaning with the weight of its fruit. Only then will the gold of knowledge obtain the heavenly aroma of the ultimate truth.

“Remember that an animate being always exists in three dimensions – length, width, and height or depth. The one who comprehends and acknowledges the fourth dimension of unending Time becomes the greatest of mankind – the Supreme Man – ‘*Purushottama*’. Some other dimensions also exist. I will share those with you some time later. Arpanam astu.” He whispered the first few words to himself and slowly closed his eyes. He quickly went into a meditative trance.

Initially Dada, Uddhava and I stayed together in a single hut. Within a few days one more friend joined us – Sudama from Saurashtra. Sudama’s arrival transformed our trio into a quartet.

Sudama was a skinny, hardworking, fair-skinned, simple and innocent son of a Brahmin. Based on my experience so far and the various tests that I had performed on my friends, I had formed a firm belief about friendship. It is not possible to explain in words how and why a pure friendship sprouts, grows and strengthens. It is a bond of hearts connected through many lives. One should not try to find its source and one should not imagine its end. It is purely meant to be experienced.

Sudama, who always spoke with spontaneous affection, became a dear friend of dada and me. Uddhava was already a part of us. We were not four individuals.

A quadrangular entity formed with the unity of our minds was living happily in the Ankapada aashrama of Acharya Sandipani.

In his daily discourse Acharya once touched the subject of other fine arts.

Glancing affectionately over our eager and curious faces, in a melodious rhythmic voice he serenely said, “My dear pupils, the second most significant of fine arts after music is Aalekha. Aalekha means Sahitya – Literature, and the art of painting. ‘Sa’ (together with) and ‘Hita’ (welfare) means Sahitya. If it does even a slightest bit of good to the reader it is Sahitya. If it succeeds in enriching the reader even a little bit, it is indeed true Sahitya. It directly touches the heart of the reader. It is similar to the art of music. Just like the Paraavani originates from the core, literature originates from the core of consciousness. It is ageless, imperishable; it is called ‘Paraasahitya’. All the Vedas that I spoke about are examples of ageless and imperishable Sahitya. The art of Aalekha also comprises a picture which touches one’s heart through one’s vision.

An artist’s pure, innocent and capable mind is indispensable for the creation of any art form whether it is music, literature, a picture or any of the other sixty-four arts. Such a sound mind can only reside in a sound body. Therefore, in the beginning itself the creators of the Vedas have deemed the body as a divine temple of ‘Vishwadeva’. No other vidya except Yoga can offer humanity the divine ornament of a healthy body.

I consider Yoga as the fifteenth vidya. Aacharya deliberated something in his mind and stopped for a moment. He moved his glance over all the pupils with his serene eyes. Then fixing his eyes on me he ordered in a commanding voice, “Srikrishna! Get up from your seat, come and sit right in front of me along with your dada, Uddhava and Sudama.” We obediently got up and promptly took a seat in front of him. Now Aacharya closed his eyes and began to chant the Guruvandana, the prayer for the Guru, in his deep voice. This was the first time we were experiencing this. A prayer for the Guru with pure emotions from the auspicious mouth of an actual guru began.

‘Aum Guru brahma, Guru Vishnu ...’ ... a thought flashed instantly in my mind, ‘Really, who could be the aacharya of our Aacharya?’ Utter silence prevailed throughout the cottage now; so much so that one could have heard even the breaking of a grass blade. Gurudeva Sandipanni started sharing the ‘Yogaveda’ with dada, Uddhava, Sudama, me and all disciples. His voice became defined and brighter than usual. It got absorbed into the Paraavani. It got the sonority of Goddess Saraswati’s melodious Vina. Completely lost in himself, he gradually closed his eyes. Words started flowing out of his mouth like the stream of Himaganga rhythmically pouring down the highest summit of the Himalayas. This was an indescribable experience, simply

unforgettable.

“Srikrishna ..., Balarama, Uddhava-Sudama, and all! Now listen very carefully, what ‘Sankhyayoga’ is! It is the most important yoga of life.

The core, ‘Mulkanda’, of a human being is located near the navel. From the core seventy-two thousand ‘Nadis’ originate and are spread systematically throughout the body. There are six Chakras or vortices of energy, located in the human body. The scarlet-coloured divine Shakti called ‘Kundalini’ is seated firmly facing down, coiled like a serpent in the Muladhara chakra located in the region of the waist.

There are ten major Nadis above and ten below it. Two Nadis each above and below, run horizontally too. The Prana Shakti or vital air consistently flows through these twenty-four major and minor Nadis, in the form of blood.

The ten major Nadis that circulate blood day in and day out are the most important ones. Those are – Ida, Pingala, Sushumna, Gandhari, Hastijiwha, Pusha, Yashswini, Alambusha, Kuhu and Shankhini. Among these ten the Ida, the Pingala and the Sushumna are the most significant ones.

Ida is the major *Nadi* that is continuously functional and carries many minor veins that run through the left side of the body. The Pingala *Nadi* is functional in the same manner on the right side of the body. ‘Sushumna’ *Nadi* is constantly active, running between the Ida and the Pingala, through the spinal cord. The sacred, divine Kundalini force sits face down in the Muladhara chakra at the base of the Sushumna *Nadi*. Very few people realize its existence and if at all they realize, it is only due to their spiritual virtuousness. A few of them have the earnest urge to wake her up. A very limited number succeed in actually doing so, and only a single Supreme Being, a *Yogayogeshwara*, with prophetic vision can actually make it dance at his fingertips with sheer willpower. The divine Kundalini when awakened, can reach the Aperture, the Brahmarandhra, located at the top of the head after breaking through the six chakras in the body; and thus can get connected through that divine ingress, to the infinite, bright, endless Universal Soul, the Paramatma. The Paramatma is the consciousness of the boundless, omnipresent, creative and weightless energy!

The science defining the rules for awakening the divine Kundalini is called the ‘Sankhyayoga’. This Yoga contains eight stages – Yama, Niyama, Pratyahara, Aasana, *Pranayama*, Dhyana, Dharana and Samadhi. Though all the eight stages are important ‘*Pranayama*’ is the most significant one amongst them. ‘*Pranayama*’ means the regulation of the Prana i.e. the vital

air or breath of a being, through proper technique.

Keep in mind that the breath is bound to the orbit of the Sun. Normally, we breathe through the right nostril during the day, which is called the flow of the 'Suryaswara' or 'Suryapravaha'. During night, we breathe through the left nostril, which is called the flow of 'Chandraswara' or 'Chandrapravaha'. Some yogis can control their breath and breathe through both nostrils during the day as well as the night. Very few exceptional yogis can breathe the Chandraswara during the day and Suryaswara during the night. It is no miracle at all, just the science of the body, easily viable through constant practice.

The Ankapada aashrama has many such individuals. A Kshatriya should always keep in mind that during the Suryapravaha it is beneficial to study the scriptures and recite the tough subjects. It is also favourable to resolve to destroy the enemy, to bear weapons and to ride horses, elephants etc. during this time.

During the Chandrapravaha it is advantageous to offer donations, diagnose diseases, reconcile for friendship, etc.

When you have your attention on Sushumna *Nadi*, it is apt to remember God and chant his name. If there is an ongoing war at such time, it is only suitable to chant the name of God and wish for the welfare of the world. Any curse given to a *Yogi* whose Sushumna *Nadi* is active in the Suryaswara does not fructify, never gets its desired effect.

The Sankhyayoga is the most difficult of the scriptures to comprehend, and even harder to practice. But once it is comprehended thoroughly, the Jivatma, individual soul, can easily move in the past, present and future as well as through the three worlds – heaven, earth and the nether world. It can attain velocity higher than air and light. While learning, or doing the self-study of this scripture, a being can attain a few Siddhis or powers effortlessly. A true *yogi*, however, should never make use of such powers, as it ultimately leads to the ruin of the spiritual power.

The state of Samadhi is said to be achieved when the being ultimately unites with the infinite, endless Paramatma, through the potency of the awakened Kundalini, after breaking through the Aperture. The One who performs any small or big tasks while in the state of Samadhi is known as 'Yogeshwar'.

A being that feels contented with the state of Samadhi and leaves the body voluntarily attains Moksha, the final salvation. The one who, without any

expectation of attaining such Moksha, lives his life for the sake of pure Love and pure Karma; who easily leaves the body simply like a fruit separating from its stem and dropping down from a tree, is called the '*Yogayogeshwara*'! The principles of life that he utters casually prove to be the guidelines for humanity for ages. As these principles are carried forward from age (Yuga) to age, the One who is an authority on them is called '*Yugandhar*', an epoch-maker.

Acharya, whose eyes had closed automatically while sharing the exclusive information about Sankhyayoga, opened them completely and looked directly at me. For a long time he silently and steadily kept staring at me. Then throwing a glance around, as if it was either intended for all or for none he said, "Who knows, such a visionary, epoch-maker '*Yogayogeshwara*' may exist amongst you pupils!" By now I had gotten used to his mysterious statements like this one. So, to avoid this complicated subject I asked him with my usual smile, "Acharya it would be nice if you could please explain to us some of the fine arts that you have mentioned so far, like '*Tandul-kusumavali*, '*Udakghata*, '*Dhaaranamatruka*, and '*Aakardnyana*'!"

Hearing my words Acharya laughed innocently like a child and said, "Okay then, listen, '*Tandul-kusumavali*' is drawing colourful designs using rice and flowers. '*Udakghata*' is playing water games or spraying water using a spray-gun. '*Dharanamatraka*' is the art of boosting one's memory. '*Aakardnyana*' means obtaining complete knowledge of underground mines. And finally, the art of the day! Especially you must listen to it Srikrishna, it is called '*Chhalikayoga*'!" He looked at the baffled faces around and laughed loudly like a child again.

While listening to Acharya's words all eyes unwittingly turned to me. I responded with a smile, "I know this art very well! '*Chhalikayoga*' means acting with shrewdness, using deceit with good motive! But please tell me more about the following arts Acharya – *Sampathya*, *Manasikavyakriya*, *Aksharmushtikakathan*, *Abhidhanakosha* and *Mlenchhit kala-vikalpa*." I astutely changed the subject.

"It is very simple. *Sampathya* means listening to what the other person says and repeating it word to word afterwards. In short, it means imitating another person, or making a duplicate. *Manasikavyakriya* means instant poetry; *Aksharmushtikakathan* is conveying a message only through hand gestures without using words. *Abhidhanakosha* is fluent elocution, and *Mlenchhit kala-vikalpa* is the knowledge of foreign languages."



Now the attention of all the pupils in the cottage was focused on the subject of fine arts. Taking advantage of that I purposely asked Acharya to make him talk more about the subject, “Gurudeva, you made a fleeting reference to fine arts such as Durvachayoga, Vastragopana, and Kriyavikalpa. It would be better for all of us if you could elaborate on those.”

Acharya smiled to himself and saying ‘okay, okay’ he elaborated on those fine arts.

“Srikrishna, Durvachayoga means explaining complex words in an easy manner. Vastragopana means sewing torn clothes correctly, in short, to sew a patch if required. And Kriyavikalpa, the other art that you mentioned needs a lot of expertise. It means changing the effect of the action of a thing. For instance, giving heat from water instead of coolness or creating coolness from fire instead of heat.

All of you must be already well acquainted with the arts of playing some musical instrument, dance and dramatics before arriving here. Let me elaborate on dramatics. Drama only reflects life. In the auditorium, the audiences naturally move their sight from left to right which is same as the direction of the earth’s rotation. Therefore, the setting on the stage should be arranged in an increasingly meaningful and attractive way from the left to right. That is why stage-setting is considered as an independent art. The introduction of the artists, comedy and light events should always take place in the left corner of the stage. Major conflicts and battles should always be portrayed in the centre of the stage. It proves more effective to show conspiracies and deaths in the deep right corner of the stage.

You must be knowing well about the arts of Ratnapariksha, testing of gems, Shayan-rachana – preparing beds, Deshhashadnyana – knowledge of provincial dialects, Malagunfana – making beautiful garlands and Dyuta – gambling.” “Acharya, is Dyuta considered an art?” asked Uddhava, who rarely asked a question. “Yes, if Dyuta is played without treachery and for the sake of entertainment, it is considered an amusing game.”

Acharya started explaining many more types of fine arts one after the other. Visheshaka-chhedya means creating moulds to apply vermilion powder on the forehead, Pushpastarana means making a level bed of flowers, Dashana Vasana Nagaraga means decorating teeth, clothes and various body parts artistically. Manibhumikakarma means painting the house according to the season. Udak-vadya means playing the Jalataranga. Chitrayoga means transforming an old man into a younger looking one. Keshashekharapiyojana

is making of coronets. Karnapatrabhanga is making ear-rings from leaves and flowers. Gandhayukti means creating aromatic fragrances. Bhushanayojana is wearing ornaments suitable for each body part. Indrajala means using deceptive techniques in war.” “Srikrishna, do you need more explanation about the art of Indrajala?” Acharya asked, with his gaze fixed on me. “Not at all. Please continue Acharya.” I answered with a smile.

“Kauchubharayoga means beautifying an ugly person or a thing.”

While listening to the meaning of each fine art from Acharya, occasionally the pupils giggled softly, as they came to know how multifaceted life was.

“Bhakshyavikarkriya is the process of preparing varieties of food. PanakaRasa is the process of making decoctions of medicinal herbs. Sutrakarma is the art of tracery, drawing vines and creepers. Suchitaranga is sewing. Prahelika means creating riddles. Pustakavachan – reading, Keshmarjana – head massage, and Yantramatraka – building machinery are also considered fine arts.”

“Acharya, what could be the exact meaning of the word ‘yantra’?” Balaramadada asked a question. He was not quite loquacious, but whenever he spoke, it was always precise and engaging.

Acharya waited for some time, then answered calmly, “A machine is a collection of various parts that catches momentum due to the inbuilt construction. So to speak the chariot that brought you to the ashrama is also a machine. Don’t forget that the foundation of a machine is a wheel!”

Thus our knowledge-acquiring period in the ashrama went on continuously for sixty-four days. We learnt a great variety of things in these sixty-four days! We learnt so many subjects with minute details that it is difficult even to name them. These sixty-four days were equivalent to sixty-four yugas. We became proficient in various subjects such as all the vidyas, sixty-four fine arts, the Vedas, the *Upanishadas*, Mimansa, Brahmanyas, Aranyakas, and Puranas, etc. And the day dawned – the day that I could never forget in my whole life – the day of *Gurudakshina*, time to pay remuneration to our Guru!

Acharya woke up way before sunrise today. He bathed in river Kshipra, performed his morning rituals and came to his cottage. He sat on the deerskin and started meditating to give his blessings to all the pupils and best wishes for their future life. He had already transcended his body.

The four of us were the first ones to wake up after him, even among us I was the first one! Balaramadada, Uddhava and Sudama woke up after me.

The four of us left together. We collected the cane baskets of our belongings from the aashrama storekeeper. By this time, we could hear the pupils in other huts waking up to the routine sound of the conch. It was still dark. In the dim light of the early dawn we started walking on the faintly visible whitish trail towards the lake where we usually swam. Don't know why, but for some reason Sudama was very quiet today. I asked Uddhava, "Udho brother, what was your most favourite topic in the teachings of Acharya? Astravidya, Shastravidya or the sixty-four fine arts?"

"What I liked most dada, is the unforgettable, profound philosophy of life that Acharya shared with us. I feel that for the *Gurudakshina*, I should stay right here in the aashrama at the feet of Acharya and keep serving him for the rest of my life instead of returning home. Offer my whole life to him as a *Gurudakshina*." Uddhava had transformed completely now. Smiling, I patted his shoulder while walking.

I asked dada, "Balaramadada, what touched you the most in the company of Acharya?" His chest puffed up with pride as he instantly answered, "I liked Acharya's teaching of the Yuddhakala, warfare, the most. Here, I understood in greater depth the wrestling that we had learnt from Kelinandakaka.

Finally, I asked Sudama, "Sudama, dear friend, from Acharya's teachings what made the most impact on you?" He did not hear my question at all. He was in a totally different mood, thinking or worried about something. Shaking him vigorously I asked, "Where are you lost Sudama? I am asking you, what did you like the most, from Acharya's teachings?"

He answered stutteringly, "I.. I liked his teachings about the ideal family life."

By this time our quartet had reached the big Neel sarovar. We gently put down our cane baskets in the meadows on the shore, untied the knot of the robe behind our necks and tucked it around our waist to get ready for swimming. All four of us entered the lake. The water was warmer than usual. Dada asked with the authority of an elder brother, "How come you brought us here today instead of going to Kshipra? Your actions are always puzzling!"

"It will be crowded with all the pupils bathing in the Kshipra today, dada. Besides, there are no lotus flowers in the Kshipra like the ones in this lake. I am thinking of taking some of these for Gurudeva." I smiled and answered while swimming swiftly in the lake.

We dispersed casually and swam for more than half an hour. Far away in the east the sun ascended through the forest of Avanti. The forest woke up.

In the aashrama many groups of pupils that had formed as a result of their friendship, had already offered their *Gurudakshina* to Acharya and were returning home in their chariots. Near the ‘Kashyapa’ gate, the main gate of the aashrama on the eastern side, many royal chariots were already waiting in line.

The sun was fully visible now. I could see Dada, Uddhava and Sudama getting onto the grassy meadow beside the lake, tired of swimming around in the waters of the lake. They took out their clothes from their baskets, wore them and waited for me.

I kept swimming for a long time, intentionally! It was my last important day in the forest of Avanti. In my mind, I was constantly going through Acharya’s teachings, while my arms were moving through the water. Aakash – Aa means up to, Kash means space, the space as far as the sight can reach. Prithvi – Prith means ample; that which is ample is Prithvi. While I was absorbing the meaning of Jala in each particle of my blood, I was also treasuring the golden brilliance of the sun in my eyes, as much as possible. This was a very unique experience. I could strongly feel that I had fully found the ‘Sri’ in me with various meanings after I was initiated by the Acharya.

The sun was quite high in the sky now. “Srikrishna, dada, dear friend, come out now.” I could clearly hear the shouts coming from the meadows on the shore. I circled around in the lake for one last time while plucking off as many blue lotuses as I could, some of them were still buds and some were partially blossomed. Holding a big bunch of those under my arms I came out of the lake. Pulling up the peel of one lotus stem up to the petals with my nail, I fastened it tightly around the bunch, and handed it to Sudama.

Meanwhile Dada and Uddhava were dressed in their royal attire and Sudama had put on his Brahmin dress – an ear cap, a long robe and a dhoti with red border. Sitting in the meadows I dried my body thoroughly in the sunlight. Then I got up. Uddhava brought my cane basket in front of me and opened it. The moment it was uncovered I was amazed at Acharya’s ingenious foresight. There it was, resting on top of everything –the fragrant Vijayanti garland, freshly woven with luscious white flowers! A mere look at it brought to mind in a flash many many expressions of Radha, my beloved soul-mate in Gokul.

Uddhava gently picked it up and handed over to me. I filled my chest with

its fragrance, and tenderly placed it on the green meadows. I got dressed in the royal attire wearing the articles that Uddhava handed to me one by one. I tied the shining, bright, soft yellow dhoti around my waist and wrapped a blue silk shawl over it. Then I wore the ornaments on my arms and hands; put the pearl necklaces around my neck. One of these had a large 'Kaustubh' jewel in it. Dada came forward and put the decorated, peacock-feathered golden crown glistening in the sun on my thick, black, curly hair.

Finally, Uddhava picked up the freshly woven Vaijayanti garland resting on the grass and put it around my neck. At first, the large, intense, clear eyes of my ruddy-complexioned, moon-faced dear friend Uddhava widened, and in amazement he went back a couple of steps. Smitten, he simply kept staring at me. Then with an ebullient heart he spoke rapidly, "Dada...dear dada! I cannot take my eyes off you today! It feels like at this moment even the sun in the sky must be blushing, looking at the splendour of a hundred suns reflecting from your beautiful face! I must drive away the effects of any evil eye. Wait a moment!" While saying all this he literally pulled out a single blue lotus from the bunch in Sudama's hands and moving it up and down from my head to toes three times, within moments he uttered a chant to remove any ill effects of an evil eye. Then he threw the blue lotus into the blue lake. His action created ripples on the lake. I instantly laughed at the innocence of his actions.

We started walking towards Acharya's cottage to offer the *Gurudakshina*. Dada and Uddhava were leading. My dear friend Sudama and I followed. Intentionally I let dada and Uddhava go ahead a little more. Lingering behind with Sudama I affectionately patted his shoulders and asked him, "Dear Sudamana, I have been watching you since early morning. Why do you look so gloomy today? Why are you so quiet?" He stopped and said, "Friend, I find myself in a quandary today. My poor parents from Saurashtra haven't sent any *Gurudakshina* for Acharya. They cannot afford it. What should I offer to Acharya in *Gurudakshina* today?" Suddenly he stopped walking as if someone was forcing him to stop. In a flash his face as fair as a Prajka flower darkened with unbearable agony.

"That's all? Be rest assured Sudamana. I didn't give you that bunch of blue lotuses without reason. Have I ever done that before? Offer these flowers at the feet of Acharya as the *Gurudakshina* with full devotion and ask for his blessings. Trust me, he will give you better blessings than the others."

Sudama stopped and looked at me. His sadness had vanished.

The sun was almost overhead when we reached Acharya's cottage. All other pupils had already offered their *Gurudakshina* and returned to their respective countries with Acharya's blessings. Acharya's cottage was remarkably silent now.

The four of us stood in front of Acharya. As I signalled, first dada and then Uddhava moved forward. Dada knelt down and put his head on Acharya's feet. As he was about to speak, Acharya spoke with his eyes closed, in the meditative trance, "You are Balarama, the prince of Yadavas!"

Dada was astonished to see that Acharya had recognized him with closed eyes. He bowed down and said humbly, "Yes Acharya, I am Balarama. My baba Vasudeva and Maharaja Ugrasena of Mathura have sent milch cows and a troop of horses along with ornaments as the *Gurudakshina*. I have already submitted those in the ashrama store. Please give me your blessings for the journey of my life."

It felt like Acharya smiled slightly. He kept his hand on dada's head and still with his eyes closed he said, "Your whole life will be prosperous. The whole world will sing your praises as the 'Elder'. But remember one thing, try to restrain the short temper that overpowers your mind at times! May all your wishes be fulfilled!"

Then Uddhava moved forward. He knelt and put his head on Acharya's feet and remained in the same position.

With his eyes still closed, unmistakably recognizing his touch Acharya said, "You are Uddhava, the son of Devabhaga and Kansa of Mathura."

"Yes Acharya, it's me Uddhava." Big, innocent-eyed, round-faced, fair Uddhava said with utmost humility, "Acharya, I have deposited clothes in the ashrama store for all the teachers along with you and food grains for all. Please oblige me kindly with your auspicious blessings for my life's journey."

Acharya raised his hand and in a very deep, unique tone he said, "Uddhava, you are a true devotee. Only you are capable of being a beloved devotee of a visionary, an epoch-maker. You will serve one such loving, visionary *Yogi*. The world will recognize you as his confidant. In your later life, you will have to perform an unpleasant duty, for which you will have to harden your heart. Farewell son, you have my full blessings." He put his hand directly on Uddhava's head.

Only the two of us were left now – Sudama and myself. I gestured with my eyes. Moving forward with utmost humility Sudama put the bunch of blue

lotuses at Acharya's feet and put his head on the bunch of flowers. He instantly choked, and started weeping. It was the heart-wrenching awareness of his poverty.

His Guru was present in front of him, in person, the all-knowing, omniscient Guru! He half opened his eyes. Still in a meditative trance Acharya consoled Sudama, patted him with the words, "You are Sudamana. You are called 'Kuchaila' due to the worn-out garments that you wear. But, in fact you are 'Suchaila' as your innocent, loving soul is dressed up in the unique outfit of Virtues from your previous deeds. The treasure of divine friendship that you possess is one of a kind. You will be recognized in the whole world for that unique friendship. So, as a best friend, always cherish the treasure of that friendship. You have my blessings."

Now the sun was shining right above the aashrama. I moved forward – as the very last disciple of Acharya Sandipani – as the Srikrishna of the Yadavas! I prostrated directly in front of him! Without opening his eyes Acharya clearly recognized that touch and with a smile he said, "Srikrishna, the most auspicious fruit of the virtuous deeds of 'Vrushnis' and 'Andhakas' for ages together. The eighth born of Vasudeva and Devakidevi! The protector of the Gopas of Gokul! My most esteemed disciple in the Ankapada aashrama, Srikrishna!" With the touch of my hands his fish-shaped meditative eyes opened gradually like the door of his cottage opening slowly, and finally they opened fully. I stood in front of him with humility. He glanced deep down in my eyes. It was a very distinctive look; even I had never experienced it before! He smiled gently.

"Acharya, each and every disciple has offered something or the other as *Gurudakshina* at your feet and obtained your blessings. But kindly forgive me for I have absolutely nothing suitable at this moment to offer you as *Gurudakshina*!" I smiled. My smile must have been different than usual for Acharya momentarily tried to trace it and reciprocated with the same kind of smile. Then he spoke in his usual serene voice, "Enough of your Chhalikavidya! I don't need *Gurudakshina* from you anyway! He laughed like an innocent child and said, "You actually lived in my aashrama as a disciple for so many days. What could be better *Gurudakshina* in this ephemeral world? He smiled again, like a new-born, innocent infant. A smile that was a reflection of his smile, spread on my face.

Gazing into my eyes he conferred an unknown spiritual energy upon me. For a long time, we both were lost in a reverie. Only I know how much and

what all I gained as his blessings, from this divine transfer of energy by Gurudeva Sandipani.

He exclaimed, “My beloved, best ever disciple, your life will always be prosperous. Oh Yadunandana, visit the sacred city of Prayaga at least once in your future life, whenever possible and visit Sage Angirasa. Oh, son of Nanda, obtain the knowledge of Brahma from him.

Just as his name implies he has undergone severe penance. He is the innate, devout worshiper of Agni, the apt heir of the original Angirasa. Don’t forget that his disposition is just like the fire! If you stay within your limits he will be warm enough, but if you transgress he will be as scorching as the fire itself. He will stay in Prayaga only for a short time. After that he will travel towards Mount Raivataka as a preacher of the religious sect that attracts him of late, to propagate it and spread the same around the world.

You will come to know your relation with him at a proper time. Farewell Srikrishna! Give him my regards when you visit him. And accept this gift of mine to you with love and cherish it always like the ‘Vaijayanti’.” Since early morning he had very carefully placed a crimson, fully blossomed lotus in his water-pot. It was charmed with a divine mantra. He handed it to me with love, and I accepted it with pure devotion, touching it to my forehead.

Aacharya’s wife would rarely come out as she was always engaged in household chores. But today she had come out. I bowed down to her along with the others. She gave her blessings from the bottom of her heart and stood still like a statue. The tears streaming down her eyes instantly revealed the root of her silent agony. Offering solace to her I determinedly said, “Oh aashrama-mata, I will liberate your dear son, Dutta from the clutches of Shankhasura and bring him back to you. Oh mata, this is my promise to you. I have already offered my *Gurudakshina* to Aacharya, and he has also given me his blessings. Please consider the liberation of Dutta as my *Gurudakshina* to you, and give me your blessings to successfully overcome the conflicts in life.”

The expressions in the eyes of our aashrama-mata changed instantly while she wiped the tears in her eyes. With eyes full of affection, she put her hands on my head.

We retreated respectfully without turning our backs to Aacharya and his wife and slowly came out of the cottage.

Sudama was not to be seen anywhere. We picked our cane baskets and dada, Uddhava and I came to the main entrance of the aashrama. Daruka was



standing in front of the gate. He scurried forward to touch my feet. I moved forward, and before he could bend down, stopped him halfway and held him in a tight embrace. His face shone brightly. I whispered in his ears, “Daruka, henceforth you will not be my charioteer or my attendant. You will be my friend, my escort who will accompany me in all walks of life. Not you, but I am going to steer the chariot today.”

The three of us followed him to the royal chariot that he had brought. The bedecked chariot that Daruka had brought today looked exceptionally attractive. Its beautifully engraved, golden cupola was brightly shining in the sunrays. The soft, golden-bordered, triangular, saffron Garudadhwaaja pennant was fluttering atop, embroidered with the emblem of the flying golden eagle. The rear end of the cupola was covered with deer and tiger skins. Tiny, golden bells were dangling along the round edge of the cupola making a sweet jingling sound on the rhythmic movement of the chariot. The chariot was quite spacious to easily accommodate a number of people along with their weapons. Four sturdy waist-high spoked wheels, were delicately maintaining the equilibrium of the well-built chariot. A sturdy yoke made of strong, painted Kikar wood, decorated with engravings was attached to it. Daruka had harnessed four snow white, tall, hefty horses to the yoke. In the very first glance they captured my heart! They were swishing their tails and pricking their ears constantly.

The moment I saw them I was enamoured. Walking briskly, I moved closer to those agile animals. Acharya’s words echoed in my ears, ‘The horse that outstrips the wind is the first loyal friend of mankind. When a horse stands on three legs and leaves the fourth one hanging in the air, he becomes useless for running. An understanding of the touch and the words of his master that a horse has, is sometimes missing even in human beings.’

I lovingly patted on the nape of the horse standing in front of me. He swished his tail in excitement and pricked his ears while neighing with joy.

I asked Daruka, “Where did you obtain such pure breed from?”

He answered with a smile, “I searched through the entire region of Panchanada to obtain this breed, Sire. He is from the valleys rich with meadows between rivers Chandrabhaga and Iravati. As hefty as he is, he also runs quite swiftly, and is very obedient too.

“Well done Daruka. I would like to call him ‘Shaibya’! What do you think of the name?”

“How can he disapprove the name given by you, Dhakalya?” Balaramadada

said with a smile and patted the horse.

I went near the next horse, momentarily ruffled his thick mane and just as I used to put my arms around Uddhava or Sudama's neck I put my hands around his thick, flexible, and muscular neck.

Uddhava was not one to get involved in only wry, futile discussions; he was an excellent warrior too. Casually but unmistakably he pushed, "Dada, you suggest a suitable name for this horse too." I laughed and looking at his ruddy, sincere face which was round like a shield, I said, "Uddhava, I casually put my hand around his neck. My action has already suggested a name for him. He is the 'Sugriva' of our chariot!"

'Sugriva', the one with a beautiful neck!' saying this Uddhava simply kept staring at the Vaijayanti garland around my neck and Sugriva's white neck with his beautiful full mane and said, "Dada, I can't tell if the white Vaijayanti garland on your bluish body looks more beautiful or your bluish hand resting on the white mane of Sugriva's thick neck!"

"Master, I have brought this thick-necked, eminent, cautious horse from the well-known country of Kambhoja." Daruka humbly provided further information.

The three of us moved to the next horse. He snorted a bit. He looked like a pure white cloud in the evening of the month of Ashwin, and he was mighty like a mountain.

"Master, this horse has been brought from the faraway country of Gandhara. For that sole purpose, I went to Pushkalavati, the capital of Gandhara." Daruka provided information even without my asking.

As usual, playfully teasing Balaramadada I said, "Dada, can you suggest a suitable name for this horse?" He stood still for quite a while but couldn't come up with any name. Disappointed, he said, "I was just thinking, how come you haven't teased me so far! How could you assign me such a brainy job? If you tell me, I can simply pick up this horse and put him gently on my shoulders! That naming... etc. suits you better!"

"Yes, that is true. It is difficult to suggest a suitable name for this horse. Only you can do it." Uddhava supported him.

"We should call him 'Balahaka'. Balahaka means a flying, white crane!" From his physique, I recognized that he was a 'Magadha' horse. 'Beautiful!' Both of them cheered along with Daruka.

By this time we had reached the last horse, firmly supporting the other end of the chariot. Actually, all these four horses were white in colour, competing

with each other, but this one was whiter than the others. Only an eagle-eyed person could have realized it. His colour was like the frothy snow-white water of a river cascading off the Himalayas. Gently patting his snout, I said to Daruka, “Surely you must have brought this horse from somewhere in the Himalayas.”

“Yes sire. I had to go far away to Pragjyotishapura of Kamarupa kingdom.” Daruka said with a smile.

“We should call this one nothing else but ‘Meghapushpa’! He looks like the flower of a snow-white cloud just touching the Himalayas. Doesn’t he?”

“Daruka, these four white horses like the *Ananta flower* have become dear to my heart. From today onwards, with Acharya Sandipani’s blessings they will gallop in the four directions of Aaryavarta.

Garuda, the king of birds is the emblem of the Yadavas’ zeal for conquest. Spreading his wide, robust wings he soars high in the sky. The pennant on this chariot commemorates Garuda, the king of birds. I humbly pay obeisance to Acharya Sandipani at this moment, and in front of my dear ones I announce the formal name of this royal chariot – Garudadhwaja! I closed my eyes with an unknown impulse and I could see many golden eagles soaring high in the blue skies in front of my closed eyes. As if somebody had pulled their strings, Dada, Uddhava, and Daruka unanimously cheered “Beautiful, extraordinary! Garudadhwaja, Garudadhwaja!”

“All of you get into the chariot.” I said. In a single leap, I took the seat of the charioteer, and held the reins of the horses, decorated with delicate golden threads, in my hands.

To take a final look at the Ankapada aashrama to my heart’s fill, I glanced around the area of the aashrama, and was startled to see a thin lone figure in white approaching slowly. It was Sudama. He was walking along the fence, carrying his sack on his shoulder. His neck was hanging low and he was dragging his feet.

He was to travel farther than us, to Saurashtra. But no carriage or even a person had come to fetch him. I immediately told Uddhava who was sitting at the back of the chariot, “Udho, go quickly and bring my dear friend Sudama here.” Uddhava was also touched by the loneliness of Sudama. He got up instantly and leaped out of the Garudadhwaaj. He lovingly held Sudama by the hand and brought him to the chariot, and both boarded it.

As soon as I tugged at their reins the four loyal horses neighed and my Garudadhwaja chariot sprinted forward from the huge Kashyapa entrance of

Aacharya Sandipani's Ankapada aashrama. My life's chariot began the non-stop pilgrimage of Karmayoga.

Daruka and I started a dialogue about Sarathyayoga - charioting, "Daruka, what kind of animal do you reckon the horse is?" I asked. He promptly responded, "A loyal friend of mankind."

"Not only that. To me a horse is like the swift rays of the sun. He is loyal indeed, but his loyalty is that of a warm, loving friend." I said.

"What kind of sounds do you hear of the galloping horses, Daruka?" I asked again.

"Sounds of their hooves running rhythmically and their neighing."

"That's all? Daruka, a true charioteer should be able to clearly hear the heartbeats of the galloping horses and their snorts and also be able to understand those well. The heartbeat of the galloping horse is directly connected with the continuous motion of the sun in the sky! You must understand this. Remember, that a horse is a child of the sun." Listening to me Daruka fell silent and was engrossed in thought. I continued, carrying the thread of his thought forward, "The sun is called a friend. Why? Because he is always there for you. Daruka, never forget it. A horse is a child of the sun; the very first and the closest animal friend forever to a human. Got it?"

"Yes sire, got it."

"How would you judge a horse to be perfectly healthy, Daruka?" I took him deeper in the field of charioting – Sarathyayoga.

"From his graceful stance, perfectly balancing his body on all four legs." Our chariot tilted on its side while taking a turn on the way and Daruka answered while balancing his body taking the support of the chariot's sidebar.

"The test does not end there Daruka. One has to also bring one's ears closer to his snout and examine the rhythm of his breath! A horse speaks volumes through his eyes. He even reveals a lot about the energy within him through the continuous swishing of his tail. A gentle breeze of wind creates whirl-like ripples on the horse's body. Daruka, an expert charioteer should be unmistakably able to know the direction of the wind only by looking at the whirling ripples on the horse's body." While controlling the reins, and calling the horses by their names Shaibya...Balahaka...I started assessing Daruka's skills as a charioteer.

I asked him, "Daruka, do you know how innately intelligent horses are?" "Yes sire, if a horse-rider gets lost in a forest, all he needs to do is let loose

his horse's reins, hold his seat tightly, and his horse unmistakably brings him back to his original place."

"Right, a horse knows very well that the horseshoes on his hooves are necessary for good running. That is why he surrenders himself silently at the time of attaching a horseshoe. He closes his eyes in a desert to avoid getting the dust into his eyes; and still carries the rider on his back in the expected direction. He specifically understands even the smallest pressure of his rider's thighs, and on that clue he changes his direction accordingly, even while he is running. His ears are very sharp and alert. He catches even the slightest of the wind breeze with precision. He has excellent understanding of his master's spoken language as well as his touch.

"Daruka, a horse never sleeps sitting on the ground or lying on the floor. In fact, he never sleeps as such. He takes a nap in a standing position. A horse is a supreme *yogi* among the animals and has the boon of innate self-control. Just as you and Uddhava are my friends, all these horses are my friends too. They have their own, very special 'Ashwagita'. I will tell you more about it at a suitable time later. Who knows, maybe in future I myself will have to demonstrate the flawless charioting skills to you. What do you think Daruka?" I steered his mind's horse somewhere deep and left it hanging there.

Yojanas after *yojana* we kept travelling and moving forward. After a few sojourns our chariot came to a juncture from where it could take a straight path leading to Mathura or to the left going to Saurashtra. For a few moments, I halted the chariot at the junction.

"Mathura is within reach now." Dada said looking at the way leading to Mathura, "Aren't we going directly to Mathura?"

"No, Dada! We will go to the left, to Saurashtra. We will drop off Sudama near his town and then return to Mathura." I announced my decision and tugged at the reins in my hands to speed up the chariot in the direction of Saurashtra. Turning back, I looked at Sudama with a deliberate smile. His face was shining bright.

After a few more sojourns our Garudadhwaaja came to a point from where it could not go any further. Sudama's town was not very far from there. He looked at the familiar whitish, winding trail leading to his town and said, "Milinda, dear friend, let us stop here. I will walk the remaining distance."

The moment had come to bid farewell to a dear friend! I dropped the reins in my hands and in a single leap I alighted from the chariot. Sudama also got

down from the back of the chariot. Uddhava, Balaramadada and Daruka waited in the chariot.

Sudama stood directly in front of me. Gathering his bag that was slipping from his shoulders he said, “Dear friend, Srikrishna, remember this poor Brahmin boy. I consider that our learning together in Acharya’s ashrama is the result of our ties in our previous birth. Could you please do me a favour?” his voice became heavy.

I grabbed both his shoulders tightly and looking deep in his eyes I said, “Speak, dear friend, Sudama! I will never forget you. Speak freely with me.”

He hesitated momentarily due to his shy nature, then said, “Srikrishna, I didn’t even realize how time flew in your divine company in the ashrama. To keep those memories alive in my heart please give me something, a gift, as a symbol of our loving friendship. I will cherish it for the rest of my life.”

He put me in a spot. I smiled and said, “Friend, are you silly or what? Didn’t you hear what I told Acharya on the day of *Gurudakshina*?”

I told him, “I don’t have anything suitable to offer to you as the *Gurudakshina*, and yet, you are asking for a gift from me today as a token of our friendship. What can I give you? Friend, I don’t have anything suitable to give you as a gift at this moment!”

He moved his gaze to the peacock-feathered golden crown on my head. He got confused. It shifted to the beaded necklace with the ‘Kaustubh’ diamond around my neck, then to the golden ornaments on my lower and upper arms.

Finally, as his eyes caught sight of my sandalwood slippers, instantly they lit up with sheer joy. Immediately bending down with some determination, he held my wooden slippers tightly in his hands, and said with ardent intensity, “This, this is what I would like to have as the token of our friendship! This is perfect.” He put his head directly on my wooden slippers. This made me feel really solemn. My smile disappeared and unknowingly I pulled my feet out of the slippers. My dear Sudama immediately put them in his bag. He looked so happy as if he had been given the realm of the three worlds.

Pulling him up immediately I held him in a deep embrace. Gently patting his hands, I bade farewell to him. I waited there for a long time in a bond of affection, capturing him in my eyes till I could no longer see the contour of his figure that kept turning back to look at me while moving forward.

Mathura welcomed us with great pomp and vigour. The entire city was decorated with garlands and festoons. Colourful Rangoli designs had been drawn in the courtyards.

The citizens of Mathura welcomed us with lighted oil lamps and showered us with flowers. Kettle-drums were being played at every intersection of the city. Horse riders moving zealously around the city were distributing sugar among the citizens. One of them was so overzealous that he climbed on the Garudadhvaja and handed me a fistful of sugar and muttering something vaguely like "...the naming ceremony will be tomorrow...", he left immediately.

We arrived at the square in front of the royal palace of Mathura. As soon as we saw Maharaja Ugrasena, Vasudevababa and Thorali at the landing, the three of us briskly climbed the steps towards them. Dada, Uddhava and I, the three of us bowed down to pay obeisance to Vasudevababa first, then to Maharaja Ugrasena. Maharaja looked tired. He said, "Gadadhara, in your absence we resolutely fought with Jarasandha's army seven-eight times, forcing him to retreat. Now that you have returned my worries are over. While bowing down to pay obeisance to Thorali I strongly felt the absence of Dhakali, Rohinimata. She was nowhere to be seen. Since coming to Mathura it had become customary to call Devakimata 'Thorali' without anybody instructing us. I asked her, "Dhakali is not to be seen anywhere. Where is she?" Smiling broadly with pure affection she said," How can she be here? She has just delivered a baby! You are blessed with a sister! She resembles Balarama – rosy-fair, plump and chubby!"

"Therefore, today itself the city has been decorated for your welcome, which was planned for tomorrow" Vasudevababa exclaimed.

"Tomorrow is the naming ceremony of your sister, Srikrishna." said Maharaja Ugrasena. So now we understood the real reason why the city was decorated! The next day groups of Mathura's populace and the Yadava men and women visited the royal palace for our new-born sister's naming ceremony. Their evident love was the acknowledgment of the suffering my father had undergone throughout his life. After so many years today this royal palace of Yadu echoed with sounds of the joyous commotion of men, women and children.

It was due to this ceremony that I found out how big and widespread my extended family was in Mathura and the Shursena kingdom. Dhakali's Gada and Sarana, my brothers born after dada had grown up now. All my kakas – Devabhaga, Devashravasa, Aanaka, Srunjaya, Shyamaka, Kanka, Shamika, Anadhrishti, Gandasha, Vatsaka and Vrika had especially gathered here for the naming ceremony of the first girl child born to Rohinimata. Amongst

those kakas, Uddhava's father, Devabhagakaka had already come into closer contact with us and formed a special bond. The rest of them were going to interact with us in future, circumstantially. I had freed some of them from Kansa's imprisonment in the first week after the execution of Kansa and had offered them suitable positions according to their capabilities.

Devashravasakaka's wife was Kansawati. She was Kansa's sister. They were a very loving couple. They had three sons, Shatrughna, Suvira, and Eeshumana. Shatrughna was lost in a forest in his childhood. Losing him was their biggest pain. Aanakakaka had two sons, Purujita and Satyajita. His wife Kanka was also Kansa's sister. Srunjaykaka's wife Rashtrapalika was also Kansa's sister. They had two sons, Dhanu and Vajra. Shyamaka-*kaka* also had two sons, Hiranyaksh and Harikesh. His wife was Shurabhu; she too was Kansa's sister. So, amongst all my kakus, four were Kansa's sisters.

Shamika-*kaka* had just one son named Pratikshatra. His wife's name was Saudamini. Then there were Kanka-*kaka*, Vatsaka-*kaka* and Vruka-*kaka*. Their wives were Karnika, Mitrakeshi and Durvakshi, respectively. Their sons were Kritadhaman and Jaya, Vruka, Taksha and Pushkara. Kanka-*kaka* was very experienced as he was a part of Kansa's ministry and had actively participated in the administrative matters.

Anadhrishtikaka's wife was Ashmaki. They had one son named Yashaswi. This *kaka* was renowned for many years as a valiant commander of the Yadavas. Gandashakaka was the only one without a child. I had six mavashis named Sahadeva, Shantideva, Srideva, Devarakshita, Vrikadeva and Upadeva. Shantidevamavashi was childless. I had many maternal cousins as well as step-brothers. This new-born daughter of Dhakali was the only girl child in the family. Hence there was no doubt that she was going to be the apple of our eyes.

In short, I had a very big family here including my kakas, kakus and cousins just like my family in Gokul.

This would obviously raise a question in anybody's mind that what were all these people doing while their brother Vasudeva was put in prison?

Quite a few times the same question had bothered me before. Devabhagakaka had a very exceptional personality amongst all the kakas. He was a holy person with a very loving countenance. He was the well-wisher of the Yadavas. Uddhava, his son was the exact reflection of his father's personality.

Amongst all the kakas, Kanka-*kaka* and Aanaka-*kaka* had served in the



royal ministry of Kansa. Except Devabhagakaka all other kakas had been overpowered by Kansa's tyranny. All of them were coming together for the first time today.

From Thorali, Devakimata's side I had four mamas named Devavana, Upadeva, Sudeva and Devarakshita. Thorali also had many sisters. Amongst them my Upadevamavashi and Devarakshitamavashi were also Vasudevababa's wives, my step-mothers. I also had ten more step-mothers!

On this day of the naming ceremony of Dhakali's blessed daughter, four significant royal envoys had arrived in Mathura from different countries with their respective royal gifts. Vasudevababa provided us with minute details while introducing them to us, because these royal envoys had come from the capital cities of his own sisters, our *aatyas*. One of them was from the country of Chedi on behalf of Shrutashrava *aatya* and her husband Damaghosha. This couple had just one son, about the same age as me, named Shishupala. As per the information that my spies had gathered he was totally under the control of Jarasandha. Keeping in mind his rivalry against the Yadavas, Jarasandha had appointed Shishupala as the commander of his army. In general, this one was going to be a big nuisance in my life. The second royal gift was from the kingdom of Avanti, on behalf of Rajadhidevi *aatya* and her husband Jayasena. This couple had two sons, Vinda and Anuvinda, my paternal cousins, who were my fellow disciples in the aashrama of Acharya Sandipani. During that time, we had hardly got acquainted with each other.

The third royal envoy had come from the country of Karusha, on behalf of Shrutadeva *aatya* and her husband Vriddhasharmana. They had a son named Dantavakra.

The fourth gift had not been brought by a royal envoy, but dispatched at the hands of a sage from a forest. Therefore, I carefully heard all the minute details given by the sage and stored the information in my mind forever. He had arrived on behalf of *aatya* Kuntidevi. Though she was the queen of Hastinapura, unfortunately she had been living in the Gandhamadana forest along with her husband Maharaja Pandu as a result of a curse by Kindama rishi and was putting up a brave fight with her fate.

Vasudevababa's eyes were teary as he related her story since her birth, "Sister Kunti has three sons of her own, Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna. She also treats Nakula and Sahadeva, the twins of Maharaja Pandu's second wife Madri, as her own. Kunti's and Madri's five sons are known as the

‘Pandavas’ by the name of their father. Srikrishna, whatever misfortune your mother and I suffered in our imprisonment by Kansa, is nothing compared to what Kunti has endured throughout her life since her birth. If ever you happen to meet her in your life, respect her appropriately, and support her as much as you can.”

Baba was overwhelmed with emotions as he remembered her in the presence of the sage who had come as a messenger.

During the naming ceremony of Dhakali’s daughter, the priest asked her, “What should we name the baby?” She looked straight in my direction in the room full of people and simply ordered me, “Srikrishna, you suggest a suitable name for your sister!”

With due respect to Dhakali’s insistence, I immediately said, “I brought back a lot of ‘Bhadra’ or fortune, from Aacharya’s aashrama. As soon as I arrived in Mathura I came to know how beautiful that ‘Bhadra’ is! I am going to call her ‘Subhadra’!” Citizens of Mathura shared with each other the name of Vasudevababa’s first daughter and our sister – ‘Subhadra’ while enjoying the sweets and dancing to the beats of drums and sticks.

That night when I went to bed after the prayer, my mind was preoccupied only with the thoughts of Kunti *aatya* and her sons, the ‘Pandavas’.

Now Dada’s and my foremost duty was the liberation of Dutta, our Guru’s son. That was constantly on my mind since returning from Avanti.

All the informers that minister Vipruthu had sent to various countries had returned by now. The informer returning from the west had arrived with good news. Dutta had been kidnapped and was being secretly held captive on a faraway island in the Shwetasagara ocean, along the western coast near Mount Raivataka also known as Mount Ujjayanta. A mammoth *Asura* called Shankhasura was responsible for the evil act. The people on the west coast called the western ocean ‘Shwetasagara’ due to its waves with surf. The locals in the region also knew Shankhasura as ‘Panchjana’.

I brought Balaramadada and Uddhava on the banks of Yamuna and discussed the delicate matter of Dutta’s liberation with them. Shankhasura was not going to surrender easily. He had hired a small army of select asuras and lived fearlessly inside a sheltered cavern on an island. After deliberations dada and I decided to launch an armed attack on Shankhasura. We decided to carry small boats on the backs of elephants, in case we had to encroach islands.

I declared our decision in front of the Yadava royal council with Maharaja

Ugrasena's consent. For this mission, brave and sinewy Yadava warriors were selected including Satyaki, Uddhava, Kritavarma, Shaineya, and Avagaha.

Our fourfold army consisting of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry marched out of the western gates of Mathura with grandeur. This was our first extended journey after finishing our education. After a travel of two whole months our army reached the western coast. This was the first time in my life that I was viewing an ocean.

Ocean! That confines the infallible strength of flowing water in the form of waves. I bowed down along with dada and Uddhava to the constantly roaring element of Jala. Our huge army camped near the ocean shore. The towering Mount Raivataka stood close by.

Our skilled informers in small boats dispersed in all directions in the ocean. By evening they reached the island and located Shankhasura's cave. We could not have used any war tactics at night on our enemy who was hiding in the cave. Therefore, we erected small tents on the ocean shores and camped throughout the night, listening to the sounds of the ocean.

Ocean! It creates a continuous roar with the sounds of its waves during the day. And at night the same waves whisper in rhythmic, mystifying, melodious murmurs. That rhythm sounds like its breathing itself, making it seem more solemn. During the stay at the aashrama in Avanti I had experienced how the forest speaks with its silence at night. Today I was experiencing, in how many different ways the ocean speaks in its own language at night.

In this first experience with the ocean I fell in love with it. This western ocean was very alluring, challenging and therefore, unknowingly it became dear to me.

The very next day our pugnacious Yadava warriors crossed over to Shankhasura's island, sailing on the blue ocean waves in hundreds of boats. We couldn't estimate the size of the *Asura* army inside the cave. We started dispatching waves after waves of armed troops to attack the cave.

Our soldiers kept coming back in despair after fighting and getting exhausted. Some of them lost their lives while slaughtering the enemy. Not just for a day or two, the battle continued for an entire week, with no result in sight and with no effect.

How long will this go on? This riddle of Shankhasura was not going to unravel itself without using some deceptive technique of 'Indrajaala'. I

recalled all counsel given by Acharya, but couldn't find a satisfactory solution. How many more of our warriors were going to die in vain, I had no clue.

On the ninth day while I was offering oblations to the Sun-god rising from the western ocean, a huge fish sprang out of the water and disappeared like silver lightning flashing momentarily. Shankhasura should be forced to come out of his cave, I thought. Sending our troops in there won't work. But if the cave is filled with torrents of smoke, he will come out like a snake slithering out of its hole. That was it! The first thing we did was to withdraw our troops.

We collected wooden logs and dry leaves in a heap and ignited a huge fire right in front of the cave's entrance. This strategy worked perfectly. At first the troops of sweaty and wounded *Asura* warriors rushed out of the cave screaming, wheezing and coughing due to the smoke. Following them the mammoth Shankhasura came out roaring, with his big red eyes wide open. He was holding a sparkling, wide-bladed sword in his hand. In his hairy left hand, he held a very big, pure white shining conch. As per our plan dada challenged him to a wrestling bout. Both of them put their weapons down.

On the sandy beach of the island, thumping their thighs loudly they confronted each other. Before that Shankhasura blew the conch in his hand very loudly and sent tremors through the surroundings.

There is a proper technique to blow a conch, he didn't even know the basics. He simply threw it aside. Meanwhile the sandy beach had turned into a battlefield, and the Yadava warriors had already killed many of the *Asura* warriors. Wrestling was not merely an art or a skill for dada now; it had become his breath itself. Very soon, surrounded by the Yadavas and *Asura* warriors who had surrendered, dada put Shankhasura to death by means of the Bahukantaka maneuver. The waves of slogans shouted by our army collided with the ocean waves. "Hail Yadava warriors, Ssikrishna, Balarama. Victory to them."

I moved forward and bending down, gently picked up Shankhasura's pure white, beautiful, auspicious conch which he had treasured in his life but had thrown absurdly in the sand some time back.

It possessed precisely every quality of an auspicious conch. Not merely a conch, it was an invaluable jewel! An unparalleled truth. Dada, Uddhava, Daruka, and Satyaki had already gathered around me out of curiosity. The sun was setting on the western ocean.

Along with the others I entered the foamy waters of the roaring western

ocean till they reached my knees. My heart was filled with an indomitable, unnamed self-confidence. Dada, Uddhava, Satyaki, Vipruthu, and Daruka – everybody was offering oblations to the setting sun with the water of the ocean itself. Reading my mind dear Uddhava poured a trickle of ocean water on the conch. I blew that divine conch getting fully engrossed in the act with my head raised high, my eyes closed and my veins protruding as I was blowing it at the top of my lungs. Instantly each and every pore on my skin experienced goose bumps. Various fish sprang out of the water to hear the sound of the conch; they momentarily sparkled in the moonlight and disappeared in the water again.

Yadava warriors, excited by the inspiring and truth-nourishing sound waves of the conch, started dancing with joy while shouting loudly, “Hail Srikrishna, King of the Yadavas, Victory to him!” It was a divine conch that chased Untruth and annihilated it. The piercing, rhythmic sound of that conch was unbearable for the imprisoned *Asura* warriors. They tore the ropes tied around them and started running away, fearing for their lives. The squelchy sand on the ocean shore crushed under their feet kept proclaiming, “He has come – He has come! He has won! Run, run for your lives you wicked, sinful souls... run, run!”

I ordered Satyaki, “Commander, enter the cave right away, rescue our Guru’s son Dutta and bring him out with honour.”

“Yes Sire”, said Satyaki and entered the cave with a few chosen armed warriors.

I gave instructions for the formal cremation of Shankhasura. Our warriors named the place ‘Shankhoddhara’ meaning deliverance of the conch and we sailed out. We saw a strip of land connecting this island to another island in the ocean. We crossed the blue western ocean through the creek. That airy island had fully captured my attention.

Moving along with Dutta, our army’s first sojourn was at the feet of Mount Raivataka, also known as Ujjayanta. It was under the rule of King Kakudmin of the Raivata dynasty. The royal capital Raivatanagara was located on the summit of the mountain. Our plan was to rest here for a while. Nobody had imagined that our stay here was going to be extended. We were eager to move towards Aacharya’s aashrama in Avanti. As per our promise we were supposed to deliver Dutta safely to his mother and obtain her heartfelt blessings. The next day while our army was performing the morning rituals a royal envoy of king Kakudmin descended from the mountain and visited me

with the king's message. The king had invited all of us with honour and delight to visit his royal capital.

I instructed our commander Satyaki to continue his journey with Dutta and wait for us near the banks of the Kshipra. He obliged. Along with the royal envoy of the Raivatakas Balaramadada, Uddhava, Vipruthu, a few chosen warriors and I started climbing the tall mountain full of thick forests.

Kakudmin, the king of Raivatakas welcomed us with open arms. After the royal meal, he offered us gifts of jewellery, cows and horses. As Vipruthu was the eldest among us, the king put an unexpected proposition to the minister– “My beautiful, humble daughter Revati is of marriageable age. I request Balarama, the elder prince of the Yadavas to accept her hand in marriage!”

The minister was completely baffled with this unexpected proposal. He didn't even know what to say. He stuttered “How - how- can I - I - take this decision?” Dada looked at me and gave a gentle smile. It meant that the matter was in my hands now.

“Dear Raivatakas, the Yadavas are pleased to accept your pure love. This marriage will surely take place. We are going to need your support in the future. In my opinion dada should meet my future sister-in-law at least once!” I declared my decision.

Millions of lights illuminated in King Kakudmin's eyes. He quickly gave orders, and within a few moments Revatidevi, the princess of the Raivatakas, dressed in fine royal attire stood in the great hall in front of us, standing still like a statue, with downcast eyes. She was going to be Uddhava's and my future sister-in-law. We looked at her carefully. Tall, healthy, with ruddy fair complexion and smiling, just like dada; she was a perfect match for him.

Uddhava and I moved forward and bowed down to pay obeisance to her. She was baffled by our totally unanticipated action. Moving back instantly she exclaimed, “What are you doing?” She blushed instantly.

“Revativahini, our relation is secured now. Not me, but it is dada who has taken this decision.” I said respectfully.

All our family and Yadava relatives were back in Mathura. So, to resolve that difficulty King Kakudmin suggested that they would just carry out the basic Swayamwar ceremony according to the Raivatata tradition. And we could perform the formal wedding ceremony later in Mathura.

As per his recommendation we carried out the Swayamwar ceremony, and along with a few of her friends we descended Mount Raivatata with

Revativahini. While we were climbing down the long, curving road echoing the thunderous roaring of the lions I constantly kept feeling in my heart that eventually I was going to foster a firm bond with Mount Raivataka too. I will have to come here again; but I couldn't tell for what purpose. I didn't know it myself then.

The warriors here were also going to assist us till Avanti now. Along with them we met Satyaki who had camped on the shores of the Kshipra. Crossing the river Kshipra in boats along with Dutta, dada, Uddhava and I entered the Ankapada aashrama, and handed him over to his mother. After so many years of separation she embraced him and wept for quite some time.

I was very eager to show Aacharya the rare, divine conch that I had brought along. The new disciples of the aashrama would peek into Aacharya's cottage and after seeing dada, Uddhava and me from a distance, they would return whispering among themselves. At dinner time before saying our regular prayers, I expressed my biggest concern in front of Aacharya, "The Magadha empire is enormous. Our Shursena kingdom is very small in comparison, almost negligible in size. Jarasandha, Kansa's father-in-law, has been fuming with anger since Kansa's execution; he doesn't let the citizens of Mathura be in peace. We had to fight off his armed attacks fifteen-sixteen times so far. Could you please suggest a way out from this situation?"

Aacharya smiled like a child and said, "Srikrishna, you have just returned after visiting the ocean. Wouldn't you like to live in its company? Anyhow, aren't you going to show me the divine conch that you have brought from the Shwetasagara ocean?" He purposefully digressed from the topic and just gave me a smile. I understood and reciprocated in the same manner.

I had safely secured the shining, divine conch in the blue scarf wrapped around my waist. Carefully releasing the knot, I took it out, touched it to my forehead and gently kept it at Aacharya's feet. He picked up the conch as delicately as the aashrama-mata would pick up a Prajka flower drenched in the morning dew, lying under the Prajka tree. His eyes gradually closed as soon as he touched the conch.

In his melodious voice, he said, "Srikrishna, this is another invaluable jewel, as precious as the Vaijayanti garland around your neck. It will be renowned as 'Paanchajanya'. You have fulfilled your promise of the *Gurudakshina*. I am going to present you with one more precious gift today. I have already taught you *Dhanurveda*. This gift will further enhance its reputation. You should consider it as another jewel."

He glanced at his wife standing inside the cottage. With Dutta's assistance, she brought out a curvaceous bow decorated with beautiful garlands of Madhumalati flowers and a quiver full of arrows. Stepping forward, Acharya balanced the bow in his hands, and twanged the bowstring once. Acharya holding a bow! Indeed, it was a very rare sight. He said, "This is my gift to you. This meritorious bow is named 'Ajitanjaya'." I got up, touched it to my forehead and accepted the gift humbly as Acharya's blessing.

I also twanged the powerful bowstring of Ajitanjaya once. Its stimulating sound kept resonating in the cottage for a long time. I carried the exceptional gift on my shoulders for some time. Then I handed the victorious bow over to Balaramadada, who was staring at it with fascination. He also carried it on his shoulders. Meanwhile Uddhava had checked out all the arrows in the quiver.

At this moment of bliss an amusing thought entered my mind like a beautiful royal swan descending on the lake. Looking intently at Acharya I implored, "Gurudeva, only once, please blow this conch, in our presence. Exonerate it forever, of all the blemishes it had acquired in the company of the Asuras. Purify the Paanchajanya absolutely."

Acharya smiled innocently. He picked up the Paanchajanya conch resting on the tiger skin with his tapering fingers. Holding his chin high up towards the ceiling of the cottage, with closed eyes our venerable Acharya blew the divine conch with passionate intensity at such a high pitch that it made the veins in his throat protrude. Instantly his fair face flushed.

I simply kept gazing, unable to decide whether Acharya's thick beard was whiter or his teeth which produced a childlike smile were whiter or the Paanchajanya conch in his palms or the remarkable white brightness produced by the sound of conch that also rendered goose bumps, was the brightest!

This time when we returned to Mathura I had four priceless jewels with me. The Vaijayanti garland, Paanchajanya, Ajitanjaya and one could say that our Revativahini was the fourth jewel!

We returned to Mathura. Maharaja Ugrasena himself came to receive us at the border of Mathura. The citizens of Mathura showered us with flowers and they welcomed Revativahini with joy. The entire city was decorated with festoons and flowers to welcome her. Paanchajanya was entering the Shursena kingdom for the first time. Recognizing the importance of the occasion, on the border of the city dada put his loving hand on my shoulders



and prodded me, “Dhakalya, Paanchajanya!” I smiled looking at him and Revativahini. Along with Gargamuni almost all leading Yadavas had gathered at the border of the city. Among them Gada and Sarana were at the front along with fresh young blood like Yashaswi, Chitraketu, Brihadbala and many more.

For once I feasted my eyes upon the river Yamuna encircling Mathura in a crescent shape with her dancing waves. Remembering Vasudevababa and Devakimata who were waiting for me in the royal palace, I bowed down. Then, on the border of the Shursena kingdom, I blew the pure white Paanchajanya conch for the first time with all my might.

Since the moment I held this conch in my hands I was transformed completely. As if the old Krishna had vanished completely. The melodious sound waves of that pure white conch hugged the waves of Yamuna and conveyed the deepest meaning of my present as well as future plans.

We were welcomed in Mathura with fanfare. But Jarasandha, the tyrant emperor of Magadha was not going to rest until he had completely annihilated the Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom. In Girivraja, the royal capital of the Magadhas, his daughters and Kansa’s wives – Asti and Prapti wouldn’t let him think of anything else except ‘the destruction of the Yadavas and mainly Srikrishna’s execution at the earliest’.

Following the political adage ‘An enemy of the enemy is a friend’, he had formed a political alliance with Dantavakra, the king of Karusha, and Shishupala, the son of the Chedi king Damaghosha. In fact, both of them were my paternal cousins. But they had surrendered to and joined hands with the more powerful Jarasandha. The trio of Shishupala, Dantavakra and Jarasandha had also succeeded in convincing the otherwise prudent Bhishmaka, the king of Vidarbha, to join their clique. King Shaibya of Sauvira, Vatsa, the king of Kashi, Shalva, the king of Videha, Trigarta, the king of Madra, Darada, and so on – Jarasandha had invited all his vassal kings to the royal capital of Girivraja. All our nemeses had gathered together to obliterate the Yadavas. Within just a week my Paanchajanya had to face the challenge of the Magadha invasion again.

This was the seventeenth attack by Jarasandha! Crossing rivers like Gomati, Sharayu, Gandaki, and Kaushiki, a giant fourfold army assembled in Girivraja. It crossed the Yamuna in a large number of boats and roaring war cries, it reached Mathura. Compared to the prior sixteen invasions, this was the ultimate, conclusive invasion. Jarasandha himself had crossed the river

Yamuna and descended upon Mathura as the commander of the giant Magadha army today. Thousands of large and small boats were anchored in the expanse of the Yamuna. Magadhas were brave warriors and warmongers.

A Yadava council was organized under the leadership of Maharaja Ugrasena and baba. Along with me, dada, commander Anadhrishti, Yuyudhana-Satyaki, Uddhava, Akrura, Kritavarmana, Satrajita, Shini, all my kakas, mamas and the Yadava leaders gathered with determination in this council. Among all of them dada, Satyaki, Kritavarma and Anadhrishti were determined to do only one thing – fight off the Magadhas with plenty of grit and make them lose the ground by hook or by crook.

I gathered all the accurate and minute details from my informers. I came to realize that this invasion was not only of the Magadhas or Jarasandha himself, but many a small and big Yadava nemeses had gathered under his leadership. This was a way more disparate war and it would go on for quite some time.

Compared to the mammoth Magadha army the Yadavas would have appeared like a mouse in front of an elephant. Yet I silently listened to the resolve of the fervent Yadavas. Short-tempered Yadavas were not going to learn to be cautious unless and until they had firsthand experience. They were not going to amend until then. I gave my silent approval to them. As proposed unanimously in the council, the Yadavas got all geared up to fight the Magadhas.

Based on the previous experience the frontiers of Mathura were secured by sealing all gates on the four sides. The borders of Mathura were besieged by the giant, roaring fourfold army of Magadha. Thunderous sounds of the war drums, kettle drums echoed in the atmosphere. A long, violent, unpredictable war had begun.

The Yadavas inside were all geared up for defence and the Magadhas outside were all eager for invasion and attack. Such was the scene now. The Magadhas started propelling huge rocks and burning torches inside the enclosure of Mathura continuously. Yadavas also began counter-attacking them from inside. About eight days passed by. The battle was still inconclusive, and it was not going to end any time soon. On the outskirts of Mathura, the farming land of the Shursena kingdom was getting destroyed under the feet of the elephants, the camels and the horses.

Jarasandha's armed riders started attacking the towns close by and badgering the citizens of the Shursena kingdom. Sometimes they would catch

the civilians and detain them. They also extorted food grains and money from the people. After ten days I offered a pragmatic suggestion to Maharaja Ugrasena. I discussed a secret decision with him in private, and proposed to arrange the Yadava royal council immediately. Until today many Yadava royal councils had been held either before the beginning of a war or after the end of it. Those were usually held in the night. This was the very first unexpected, royal council arranged while the war was still on.

Maharaja Ugrasena commenced the royal council. While looking at the burning torches in the council he said, “We Yadavas have determinedly faced the constant armed assaults of the giant Magadha army and if required we will do so again in future. I can see that Srikrishna is the only Yadava leader in our kingdom today with the capability to evaluate a situation correctly and take a suitable decision accordingly. In my opinion you all should listen to him and comply with his decision. Srikrishna believes that this war should be brought to an end. If the Magadhas are not ready to do so, then the Yadavas should do it from their side.”

“What does this mean? We have fought with them staunchly sixteen times before; why surrender now? That is not possible.” Satyaki burst out with his usual vigour. Along with Balaramadada and Anadhrishti many valiant Yadavas supported him unanimously, “He is right. We will keep fighting till the end.” After a long, chaotic discussion and a furore of questions and answers the council was clearly divided in two groups – one that agreed to end the war and the other that was ready to fight the war with determination and win it at any cost.

Sitting quietly on my seat I kept listening to everything. At this time, I strongly felt an innate trait of the Yadavas. They feel, look, behave and are powerful and invincible as long as they are united. But once their ego is hurt and they are divided, it is impossible for anybody to control them.

The royal council that Maharaja Ugrasena had held at night had commenced so peacefully and now it had turned tense due to conflicting opinions of the attendees. In the utter chaos, nobody could comprehend what others were saying. Yet I was quiet! I was utterly silent.

Finally, Vikadru, the oldest and most senior Yadava in the council hall stood up. His pure white, thick beard trembled with his wobbly neck. Raising both his arms he roared in a commanding voice, “Silence, everyone keep quiet! Using my authority as the most senior and experienced person I demand that all of you listen to me carefully and do as I tell you to do.”

The old man hawked, his body shook for a moment. Then he continued, “What is all this ruckus about? It is all in vain! Do you even know the actual reason of the wrath of Jarasandha, Kansa’s father-in-law? Are you ever going to take that into account? He has no reason to be hostile towards the Yadavas. As he is your kith and kin he never had any enmity towards you before. Isn’t Srikrishna the only reason for all this? Kansa sent many deadly executioners to kill Srikrishna because he thought that Srikrishna was the one who was going to destroy him. Srikrishna survived all the attacks astutely and killed him. As Kansa’s father-in-law, wouldn’t Jarasandha want to avenge his son-in-law? He wants to inflict vengeance on Srikrishna. Only for that purpose, time and again he is assaulting Mathura with his army. Not once or twice, but sixteen times he has attacked. How long are we going to sacrifice our young Yadavas in these battles against the Magadhas? How long are we going to let them get victimized by Jarasandha’s uncontrollable wrath?”

“I see only one solution that will benefit all Yadavas from this situation. Srikrishna is younger in age. I believe he will understand precisely what I am saying, without getting upset. I clearly think that henceforth Srikrishna and Balarama should not stay in Mathura even for a moment. They should go somewhere far away to live incognito. That will give some peace to the citizens of Mathura left behind. Isn’t this the only solution to this problematic situation?”

“Srikrishna, what do you think about this?” Old Vikadru stood shaking and staring at me pointedly. The piercing and experienced words of an aged Yadava left all those gathered aghast. This was totally unexpected, unthinkable.

Getting up quietly, I briskly glanced around the fully packed Yadava council. Then my inner voice as melodious as the flute of Gokul and resonating like the conch of the western ocean, erupted, “Yadavas! Isn’t what the venerable Vikadrubaba said significant? It is the bitter truth. The words of the aged are like an effective medicine. Aren’t they? He has fearlessly and accurately diagnosed the current problem of the Yadavas. Jarasandha is desperate for Srikrishna’s blood! I am well aware that the powerful Jarasandha, whose son-in-law I executed, is my arch enemy. Today he is riding on the unconquerable pinnacle of power, trying to crush the innocent Yadavas under the feet of his giant army, only to seek revenge on me. He has untiringly done it sixteen times before.

“Isn’t Vikadrubaba speaking the truth? Why should many people suffer for

the sake of a single person? If I am a true Yadava, then shouldn't I give up the thought of my personal good for the sake of the whole Yadava clan?

“Vikadrubaba's hair has turned gray with his experience of dealing with the world, and not due to the assault of weather! As I am younger in age I would like to humbly tell him that I had already proposed to Maharaja Ugrasena to arrange this council today to implement the very suggestion that he just offered. I have already told him that instead of becoming the cause of the Yadavas' peril, I am going to leave Mathura today itself along with Balaramadada!

“I know that due to my actions today, future generations will loathe and mock me as 'Ranachhodadasa' – a runaway warrior. I am happily willing to bear that dishonour, that stigma on my character. I would rather accept a single Yadava being called 'Ranachhodadasa' than the whole Yadava clan perishing in vain.”

I glanced around the hall. I could clearly see a lot of faces distressed and agitated at the thought of me leaving Mathura. It was the same look that the Gopas and Gopikas of Gokul had on their faces when I left Gokul.

Maharaja Ugrasena stood up and said, “Oh Yadavas, Srikrishna had already informed his decision to me and he was the one who suggested this council be held today. I think Srikrishna is not easy to understand, for you, me or anybody for that matter! From whatever I know of him, I declare as the king of Mathura that whatever anybody wishes, Srikrishna is not going to stay in Mathura even for a moment now. It is not in his nature to remain in one place anyway! Does water or air ever remain stagnant in one place? Do the rays from the sky ever stay in one place? But wherever he goes, I implore him from the bottom of my heart that his emotional bond with Mathura should always stay alive in his heart, at least as long as I am alive.”

The special council of the Yadavas was over. That very night, by a secret passage, Balaramadada, Uddhava and I along with Vipruthu and a few chosen Yadava warriors reached the shore of Yamuna. We sailed towards the South in large ships.

While we were sailing, our infiltrators were spreading rumours among the Magadha army base, Srikrishna has escaped! He got scared of the Magadhas and ran away from Mathura! It was certain that after hearing this news, Jarasandha was obviously going to follow us. As soon as his army started retreating from Mathura, select armed Yadava troops were going to join us at a certain place in the South. At present Mathura was going to be battle-free.

A select few of us left Mathura, but the question remained as to where exactly to go in the South. I had already pondered over it before taking this decision. As per the information gathered by our spies there were four more Yadava kingdoms in the South. These were established by the four sons of our founder, Maharaja Yadu, born to his Naga wives. One of them was located on the banks of Narmada, known as Mahishmati. King Muchkunda had established the Mahishmati kingdom to the south of Mount Hrikshawana. There was also a well-known city called Purika in the kingdom.

The second was the kingdom of Padmawata near Mahabalishwaram; established by Yadu's son Padmawarna on the plateau of Sahyadri near the banks of river Venna. This kingdom also incorporated a city named Karvir on the banks of river Panchaganga. Famous since the Vedic times, it was ruled by a vassal king named Shrigala of the Naga dynasty. Karvir was also known and regarded as 'Dakshinakashi'.

The third royal city of Kraunchapura established by Yadu's son Sarasa was located to the south of Karvir. This city had red soil and its land was fertile. This kingdom was called 'Vanavasi'.

The fourth kingdom founded by Yadu's son Harita was located on the coast of the western ocean. The skilled fishermen over there were expert ocean divers. They were skilled at easily pulling out sea shells that contained pearls inside, sea corals and conches from the ocean's belly.

Minister Vipruthu had already dispatched our emissaries with messages to these four kingdoms. The most significant news brought by our emissaries for me was that Sage Jamadagni's son, Bhagwan Parashurama along with his selected disciples, had descended in the Padmawata kingdom on the banks of the Venna river.

After consulting dada, I decided to go and visit Parashurama first. We had no clue as to how many rivers and forests we would have to cross in order to reach him. While leaving Mathura, we had not forgotten to secretly carry a vast treasure of diamonds, rubies, pearls, jewels and gold. We had given plenty of instructions to be cautious to commander Satyaki, who had stayed behind. As soon as Jarasandha's army began to retreat, Satyaki was going to meet with us by way of Mount Gomanta along with a few select fearless warriors.

During this expedition to the South, after three months, we faced the biggest challenge of Dandakaranya! A challenge of the mountain ranges of Vindhya, Satpuda and Pariyatra.

There was only one narrow path to go through this forest, known as 'Dakshinapatha'! We took along an experienced forest-dweller as our guide, who scrupulously knew the tricky twists and turns of the path. Only the robust and sinewy horses that Daruka had bought with an expert's eye were with us.

Dakshinapatha! How narrow was it? So much so that only one horse rider holding the reins of his horse could barely walk taking one step at a time; that too while cutting the thorny wild creepers blocking his way, slowly moving forward with arduous effort.

"Dhakalya, how are we going to know when the night descends upon us in this dense forest? How are we going to rest in the night? How long is this journey going to last?" The otherwise confident dada raised a series of questions and doubts.

Putting my hands on dada's shoulder with great affection I said with a smile, "Oh dada, Haladhara, don't worry so much. We would recognize the night time by the clearly intensified creaking sound of the crickets that is so indistinct during the day time. The chirping of the birds would obviously cease by that time. Don't you think so? Sometimes the thunderous growling of the wild beasts will also make the path shudder at night.

"We will have to use our axes to cut the wild creepers and clear enough space to build small huts. We will have to dig trenches around them and keep fire burning in those trenches throughout the night. The fire will keep the wild beasts away from the huts, but we will still have to pay close attention to the fiery sparks to prevent wildfire. We will have to take turns amongst us as sentries throughout the night. We will be taking many such breaks during our journey.

"At dawn we will have to dismantle our huts and extinguish the fire completely by covering it with soil and continue our journey. We will have to sparingly use the rations that we are carrying with us. It will take us a month's time to safely get across this vast, dense forest. Then we will be able to enjoy the sunlight to our heart's content. For a day or two it will be an odd feeling to be suddenly exposed to the sun after a long journey in the darkness of this forest."

Giving each other support and encouragement, we determinedly completed this arduous journey. Finally, after a month we reached the other end of the forest along with our horses.

We crossed river Godavari along the border of the Vidarbha kingdom and

descended into the Ashmaka kingdom. We also crossed river Bhima, keeping on our right the Nasik area of Mount Janasthana in the Kuntala kingdom where Srirama had resided. We came to the border of the 'Padmawata' kingdom of king 'Padmawarna'.

Now the 'Bhrigu aashrama' of Parashurama located in the forest on the banks of the river Venna near Mahabalishwaram had come closer. I sent a messenger to Bhagwan Parashurama with the news of our arrival. We rested at the border for a day. Next day, early morning, Balaramadada and I left for our meeting with Bhrigu Parashurama along with a few hundred Yadavas.

First, we bathed in the confluence of Krishna and Koyana and then passed through the holy land of Karahataka, to enter the area near river Venna. Parashurama had sent two of his disciples with matted hair to receive us. Holding their shining axes on their shoulders they welcomed us. We left with them to meet the senior Bhrigushreshtha. We reached the tall, wooden gate of the Bhrigu aashrama.

The son of sage Jamadagni himself stood at the entrance with a smile on his face and his arms wide open, which completely wiped out his image that I had built in my mind for the last month and a half. I was absolutely stunned to see him. Just as I was enamoured by Aacharya Sandipani, I was drawn to the senior Bhrigu the moment I saw him. I moved forward briskly along with dada. Right at the entrance I laid myself prostrate at his feet to pay obeisance with utmost respect and humility. Dada followed suit. He instantly picked me up and holding me in an affectionate embrace he uttered words of blessings in a gentle rhythm, "Victory to you revered Yadava!" Dada was blessed the same way.

In Gokul, my restless urge for Yamuna would get quenched the moment I viewed her. Since we left Mathura I had longed to meet Bhrigushreshtha Parashurama. That thirst of mine which nobody else would understand got quenched only when I saw him in person.

He had a thick, full, and snow-white beard. He wore white upper and lower garments. *Rudraksha* garlands were tied around the matted hair on his head. Bhrigushreshtha Parashurama who was very aged, yet had a glow on his face and serene eyes, smiled peacefully and said, "Your arrival here has emancipated this land. I know who you are. Come into the aashrama. Take some rest and have some fruits first. Then we will talk." His words were as distinct and clear as the sound of an axe striking against a rock and also as melodic as the chanting of ॐ.



After we took rest Bhrigu Parashurama inquired about our journey with genuine interest. I elucidated to him my anxiety over Jarasandha's assaults on the Yadavas in entirety.

As he heard about my journey to the South, and the problem of Jarasandha he was lost in thought. Closing his eyes for a few moments he went into a meditative trance, and said, "Oh Yadava king, Srikrishna, your decision to leave Mathura was the right one. You have already declared a suitable reason and that has convinced all the Yadavas. I know very well why you left Mathura!

"You will never stay put in one place, leave alone Mathura. You are a '*Chakravarti*'. Wherever you put your feet, that land will be blessed. Therefore, you will constantly be on the move, and you should! Jarasandha will come looking for you wherever you go! Therefore, I would suggest that you should, along with your people, go to the strong and secure, naturally beautiful Mount 'Gomanta'. Once your Yadava army reaches there you should wipe out Jarasandha completely. After your triumph on Mount Gomanta come and visit me again. I have been saving an exceptionally precious gift for you since many ages now. I will be relieved once I hand it over to you with my own hands. I cannot give it to anybody else!"

Meanwhile Balaramdada who had not participated in our discussion but was totally impressed with aacharya's foresight, gathered his courage and said, "Bhagwan, it may seem disrespectful. Please forgive me, but I am in a dilemma whether to ask you or not. I would like to ask a question if I have your permission." Dada brought both his palms together and leaned humbly in front of Bhrigu. This look of his was totally new to me. I had never seen him so humble even in front of our parents.

"Go ahead Balarama, don't hesitate." The gleaming Bhrigu replied with a serene smile.

"Bhagwan, we didn't see your shining axe, usually resting on your shoulders when we met you. How come? Have you changed your mind about your vow of destruction of Kshatriyas? Or has our Kshatriya status been eradicated since Maharaja Yadu, as is believed?" Bhrigushreshtha looked at the golden-bladed plough that dada had taken down from his shoulder and gave a wide smile for a moment. He said, "Not I, but Srikrishna will give a convincing and pertinent answer to your question!" With his serene eyes, he looked at me purposefully. As our eyes met we both smiled.

Just as Bhrigushreshtha would have answered, I gave precisely the same

answer to dada and our Yadavas, “Oh Bhrigus and Yadavas, the axe is a symbol. The axe cleanses the intellect of the weeds! Bhagwan never had any enmity with the Kshatriya clan! He was against the vile attitude of the arrogant, blind and thoughtless Powers that obstructed growth and development— the basic attributes of life in the name of the Kshatriya *Dharma*. Once his mission was over he knowingly took the axe off his shoulders. His disciples have adopted the same axe as a custom in commemoration of their Guru. Dada, tomorrow you too will take your plough off your shoulders once your life’s mission is accomplished. Yet it will be associated with your name forever. You will be known as ‘Haladhara’ to future generations.

“Now, to speak about our Kshatriya status, it is not characterized by birth, but by innate valour. I think for the same reason Bhagwan has blessed us suitably. Maybe he has kept my precious gift with him for the same reason.”

“Perfect! I knew he would speak correctly. Srikrishna, Balarama, I confer many blessings on both of you. Krishna, Rama, may victory always be with you!”

Holding me on his right and dada on his left in an embrace Parashurama patted our shoulders affectionately. His touch had comforting warmth. We stayed for two days in the Bhrigu aashrama accepting the hospitality extended to us by Bhagwan, then left for Mount Gomanta.

Gomanta! This was the mountain with a very dense forest amongst all the mountains we had crossed so far. It was spread long and tall and was challenging to cross. Many dense forests of tall and thick-leafed teak trees had spread for many *yojanas* at the foothills. After that the gradual incline of the mountain was full of dense forests of other trees like *Jamun*, *Aamra*, *Khair*, *Anjan*, *Shisam*, *Kenjal*, *Kanchan* and many more. An open plateau was located at the summit of the mountain. It was also covered with grass and scattered trees. The Gomantaka kingdom of the *Kadamba* dynasty was clearly visible from this plateau on the western side.

Along with select Yadavas, Dada and I entered the thick forests of Gomanta. By evening we reached the summit. Our troops immediately built a few strong huts on the plateau using their axes and sickles. That night, standing on the tall boulder, I feasted my eyes upon the silver, water line of the western ocean visible far away on the horizon. Dada stood next to me. I said to him, “I don’t know why I was drawn to Yamuna when I was in Gokul and why am I irresistibly drawn to the western ocean ever since we came here

to kill Shankhasura!”

Looking once at the line of water in front and then at my eyes dada said, “You are drawn towards the ocean abound with water, but people like me get attracted to your ocean-like eyes. Where must be Mathura that we left far behind and where is this Mount Gomanta? Dhakalya, how far have we come?”

Then for a long time dada and I kept chatting on the boulder. My inquisitive sight kept wandering in the surroundings of Mount Gomanta in the twilight.

I started providing dada the information about the Southern region that I had gathered from my informers. Pointing to the east I said, “This is the Vanavasi kingdom. The Pandya and Malaya kingdoms are located in the south. At the end of this land of the Aaryas a place called ‘Kumari’ is located at the tip. There is also a gigantic southern ocean, much larger than the western ocean coming from the right and the eastern ocean from the east. The southern ocean meets these two oceans on the southern side.”

Our days passed blissfully on the beautiful Mount Gomanta, bustling with fauna. Within a week’s time dada and I wandered and surveyed as much area of the mountain as we could. We checked all the possible paths for descending the mountain and memorized them.

A variety of juicy fruits, clean water rich with iron and the cool breeze of the western wind made dada and me fall deeply in love with the mountain. We didn’t even realize how our blissful days began and how they ended.

Our joy started escalating when the troops of armed Yadava warriors from the southern kingdoms of Mahishmati, Padmawata, Vanavasi and Harita, began assembling on the mountain as per the message delivered by our prime messengers. Our delight reached its peak when the expert charioteer, commander Satyaki, possessor of knee-long arms, joined us with his troop. Now plenty of tents for the Yadava army were raised wherever they could find a place between the trees on Mount Gomanta. Our armed messengers started providing us minute specifics of the mountain right from the teak-wood forests at the bottom, up to the plateau region on the summit. The entire mountain was transformed into a huge military camp.

While passing through the forest of Dandakaranya, meeting Bhrigushreshtha Parashurama, and since arriving here I was constantly feeling that ‘Something was definitely going to happen here! Some spectacular event was going to take place that would be eternally memorable

for the future generations’.

That is exactly what happened. Barely a month had passed since we came here. One day along with the rising sun a tumultuous cacophony of war tabors and kettle drums flooded the thick forests of Mount Gomanta. The war cries kept escalating along with the rising sun. The shrill sound of the war drums was so loud that it scared the freely chirping birds away. Some were so petrified that they just sat mutely in their nests.

Dada, Satyaki, the commanders of the southern Yadava kingdoms and I – we all climbed up on the spacious, big boulder on the plateau and surveyed the bottom of the mountain. Waves of Magadha army full of elephants, horses and infantry were moving about at the foothills. They were clamorous. Rows of triangular, scarlet Magadha pennants were spread around. Behind them rows of silver Chedi flags were visible.

It was obvious that vengeance had taken over prudence. Jarasandha had redirected his seventeenth assault on Mathura right to Mount Gomanta in the South to take revenge on me. His wrath for me for executing Kansa had gradually reached its peak. He had followed me along with Shishupala, the Chedi king, and reached here, faraway to the South, directly at Mount Gomanta. He was accompanied by his allies like the Kalinga king Shrutayu, Kashmir king Gonarda, Kinnara king Druma, Malava king Suryaksha, Venudari, Chhagali, Somaka, Darada and so on. They had arrived with their armies.

Now with the celerity of a cheetah we took some prompt actions on the mountain. First, we withdrew our troops from the forests at the bottom to the top plateau. Then I divided the whole army according to the disposition of the mountain, taking a strong defensive stance. The Magadhas of Jarasandha never knew patience and composure. As soon as they came they immediately tried to break into the teakwood forests. Our Yadava army, already hidden in the forests, counterattacked fiercely and slaughtered them. That made the new incomers retreat in fear. A long arduous battle had begun.

Every day, Jarasandha and Shishupala started thrusting fresh warriors with strong mettle into the teakwood forests. A lot of them got killed in vain as they couldn’t do much in the cramped, thick forests. The Yadavas were spread halfway up the mountain. Jarasandha and Shishupala’s Magadha, Chedi and other troops were at the bottom of the mountain. The thick forests of teakwood lay in between. This scene remained undisturbed, without letting the enemy cross even an iota into the mountain forests.

Jarasandha had become impatient to grab this black Yadava of Mathura in his clutches. He was dreaming of slaughtering me with his mace, but for now he was stuck in one place. Wearing his body armour Jarasandha would restlessly move through the four divisions of his camp every day. Coming to the bottom of the mountain, he would hold his hand above his eyebrows and look up resignedly at the tip of the mountain with cringing eyes. Utterly frustrated, he had started shouting at the army commanders under him.

To lure Balaramadada and me out of the mountain and onto the open ground, he decided to set the entire Mount Gomanta aflame. He hastily withdrew his elephant and horse troops from the base of the mountain, and brought forward armed troops of his infantry holding burning torches in their hands. I immediately recognized what kind of devious, fiery move he was about to make.

Giving instant commands dada and I instructed everybody to leave the mountain by any way they could and gather on the western plateau at the base of the mountain.

The moment Magadha warriors touched the dry teak leaves spread on the ground with the burning torches, they instantly started burning like camphor. Within a short time, the complete base of Mount Gomanta got engulfed in the huge, rising flames of fire. The blowing wind flared them and the quivering, bright yellow flames of that inferno started rising sky high creating havoc.

Mount Gomanta usually boomed with the roaring sounds of innumerable wild animals. But now those wild animals like hyenas, wolves, cheetahs, tigers and lions got scared. They started running for their lives, desperately trying to jump high and long to escape the fire. Some succeeded, but others couldn't make it out of the fire. The acrid, unbearable smell of their burning fur and flesh began spreading into the atmosphere. The burning sensation of the flames made the herds of mammoth elephants cry for their lives. Raising their trunks, they let out ear-splitting, trumpeting cries. Ramming and shoving against each other they started running helter-skelter. Some of them escaped. Others fell down on the way, got burnt and finally died of unbearable pain.

Deer, rabbits, antelopes, wild pigs, wolves, foxes and all other animals started running hither and thither. While trying to escape some of them rammed into each other and fell in the fire. Many birds like eagles, cuckoos, pigeons, herons, peacocks, falcons and parrots dropped dead in the fire as if they were flightless, due to the fiery heat. Reptiles like serpents, lizards and

iguanas crawled out of their holes underground trying to escape the fire. A few of them succeeded, others collapsed wriggling in the fire and burned to death. Tall trees like teak, Anjan, Kanchan, Khair, KenjaL, *Jamun*, Hirada, and Behada made loud crashing noises while burning down. As the mountain forests turned into a huge pit of fire, the gust of wind scattered the hot burning ashes around.

Even Jarasandha's Magadha warriors at the frontline couldn't bear the blasts of hot air coming from the blazing mountain and inadvertently retreated a few meters back in fear.

On the Magadha base, inside their tents Jarasandha and Shishupala were happy and shouting ebullient cries with their commanders, and had already started guzzling down pots of Maireyaka wine. They had thought that Srikrishna and Balarama must have burned to death in the blazing fire of Mount Gomanta like sweet potatoes roasted in a fireplace.

Dada and I had already left the mountain after getting all the Yadava warriors safely out of the mountain from the western side. Just like an arrow shot out of the bow stops on its own only when its speed dies, the wildfire on Mount Gomanta was going to stop on its own sometime. It was in Jarasandha's hands to start the fire, but to stop it was in nobody's hands now – not his, mine, or dada's.

Our military joined hands with the military of the southern kingdom, with the wildfire illuminating the Vanavasi kingdom on the one hand and the Gomantaka kingdom on the other. Then this united Yadava army encircled the mountain completely and assaulted the intoxicated and unwary Jarasandha and Shishupala with the battle cry, 'Hail Goddess Ida'. The attack began even before the Magadhas and Chedis could get hold of their weapons. As our army reached the open plateau and vehemently attacked in the midst of the ear-splitting sounds of the war drums, the mammoth Magadha army got stunned. The Magadha warriors were already bedazzled by the wildfire, now they were totally bewildered. They couldn't figure out how and where to run.

The Magadhas were, in fact, proficient, courageous and valiant in war and at this moment they were sizeably larger in number than us. Yet, boosting the spirit of our brave warriors dada and I, mounted on elephants, attacked our enemy. The very first king dada encountered was King Darada. Within moments dada pulled him down from his chariot putting his Samvartaka plough around his neck, and with one strike of his Saunanda pestle executed

him.

It had never happened before in any of the previous wars, but it happened today. Though Jarasandha was an emperor and his terror had spread all over Aaryavarta, he retreated! He turned his back and started running! His army followed him. Our fervent, victorious army began chasing the Magadhas now. Holding the Saunanda pestle in my hands and holding the Samvartaka plough on his shoulder, dada and I were now leading them in a chariot. The Magadhas and Chedis running ahead and the northern and southern Yadavas behind them; the chasing game lasted till evening. Finally, we drove them out of the borders of the Vanavasi kingdom, and came back as the evening was setting in.

We came to the base of Mount Gomanta and camped on the same spot where Jarasandha and Shishupala had camped before. The mountain was still burning. Our troops built new tents in the light of the blazing fire that was as bright as daylight. Dinner was served. Our warriors were exhausted after fighting for so many days and the chase of the Magadhas today. They rested in their tents and on the open plateau.

The next day our victorious army began marching towards the Shurparaka aashrama of Bhrgushreshtha Parashurama. The news of our victory over Jarasandha had automatically reached his aashrama. The aashrama bhrigus joyously welcomed us with festivity. Now I was eager to see the dazzling, bright, visionary and grand face of venerable Parashurama. How wisely he had guided me to go to Mount Gomanta! What if I had not met him at all? What if Jarasandha had caught up with us on the open plateau? Bhrgushreshtha was still near the banks of river Venna. After accepting the hospitality of the Shurparakas, Balaramadada and I left for that aashrama, along with our army.

With us was our commander Satyaki, who had travelled through Dandakaranya and reached the southern kingdoms right after us. He was much impressed by our recent victory over Jarasandha and Shishupala. While travelling again by way of the Koyana river passage, dada, he and I were together in the same chariot. Many months had passed since we had left Mathura. During the recent eventful period, we hadn't got any news from Mathura. So, I was trying to extract each and every piece of news from Satyaki. He was elaborating some things on his own. He said, "Maharaja Ugrasena and all the Yadava leaders of Mathura are tired of these consecutive wars. Though you and Balarama have left Mathura, they are still worried that

the Magadhas will return.”

“Commander, Jarasandha, his allies and the Magadhas will never assault Mathura again now! I have also taken a firm decision. After this journey through the South, when we return to Mathura I am going to present it to the Yadava royal council. The situation in which and the way I left Mathura is a matter of anguish for Yadavas. I know it well. That guilt needs to be removed. I will do it myself at the right time.” I consoled Satyaki patting him on the shoulder.

We came closer to Bhrigu aashrama near river Venna. Last time only dada, Vipruthu, a few select Yadavas and I were there. This time we had the victorious Yadava army of the South with us. This time Bhrigushreshtha Parashurama himself came to receive us with all his disciples. And yes, this time a six-seven-inch-wide axe was shining on his shoulders! Dada, Satyaki and I – we all prostrated respectfully at the feet of the bright, visionary sage.

Walking towards his cottage, he kept his hand on my shoulder and said lovingly, “You felt deep regret when Jarasandha burned down Mount Gomanta, a beautiful creation of nature that came into existence after hundreds of years of penance. And you are right to feel the pain. But I clearly foresee that even you will be compelled to take such a decision in the future, to burn down a forest even thicker than this. And you will have to do it for the sake of humanity’s welfare.” The elderly Bhrigu smiled in his thick, pure white beard.

We arrived at his cottage and had some fruits. In the centre of his cottage there was a *Yajna* pit that would be ablaze throughout the day and night. Bhrigushreshtha Parashuram sat on a tiger skin on a tall, wooden seat next to the *Yajna* pit. On his right and left his main disciples and our Yadava leaders were standing wherever they could find place.

Keeping the *yajna* pit in the middle, dada and I sat on deer skins in front of Bhrigu. Our Yadava army was dispersed outside the cottage throughout the aashrama. As Aacharya Sandipani used to give us a discourse in his solemn, melodious voice in Ankapada aashrama, Parashurama said to us with the same intent of a Guru, “Rama-Srikrishna, only Srirama, the son of Dasharatha, along with Lakshmana had crossed the Dandakaranya, the southernmost tip of Aaryavarta before. Now you have come, and even I got a chance to meet you.

“I am much more experienced than both of you as I am older in age. Based on that experience I can clearly foresee the purpose of your life. I am going to



sum it up for you briefly. Listen carefully.

“The essence of true Kshatriya *Dharma* is the protection of the life and rights of the weak. That is the true meaning of Purushartha.

“Brahman *Dharma* is that which explains in a simple way, what is meant by responsibility, what is nature, what is life, and what are rights.

“Though I am a Brahmanakumara by birth I have dutifully practised the Kshatriya *Dharma*. I annihilated the supercilious and arrogant Kshatriyas who blocked the flow of life. I never had any desire to possess any royal thrones. I have been building Bhrigu aashramas throughout Aaryavarta and have devoted my life to the duty of giving knowledge to others as a Brahmin.

“Let me tell you the meaning of life in short as I have comprehended it. Jnana, Vijnana, and Prajnana are the three basic realms of life. Jnana is complete cognizance of our surroundings and nature.

“Vijnana is special knowledge. The detailed knowledge of a particular subject. I obtained Vijnana by acquiring the knowledge of the Brahmastra.

“Prajnana is the thorough knowledge of all facets of life, including the knowledge of self. Prajnana is the quest for the eternal energy that resides within oneself and within the animate and inanimate.

“Whatever I am telling you now is very significant as it is from beyond the realms of Jnana and Vijnana. It is from the realm of Prajnana.

“Rama-Srikrishna, though you are born in the Yadu dynasty, you don't belong only to the Yadava dynasty, not even to the Shursena kingdom, and not just to the Aaryavarta which ends at the borders of Dandakaranya. You are the eternally burning lamps on the bank of the perpetually flowing Ganga of human life. You cannot be contained within the limits of a dynasty, a place or time.

“With a specific vision in my mind I travelled and worked all my life. Srikrishna, I see in your eyes that you are my true heir in terms of my life's mission, and therefore I am going to present you with an invaluable, divine gift today. I can see that you are fully capable of understanding its essence, activating it at the right time and immersing it when necessary. You are the only one who solely and truly deserves this.”

The senior Bhrigu closed his eyes gradually. His face in the meditative trance started to look hot and glowing like the blazing fire in the *Yajna* pit. The mantras of initiation began shooting out of his mouth like rapid arrows. They resembled the sound of my Paanchajanya conch. I had never heard these mantras before. Within moments they made everybody around us feel

amazed and speechless. But they were swiftly getting inscribed in my memory. Each particle of my body blossomed like never before.

Instantly Aacharya's cottage got filled with various echoing, melodious sounds. Those sounds went on escalating every moment. Within a few moments, the cottage got filled with a dazzling light that would put the brilliance of hundreds and millions of suns to shame.

The glowing bright, meditating senior Bhrigu with a white beard and matted hair raised his right index finger in the air and it stayed there for a moment or two. A shining, divine chakra with twelve spokes, swiftly revolving around its axis appeared instantly on his finger, like a bud of *Brahmakamala* blossoming in the early morning in Manas sarovar. Its divine light blinded everyone in the cottage. They couldn't see anything but the powerful light. Out of fear they all tried to grab hold of each other for support. Dada was also holding my hand tightly and was captivated. Yes! Only I could see it clearly. The spinning divine chakra carried by Bhrigu. Along with Bhrigushreshtha holding the chakra in his hand, I could also clearly see each and every corner of the cottage. To me that blinding divine light looked and seemed like the cool moonlight in Gokul on the night of Purnima and *Rasa* dance.

As Bhrigushreshtha signalled with his eyes I got up and walked away from dada, towards him. He uttered a few mantras in my ears and said to me, "Experience the power of this 'Sudarshan' chakra yourself!" He closed his eyes and chanting the mantra he projected the divine chakra in front of him. Within a trice, it crossed over the river Venna, touched the faraway mountain ranges, and swiftly coming back on his finger it rested there. Spinning around itself it gradually disappeared, just as it had appeared.

With his eyes closed, Bhrigurama released the sacred water from his water pot on my right palm and said, take a sip of *Aachamana*. I did as instructed. He further said, "Yadava king, son of Vasudeva, Srikrishna, from today onwards you have the authority over this chakra of brilliance called 'Sudarshan', which was with me for many years. Achyuta, you already know the story of the birth of this chakra! However, let me repeat it just to refresh your memory.

"Many eras back Lord Shiva himself created this divine Sudarshan chakra to destroy the malicious powers of the demon Tripura. Lord Vishnu Himself..." Bhrigu stopped short before saying something. He opened his eyes and started looking at me. His eyes that looked like the burning pit of a

*Yajna* fire some time back now looked very serene. His mysterious smile beginning from his lips and lingering in his beard seemed to me like my own smile. The thought made me reflect his smile.

While closing his eyes again Bhrigu said, “Who is Lord Vishnu? Do I really need to explain it to you? You know it all– everything! So then, ‘our’ Vishnu offered Shiva a thousand lotuses with utter devotion to obtain the Sudarshan chakra. Then it was given to Agni. Agni gave it to Varuna. From Varuna it came to me. I never made use of the chakra in my life as I never felt the need to do so. My axe was more than enough to accomplish my life’s mission.

“From today you have become the complete master of the divine Sudarshan chakra. Launch it only when you find it absolutely necessary to do so. You have to protect Truth, Justice and *Dharma*. Balarama will have to accompany you like your shadow and protect you.

“Remember oh sons of Yadavas! Using Balarama’s plough, you have to plough this land of the Aryas and sow the seeds of the Truths of life that will be cherished for ages. And you have to protect them with the Sudarshan chakra.

“My life mission is over now. Srikrishna, in my opinion you are the only one suitable to carry forward my mission. I will give my final discourse to the disciples in Shurparaka aashrama and then head directly towards the Himalayas, for Vanaprasthashram.

“As the senior leader of all Bhrigus I give you plenty of blessings. May victory be with you Srikrishna, Balarama...!”

Ever since I obtained the mantras of Sudarshan I was completely transformed. Listening seemed better than speaking now! My vision was always thirsty to foresee the faraway future. I constantly felt that I had gained a miraculous power of reading a person inside out. I could hear the susurrus of huge trees like the *Vata* and *Ashwattha*, susurrus originating from thousands of roots underground and spreading to millions of leaves which reached out to the sky. I could constantly feel that this power was beyond the body, the mind, and even beyond Kala, the Time.

Dada, Satyaki and I were sitting in our tent, discussing our return journey and the hurdles we would be facing. Only dada and Satyaki were talking, and the commanders of the four southern kingdoms were answering their questions. I was just listening.

Meanwhile, the head of our surveillance team brought in a robust citizen

inside. He bowed down and said, “This is a citizen of the Karvir city in the Padmawata kingdom. He wants to protest against some kind of injustice. He demands justice.”

I checked out the citizen of Karvir from head to toe. Putting his hands together he said with utmost sincerity, “Maharaja Srikrishna, do we have to leave the Padmawata kingdom and find another place to live? King Shrigala is behaving just like a jackal, as his name implies! He is forcefully seizing our women, wealth and land. Many citizens have suffered his wrath. Some have fled from the kingdom.

“We have heard that you executed Kansa, the tyrant king of Mathura even though he was your own mama. We don’t see anybody else who can penalize King Shrigala. Please do something, save us from the clutches of this vicious king.”

I stood up and went closer to him. It amused me that he had called me ‘Maharaja’. I was not ensconced on any royal throne, and never had the desire to possess one. I had not even been formally crowned, and yet he called me ‘Maharaja’. I gently patted his shoulder. Immediately dropping on his knees, he put his head on my feet. With that touch, the same sacred sound that had echoed before the manifestation of Sudarshan resonated through my entire body. Holding his shoulders, I pulled him up and comforted him. I commanded Satyaki, “Commander, plan our troops’ return journey via Karvir!”

Our fourfold army travelled in the direction of Karvir. Shrigala’s Karvir kingdom was a tiny vassal kingdom, contained within the Padmawata kingdom. It was located on the banks of river Panchaganga. But the arrogant and insolent Shrigala considered himself to be an invincible, powerful emperor. He didn’t even recognize the authority of king Padmavarna.

He had built a strong, protective fortification on the banks of river Panchaganga. Satyaki offered many suggestions to cross that. I merely listened to his suggestions. Then using a herd of elephants, I got the gates of Shrigala’s royal fort broken open. Dada, Satyaki, a few select Yadavas and I entered the fort forcefully. Our troops collided with those of Shrigala. I stood at the bottom of the staircase leading to Shrigala’s palace. I carried only the Ajitanjaya bow on my shoulders, the Paanchajanya conch tied around my waist and the Vaijayanti garland around my neck. Shrigala was a tall, hefty and armed warrior. Standing on the highest step, wielding his huge, shining, round iron mace, he roared, “You low-life cowherd of Vasudeva who ran

away from Mathura! You may have forced Emperor Jarasandha to retreat using the wildfire on Gomanta to your advantage. But this is the city of Karvir, the city of invincible wrestlers. I am the sole emperor here. You better go back the way you came. Otherwise I will tear you to pieces and eat you raw!”

His poisonous words like hot embers didn't fall on my ears at all. The divine mantras of Sudarshan that had been echoing deep in my mind for so long, inadvertently started revolving in my mind and my brain. Only I could feel the barely audible, unrestrained, bright waves of those mantras coming from my lips. Blazing, radiant particles started moving about through my entire body like embers tossed around. My eyes closed involuntarily. I was no more Srikrishna Vasudeva Yadava, only a pillar of bright, radiant, pure Light! My right hand slowly got raised. Following an ear-splitting, tumultuous sound that filled Shrigala's palace, the radiant Sudarshan chakra with twelve spokes manifested, revolving swiftly around itself on my right index finger!

It was revolving rapidly, almost invisible to the sight.

My index finger involuntarily bent forward aiming at the target. Sudarshan had been launched for the first time! On the banks of Panchaganga, in the Karvir kingdom! In a trice, unmistakably cutting through Shrigala's arrogant, thick neck the radiant chakra leaped forward. His tall, hefty, insolent, armoured torso tumbled down the stairs splattering blood all over. His bloody head followed. The iron mace which was agog to crush my head, came tumbling down with clanging sounds and lay near my feet. The moment his blood touched me the chakra retreated swiftly. Settling on my index finger, it revolved around itself for a moment with decreasing rotations and gradually vanished!

The Karvir city on the banks of Panchaganga was liberated from the clutches of Shrigala. Shrigala's queen Padmawati had only one son named 'Shakradeva'. Strong like a teakwood log, he was healthy and had just entered youth. He was wounded while fighting with our army. Our warriors presented him in front of dada and me as a royal prisoner, tied in ropes. We didn't want to capture the throne of Karvir, just wanted to do the same that I did in Mathura after Kansa's execution. We wanted to formally declare Shrigala's son as the royal heir of Karvir. But that young prince kept staring at us with sheer hatred and contempt. This man had a rare mettle. It was necessary to steer him in the right direction.

Going near him I loosened the ropes tied around him and freed him. He was still staring with his fiery eyes full of loathe. Looking directly into his fearless eyes I patted his shoulders and said, “Oh son of Shrigala, never follow your father’s destructive ways. It won’t be helpful in any way. We are entrusting you with the responsibility of the Karvir kingdom. Oh, Son of Karvir, build a kingdom here, for the welfare and happiness of your subjects. In memory of your father declare a new name for Karvir, Kolhapur.”

Now the son of Karvir transformed completely. Instantly bending down, he put his head on dada’s and my feet. Pulling him up, we embraced him. That night we tasted the delicious aromatic rice made from the fine rice grains that grew on the fertile land of Panchaganga’s coast. Karvir was a holy place, so we bathed in the Panchaganga too, and drank pots full of rich creamy milk of the healthy buffalos. After a week, the citizens of Karvir along with Shakradeva gathered on the banks of Panchaganga to bid farewell to us. They gave out victorious shouts, “Hail Lord of Mathura Maharaja Srikrishna, Balarama! Hail Lord of Karvir, Maharaja Shakradeva!” Our victorious Yadava army left Karvir.

Leaving behind the Kuntala and Ashmaka kingdoms again, we camped near the border of Vidarbha after many sojourns. Kundinapura, the famous city of Vidarbha was only a few *yojanas* away. King Bhishmaka had much earlier collaborated with Jarasandha against us. His son Rukmi was as impatient and short-tempered as our Satyaki. He had the strong support of his four brothers – Rukmamali, Rukmaratha, Rukmabahu and Rukmakesha. During this sojourn Satyaki asked me, “Should we send our messenger to Bhishmaka and ask for his consent? There is a huge, ancient temple of Goddess Ambika here. We can pay obeisance to the goddess!”

“No, not right now. We are going to pay obeisance to the goddess at the right time!” Smiling, I declined Satyaki’s suggestion.

We reached Dandakaranya again on our way back. After a month’s gruelling journey, we finally crossed Dandakaranya and arrived in the Bhojapur city of the Avanti kingdom. This was the city of King Kuntibhoja, the foster father of our Kunti *aatyā*. Here we unexpectedly met with Gargamuni. He had visited King Yavana of Ajitanjaya city on the western coast. I had a strong feeling about the name of the city – Ajitanjaya and the name of the king, ‘Yavana’. My bow had the same name as the city and ‘Yavana’ were the people living in the faraway region of Gandhara, river Kabra. All said and done they were outsiders. I questioned Gargamuni,

“What is your relation with King Yavana?” He astutely avoided the answer by saying something vague. He was the royal priest, as revered as our Guru. Therefore, I didn’t vex him any further.

After many sojourns, we reached the borders of Mathura. This time Maharaja Ugrasena came to receive us along with Vasudevababa and few select Yadavas from the eighteen royal families.

The victorious news of our triumph over insolent Jarasandha had reached the Shursena kingdom long back. All the citizens of Mathura had gathered at the border. Uddhava was also there, right in front, next to Baba along with his brothers Bruhu and Chitru.

As we descended from the chariot the women from the royal family put a vermilion dot on our foreheads. They welcomed us with platters of lighted oil lamps. Various musical instruments were being played. In that loud sound, people couldn’t hear each other. Meanwhile, seeing me, eager Uddhava instantly came forward, and said to me, “Dada, your face looks more radiant than ever. I have never seen it so bright before! I am proud of you for defeating Jarasandha. But, but I am quite upset with you about one thing!”

“About what? Come, let’s talk.” I moved forward with him. We paid obeisance to baba and Maharaja Ugrasena. Getting rid of Jarasandha after a long time of twelve years, the oppressed Yadavas were exultant about Jarasandha’s retreat from Mount Gomanta. It was natural. Tossing vermilion in the air, dancing with pomp and vigour they took out a huge procession of us in the chariot. Asking Uddhava to get in the chariot I asked him, “Udho, brother what were you so upset about?”

“You left Mathura so suddenly, without meeting me and without taking me with you, that is why.”

“That’s it?! As a dear brother, I had shown you the previous three precious jewels immediately after I got them. I thought you will ask me what I have brought with me today.” I confounded Uddhava and kept him busy in my questions.

“You have brought with you the most precious, invisible jewel this time too. I already know that!”

“How come?” I asked him. The chariot was moving ahead with the speed of an ant. On the beat of the instruments the otherwise pugnacious Yadavas, were dancing and shouting slogans!

“From the expression on your face! Your face is emitting extraordinary

splendour today. Tell me dada, what have you brought with you?”

Putting my hand on dear Uddhav’s shoulder and looking deep into his clear, transparent, philosophical eyes I said, “I have brought a jewel that gives a healthy acceleration to the lifecycle of the universe. Can you guess what it is?”

“To the lifecycle of the universe? Dada, you have formally obtained the holy mantras of the divine Sudarshan chakra! Tell me, where did you meet Bhagwan Parashurama?” With uncontrollable joy Uddhava embraced me tightly in the slow-moving chariot. I had never seen him so excited before. It felt like not I, but he himself had obtained the Sudarshan chakra.

After dinner, in the family room, Vasudevababa looked quite worried about something. He said, “Dear son Srikrishna, I get a chance to meet my three sisters and your aunts Shrutashrava, Rajadhidevi and Shrutadevi now and then, and share the news of their welfare. But my beloved sister Kunti has been alienated from me since childhood.”

“Father, I can see that Kunti *aatya* is really your most favourite sister!” I stopped for a moment. Supporting baba Thorali immediately said, “What exactly are you implying?” I smiled and said, “Thorale, isn’t that so? Weren’t dada and I alienated from both of you since our birth? How could baba forget that?”

“Let it be. Srikrishna, your *aatya* has been bravely facing her tough destiny. After the death of her husband Maharaja Pandu, she has recently returned to Hastinapura from Mount Gandhamadana in the Himalayas. Her five sons are with

her. I don’t know how she is going to bring them up in Hastinapura.”

Moving close to him I lovingly held both his hands in mine. Glancing at his thick beard with traces of white I said, “Baba, your dear son Srikrishna will never keep away from his beloved Kunti *aatya*. I have never seen her sons, my paternal cousins, but I will never ever forget them – the five Pandavas in my life. They are as beloved to me as they are to you.

“In the name of the infallible power that I have obtained, I promise you as your son that I will see that Kunti *aatya* and the Pandavas get justice! I will stand behind them for the rest of my life.”

“I was sure you would say the same. That is why I shared my anguish for Kunti with you.”

I immediately dispatched a messenger and called for minister Akrura. As he arrived, putting the responsibility of this mission on his experienced



shoulders I said, “Akrurakaka, you are to immediately leave for the royal capital Hastinapura of the Kuru kingdom, and meet with our Kunti *aatya* and her sons, the Pandavas.

“Just as you comforted and supported us in Gokul, do the same for her. The Pandavas are still young. Don’t forget to skilfully convey to Maharaja Dhritarashtra to treat them duly. Keep an eagle eye on the Pandavas and make a note of their nature and their special qualities. Keep in mind that in future I may form a deep bond with them!”

“As you wish sire. After returning from Hastinapura I will present the details to you.” Akrura left to fulfil the duty assigned to him.

Looking at his disappearing figure, a clear vision of the royal palace of Hastinapura, far away on the banks of Ganga swam before my eyes. In spite of his blindness Maharaja Dhritarashtra was dreaming of the coronation of Duryodhana – the eldest of his one hundred sons.

Maharani Gandhari’s crafty brother Shakuni who had come from the Gandhara kingdom, was willingly feeding him with cunning, political machinations in his sweet tongue. The royal gurus Drona, and Kripa were occupied in edifying the royal princes in warfare. The only person with a sense of justice that I could see was the royal minister of the Kurus, Mahatma Vidura. I had instructed Akrurakaka to meet him too. The onus of the Kuru kingdom which was located far away on the banks of Ganga lay on the shoulders of the senior Kuru Bhishma. Hearing his life’s story from baba I had developed a natural affection for him. It was exactly the same feeling that I had for Uddhava.

Now father’s face brightened with satisfaction. Coming closer to me, he held both my hands lovingly in his. Gently patting my hands, father talked to me in a melodious tone that reminded me of Aacharya Sandipani and Bhagwan Parashurama, “Srikrishna, every valiant warrior from the eighteen royal families of the Yadavas has always kept one aspiration in his life – of obtaining the highest epithet of the human race, the epithet of ‘Vaasudeva’ – the Supreme Being.

“My dream of becoming a ‘Vaasudeva’ was never fulfilled.

“Dear son, would you make that unfulfilled dream of mine come true? I can clearly see all the essential divine qualities and traits amalgamated in you to achieve that status. Will you accomplish this unfulfilled wish of mine?”

Looking into his eyes with an immense and incomprehensible self-confidence I said, “For sure baba, I will become ‘Vaasudeva’. Working

diligently to achieve that goal, I will travel all over the world, and spread Love that goes beyond discrimination. I will treat all like they are part of my own existence, and will diligently strive to gain the knowledge to spread love around me. I will act in a neutral, detached way that befits only the 'Vaasudeva'. Though I was born within the confines of a prison, I will keep the life-flow moving freely. Your son Srikrishna will attain the epithet of 'Vaasudeva', and you will surely witness it with your own eyes."

With a certain determination, I bowed down and paid obeisance to my parents. That night walking towards my bed chamber the divine mantras of Sudarshan chakra kept resonating in my mind. Lying in bed, while observing the symbols of the conch, fish, flag, *swastika* and chakra on my rosy palm and stroking the hairy calf symbol on my chest only one word surrounded my existence and kept revolving around me – 'Vaasudeva, Vaasudeva!'

The very next day, in the royal council of the Yadavas, minister Vipruthu made a significant announcement in front of Maharaja Ugrasena. Pointing to father who was sitting on the right of the Maharaja he said, "Vasudeva's sister, wife of the Chedi king Damaghosha – Shrutashravadevi has arrived in Mathura from the city of Shuktimati to meet him. She has come from the Chedi kingdom to discuss something of utmost importance. Please allow me to present her in the council."

Dada and I kept looking at each other after hearing that. We were going to see father's eldest sister, our eldest *aatya* for the first time.

The minister reverentially presented the Chedi Maharani, our *aatya* in the council. Shrutashravadevi presented royal gifts to Maharaaj Ugrasena, offered salutations to him, and addressing the Yadava council, especially our father, she said, "I am the daughter of Mathura. My son Shishupala is beyond my control and that of the king. He has associated himself with the Magadha Emperor Jarasandha of Girivraja. He recently chased Srikrishna along with Jarasandha and conceded humiliating defeat on Mount Gomanta. He has returned home barely saving his own life. I implore the Yadavas, Vasudevadada and especially Srikrishna to forget and forgive the recklessness of my son."

This was completely unexpected for Maharaja Ugrasena. Utterly perplexed he couldn't even respond properly to her plea. He kept looking expectantly at Vasudevababa. I could clearly see baba caught in the predicament due to blood relations. This stalemate had to be broken. I had to intervene. By now I had enough practice to convince things to others in a way that was easily

comprehensible to them.

I got up immediately, glanced around the council hall and said, “Yadava warriors, the Maharani of Chedi is the daughter of Mathura, so the Yadavas should accept her plea without a doubt. I readily accept it. On behalf of all present here I promise our revered *aatya* that I will patiently tolerate one hundred offences of her son, my cousin Shishupala. Nonetheless he will never be able to commit the hundred and first offence! He should be watchful not to commit that mistake. Otherwise he will have to suffer the consequences of his actions. My dear *aatya* should be content with this promise. She should accept the hospitality of the Yadavas and convey our regards to Maharaja Damaghosha.”

*Aatya* went back satisfied. Nowadays for no reason I was reminiscing Gokul in Vraja. Though it was close in distance, for me it was not possible to pay a visit there. For one thing, if I went there it would be really difficult to come back. The other reason was that I had been completely transformed since I left Gokul, therefore the gopas and gopikas of Gokul were not going to be able to bond with me like they did before. The ‘Srikrishna’ in me had no right to shatter the image of the ‘Gopalkrishna’ in their hearts.

Therefore, I brought up the subject when Balaramadada, Revativahini, baba and Thorali were having a family discussion, and dada was in a pleasant mood. I told him, “Dada, you should go to Vraja one of these days and meet Nandababa, Yashodama, Eka, all our childhood friends, Radha and the gopagopis, and bring the news of their wellbeing to us.

“And do one thing. Don’t wear the royal costume while leaving from here. Wear the simple gopa dress of Vraja and visit them by being one of them. Only then they will recognize you, and open their hearts to you.”

As per my suggestions dada went to Vraja and brought the news of the wellbeing of all the people there.

Mathura was free from worries at present, now that the threat of Jarasandha and Magadha’s assaults had been warded off. Days were passing by joyously. Taking the chariot, I would usually go for a ride with dada and Uddhava on the shores of Yamuna. During one such ride dada asked me a tricky question, “Brother, you entangled me in the chains of marriage, but what about you?”

“I have never been approached with a proposal by any king like you were, dada. Otherwise I would have thought about it too.” I dismissed his question casually.

That day after returning to the royal palace, minister Vipruthu presented a

very peculiar news to our family. His head hanging low he said, “Bhishmaka, also known as Hiranyaroman, the king of Vidarbha has organized the Swayamwar – wedding ceremony – of his daughter Rukmini, but he has not invited the Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom!”

Maharaja Ugrasena asked Vipruthu, “Minister, what could be the reason that the Yadavas have not been invited by Bhishmaka?”

Backing him, baba said, “How come Bhishmaka has been so mesmerized by Jarasandha?”

Minister Vipruthu answered hesitatingly, “The princess is still young anyway. And Mathura is so far away from Kundinapura. It is possible that they may have forgotten our royal family by oversight.”

“How is it possible minister? We have just recently returned passing by their kingdom after executing Shrigala, the southern king of Karvir.” Balaramadada firmly emphasized his point.

“I know why the king of Vidarbha has not invited the Yadavas. Word is that our forefather Maharaja Yadu was cursed by his father Yayati. Everyone believes that since then, Yadavas have lost their Kshatriya status. The Royals of Vidarbha do not consider the Yadavas as their equals.” I said calmly after hearing all the opinions, bringing the discussion to the point. The minister was startled.

“...Therefore, only for that purpose I have decided to attend the Swayamwar ceremony even without any invitation. Dada will stay behind for the protection of Mathura. I will bring the princess of Vidarbha to Mathura in the presence of King Bhishmaka, Jarasandha’s ally, his son Rukmi – the disciple of Bhrigushreshtha Parashurama, and his brothers Rukmamali, Rukmakesha, Rukmaketu, and Rukmabahu. Initially I will try to reconcile with them and if that doesn’t work, as the last resort I will abduct her by force as per the great tradition of the Kshatriyas.” I spoke with a certain resolve. Hearing my words, the royal council calmed down. Only two people spoke correctly. Uddhava said, “Dada, your decision is right and it befits you perfectly.” dada said, “Be rest assured. I will look after Mathura.”

A few days before Kartiki Purnima, our troops left the borders of Mathura, moving towards Dandakaranya again. Once before I had passed through this dense forest with the intense urge to meet Parashurama. This time I was going to pass through it again, for obtaining the Vidarbha princess whom I had not seen so far.

Our army included select warriors from the eighteen royal families of

Yadavas – Anadhrishti, Satyaki, Uddhava, Avagaha, Shini and many more. This time we followed a different route, crossing river Charmanvati in the Kuntibhoja kingdom and passing through the Nishadha kingdom. Again, we made an arduous journey through Dandakaranya. After a month’s time, we entered the Vidarbha kingdom of the Aandhrabhrutya dynasty.

Kundinapura! The royal capital of the Aandhrabhrutyas. On the outskirts of the city many kings invited for the Swayamwar had settled in their camps. Among those were kings like Jarasandha, Shishupala and Shalva. Also, kings of southern and eastern kingdoms like Panchala, Vatsa, Matsya, Videha, Kosala, Anga, Vanga, Tripura and Uttkala were assembled there. Spies were active in gathering news from the rival camps. Various kings were being named as the prospective ‘Son-in-law of Vidarbha’ in all the camps. The name of Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom was not even being mentioned in any of the camps. If at all it came up, it was instantly rejected by bringing up the old curse and the subject was changed. The tension increased as the Swayamwar ceremony was only four days away. We got hopeful news from only one camp – the camp of King Krathakaishika!

He did not approve of the fact that we were being excluded from the Swayamwar based on the rumour of the eradication of our Kshatriya status. King Krathakaishika dispatched his minister to us and invited us honourably to his city. There in the presence of Satyaki and Anadhrishti, Krathakaishika bestowed his kingdom upon me. In the presence of everyone in the royal council, he crowned me in a proper ceremony at the hands of the royal priests.

After coming so far after crossing the Dandakaranya it would have been degrading to the valour of the Yadavas accompanying me, to return for such a trivial reason. Therefore, I accepted the kingdom of King Krathakaishika. For once in my life I sat on the royal throne. Honouring Krathakaishika’s earnest affection I became a formally instated king, and returned to the frontiers of Kundinapura along with our united armies.

Now we were officially eligible for participating in the Swayamwar ceremony of the Vidarbha princess. We were waiting in our camp for the next day’s Swayamwar ceremony.

In reality the Swayamwar did not take place at all. That very night Jarasandha, Shishupala and Shalva turned the wheels of a conspiracy. They organized a council of all the assembled kings, in which Jarasandha and Shishupala vilified me intensively.

After the council, they sent a message to Bhishmaka's son Rukmi – 'If Srikrishna, a cowherd who was defeated in war and who was made king by somebody else is treated the same way as us in the Swayamwar ceremony we will never approve it. Srikrishna is not a Kshatriya! He is a worthless, low-life cowherd! He has no right to be in the Swayamwar ceremony at all. His participation in the Swayamwar is an insult to us.'

King Bhishmaka got utterly confused by this message. Rukmi advised him, "Order Srikrishna to go back, and organize the Swayamwar ceremony for the rest of the kings who are assembled. He was on the verge of convincing Bhishmaka to do so. As Krathakaishika reached there on time and presented our side to Bhishmaka, he had a change of heart. He was ready to invite the Yadavas to the Swayamwar ceremony.

As that news spread among the kings assembled on the outskirts of Kundinapura, they lost their temper. Jarasandha and Shishupala were the first ones to abandon their camps and return to their kingdoms. Following them Shalva and all other kings left their camps.

We were the only ones left on the desolate land of Vidarbha – the Yadavas of the Shursena kingdom and our closest ally Krathakaishika. That day at our camp base I was at a loss of words to communicate with Krathakaishika. How obstinate were the kings of Aaryavarta! Finally, with resolve I said to our strongest supporter, "Dear friend, let us return to your royal city now. Let our warriors take some rest. Then we will return to Mathura. From today onwards you have become our closest ally."

On our return to Krathakaishika's kingdom, the first thing I did was to reinstate his royal crown to him in a formal ceremony. Putting the crown back on his head I returned his kingdom to him. The burden on my head was released and I felt so liberated at that time. While returning in the embellished chariot gifted to us by Krathakaishika I said to Uddhava, "Udho, you always admire your dada and feel so proud of him. But see how he was humiliated by the trio of Jarasandha, Shishupala and Shalva!"

"Whatever you say dada, only you can take such a decision to return Krathakaishika's kingdom to him, and it befits you perfectly. You did not let anything tarnish your pure reputation. I am indeed proud of you." Satyaki and Anadhrishti were following us in Garudadhwaaja. In front of them Uddhava and I were in the decorated chariot gifted by Krathakaishika.

At this time, deep down in the recesses of my mind the mantras of Sudarshan chakra were resonating vaguely. But at the surface of my mind

only two names were revolving. I could clearly see the faces associated with those names in the natural surroundings around me – one was of Krathakaishika and the second was of the not yet seen Vidarbha princess, Rukmini! Really, what did she look like and how was she in person?

On our return to Mathura we faced a very bizarre situation regarding our elderly royal priest Gargamuni. Even I didn't know what to ask him and how to ask it. Gargamuni was the father of our probably foremost enemy, and that bitter truth came to our notice just now!

Jarasandha had repeatedly failed in his attempts to uproot us from Mathura. So, he had played a very astute game this time. He had formed an alliance with Shalva, the ruler of the Saubha kingdom. To annihilate the Yadavas, rather to destroy me for good, he had summoned to Aaryavarta, Kalayavana, our enemy from near the faraway kingdom of Gandhara!

Shalva himself was not naïve. He owned a high-speed aircraft, a sky-travelling machine that could easily travel thousands of *yojanas*. It was named 'Saubha' in honour of his kingdom. His royal capital Martikavati was located on Mount Arbuda between the borders of Aanarta and Marusthali. He had flown to the Gandhara kingdom in his Saubha aircraft along with his minister and commander and invited Kalayavana to assault us.

Kalayavana used to reside in his state within the Gandhara country for some time and at other times in the southern kingdom of Aaryavarta in the Ajitanjaya city with his foster father Yavanaraja. He was in fact a biological son of our royal priest Gargamuni!

How did all these shocking, improbable things come to be? During one of Gargamuni's travels the Yavanaraja of Ajitanjaya city approached him, and served him humbly to obtain his blessings. Gargamuni had blessed him to bear a son. In spite of having many wives the Yavanaraja did not have any progeny, and was not going to have any. When he brought the fact to Gargamuni's attention he felt bewildered at first. Then getting hold of himself he said to the king with strong determination, "My word will never be untrue. You will obtain a son. Though you cannot become a father yourself, you will be the foster father of my own son!"

To keep his promise, when a gopa woman named Gopali gave birth to Gargamuni's son in Mathura he gave off his son to Yavanaraja right after his birth. Kalayavana was that same son!

Just as calmly as he had done all this, he told us the whole story calmly and fearlessly. How was it possible to get irate with him? We put forth the

complicated situation about his son, Kalayavana. He calmly said, “The day I gave him away as a foster child to Yavana he became Yavana’s family. I gave up my right as his father. As the Yadava leaders you are free to take any necessary action against him. I will raise no objections about it. I have always been loyal to the Yadavas and will remain so in future.”

Gargamuni was an exemplar for us. The most erudite person, he was an expert in horoscope-reading and architecture. For many years, he had imparted all-round knowledge of life to the young and the old Yadavas. It was impossible for us to blame him or do anything that would hurt him.

“We might have to eliminate Kalayavana, which you may not approve.” Dada opened up with Gargamuni truthfully.

Looking at him I smiled and said, “You are wrong dada, aacharya would never feel that way!” I looked at aacharya expectantly.

He also smiled and said, “Srikrishna is right! Balarama, you did not understand me correctly.” He clearly affirmed his decision in this matter. Now we got ready to face any kind of ordeal. Jarasandha was not going to be content unless and until he uprooted all Yadavas along with dada and me. His ego was now badly hurt due to the humiliating defeat on Mount Gomanta. He had expanded the circle of his allies by inviting Shalva and Kalayavana. Again, a joint council was held to plan an attack on Mathura. Along with my paternal cousins Shishupala and Dantavakra he was getting assistance from his new ally Kalayavana. Bhishmaka was also going to help him secretly in the plan.

Assaulting us from three sides – Shishupala and Jarasandha from the east, Shalva from the west and Bhishmaka from the south, they were going to slaughter Mathura. Jarasandha felt that the Yadavas were an obstruction in the path of his Narmedha – a *Yajna* with human sacrifice. He was only fifteen kings short of completing the required number of hundred captive kings for the human sacrifice in the *yajna*.

We started getting news of various powerful armies of our enemies assembling in Girivraja from all sides. Accompanied by minister Vipruthu, Uddhava, dada and I immediately approached King Kakudmin of Raivataka kingdom. With his assistance, taking a few divers with us, for one week we thoroughly inspected the ocean from the Prabhas region of the Aanarta kingdom to Kushasthali. For hours, we scrutinized the expanse along the ocean coast till the island where Shankhasura was executed.

Fortunately, in the region of Mount Raivataka we came across an



undisturbed large island near Kushasthali. Covered with a multitude of trees the green island looked beautiful like an emerald stone fixed in the blue socket of the ocean. Luckily, it was connected to the island Shankhodhara by a tail-shaped passage of about twenty *kosa* long, running under the ocean surface. It was not a single island. In fact, these were twin islands attached to each other by means of a tabor-shaped passage in the ocean. It was easily possible to reach the Kushasthali island by crossing the distance of a *yojana* through the ocean creek. A perfect place to keep a watchful eye on the ocean!

The twin islands were convenient to get in touch with the Aanarta, Saurashtra, Bhrikukachchha, Marusthala, and Avanti kingdoms located at the rear. Adjoining these islands on the north there was a desolate region that stretched for thousands

of *yojanas* – the desert land of Kachchha. It meant that from three directions – the South, the West and the North – no assault was possible on these islands. The western ocean had spread around all the three sides. Only from the fourth direction, the eastern side, these islands were connected to the land of Saurashtra.

Sailing in a boat I surveyed both islands scrupulously along with dada, Uddhava, Satyaki and Vipruthu. Both islands were quite capacious. We sat on a huge boulder at the centre of the Kushasthali island. It had survived the surge of the sun's heat and the impact of ocean water for millions of years. Shining brightly in the rays of the sun it was almost blinding to the eyes. Don't know how but sitting here I inadvertently went into the meditative trance taught by Acharya Sandipani.

Instantly I broke away from the island around me, dada, Uddhava and Vipruthu. For a long time, I silently communicated with the continuous sound of the ocean. The mantras of Sudarshan and the sound of the ocean fused into each other. I felt that the eternal sound had been well known to me since before. I have a ceaseless and unbreakable bond with it. No, in fact it is my own sound! The sound and I are not two separate entities! The resonating, rhythmic Sudarshan mantras within me and the sound are one.

That eternal sound was speaking to me with a roar now, "Srikrishna! This is your *Karmabhumi*! Oh, son of Vasudeva! Erect the first glorious, majestic golden city of the Aaryavarta! Raise the first harbour of Aaryavarta that will become home to many magnificent ships. Right here, on the coast of the vibrant ocean! This is the place of your duty, your ascetic abode, and your ultimate accomplishment!

“Arise, oh descendant of Vrushnis and Andhakas, the son of Vasudeva, Achyuta, make such a firm, sky-high resolution that the whole world will remember it forever. Take a vow right now to build a mammoth, formidable, organized, secure golden city for the Yadavas on the land of Kushasthali!”

I opened my eyes peacefully, and automatically stood up as if entranced. I untied the Paanchajanya conch tied in a scarf around my waist and held it in my fist. Momentarily touching it to my forehead, I raised my head high towards the sky and blew my precious, auspicious, divine Paanchajanya conch at the top of my lungs to pronounce my resolve. Its hair-raising sounds mingled with the roaring sounds of the western ocean. With a desire to listen to that sound many a huge silver fish sprang out of the ocean water, glistened and disappeared in a trice.

Uddhava, a possessor of presence of mind, rushed forward and promptly brought a palmful of water from the western ocean and let it trickle on the gleaming, white Paanchajanya; it dripped on the land of Kushasthali. Uddhava rapidly uttered some mantras for land-worship. We all prayed humbly. A promise was made to erect a secure, grand, and inhabitable golden royal city of the Yadavas on the land of Kushasthali on the coast of the western ocean to raise a new, powerful welfare state!

The next day Uddhava sought out a knowledgeable elderly priest from Saurashtra, who was well-versed in the Vedas. Under his guidance, we performed a formal ritual of land-worship by chanting mantras. Then we returned to Mathura.

Soon I called for a Yadava royal meeting in Mathura. For many prominent Yadavas it was going to be the last meeting in Mathura. As per my suggestion Maharaja Ugrasena was going to appoint Gargamuni as the chief guest of the meeting. After the meeting, all the Yadavas were going to make loyal efforts for the all-round prosperity of the new city. The meeting was overcrowded like never before and began in a solemn atmosphere.

I greeted everyone warmly and said, “Dear Yadavas! I have delightful news for all of you. Soon a new royal city will be erected for the Yadavas. I have selected an auspicious location for the city, thoroughly examining it with dada and Uddhava. I have returned only after sanctifying that location. This land is located far away on the coast of the western ocean, near Mount Raivataka in the Anarta kingdom in Saurashtra – the name is Kushasthali.

Gargamuni, the greatest architect of Yadavas will design and raise this spectacular city. I am quite sure that he will raise a city befitting the

reputation of the Yadavas. All the craftsmen amongst you – architects, iron smiths, carpenters, masons, and goldsmiths – will have to use your expertise for the construction of this city. Many skilled workers from other kingdoms invited by minister Vipruthu will assist them in the mission. Tomorrow itself we all have to leave for the site in bullock carts. This city will belong to all Yadavas. Therefore, all the citizens should strive to assist through days and nights.

As Mathura is our original kingdom since the time of Maharaja Yadu we cannot desert it completely. Therefore, as per his wish Maharaja Ugrasena will stay back in Mathura for some time, along with a few warriors. All others – young, old, men and women will take off for the western coast. Starting from tomorrow there should be a constant flow of Yadavas travelling from Mathura to Aanarta, Saurashtra. Do you all agree?” I raised my right fist high in the sky and appealed emotionally to the overcrowded council.

“Agreed, we absolutely agree revered Yadava! We all will leave Mathura tomorrow itself. Hail Yadava leader, Maharaja Srikrishna!” There was not a single soul that did not respond spontaneously to my appeal.

A few days passed by. The news of a total solar eclipse predicted by Gargamuni and other royal priests of various kingdoms spread everywhere. As per the traditions the ritual to ward off the ill effect of this eclipse was to be carried out. For that purpose, the kings of major kingdoms in Brahmavarta and their royal ministries were going to assemble at the holy place Kurukshetra on the shore of Sanneth sarovar near the Suryakunda. The Yadavas were also going to attend. We dispatched a few troops ahead to set up our camp. As it is, our Shursena kingdom was experiencing a total eclipse – a destructive concord of three powerful arch enemies – Kalayavana, Shalva and Jarasandha!

An auspicious day for our departure was selected. A few chosen people like dada, Udho, both commanders, Akrura, Satrajita and I left for Kurukshetra. In this journey dada and Udho were going to steer Garudadhwaaja. I don't know why but this time I felt from the bottom of my heart that I should not be steering the chariot at all. Sitting at the back of the chariot, many thoughts revolved in my mind while observing the eye-capturing nature.

Kurukshetra! A holy place, bursting with lakes! Generations of forefathers of various Kshatriya dynasties like the Yadavas, Kurus, Matsya, Chedi, Panchala, Panchanada, Virata and many more would assemble here without fail, at the time of every solar eclipse, and feel blessed by offering alms in

charity at the shore of the Sanneth sarovar.

We were also going for the same purpose. But no matter what, the bird of my mind was not ready to perch on the branch of my body, even for a moment. It restlessly kept fluttering within. I had been hearing the divine mantras of Sudarshan in my mind till today ever since I was blessed with it. But this time all I could feel was the raucous sound of the ocean's high tide and the shrill cry of female lapwings. Why was it happening? I asked myself the same question countless times, but couldn't find a satisfactory answer. Finally, smiling to myself I simply shook off all the questions. Looking at my smile Uddhava said, "Dada, what were you thinking about for such a long time?" Pointing towards Sanneth sarovar in front of us, diverting his attention I said, "Uddhava, we have reached our destination, Kurukshetra, the land of *Dharma*! Let's get down."

The Yadava camp was set up on the northern side of the Suryakunda. As per the instructions of Gargamuni we finished our bath and stood in the Suryakunda. We offered oblations to the Sun god that was getting overshadowed in the sky. Standing on a platform near the Suryakunda, dada, Uddhava and I began offering charities to the pilgrims. Everywhere along the lakeshore such charities were being offered. We too offered holy cows, domestic animals, pots of pure honey, bottles of divine medicinal herb extracts, clothing, food grains, gems like rubies, pearls, corals, golden and silver jewellery in charity. As the bright disk of the Sun was getting shrouded my entire body started shaking. I lost sense of everything around me – my relatives, the minister, the sages, Sanneth sarovar and yes Kurukshetra too. My eyes closed inadvertently. For a moment, it felt like I myself was getting eclipsed! I - the sun itself! Then everything went blank. Bit by bit I got completely eclipsed!

After a few moments Uddhava shook me forcefully. With his eyes enlarged, a strange look in his eyes, he said, "How horrible you looked during the time of the eclipse dada, horribly dark! Please tell me at least once, who are you exactly?"

I diverted his attention by saying, "Will you please first listen to what Akrurakaka has to say?" Then I simply laughed, like nothing had happened at all. Akrurakaka humbly said, "Sire, I just met Vidura, the royal minister of the Kurus. From Hastinapura your *aatya* Kuntidevi has also arrived here to offer charities, along with her five sons. They have just finished their offerings. When she came to know about your arrival here she has started for

here to meet you, along with her sons. I said to dada, “Dada, our charities are already paying off! This is an opportune time to meet our *aatya* along with her sons, that too on the day of the solar eclipse, near the Suryakunda, at Kurukshetra. Let us go ahead to welcome them.” Now I smiled as usual and started walking ahead with Akurakaka without looking back to see if both of them were coming or not.

We had barely crossed a small distance of the lush green meadows spread around us, when we saw *aatya* Kuntidevi in front of us, whose memories father had shared with us from time to time. She had a round moon-like face. She was a little plump, wearing a soft, bright white saree with a bare forehead! She was walking slowly and graciously. Two of her sons were on her right. And one on her left, tall, strong and hefty. Behind her stood two sons looking like a pair of elegant royal swans – coeval, of similar built and height. Behind this royal family of the Pandavas was Mahatma Vidura, the minister of Kurus. He was the same age as our minister Vipruthu and had the same virtuous disposition like him.

Just as I had been drawn towards Acharya Sandipani and Bhrgu Parashurama I was drawn to Kunti *aatya*. Walking forward briskly I approached her. Dropping my knees on the ground I put my head on her honourable feet. I intensely felt that the touch of her feet was exactly like the touch of the feet of Thorali in Gokul and Thorali in Mathura. Though she was baba’s blood sister, to my wonder, the touch of her feet was not like the touch of baba’s feet. For a few moments, my head remained on her feet involuntarily. Two warm teardrops fell down and settled on my cheek. My whole body shook just the way it did during the solar eclipse. Her words that she had held back for ages, followed: “Oh Krishna! Arise!”

I stood up, my eyes momentarily met hers. We instantly felt the connection of our hearts for many births. These eyes were so unique. I had never seen such eyes. They were neither like that of both my matas nor my baba. The very next moment, my dear, self-respecting, patient *aatya* Kuntidevi held my arms and embraced me tightly. Emotionally overwhelmed, her body trembled and she sobbed for quite some time.

After some time, she regained her composure. Holding my shoulders tightly she made me stand in front of her eldest son. Like a proud, and experienced Kshatriya lady that she was, she spoke in a clear, determined voice now, “Yudhishtira, this is your *mame* bandhu, the son of my elder brother Vasudeva and his wife Devaki. The world calls him Srikrishna, but for me he

is only Krishna!”

I stepped forward to bow down and pay obeisance to Yudhishtira. He didn't let me do so, and simply said, “No no, let it be. Let it be.”

Meanwhile dada and Uddhava had already obtained blessings from Kunti *aatyā*. She held the upper arm of her hefty, fair-skinned son standing on her left, pulled him forward and said, “My son, Bhima! To restrain him is like restraining the stormy wind. Apart from me he may listen only to you someday! Recognizing his mother's gesture, hefty Bhima pulled the two brothers standing behind him, made them bow down to me and said, “Yadava, they need your guidance more than me. My dear brothers Nakula and Sahadeva.” Pulling both of them up I looked at them. Nakula looked very handsome among the two, with his sharp nose, well-built physique and ruddy fair complexion like Uddhava. The only difference was that Uddhava would have seemed gentler, only to me. Bhima held me in a deep, loving embrace. His face looked peaceful now, like a lion whose hunger is just satiated.

In a single glance, I admiringly observed the faces of my four cousins and noted all their qualities subtly in my mind. Yudhishtira was tall, broad-shouldered, fair and sharp-nosed with a raised chest. His face was very calm. His thick neck was high above his shoulders. His eyebrows extended closer to his ears. His ears were big and long, with fleshy lobules. He was probably just a little older than me.

The edges of Bhima's eyes were reddish. He looked literally like a mountain and a lion. His chest was so muscular and solid like iron that if one would have struck him on the chest with a powerful blow of a closed fist it would have made a clear metallic sound ‘Thanna’! His thick, curly hair was elegantly resting on his sturdy shoulders. His voice was so thunderous that even while speaking normally it would sound like the thundering clouds of the Mriga Nakshatra, quite suppressive to the listener. He too was older than me.

Nakula and Sahadeva were coeval, with similar height and physique – like a pair of male pigeons. Both looked muscular and fresh. They were a little shorter than me. Bhima was a little taller than both of them, but a bit shorter than me. In this very first meeting with them I strongly noticed that none of them had a crown on their heads. Especially today on their visit to this holy place they were wearing the traditional twisted turbans of the Kurus on their heads.

While observing them again according to their heights I realized that none

of them was as tall as me. Mahatma Vidura, the royal minister of the Kurus stood close by. The moment my eyes met his, they sparkled with radiance. His fair, round face became intense with emotions. He was elderly and the royal minister of the Kurus, still he began to bow down in front of me. Promptly pulling him up and embracing him, I whispered, “How are you doing?” One more bond of friendship was recorded in my mind. Finally, turning towards Kunti *aatya* I asked her the most important question, “How come your fifth son is nowhere to be seen? The one I want to meet!”

“He was right here somewhere.” Looking at me she simply kept smiling. I had no clue what was happening. Till today I used to make fun of the people around me, but Kunti *aatya*’s smile was teasing me. She just rolled her eyes up towards her eyebrows like the Yogis. I understood that he was standing right behind me. Slowly I turned in a half circle. Waiting for quite a while to see my feet, the bright Kuru warrior standing in front of me moved rapidly. In a blink of an eye putting his left knee on the ground he took the Virasana pose. Such elegance and grace – it completely astonished me! It was such a matchless posture that anybody could have been enamoured by it. How did he appear to me in the Virasana pose? Like the graceful king of the birds, the royal swan, fluttering his pure white wings, while gently alighting on Manasa sarovar! Like the elegant white pigeon sitting on the dome of the Yadava royal palace in Mathura! No! In fact, he did not look like anything else. He looked only and solely like himself, and that too because of his distinct posture of the Virasana.

I caught him by his strong, muscular shoulders tightly and gently pulled him up with warmth and looked deep into his eyes. He smiled momentarily. We recognized the bond connecting us since many previous lives! He was of the same height as mine, with the same complexion as mine, fish-shaped eyes, a sharp nose like the tip of an arrow! Thick-necked like my horse Sugriva. He was exactly my replica! For a moment, I thought that I was looking at my own reflection in a mirror. The next moment I recognized the slight difference between both of us. I laughed to myself. He also reciprocated with the same smile. I had a double-tooth near my right chin, and he had a double-tooth near his left chin! Kunti *aatya* stepped forward and putting her hands on both our shoulders she gently pressed them. Before she could say anything, I spoke up, “*Aatya*, this is your son Arjuna! The one who acquires whatever knowledge that he comes across. The one who considers virtue as wealth and earns it. *Dhananjaya, Partha*, isn’t it?” Looking into his

eyes I questioned him.

“Oh Hrishiksha, you are the one who has conquered all the senses since birth. You need no introduction of any kind! And as far as I am concerned I have already showed you what you mean to me, by taking the Virasana stance at your feet the moment we met.” He said. The next moment I held the handsome, muscular man in front of me in a deep embrace. I heard my dear *aatya* whispering a few words again, “They look so alike. Can’t figure out who is who! Just stay like this always – inseparable. My blessings to you! May you have a long life; may you be victorious!”

A tranquil night alighted on the shore of Sanneth sarovar in Kurukshetra. From Kunti *aatya* I intently listened to her trying, turbulent life story. Her four youthful sons fell asleep one after the other. Throughout the night, she kept telling the gripping story of Pandavas’ childhood full of joys and sorrows. I kept listening to her, holding back the divine mantras of Sudarshan rising in my mind again and again. The only witness was Arjuna, smiling sweetly in between. He was *Gudakesha*, the one who had conquered sleep!

Just like a few select Yadavas, the four horses of my chariot, the western ocean, charioteer Daruka, friend Sudama, dear Uddhava, and the sun in the sky – which was eclipsed a few moments ago, felt like a part of my existence, so did Arjuna. I met my soul-mate Radha in Gokul, Uddhava was my most favourite cousin, but this one was my friend for life, much distinct from all others.

I was an *Ashwattha* tree, an upside-down tree! But Arjuna was the straight shadow of the upside-down tree! I was a figure of energy – a brilliant flame of life. My young friend Arjuna was the shadow of the same divine flame! Can a flame ever have a shadow? Yes, it can. That too so bright! Dark complexioned Arjuna seemed like that bright shadow to me. I was striving to achieve a particular mission in my life with a relinquishing sentiment. Only ‘Premayoga’, pure love could help me achieve this mission. Therefore, I was looking for a valiant man with utter devotion and loyalty towards me as a medium. I found that man in Arjuna today.

We bade farewell to Kunti *aatya* and returned to Mathura.

Upon arriving in Mathura commander Satyaki presented a disciple from the aashrama of Bhrigukachchha before me. The news he had brought was not going to give us any time to relax. Kalayavana’s sizeable army had assembled on the western coast by way of the ocean. Coming from the royal city of Girivraja, Jarasandha’s enormous Magadha army had unified with it.



From the royal city of Martikavati on Mount Arbuda, Shalva had also joined hands with them. Bhishmaka had already left with his army from Kundinapura to join them. The sea of the united army of the trio had spread along the coast of the roaring western ocean. They planned to surround Mathura from all four sides and annihilate us.

Parashurama's follower in Bhrigukachchha had immediately conveyed the news to us. Dada and I quickly instructed our army. With no time to waste now Mathura echoed with the cacophony of war drums. Our golden chariots bearing orange pennants with the Garuda emblem were equipped for war, and left for the western ocean through the western gates of Mathura. So to speak the Yadavas numbered in billions, but only a few millions of them were actual warriors. The rest were engaged in the daily chores. A lot of them had already been dispatched to Kushasthali Island to assist in the construction of the new royal city.

During this military journey dada and I had taken all Yadavas of Mathura with us. Many competent warriors like Satrajita, Kritavarma, Akrura, Shini, Avagaha, Yashaswi, Chitraketu, Brihadbala, and Bhankara were with us. After many sojourns, we reached the western ocean coast, near Mount Arbuda in Marusthali. We received information that the rival army had settled in a huge encampment at the base of a mountain near Dhaulapura. As we were approaching Dhaulapura I presented a strategic proposal to dada. Had we launched only a one-pronged attack we would have never succeeded. The combined army of the trio was thrice as big as ours. The western ocean on the one hand, the ocean of the rival army on the other hand, and in between was the widespread Marusthali, such was the scene. I convinced dada and both commanders that it was inevitable and beneficial to divide our army into three sections. Dada should attack Shalva and veer him to Mount Arbuda. Both commanders should con Jarasandha to chase them and divert him towards the Magadha kingdom itself. With a selected troop, I should directly face Kalayavana.

Dhaulapura! A city surrounded by deserts on all four sides. Here I was going to show Kalayavana that though he was the Yavana I was going to be his 'Kala' – Death. As planned dada veered Shalva out from one side. From the other side our valiant commander duo challenged the Magadha army of Jarasandha. Kalayavana was left alone on the desert base of Dhaulapura. Now in the cacophony of war drums I directly attacked Kalayavana. Within moments my Garudadhwa caught up with Kalayavana's chariot. First, we

fought a thrilling battle with Bhrushundis and Shataghnis, propelling rocks at each other. The chariots around us and the horses were barely visible in the deluge of rocks from both sides. But our chariot was sturdy as it was made of iron. Controlling the four horses of our chariot, Daruka rotated it like a spinning top around Kalayavana's chariot. Both chariots were out of rocks. The bow and arrow battle began now. Kalayavana was a skilled warrior. His charioteer was probably an expert too. As the arrows in our quivers finished we began the javelin war.

Daruka was handling our horses exactly as per my instructions. A single tug of the reins, and all of them would fold their front legs to sit down in unison. With each tug of their reins they were dragging the chariot awkwardly around. Suddenly I ordered Daruka to haul my chariot out of the battlefield. He skilfully steered our dragging chariot out of our army. With a certain idea in my mind I pulled out the Paanchajanya tied in my scarf and raising my head skywards I blew it with a strange, terrifying sound. It was a signal for our army to retreat from the war and run away. The Yadava army under my command was well acquainted with it. Our army retreated and our warriors started running away.

Kalayavana instructed his charioteer in the Yavani tongue. His chariot with seven sand-coloured horses began chasing me. So far everything was going according to my plan. My expert charioteer Daruka kept our chariot ahead. Kalayavana was thrilled to see us running away from war fearing for our lives. His eyes already red by drinking the Gandhara wine became redder while screaming at me with rage. He pulled his charioteer by the collar in the back of the chariot, and himself took the reins of the hefty Gandhar horses in his tight fists and gave them a tug. Screaming something viciously in his incomprehensible Yavani tongue he began chasing me.

Yavana chasing Kala – such was the spectacle on the battlefield of Dhaulpura! I smiled to myself. By this time Daruka had skilfully drawn Yavana many *yojanas* away from the battlefield.

Now the next phase in the drama of this combat began. As I signalled, Daruka pulled all the eight reins in his hands in a specific way and at the same time he made a peculiar noise with his mouth warning the horses to come to a halt. Picking up their front hooves they neighed loudly and folding their knees sat on the ground instantly. As if our chariot, which was running for life was broken down, and had become useless. Daruka swiftly jumped onto the ground, and immediately untied Sugriva. Shaking his tail, with his

ears pricking up he stood up in a trice while snorting. I jumped onto the ground swiftly like a cheetah. Running rapidly, I mounted Sugriva, and prodded him with my heel. That auspicious white animal understood my signal perfectly. Pulling his front legs up, he neighed much louder than before and sprinted ahead swiftly.

In front of us stood Mount Dhaula – average in height, composed of layers of sand amassed over the years and surrounded by small trees and short bushes. Sugriva's speeding white line kept galloping towards the mountain. After passing quite some distance I looked back. Kalayavana, burning with the fire of vengeance was still after me. He had also untied one of the horses of his chariot and was riding on it. He was not going to stop at any cost. I smiled again. Kala chased by Yavana. Yavana chasing the Kala. This was an excellent opportunity indeed. We rode our horses till we perspired. We reached the summit of Mount Dhaula. Now I let Sugriva go, and started walking on foot. The blazing sun was scorching my skin. Atop was the hot, shining sun and the endless blue sky spread across. The hot, barren desert land was spread everywhere under my feet. I could see in front of me a mouth of a cavern, about nine-ten feet tall and covered with small creepers. I muttered to myself, "This is the place of Rajarshi. This is the place where this war drama is going to end." I evoked our family goddess Ida, and entered the cavern of sand. I was certain Kalayavana was going to chase me here too. I kept walking, turning left and right through the dark passage. After a long time, I reached the spacious central part of the cavern. This was in fact a safe, auspicious place of meditation for many sages of Marusthali. It was dimly visible due to few sun rays peeking through a few holes in the roof.

My searching eyes saw an indistinct figure lying in the corner, for ages. It had become possible for him only because he had acquired control over his breathing through severe penance. An anthill had formed up to his throat on his supine body. He was the royal sage Muchkunda, the forefather of one of the branches of the Yadavas in the south. Thinking of something I laughed to myself.

Stepping forward I humbly put my head on his feet which were not visible due to the anthill, with utmost respect. Untying the long blue scarf around my waist I held it in my hand, and opened the knot of Paanchajanya. Touching the divine conch to my forehead first, I put it near the feet of the royal ascetic. Then with caution I gently spread the shawl on his body without disturbing his meditation. Paying obeisance to him again I squeezed my body in a

corner and hid there. Apart from the sixty-four art forms, I had already mastered this special skill of hiding myself in small places. Who knew when and where else this skill was going to come in handy for me?

Some time passed by in the wait for Yavana chasing Kala. After some time, a few intimidating Yavani words echoed. They meant, “How far are you going to run, you cowherd of Mathura? Where can you hide?” Deep, heavy breaths followed. Within a moment, Kalayavana, who I was only able to hear appeared in the midst of the cavern. Dark black, tall, red-eyed, with a ferocious face. Even at that moment, watching him from a distance I strongly felt that there was no resemblance between him and our graceful Gargamuni.

Furiously moving his neck in a circular motion, blabbering constantly, the tall, giant Yavana got excited when he saw my blue scarf. His loud, roaring shriek reverberated in the interior of the cavern, “Sleeping! You, shameless cowherd. Get up! Are you going to get up or not? Get ready for a duel.” Shouting at the top of his lungs, thinking it was I who was sleeping there, he threw a single hard kick. Breaking the anthill around, his kick reached the chest of the royal ascetic Muchkunda. He sharply stood up straight due to the interruption in his prolonged *Yoganidra*. The light in the cavern seemed brighter. Then he picked up his Agnikankana weapon lying at his feet that he had kept before beginning his *Yoganidra*. Muchkunda was a Yadava, and expert in Agnikankana war. He roared while taking a stance, “Insolent Yavana, you interrupted my *Yoganidra*. Now pay for it!”

Instantly he turned his Agnikankana weapon with such lightning-like speed, that when its sharp edges pierced Kalayavana’s skull, he screamed with agony. Following that the royal sage Muchkunda struck him on his chest, arms, wherever he could strike. For the first time, streams of Yavana’s blood touched the auspicious grounds of that holy place. Kalayavana fell down. Whimpering with agony in his Yavani tongue finally he lay dead. I came forward and put my head on sage Muchkunda’s feet. Pulling me up, he embraced me. As we were related through the Yadava lineage he commanded me, “Srikrishna, pick up your life-saver Paanchajanya conch. Then go to the entrance of the cavern and blow it with your soul in this barren land. I would have handed it to you myself but my hands are soiled with a Yavana’s blood!”

Mesmerized, I picked up the Paanchajanya conch, and came to the entrance of the cavern. Raising my head high I blew that divine conch effusively. Its inspirational sound kept resonating in the atmosphere of Dhaulgiri,

Dhaulpura, Arbudagiri, Marusthali and the nearby expanse. Kala had finally taken over Yavana. One storm of a foreign invasion on Aaryavarta had been pacified.

We dispatched Kalayavana's immeasurable treasure to the Kushasthali Island. It mainly contained hefty Gandhara horses, and plenty of camels. It also had many bullions of gold that Kalayavana had amassed by ransacking many kingdoms along the west coast after coming here.

Aacharya Sandipani and Gargamuni chose an auspicious day for performing the formal rituals of land-worship for commencement of construction of the royal city on the Kushasthali Island. It was a Saturday, with the auspicious Rohini Nakshatra. Dada, Uddhava and I went there with the royal minister, both commanders and select Yadavas. Vasudevababa and Devakimata also arrived on Kushasthali island in time. The rituals of the land-worship were performed at the holy hands of our parents.

Now the enormous undertaking of construction of the new royal city commenced officially. Gargamuni invited Maya, an accomplished *Asura* architect, for assistance in the project. Vishwakarma, a creator from the Kurujangal region was also summoned. In a chamber on the shore of the island, both of them created a clay replica of the city with the aid of many experts from various kingdoms. Dada and I went there ourselves and examined it thoroughly. Simply ingenious, it was creativity at its best! Impressed with the replica, I put my arm on Maya's shoulder and tried to assess his knowledge of architecture saying, "The royal city and the royal palace will be erected here on the Kushasthali Island. On the adjacent twin island the Queens' mansions will be constructed. I have examined all the details in your plan of the city. They are very good. Not a single flaw in the design. I will be looking forward to see my residence in the royal city, especially how you build my spacious resting chamber, connected by a special stairway as I want it. I have a special design of a stairway – a 'Krishnasopana' – in my mind, leading to the resting chamber in the upper section of the residence. It is going to be the most significant part of this design."

"Your wish is my command, Maharaja. I will raise the 'Krishnasopana' as per your wish, using my expertise in architecture to the best of my ability. I will never back off." Maya said with the innate pride of his expertise, but in a humble manner. He and Gargamuni kept listening to me. I gave them a detailed idea about the unique stairway leading to my resting chamber in the

upper part of the residence. I told them, “I want this stairway built from mainly the broad planks of the Krishnashisam wood. These wooden steps will be covered in gold-plated, thick copper sheets. To begin with, this stairway will have only twenty-five steps. The first eighteen steps in memory of the eighteen royal families of the Yadavas. The next four will be for both my fathers and mothers. The next two will be for dada and Revativahini. The remaining one will be for Aacharya Sandipani.” Thus, initially there will be only twenty-five steps of the Krishnasopana.

“Only twenty-five? Your life is going to begin here. Many more people will come into your life. What about them?” Gargamuni asked. Smiling at him I said, “For that, sufficient space will be left between every two steps. Steps will be added in that space as needed. Besides, the top passage will be raised higher as and when necessary. Probably you yourself will have to complete that task!” Then for a long time I provided details of the Krishnasopana design in my mind to Gargamuni, Vishwakarma, and Maya. I clearly read the question reflecting in their eyes. They were wondering, in this enormous undertaking on the twin islands, I didn’t show any interest at all in the royal palace, the royal council, the Queens’ residences, or the temples or gymnasiums; then why was I so focused on this particular stairway? Before they could ask me any question I distracted them by saying, “From today onwards dada and I will travel frequently from Mathura to Kushasthali. We will supply the necessary materials on time. Let the project begin!”

Now from all over the region of Brahmavarta hundreds and thousands of craftsmen like ironsmiths, wood-cutters, coppersmiths, carpenters, goldsmiths etc. assembled on Kushasthali Island. A great part of this island was covered with the thick meadows of Kusha grass. All the labourers had to clear these thick meadows to begin with. After that many sounds of cutting, banging, creaking coming from various workshops began merging with the sounds of the western ocean. In the wood-cutting workshop huge and tall trees like Teak, Shisham, Katahal, Ain, Khair, and Kikar were getting cut by the sharp teeth of the saws. One after the other, wooden planks in various shades of dark yellow, dark black, white, with concentric ring patterns were getting stacked in a pile. On top of them black ants crawled around briskly. Huge furnaces set up in different places started glowing and metals like copper, iron, lead and gold began melting and boiling in them. Enormous, hot swaying clouds of smoke started rising high in the sky. Victorious slogans, sometimes in the name of Goddess ‘Ida’, and sometimes in the name of our

forefathers Yadu and Kroshtu were being shouted. In the echoing sounds of the slogans fresh, hot molten metals were being poured in the tall moulds using huge pincers. As the iron, copper and gold sheets got ready after a certain time they were picked up with giant pincers and put up against big boulders to cool down. The heat waves generated from these sheets made the ironsmiths sweat profusely. The land of Kushasthali was soaked in the sweat of the striving labourers. Every moment hundreds of hands offered the oblations of sweat, essential for any kind of creativity, to the Goddess of Labour. The sculptors got engaged in shaping red Jambha rocks with their chisels. The labourers got engrossed in rotating the stone wheels, crushing burnt limestone while shouting slogans. The carpenters got busy in erecting well-designed, floating wooden bridges.

Many seasons passed by. The enormous undertaking of creating the Yadava royal city lasted for many years. During this period when the task got demanding Maya invited his skilled colleagues Taraksha, Kamalaksha, and Vidyunmali for assistance. When they also felt overloaded with the task at hand, Maya's proficient sons, Dundubhi, Mayavin, Ajakarna and Kalika promptly came to assist them. Dada and I supervised all of them. Every time taking skilled Yadavas with us we made many trips to Kachchha, Saurashtra. One day a special envoy of Gargamuni and Maya stood in front of us in Mathura with the much-awaited message, 'The construction of the royal city has been completed. Maharaja should choose an auspicious day for his coronation. He should come with the senior Yadavas and take a look at the city. If he observes any defects those would be fixed as per his instruction. We are sure he won't find a single defect. Actually, we are confident that when Srikrishna sees the 'Krishnasopana' that he has desired, he will surely give a pat on our backs. Veteran Twashtta has also arrived to offer his guidance'.

One day I left with dada and Uddhava from the western gate of Mathura in Garudadhwaaja, steered by Daruka. Behind us were the chariots of both the commanders, followed by the cavalry. We were now well acquainted with the route from Mathura to Kushasthali. Crossing the rivers and passing through the forests along our way we arrived at the coast of the western ocean.

We looked at the Kushasthali Island in front of us. What an unbelievable sight it was! At first glance the golden fortification spread from one end to the other, glistening in the sunrays dazzled our eyes. Its long, yellowish, wobbling reflection in the water didn't stay steady even for a single moment.

It kept dancing on the waves. As a narrow strip of land had gone under the water in the ocean, the twin island on the right couldn't be seen. All of us arrived in the royal city on the Kushasthali Island in large boats dispatched by Gargamuni. After walking for some time, we stood in front of the gigantic, golden main entrance on the east. It was about five *purusha* tall, made from the sturdy Kikar wood. It had two doors covered in thick gold-plated, copper sheets with beautiful engravings. It was difficult to keep one's eyes open in the bright light reflecting from it. The majestic, graceful Garuda on its surface, spreading its golden wings as if about to soar in the sky was eye-catching. It had sharp, golden talons. It was the motivational insignia on the Yadava pennant. The onlookers would halt right in front of the gate in awe. It had effortlessly balanced the golden replica of the full moon on its head. It was the emblem of the Yadavas of Somavansha. On the right door, the little golden star, Arundhati, was shining next to a crescent moon. The remaining surface was covered with golden figures of the weapons used by Yadavas – the sword, the chakra, the mace, the trident, the pestle, Bhrushundi, Agnikankana, the bow and the arrow. A single fearless, serene, healthy cow and a lion looking at her in the same way could also be seen.

After we finished observing it, the gatekeepers opened the gigantic gate. To pay obeisance to my *Karmabhumi* I touched the land with my right hand, then touched it to my chest and head. Dada followed suit. We followed Maya, Vishwakarma and Gargamuni to the top of the stairway near the gate. Gargamuni and Maya opened two in-built eye-shaped windows on the right and left side of the golden fortification wall. Providing information about it both of them said, "If at all there is any concern of assault on our royal city, it is only from the eastern side. The other three directions are protected by the western ocean. These two eyes for surveillance of the eastern direction are a precautionary measure for the royal city. From here one can see a ten *yojana* stretch of the ocean and land in a single glance." While hearing that I commended Maya for his creativity and put forth some more food for thought for him saying, "There must be a western gate on the opposite side of this gate. We must select a perfect place for surveillance of the ocean from that gate. Not on the island, but in the ocean, by locating a huge boulder in the ocean itself."

"I didn't get it, sire. A watch-post in the ocean?"

"For what Dhakalya?" Dada asked out of curiosity.

"Dada, this is not going to be merely a new royal city of the Yadavas. You



may have forgotten, but I haven't. Kalayavana came by way of the ocean. We will have to protect this city by building a new naval force. A few kingdoms are located on the west side of the ocean too. To communicate with them we will have to develop a harbour in the city. To guide the ships towards the harbour we will have to erect a lighthouse. We will have to keep a tall torch of *Karanjel* oil constantly burning in the lighthouse after sunset. During the day, of course its golden dome shining in the sunrays will be visible from far away."

Listening to my talk dada, Uddhava, Gargamuni, Vishwakarma, Maya – all were lost deep in thought. I was also engrossed in thinking about what suitable name should I announce for this eastern gate in the first royal council here?

I looked at the temple on the left with satisfaction. The orange pennant was fluttering on its golden dome. It was the golden temple of our family goddess Ida; much grander than the stone temple in Mathura. Uddhava, dada, and I entered the temple along with others. Standing in the heart of the temple, Goddess Ida with ten hands, holding weapons in each of them was vividly visible from the square outside. The temple was not yet inaugurated officially. Therefore, to pay obeisance, we all brought our palms together in prayer while standing outside. Observing the pillars and arches inside with beautiful carvings on them, we walked around the temple and sipped the holy water given by the temple priest.

Looking at the large corral for the cows I asked Gargamuni, "How many more gates does the city have?" He answered, "Three more gates in the three directions, sire. Each main gate has wicket gates too. Besides, taking into account the structure of the island, some small gates have also been built at various places." Satisfied by the well-built cow corrals I asked Gargamuni, Maya, Twashtta, Vishwakarma, and the craftsmen leaders around, "It is excellent that you have raised the corrals, but what about grazing the cattle?" A Yadava leader from the group answered zealously, "Sire, for that purpose there are grazing prairies beyond the trench outside the fortification wall. If those fall short, we can sail our cows in boats to the land of Saurashtra for grazing." I admired his enthusiasm.

"How are the cows going to cross over the trench every day?" I questioned. "For that we have built wide, floating bridges." An expert woodcutter, a gopa Yadava leader provided the information.

I laughed with satisfaction. Looking at dada I winked and asked the next

question to the sentry of the fortification, “Can’t the same floating bridges be used by the enemy to cross over the trenches?”

“Not at all. The floating bridges can be removed in case of an attack by the enemy. Once that is done, the island will be completely cut off from the outside world. Besides, the deep and wide trench inundated with salty water is also secured. Meshes of thorny water creepers are spread throughout the trench. Also, huge, alligators and crocodiles chased from the ocean have been trapped in the trench by placing iron grids between the trench and the ocean. They cannot return to the ocean. Roaming around in the trench they keep feeding themselves on the small fish that pass through the iron grid. In addition to that food remainders after the craftsmen finish their meals are also tossed in the trench to feed them. These huge alligators and crocodiles are in fact the real protectors of the trench.” The sentry answered proudly.

Now all kinds of troop leaders, craftsmen chiefs, skilled sculptors, and armed warriors had started walking along with us. We came to the southern gate. The dark black boulders bathing in the pure white foam of the ocean water on this side of the coast looked so wonderful! For a long time, I kept watching along with others the foamy waves colliding with the boulders.

From there we left for the western gate. From this direction, the deluge from huge rainy clouds caused by the ocean winds was going to descend upon the island. As soon as we reached here, I looked at a huge boulder visible far away in the ocean. Pointing at its peak with my forefinger I said to the royal minister, “On that rock the lighthouse for this harbour will be raised.” While everybody was thinking about it dada asked a relevant question, “Dhakalya, what about the deluge of rain that will thrash this western gate?”

I smiled at Dada. Putting my hand on the royal minister Vipruthu’s shoulder, walking towards the northern gate I said, “Minister, there are heaps of sun-dried Kusha grass spread all over the island. Get thick dry grass sheets made and cover the wings of the golden eagle on the western gate well in time.” Now the last gate, the northern gate, was in sight. Only this door was going to connect this island to the twin island with the Queens’ residences by way of sea. Standing at the gate, I was immersed in my own thoughts for a long time looking at the gulf spread before us. I said to dada, “Somewhere far away in the north, even beyond Kurukshetra there lies the monumental snow mountain reaching high up in the sky – Mount Himavana. Kailas, the residence of the greatest ascetic Shiva is located on that mountain.”

“Dhakalya, do you remember how we built a *Shivapindi* of sand with our hands in our childhood?”

“Indeed, I do. Along with our gopa friends both of us offered ‘*Abhishek*’ with pots of milk.” I halted momentarily while walking along with others. As I had anticipated there was indeed a golden Shiva temple with a dome. Shiva was our deity in Gokul as the deity of the Abhirbhanu dynasty. In Mathura, our Yadava family deity was Ida. She was also here. Creative Gargamuni had wisely founded the temples of both deities in this city. On the western gate of my mind a deluge of some unknown rain began pouring. Pure white and uncontrollable. The Sudarshan mantras also echoed momentarily. I stopped dada, Uddhava, royal minister, Gargamuni, and the others and started talking rapidly, “The main eastern gate with the watch tower will be named ‘Shuddhaksha’. The southern gate witnessing the rocks bathing in the foamy ocean waves will be called ‘Pushyadanta’. The western gate bearing with a smile the deluge of the ocean rain, will be known as ‘Aindra’. This northern gate witnessing Shiva will be called ‘Bhallata’.”

The Yadavas around me kept listening and I kept talking, “Dear Yadavas, we can see the edifice of the royal assembly with the glistening dome in the centre of this island, encircled by the royal palaces. No other kingdom in the entire Aaryavarta possesses such a unique edifice of the royal assembly. This assembly will be called Sudharma! Sudharma – that which protects all that is True, Beautiful and Righteous! I haven’t thought of a suitable name for this city yet. But I will do that soon, and announce it in the royal assembly at the right time. Come, let us go there.”

We started walking towards the royal assembly by the royal highway passing in front of the northern gate. On our way, we saw dancing water fountains in many places. On both sides of the road a variety of trees were planted artistically. Behind them were well-planned markets with a variety of shops. There were also fenced parks at places. The empty space between two parks was utilized to build armouries, treasuries, and stables for horses, camels and elephants. While observing all that, I asked Maya, “What about the physical exercise of the Yadavas?”

Dada immediately asked his favourite question, “Where are the wrestling pits?” Where are the grounds for the elephant fights? Where are the areas for the Yadava warriors’ competitions of horses?”

To satiate his curiosity Gargamuni answered, “Those are built in many open places between the two royal highways.”

We reached in front of the east-facing door of the royal assembly. This was where my 'Karmayoga' of life was going to take place. I touched the first step of the royal assembly with both hands. Then touching my chest and the top of my head with the fingers, I brought both my palms together and prayed with my heart full of emotions and moved forward.

Looking at the circular structure of the royal assembly I was also dazzled for a while and stood still. Everything here was shining, golden and bright. In the western direction in front of me there was our elegant insignia. The huge golden Garuda spreading its wings and effortlessly bearing the shining, full moon on its head was ready to soar high in the sky.

Two majestic golden thrones were positioned on the highest plane in such a way that the tops of their backs were almost touching the curled talons of the golden Garuda above. These were designed for the Maharaja and Maharani – for my father and mother. Both the chairs had their hand rests designed in the shape of lions with their jaws wide open. Not a single corner on these thrones was left without a decorative design and the royal emblems. Located almost near the base of these two thrones were two seats a little smaller in size. These were for the crown prince and his wife, for my dear dada and *vahini*. A little below that on the next plane, to the right was a seat covered with deerskin with a plain wooden back and no hand rests. This was for the royal Acharya Sandipani. Another similar seat was located on the left for Gargamuni, the royal priest. Below that on the next plane, there were ten seats in a semi-circle, five on the right and five on the left, for ten royal ministers. At the centre of this ring, a large seat was elevated for the chief minister, Vipruthu. On his right, there was a tall, stone socket to place the magnificent, golden, jewel-studded royal sceptre of the Yadavas. Touching the base of the royal sceptre were two seats, one on either side, for the two commanders of our army – Yuyudhana also known as Satyaki and Anadhrishti who were Satyaka's sons and Shinee's grandsons. On the plane below there were two long half-circular rows of seats for the spies, envoys, army leaders, treasurer, armoury chief, and chiefs of horses, elephants, and camel troops, and many more.

There were two seats located high on the right, clearly away from the rest of the seats, somewhat parallel to Maharaja Vasudeva's throne or to Prince Balarama's seat. These were also golden but simple, without any decorative engravings on them. Yes, the right seat among them was for me and the left seat was for my future wife. Right now, it was empty.

This seating arrangement of the royal assembly would certainly inspire awe in the spectator. In front of these royal seats was a huge square. It was for the citizens, the guests, and the people seeking justice from the Maharaja; this was the real 'Sudharma' assembly. There were separate sections for men and women. For other royal ladies, separate sections of galleries were located on both sides, parallel to the royal throne. Next to those were the sections for other women guests and learned women invitees.

I checked each row of the seats leisurely with dada and Uddhava. In this circular structure of the royal assembly designated platforms for armed sentinels were also built. Near the eastern gate a huge, round time-disk was dangling. Right next to it a long hammer was placed in a groove – this was to give the time-indicating tolls. Both were made from iron and polished with gold. I came here with everybody. Out of curiosity I picked up the hammer from the groove. Looking at the ocean waves I struck a blow of the hammer on the dangling time-disk. "Thann!" The sound echoed. 'Kala' woke up shaking his body. The sound waves scurried far away to catch up with the sound of the ocean.

We left the Sudharma assembly contented. After taking a look at the well-built mansions of the Prince, the royal priest, the chief minister, and the commanders, etc. we finally we arrived at my residential mansion.

I was very eager and extremely curious to see how Maya and Gargamuni had built the 'Krishnasopana'. The moment we entered the mansion, we saw the huge, long, spacious Srikrishnasopana, with glistening golden stairs right in front of us. It was exactly the way I had envisioned it. Moving closer, I stood near the lowest step, touching it and tightly holding the railing on the left. My gaze moved sequentially from the first step upwards and reached the twenty-fifth step eventually. Unknowingly I entered the deep meaning of life.

"How far up do I have to climb the staircase of my life yet? How many more men and women am I going to meet at every turn of my life? How many such turns of my life have I left behind? My beloved Gokul, my baba and mata there, kakas and kakus, aajoaba, friends, the gopas and gopis, Eka and Radha. Gokul? No, a childhood! Doesn't everyone have a Gokul of their own childhood in their life?"

We climbed up the golden staircase, visited the resting chamber and the bed chamber on the upper level and came down. I walked through the complete mansion, checking all the big and small rooms and passages. While leaving the mansion with a contented heart I handed a pearl necklace to Maya and

said, “Maya, sir, we saw Kushasthali, and we loved it. It doesn’t have a single fault in it. You will be duly honoured in the special royal council. Tomorrow we will visit the neighbouring Shankhoddhara Island to see the Queens’ residences.”

That day we stayed at Kushasthali. The next day we woke up before sunrise and performed our morning rituals. Standing waist deep in the ocean water the three of us offered oblations to the Sun. Instead of travelling by way of the channel connecting the twin islands we sailed in boats to arrive at the Shankhoddhara Island. Even here there was the trench and fortification like Kushasthali. It was a little smaller in circumference. It also had four big gates but not as big as Kushasthali. Here too many kinds of facilities were built. Cow corrals were built and grazing meadows were reserved for the cattle. The boulders near the fortification on the sandy shore of the western ocean were shaped like seats. The Yadava pennant - was fluttering in the air on a platform at the centre of this island.

The chariot assembly on this island was quite spacious. The path connecting both islands was narrow and long. Communication between the two islands by this way was possible only by chariots and horses. If commuting by water was required, it was only possible by boats, rafts, etc. Both the modes of transportation were already in use. The Queens’ residences had eight grand palaces – four on both sides, facing each other. While observing those edifices, I asked Gargamuni with the usual playfulness, “Why are there exactly eight of these edifices? And for what?” He took a moment, then with a slight smile he said, “Even though the Yadava prince may have only one wife, surely the fragrance of her reputation will disperse in all eight directions! These eight edifices are a symbol of that!” I kept looking at him in amazement.

We also checked out the mansion for Balaramadada’s queen. Spending the night on that island, the next day we returned to Mathura from there itself.

The invitations for Vasudevababa’s coronation were dispatched to various kingdoms in Aaryavarta. I sent off Uddhava again to invite Nandababa, Yashodamata, Ekananga, Radha and all from Gokul. But he returned with a sentimental refusal and a few gifts. Yashodamata had refused to come saying that, “If we see you after so many years now, we wouldn’t be able to return to Gokul. We cannot leave Gokul forever like you have left Mathura. As per your convenience, you only come to visit Gokul. Come to meet dear Eka. See how she has grown. Come and meet your friend Radha too at least once. Till

then we will meet the Gopalkrishna in our hearts every day!”

But almost all the Yadavas of Mathura left the city to attend the coronation. Only a select few stayed behind. Aacharya Kashyapa Sandipani planned the complete agenda for the coronation. Kushasthali Island, glistening with the golden gates, royal palaces, and the fortification, was now fragrant with various kinds of garlands. It was embellished with delightful decorations. First, in the presence of all sages and hermits from various kingdoms Sandipani and Gargamuni performed a religious ceremony at the hands of aai and baba to begin the function. Many idols of gods and goddesses were formally installed in many temples. Plenty of charities were distributed. Then the actual coronation ceremony began with vibrant sounds of various musical instruments. At the exact moment of sunrise, with various ascetic sages from holy places like Kashi, Prayaga, Ahichchhtra, Kurukshetra, Panchanada, Hrishikesh and many more coming together to chant the holy mantras, the rituals of the ceremonial ‘*Abhishek*’ began. Till today, so many times my forbearing mother and father had performed the continuous ‘*Abhishek*’ of their tears on the land. Today they both appeared somewhat thinner due to keeping fasts before performing the rituals. Yet the faces of Vasudevababa and Devakimata were shining with unlimited, unparalleled radiance today. Their loving eyes silently reflected the serene satisfaction of their lives’ fulfilment.

The sun arose. His first rays bowed down to touch the feet of venerable Yadava Maharaja Vasudeva and Maharani Devakidevi. At that moment hundreds of sages and ascetics began continuously intoning the mantras from the Vedas. Five priests performed the holy *Abhishek* on mother and father’s heads with the holy waters of Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu, Narmada and Kaveri – the holy rivers of Aaryavarta. That was followed by the *Abhishek* of the five holy liquids – milk, honey, golden-water, lotus-water, and sandal-water. The waters of the three oceans protectively surrounding Aaryavarta on the three sides were also offered. The concluding *Abhishek* was performed with the waters of seven rivers. Mother and father wore elegant royal costumes and ornaments.

Similar rituals were performed for Balaramadada and Revati *vahini* to proclaim them as the crown prince and princess. Both of them also wore shining royal costumes and ornaments. I too took the holy bath along with Uddhava and all my maternal and paternal cousins and performed the necessary rituals. I wore my usual yellow dhoti.

As usual the precious Paanchajanya conch was tied in a blue scarf around my waist. I put my peacock-feathered crown on my head. I did not forget to wear the Vaijayanti garland around my neck over a pearl necklace studded with a kaustubh jewel. I wore gold-plated iron armour on my chest. My Ajitanjaya bow and arrows were on my shoulder. I fastened the Nandaka sword at my waist, and held the Kaumodaki mace in my hand. Uddhava handed me a fully blossomed red ochre lotus flower.

As the *Muhurta* was approaching, we left the royal palace to go towards the Sudharma royal assembly. Leading us was chief minister Vipruthu holding the royal sceptre. Behind him were Aacharya Saandipani, Gargamuni and many sages. Behind them was baba, wearing the Yadava turban on his head and Devakimata in her royal costume. They were followed by the crown prince and princess – Balaramadada and Revativahini along with Rohinimata in their royal costumes. I followed them. On my right were Uddhava, his brothers Chitraketu, Brihadbala, and many maternal and paternal cousins. On my left were Satyaki, Anadhrishti, Akrura, Satrajita, Vikadru and many ministers of the royal council.

As soon as our royal procession entered the Sudharma assembly from the eastern gate, a cacophony of drums and trumpets ensued. Following that hundreds and thousands of excited Yadavas standing on both sides showered my dear mata and baba with various flowers. Walking on the red carpet our royal panel reached the royal altar at the east side. As per the instructions of the five priests' baba gently put his right foot forward on the footrest of the royal throne, and making a cautious effort to not let his foot touch the royal throne he seated himself in an elegant posture. Devakimata followed suit and took her seat. At that moment, each and every corner of the Sudharma assembly resonated with the exhilarating sound of non-stop applause.

As the coronation *Muhurta* was barely a few moments away the head of the five priests moved forward to remove the Yadava turban from Vasudevababa's head. The main rituals of the coronation commenced now. In a clear voice, the five priests began non-stop incantation of the mantras. Many hymns from the Vedas singing the praises of Rajadharama – imperial duties and rights – started gushing out unceasingly from their mouths like a waterfall gushing incessantly in torrents.

Time-measuring vessels had been kept in big, round, golden tubs near the four entrances on the four sides. Capturing the exact moment of the coronation *Muhurta*, all the time-measuring vessels simultaneously sank in



the water inside the golden tubs making a sinking sound. The timekeepers at all gates simultaneously struck powerful time-indicating tolls on the time disks. Their sound echoed together - 'Tha ...nn ...nn'. At that moment, on the royal altar the five priests picked up the crown in their hands. The traditional golden, grand royal crown of the Yadavas was gently installed on father's gray-haired head. After that they installed a smaller golden diadem, suitable for a woman's delicate face, on Devakimata's head. Seeing that, two tears appeared in the corners of my eyes, like never before.

Following that similar rituals were performed for the crown prince and princess. After that the royal priests declared minister Vipruthu as the royal chief minister, and officially handed over to him the pride of the Yadava clan, the golden royal sceptre embellished with diamonds and jewels.

Now that their religious rituals were concluded, the royal priests settled in their own seats. The chief minister was now in charge of the royal assembly. As he raised high the royal sceptre in his hand the entire assembly hall arose. As it was brought down, everybody sat down mechanically. There was absolute silence. The senior, tall, experienced, chief minister Vipruthu talked with authority in his clear voice, "Dear Yadavas, and honourable invitees, now venerable leader of the Yadava clan, Maharaja Srikrishna will felicitate the creator of this precious royal city – the architect Maya and his associates Vishwakarma, Gargamuni and Twashtta."

I smiled and glanced at Uddhava sitting in the royal council. In my mind, I bowed to dada, *vahini*, Thorali, baba and Dhakali sitting in the gallery. First, I bestowed rich garments and platters of jewellery upon the aforementioned architects and felicitated them. Then I began to speak, "All my dear Yadava men and women, we consider our guests as gods, and I welcome all our guests. I am exceedingly happy today that the Yadavas who have endured suffering and humiliation for so long, now own their own royal city and royal palace. This was a divine dream that they carried forward in their hearts for ages. This royal city has been erected with the blessings of the Ocean-god, and the conscientious, diligent efforts of millions of Yadava brothers. While inaugurating this city, I am overwhelmed with unparalleled joy that cannot be expressed in words.

"First of all, let me formally announce the names of the four gates of this royal city. The eastern gate is 'Shuddhaksha', the western is 'Aindra', the southern is 'Pushpadanta', and the northern gate will be called 'Bhallata'. The perfect name that is coming to my mind for this royal city of the Yadavas

is Dwaravati – Dwarika – Dwaraka!

“My dear Yadava brothers, the chief representatives of the sixteen major kingdoms of Aaryavarta are present here today. Some have not come. I am well aware that those present today have brought invaluable gifts for Vasudevababa and for the Yadavas. But more than that, they have brought their heartfelt blessings along. We, the citizens of Dwaraka, are looking forward to a future full of peace and harmony with other kingdoms along the ocean coast. I have complete faith in the universal truth of Love.

“I have declared the name of this royal city with the permission of Maharaja Vasudeva. I presume that Aaryavarta will certainly acknowledge Dwaraka as the seventeenth kingdom of the region. Everyone is welcome in this city.”

By this time the Sun god in the sky, a witness to the very first coronation in the golden city of Dwaraka, was about to set. The emissaries of various kingdoms like Raivataka, Kashi, Kosala, Kuru, Avanti, Ashmaka, Panchala, Videha, Sindhu-Sauvira, Shibi-Ushinara, Daarwa-Abhisara, Kamboj, Gandhara and many more offered their royal gifts to Maharaja Vasudeva. No gifts arrived from Magadhas of Jarasandha, Chedis of Shishupala, Shalva, Dantavakra and especially from the city of Kundinpura of Vidarbha king Bhishmaka; and were not even expected. The southern Yadava kingdoms of Vanavasi, Kraunchapura, Padmawaat, Mahishmati, Purika, Ratnadipa, and Harita had offered us many exclusive gifts including substantial amount of gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls; along with copper, lead and iron jars full of honey and liquor as well as closed containers of extracts of medicinal herbs.

Ten veteran Yadavas were going to bear the onus of the ministry of Dwaraka – the kingdom of millions of Yadavas. One of them was Uddhava’s aged, experienced, composed, loving father Devabhaga. Veterans Devashravasa and Vikadru were going to bring in their diplomatic expertise. Hardika’s son, accomplished charioteer Kritavarma also known as Hardikya was there. Aahuka, Satyaka, valiant Satrajita and Satyavrata were also part of the ministry. Then there was Chitraka, the aged and expert father of minister Vipruthu, along with Akrura.

That evening I came to the ocean beach through the western gate ‘Aindra’, along with Uddhava. Daruka stayed behind with the chariot. There was an array of reddish pink clouds touching the ocean at the horizon. I was captivated and kept staring at them. Uddhava asked me, “What are you

looking at in the colourful sky dada?” I looked at him smiling and answered, “The sky is of your complexion today...”

He was no less; and always loved to speak enigmatically to me. He exclaimed, “Crazy people like me are always eager to look at the perpetual azure behind such colourful clouds.”

I realized what he meant and wanted to keep him guessing. I called for the fisherman chief in front of us. He was engrossed in unloading the cane baskets full of fish that he had just caught from the sea. He humbly came forward with his palms joined and said, “Your command, sire?” I asked him smiling, “Can a few of you go back in the sea with your boats? Can you dive in and search for the shells with pearls in them and gather them on the shore for us?”

“As you wish Maharaja.” He agreed willingly and gave no excuse. By this time other fishermen had gathered around them; they were also ready to join him. About ten-fifteen boats entered the ocean again.

That group of daring Yadavas collected plenty of shells, and after cleaning them, filled them in cane baskets and lined them up in front of me. I instructed them to dispatch those to the royal palace and returned with Uddhava.

On our way back Uddhava asked me as expected, “Dada, Vasudevababa’s coronation today was an extraordinary event. Everything went smoothly. Nothing bothered anybody. I am the only one to ask you, when are you going to fill the vacant seat on your left? Who is going to be our not yet seen, lucky, virtuous *vahini*?”

Soon the Yadava kingdom in golden Dwaraka settled into a routine. Warriors, attendants, artisans and civilians started commuting easily between both islands. The sounds of tolling of temple bells began blending with the ocean sounds. Most of my stay was in my residence neighbouring the royal assembly hall. I began living in the resting chamber above the golden staircase. Uddhava used to attend to my needs. One day he and the minister presented a middle-aged, lean, and bearded Brahmin in my resting chamber. It was clearly visible that the Brahmin had made a long and arduous journey. His originally neat clothes were now torn at places and soiled. His fair complexion was tanned due to the journey on foot in scorching sun. As he approached me, he instantly prostrated in front of me. Holding his shoulders, I pulled him up and comforted him. He handed me a soft, silk pouch that he had carried carefully in the shawl on his shoulder and said briefly, “Maharaja

Srikrishnadeva, it is only in your hands now, to save the precious life of our princess. Her father and brother have arranged for her wedding against her wish. It will take place very soon. You should immediately leave with your army for our city Kundinpura in Vidarbha.”

Kundinpura! The moment I heard that name many white swans of reminiscence fluttered in the sky of my heart. The image of Rukmini floated in front of my eyes – the one whom I had never seen before, the daughter of King Bhishmaka and Maharani Shuddhamati. Pages of an emotional epic that could not be put in words, instantly fluttered in front of my eyes. The name of the city Kundinpura and the name of Princess Rukmini were blended in that flicker. Hearing these two names the deeply rooted divine mantras of the Sudarshan chakra spontaneously resonated in my mind.

“Your name?” I asked the humble servant.

“I am a Brahmin; my name is Sushil. I am the priest for the daily religious rites performed by Vidarbha princess Rukminidevi.” He answered.

I seated him on a chair. A Yadava attendant offered him fruits and a glass of milk. The courteous envoy was reluctant to eat anything in my presence. Patting on his shoulders I comforted him again. He then finished the fruits and milk. He looked quite fresh now. I collected all precise details about the princess’ wedding. I instructed the minister to take care of him and to arrange for the Brahmin to rest.

As Jarasandha had been unable so far to defeat the Yadavas, dada and me on the battlefield, he had conspired again to fulfil his devious motive. Inviting Bhishmaka’s son Rukmi from Kundinpura to the Magadha capital Girivraja, he had honoured Rukmi in a royal assembly by offering him a gold-hilted sword, a large shield and silken royal vestments.

Rukmi! Ruddy complexioned like our Uddhava. He was impatient and quick-tempered like Balaramadada and Satyaki, and also valiant like them. He was good-looking like his sister. As his father Bhishmaka, also known as Hiranyaromana, was getting old, the eldest son Rukmi was running the kingdom.

Jarasandha was trying to corner me by forming an alliance with Rukmi. He had sent Rukmi to Shuktimati, the royal capital of my paternal cousin Shishupala. Rukmi had proposed that Shishupala should wed his sister Rukmini, and Shishupala had eagerly accepted it. Both of them had persuaded King Bhishmaka to fix a date for the wedding. Magadha emperor Jarasandha had astutely designed the entire plot from his capital Girivraja. He

had an axe to grind. So, he wanted to pull Bhishmaka and his sons on his side by keeping them under obligation using Shishupala as bait. They did not take into account Rukmini's wish or choice at all; for she was merely a woman to them.

I began reading the letter written on birch parchment delivered by Sushil. It was not merely an epistle, but the ultimate lamentation of a sensitive and effervescent Kshatriya lady who had the earnest wish to get married to me without even seeing me. She had openly expressed her emotions in her own handwriting using a peacock feather,

“Oh Srikrishna, the most enchanting one of the three worlds, those who perceive your superiority, are relieved of all their grief instantaneously. Those who see you with their own eyes and place you in their hearts are blessed for their lives. Ever since I heard your acclaim I have been yearning for you unabashedly. I simply cannot help it. I am penning this epistle, surrendering my modesty at your feet.”

The very commencement of her epistle gripped my mind in an unbreakable hold. She was imploring me for pure, genuine Love. And what else had I done in my life so far! What was I going to do in future? Offering pure, genuine Love without expectations was the essence of my life after all. Wasn't it?

Curiosity got the best of me and I started reading further, “Madhusudana, everything about you is simply exceptional – your character, your lineage, age, lustre, wealth, beauty, power, eloquence – everything. You enchant the universe, so it's no wonder if a lady of marriageable age like me, surrenders her life like a Prajka flower at your feet.” She had perfectly captured the Krishna and Srikrishna in my name with a precise choice of words. I smiled to myself in appreciation of her brilliance and began reading further, “Oh beloved, you can say whatever you wish to about me, but I have already surrendered myself to you in the heart of my hearts. Therefore, please leave no stone unturned to do whatever is necessary at this time!” The articulate emotional rendition in her epistle amazed me further, “You are the lion, the monarch of millions of Yadavas. But if you delay even a bit to take your share, then a jackal named Shishupala will lay his hands on it. It will be like a crow grabbing the share of an eagle. Won't it?”

She had skilfully used striking words that would instigate the pride of any true Kshatriya. I could clearly sense the dynamic beauty of her intellect along with her physical beauty. She wouldn't let the reader stray from the topic.

Even while realizing that, I laughed to myself. She had written further, “You might think it as my audacity to write an epistle to you like this. But only for your sake I am ready to sacrifice my family, my womanly modesty...everything that I have.”

Her brilliance evident so far in her epistle had reached its zenith in the content ahead. It was like a gesture of a guru who holds his disciple’s hand to teach him how to play the game of *Hututu*. Indeed, she was a pure manifestation of a woman’s innate brilliance. She had further written, “You may be concerned that there could be trouble when you enter the wedding hall, but be rest assured about that. The Bhoja dynasty has a familial custom of the bride visiting the temple of Goddess Ambika on the outskirts of the city. Be present and ready with your chariot at the time of my visit to the temple of Goddess Ambika with my friends. The moment I come out of the temple, take me into your captivity and abduct me. As I have been wedded to you in my heart your character will not be tarnished by the sinful abduction of an unknown woman. You have no reason to harbour such doubt!” Her clearly suggested solution produced a dimple in my cheek. Overly curious about how she had concluded, I read further.

“Oh lotus-eyed Hrishiksha, after all this, what if you decide to turn down my request? In that case Manamohana, Madhusudana, have no doubts that I will end my life remembering you. Probably then at least you will be my husband in the next life if not in this one.

Oh Srihari-Sridhara-Srikrishna! I desperately await you. Don’t forget Anandakanda, Mukunda, and Govinda that for me even a moment’s delay will be the end of this world! Just drop everything and leave urgently!”

Uddhava was lost in himself observing the iridescent peacock feather in my golden crown. I said to him, “Udho, you always question me about who is going to occupy the seat on my left in the Yadaava royal assembly. She is the one who deserves that honour. Rukmini, your *vahini*!” I handed over the birch parchment to my dear brother Uddhava. He also read it thoroughly.

“Go Udho, hurry. Dispatch a scribe, royal envoys and the cavalry chief immediately. Order the treasury chief to keep a few platters of royal gifts ready. Tell Daruka to take along the four white horses of the Garudadhwa chariot, their backs covered with decorative garments. The chariot will remain behind. We will only take the horses with us. I will leave for Kundinapura today evening itself along with Sushil. Tell dada to follow me along with the army, and you come with him too.” I dismissed him with

instructions.

Ecstatic Uddhava scurried away promptly. A scribe showed up within a few moments; I dictated four letters for the four Yadava kings in the south to meet up with us directly at the border of Kundinpura with their armies. The sealed missives were dispatched with the royal envoys. I ordered the cavalry chief to be at the ready with a few nimble horses and combative Yadava warriors. We had learnt a lot by the experience of travelling twice through Dandakaranya. Dwaraka to Kundinpura was a long journey. We had prepared special troops to assist us during this journey. All of them were ordered to be at the ready.

The wheels turned fast. We bade farewell to all and received some customary curds and blessings from Devakimata, whom we always called Thorali out of habit though she had now become the Maharani. By this time the news of our departure to Kundinpura had spread through the royal families of Yadavas. Everybody knew only this much – Maharaja Srikrishna is leaving for Kundinpura along with gifts to attend the wedding ceremony of the Vidarbha princess Rukmini.

This time we crossed through Dandakaranya within two weeks, and immediately dispatched a royal envoy with the news of our arrival to King Bhishmaka. He dispatched his minister Rukmavarma to welcome us. He tried his best to persuade me to enter the city along with the army. After giving many excuses I cleverly declined his invitation. Our encampment was set on the outskirts of the city. The next day itself the wedding ceremony was going to take place in the royal assembly hall. Many southern kings had arrived for the wedding ceremony. From the north Jarasandha, Shalva and Dantavakra had arrived together. Shishupala, the bridegroom to be, had already arrived in Kundinpura. Many other kings had arrived with their armies either because they were in awe of Jarasandha or due to his coercion. From the south the four Yadava kings – our kith and kin – had camped on the southern boundary of the city as per my instructions. Skilfully, using my own Krishna style, I gathered succinct information of all those who had arrived from minister Rukmavarma.

Convinced by Shishupala, his prospective brother-in-law, this time too, Prince Rukmi had not invited us Yadavas for the wedding ceremony considering us as lowly cowherds. He had become wary due to the fact that we had arrived for the wedding ceremony in spite of not being invited. He had sent his informers to our camp disguised as servants. I had to design a

counter-strategy to keep an eye on his informers and plan our course of action accordingly.

King Krathakaishika had camped on the southern boundary of Kundinapura. I requested for his embellished royal chariot to be dispatched to our camp. As per my instructions it was yoked with four hefty, dark black horses.

As expected Rukmi had received the news during the night itself that a black-horsed royal chariot had arrived at our encampment. He called for his secret service chief and warned him, “Keep a close eye on the black-horsed chariot of black Krishna! Surely, he will plot some dark scheme and do anything any time!”

Immediately after my arrival here I had sent a message with the Brahmin Sushil to the Vidarbha princess – “I have arrived. Do not worry. Be rest assured. Be patient.”

The day of the princess’ wedding dawned on Kundinapura. Their royal palace resonated with holy sounds of various instruments. Family members clad in royal attire gathered around the wedding platform. Shishupala stood near the wedding platform, with the twisted gold-bordered turban on his head and ‘Mundavalya’, the dangling pearl strings tied on his forehead. After the wedding, he was going to wear his formal Chedi golden crown. He was going to crown Rukmini with the Chedi diadem meant for the Maharani, with his own hands. He was daydreaming about his blissful wedded life. His mother Shrutashrava and father Damaghosha stood behind him. Jarasadha’s son Sahadeva stood as the groom’s best man. Rukmi and his four brothers, clad in flashy royal costumes strutted about with golden crowns on their heads. Due to the terror of her armed brothers Rukmini was first going to place the wedding garland around Shishupala’s neck as her ‘own wish’! In the packed hall Rukmi was hunting only for me to banish me from the ceremony. It was a well-planned scheme by all of them. As the time of the wedding ceremony drew closer I began my strategic movements swiftly on the northern boundary of the city. First of all, I started dispatching troops of Yadava warriors towards the royal palace of Kundinapura, with my royal gift platters. They were going to go till their destination but not going to enter the palace and participate in the wedding ceremony. In fact, from there they were going to disperse and return to our base.

The selected warriors who remained behind let loose the black horses of Krathakaishika’s chariot and yoked the four white horses of my Garudadhwa chariot that we had brought along, and hoisted the Garuda



pennant on the chariot.

The most exciting moment of my life so far, the moment of my wedding that was going to be reminisced for ages to come, stood in front of me. Daruka brought the chariot with four white horses, boasting a saffron pennant marked with the golden Garuda in front of my pavilion. Dropping the reins, he descended from the chariot. Walking swiftly, he approached and bowed to me and Uddhava standing on my left. I verified with him, “Everything ready? Anything missing?”

“No, sire, venerable Yadava, everything is in place! Arrows-quiver, Ajitanjaya bow, chakra, Agnikankana, Kaumodaki mace, Saunanda pestle, Nandaka sword in a scabbard – everything has been kept at the rear of the chariot. All is set.” He answered promptly giving me a pleasing smile.

Both of you stay right here. I will visit the Aandhrabhrutya Goddess Ambika’s temple and be right back along with her blessings!” In a single leap, I was on the chariot and took the charioteer’s seat. Unfastening my beloved Paanchajanya conch from the blue scarf tied around my waist, I held it in my palm and momentarily touched it to my forehead. On the boundary of Kundinapura, pointing it towards the sky I blew it with bulging veins. I could feel that I had never blown it with such intensity before. I held the reins of my dearest friends, the four horses, in my hands. Remembering baba, aai, Acharya Sandipani and our ancestors from Maharaja Pururavas to Shura I hollered from the core, “Megha, Shaibya, Bala, Sugriva, go!” Responding to my voice the horses neighed exultantly and sprinted forward. I left alone, with my chest brimming with self-confidence.

Within a short time, taking many twists and turns, I brought my Garudadhwaya chariot in front of Goddess Ambika’s temple located at the base of the dense mountain range. I positioned it under a *Champaka* tree at a little distance from the temple. The priest and the attendants of the temple were stunned. Moving forward, briskly climbing the steps I passed through the central square and entered the temple. Bowing down to the divine Goddess Ambika I put my moist forehead on her holy feet. Slowly walking around the idol of the goddess, I spread my right palm resting on the left palm in front of the temple priest to receive the *Tirtha-Prasada*. Still baffled, with his eyes wide open he kept staring at the peacock feather tucked in my golden crown and the pure white Vaijayanti garland around my neck. Consuming the *Tirtha-Prasada* offered by the priest who was still in the bewildered state, I removed a pearl necklace from my neck and keeping it

gently in his hands I asked him, “How come you didn’t go to the city for the princess’ wedding?”

“The princess-bride herself will soon be here to get the blessings of the goddess. After offering my blessings to her I will go to the city to receive the royal gift.” The priest answered with a smile.

Looking at the pearl necklace in his hands I whispered, “This is my gift to you.”

The entire city had gathered at the wedding hall. Only a few people were left in the temple. I strolled around the temple to take a look at the place that was going to be a memorable part of my life. Descending the steps, I returned to my chariot and sat leisurely in my seat. I was lost in my thoughts. Within a few moments, the rhythmic galloping sound of many horses was heard. Following that a cacophony of musical instruments blended into it. I became cautious and stood up. Soon armed horse riders surrounded the temple. It was the cavalry for the protection of the princess. Following them many bearded hermits and anchorites clad in saffron and white clothes arrived, clacking their wooden slippers on the floor. They were intoning Vedic hymns, blowing their conches in between. Climbing the steps, they entered straight into the temple. Behind them was a bevy of bridesmaids. They carried platters of fruits, garlands, ornaments, garments, and other materials needed for the worship of the goddess. After them the royal women relatives of the bride, dressed in rich, vibrant costumes alighted from various chariots. Behind them were grand, embellished chariots of the bride’s five brothers. At the very end was the grand, embellished tallest royal chariot of Rukmini, the princess-bride. The white pennant of the Bhoja dynasty fluttered atop the chariot.

Headed by a bevy of maids that carried the platters of charity the royal ladies entered the temple while chattering. The five princes began climbing the temple steps with the commander and a few armed escorts. They entered the temple. Now they were out of sight. The Maharaja and Maharani remained behind to perform some rituals. In the end, from the grand, embellished chariot the bride – adorned with jewellery – alighted from the chariot and put her feet, decorated with henna designs and bearing anklets, on the ground.

The indistinct sight of her feet from a distance stirred an irrepressible unknown emotion in my heart. The waves of the Sudarshan mantras sprang up from deep down in the recesses of my mind. Automatically my hand moved towards the Paanchajanya conch in my scarf. Instantly putting it to my

lips I blew the large, white conch from the bottom of my core with passion.

When she heard its novel sound, she was baffled, and stopped in her place momentarily. She quickly flung back the dupatta that covered her face and stared in the direction of Garudadhwaja chariot. She was like a fully blossomed lotus in the moonlight! That is how her face looked – vibrant and blooming with youth. When she saw the Garudadhwaja pennant fluttering on the golden flagpole of my chariot, her face lit up with a tide of joy. The next moment she smiled and pulled the dupatta back on her face, and started walking towards the Ambika temple, firmly and fearlessly.

My job was done. She had received my signal.

Within moments the rituals of worship began in the Ambika temple. Innumerable bell sounds resonated in the surroundings; sounds of conches blown by the sages blended with them. For almost about half an hour all rituals inside were performed with the intonation of the mantras. First the platters of charity touched by the bride's hand came out and started being distributed. Goddess Ambika blessed the princess bride Rukmini from the bottom of her heart. I had already received her blessings.

Now the groups of bearded sages and anchorites clad in saffron and white garments came out of the temple. No one realized that the bridal procession had not come out of the temple in the same sequence it had entered. Sushil had done his job perfectly, according to my instructions. Breaking the sequence of the procession, the princess herself came out adorned in bridal attire, only with a few maid servants by her side. Her eyes were searching for only one thing – the golden pole with the Garuda pennant. Meanwhile I had turned my chariot around and pulled it right in front of the temple steps.

She came! Like a moving sculpture in marble, delicately climbing down the white steps of the temple brightened in the sunlight! Like an autumn dawn, fresh with the fragrance of Prajкта flowers! Like a streak of lightning in the gray clouds at the beginning of Aashadha. The moment she came in front of my chariot she flung off her dupatta. Our eyes met for the first time! Time stood still! In silence, our eyes spoke volumes with each other. I smiled to myself as a humorous thought occurred to me, even at that moment, 'There is one more Vani beyond Vaikhari, Madhyama, Pashyanti and Para, Gurudeva Sandipani – the silent speech of Love – Premavani!' The next moment her big, bright, dark black eyes fell on the peacock feather in my crown. For a moment, they were glued to the inviting iridescent colours. But in an instant, she blushed demurely. For a moment, her eyes met mine, recognizing our

eternal love for each other. Again, her face was swept by unique royal modesty. Then her beautiful fish-shaped eyes moved from the Vaijayanti garland resting on my chest and settled on my feet. Only a few select people had given me the feeling of such closeness, as if they were a part of my body. I felt the same about her. Yes, she was the most important organ of my body – the heart!

The crimson-fair, elegant, tall, comely Kshatriya lady standing in front of me was overly stirred when she saw me. The tears that she had restrained so far began streaming down her face. She surged forward and put her fair, exhausted head on my golden striped royal sandals and whispered, “Achyuta, Madhava, how long did I have to wait for you? Take me away, far away from here, never to return – don’t waste a moment now.” Holding her crimson-fair hand in my robust, strong bluish hand, I promptly pulled her gently in the back of the chariot. Then descending from the back of the chariot, in a single leap I took the seat of the charioteer. Pulling the reins of the four horses of my chariot I signalled them to run, ‘Megha..., Bala..., Shaibya..., Sugriva.... go!’ Raising their front hooves high in the air all horses neighed together loudly, indicating that they had understood and sprinted ahead immediately. Just then many of the sages who had come out showered flowers on us and raised their rosary-holding hands, to offer blessings. Many of them blew their conches with sky-piercing sounds. All of them had already recognized the ‘Garudadhwaya’ pennant of my chariot correctly. Deflating the ego of the Aandhrabhrutyas, my Yadava chariot sprinted across abducting beloved Rukmini, with Goddess Ambika as our witness and which was as per the practice allowed by Kshatriyas.

As per her wish I had officially abducted Rukmini, a widely-accepted practice that Kshatriyas considered honourable.

I brought the chariot near the northern boundary of Kundinpura. Uddhava and Daruka were already waiting there for me. Balaramadada had just arrived from Dwaraka, along with the army and was resting in his pavilion. I descended from the chariot and Daruka took his place as charioteer. I climbed in the back of the chariot along with Uddhava. We left in the direction of the Dandakaranya. Dada was supposed to stay behind to keep the other kings at bay and defeat them. I had the mammoth cavalry – ours combined with the southern Yadava cavalry – with me.

There in Kundinpura total bedlam had erupted. Prince Rukmi, boiling with anger was not going to sit quiet after this. We travelled faster and arrived near

the Dakshinapath of Dandakaranya along with the chariot. Now the question was what to do with the chariot, as it was not possible to enter Dandakaranya along with it. It was not even possible to return the chariot to King Krathakaishika. Daruka and Uddhava were pondering over the situation, when I offered a solution to them. The chariot should be offered to the Vanavasi king in the vicinity. In return we should ask for some honey, long-lasting wild fruits and some holy, medicinal herbs. Rukmini was the only lady among the Yadavas at the time, so we should also ask for an enclosed palanquin and a few female attendants to accompany her on the way. Also, impose the condition to fight against Rukmi who was chasing us, to keep him at bay as much as possible.

A troop leader met the Vanavasi king on our behalf and got all our conditions approved. We crossed Dandakaranya as quickly as possible. Our cavalry arrived near the city of Avanti along with the Vidarbha princess sitting in the palanquin guarded by armed soldiers. A few royal chariots and select elephant troops coming from Dwaraka to welcome us met us here. Acharya Sandipani was in Dwaraka now with his family. But our Ankapada aashrama, well looked after by his successors, was in the vicinity near the banks of the Kshipra. It had become much more active now and had prospered a lot. Uddhava proudly shared this information with his *vahini*. After listening to that, Rukmini implored me to let her visit the aashrama at least once. I caved in and with Uddhava and a few armed soldiers I sent her to visit the aashrama along with a few royal gifts.

On the border of Avanti, near the banks of the Kshipra we awaited Rukmini and Uddhava. It took them two days to come back. The aashrama disciples had welcomed them with great joy and urged them to stay overnight. They returned in the afternoon the next day. We were getting ready to move towards Dwaraka. Just then a cacophony of war drums was heard from the south side of Avanti. Suddenly within moments our camp was surrounded by horse riders. It was Rukmi! His face was red with anger. He was fuming with rage over the abduction of his sister.

Barely halting his robust, sturdy horse he alighted from it directly next to my chariot. In a moment, he tucked his dhoti tightly and got ready. He indignantly pulled his massive club from the leather case hanging on the horse's back and directly charged upon me.

Raising his thick eyebrows and dilating his eyes he roared in an emphatic voice, "You, runaway cowherd! You, fiendish thief! You abducted my dear

sister Rukmini, the grace of the Bhoja dynasty in front of everybody. I dare you to fight a duel right now. Better accept my challenge if you don't want to see bloodshed on both sides. If you think yourself to be gallant enough, accept this challenge. If you want to take away my sister it will have to be over my dead body. Or else I guarantee you that I will kill you myself in the duel! I will certainly take her back to Kundinapura, to get married to Shishupala whom we have chosen as her groom. I have taken a vow that if I don't fulfil my promise I will not set my foot on the grounds of Kundinapura again! You coward, get down if you have any courage in you." Swirling the massive club around himself, shouting in the name of the goddess – Victory to Goddess Ambika – he gyrated and took a stance to fight with me.

It was mandatory that I accept the challenge of the duel now. As a Kshatriya, I had acted in line with one tradition – that of the abduction of the bride. Now I had to comply with this norm too – to accept the challenge of the duel. I also tucked my yellow dhoti tightly in a moment, patted my upper arms, and prayed in memory of Kelinandakaka. Lifting my huge 'Kaumodaki' mace from the back of the chariot and roaring the war call of victory to the Yadava Goddess Ida, I leaped out of the chariot. Rukmini tried to stop me, but only the shawl on my shoulders remained in her hand. I also brandished my club to accept the challenge.

Our maces collided with each other instantaneously in the meadows on the borders of Avanti. A crashing sound exploded and fiery sparks flew around. A deadly duel commenced. Warriors on both sides became spectators, holding their breaths,

their mouths agape. Keeping an eye on his foot movements

I was anticipating each and every move of Rukmi and the direction of his next strike. I was blocking his strikes accurately, and dodging his deadly attacks by scanning the muscle movement of his chest and thighs. Both of us were perspiring profusely, drenched in blood streams all over our bodies due to the hard blows of maces by the rival. The hand grips of both our maces got twisted ultimately, and so we had to cease the mace duel. Throwing a contemptuous glance at Rukmini in the chariot Rukmi dropped his mace on the ground. I also threw mine.

He pulled his shining wide-bladed sword out of the hilt tied to his waist in rage and challenged me to a sword fight. I had nothing in my hands. Nimble leaping towards my chariot, I caught my Nandaka sword that Daruka promptly threw towards me.

We began fighting swiftly slamming our swords against each other. At times, we tried to strike each other through the air aiming towards the neck and at times we blocked each other's strikes coming from down below in the direction of the calves. After all, Rukmi was a master sword fighter. For about half an hour our blood-tingling sword fight continued, destroying the grass under our feet. Both of us were quite wounded and blood-soaked by now. We both looked like the *Palash* tree in the summer – dreadful and blood red; fully engrossed in the challenging duel we had completely forgotten about our surroundings. The Vaijayanti garland around my neck was drenched in blood. A few blood drops had splattered on the peacock feather atop my head. My silk dhoti was wet with blood and sweat, and had stuck to my body at places. But the duel was still inconclusive.

Ultimately, I struck a firm blow right at the centre of Rukmi's sword breaking it into two pieces. He got terrified now. He knew too well what could be the outcome of a duel. Barely blocking my blows with his broken sword, he began retreating one step at a time towards my chariot. His sharp tongue that had been berating me outright in front of the warriors on both sides just a short while ago, got stuck in his throat now out of fear for his life. In a trice, his sweaty red face turned black with the fear of death.

With firm resolve I picked up my sword to strike the last blow to decapitate him, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't bring it down! It was Rukmini! Standing in my chariot she had held my sword's blade tightly in her hands, like her life depended on it. Her palms had already started bleeding. She did not utter a single word, but her eyes spoke volumes, 'Oh my dear Lord, are you going to take me to Dwaraka as your bride, after killing my brother? He has made a mistake. Are you also going to make another mistake of not sparing his life?' The deep, yearning compassion in her eyes touched my heart deeply; I caved in.

Slowly, I took my sword down. I could never forget that look of compassion in Rukmini's eyes, for the rest of my life. I composed myself, got in the chariot and instructed Daruka while wiping my sweaty forehead with the end of the yellow 'dhoti'. "Put some medicinal herb extract on her wounded palms. First take the chariot to the banks of Kshipra. We will leave for Dwaraka only after taking a clean bath." Meanwhile Balaramadada had defeated all the kings who had engaged in a war with him in Kundinapura and joined us with his army. Defeated Rukmi, who had been spared by me, went back fretting and fuming from the borders of Avanti. The joyous populace of

Avanti named the place of our duel ‘Gopalapur’!

Along with Rukmini we all arrived at the shores of Kushasthali and dispatched a messenger to Dwaraka with the news of our arrival. Within a single day the entire city was decorated. The buildings were decorated with lamps. Arches embellished with flower garlands were raised. Minister Vipruthu welcomed us along with baba, both matas and a mammoth crowd of the Yadavas.

Gargamuni and Aacharya Sandipani soon decided upon an auspicious day for our wedding. On that day in a spectacular ceremony my wedding to Rukmini – the daughter of Vidarbha – took place in front of all Yadavas.

It was the most memorable event for the populace of Dwaraka, after baba’s grand coronation ceremony. This time too we received countless gifts from our friends and relatives. The treasury of Dwaraka was flooded with those riches. Rukmini literally proved to be ‘Lakshmi’, the goddess of wealth, for the Yadavas of Dwaraka.

A few days passed by. The Queens’ mansions on the twin island were yet to be inhabited. Therefore, along with her maids and friends, Rukmini lived in the royal palace, in my chamber connected to the golden staircase. The first time while she was climbing the shining staircase along with me, she paused and questioned, “So many steps on the staircase! Why?”

She possessed an unequalled intellect to go with her matchless beauty. I had already realized it when our eyes met for the first time. I had to give her a convincing answer. I smiled and said, “Life itself is a staircase, dear. We keep climbing it without stopping, without resting. Take it as a symbol of that. You may consider these steps similar to the flight of stairs which are there for resting along the banks of rivers like Ganga and Yamuna. What do you think?” She did not say anything at that time.

Today I wanted to surprise her with a beautiful gift. Climbing the stairs, I arrived in the lobby of the resting chamber. As per my instructions the palace attendants had already brought and arranged wicker baskets in a line along a wall. They were covered with round wicker lids. The maid scurried inside to announce my arrival to Rukmini. I took a seat on a golden chair and waited for Rukmini.

In a moment, I could hear a very delicate tinkling sound of the golden anklets, which could be heard only if you strained your ears. Followed by that, the pleasant perfume of sandalwood paste wafted in the air floating on the ocean winds of Dwaraka. The next moment a ruddy fair foot



came out through the

sheer veil in the chamber, and halted for a moment. It wore a golden anklet embellished with tiny golden bells, reminding me of a ripened mango fruit – plump, fresh, pinkish and golden bright! I simply lost myself looking at it. It had a novel freshness today.

In a moment, Rukmini stood in front of me, arranging her thick, black, open hair wrapped in a white cloth. She looked so different, exceptionally beautiful and radiant today. Like a statue of marble! I playfully said to her, “As it is you are good-looking, but today you look exceptionally gorgeous. Your bare feet are looking more beautiful than your face!” She simply smiled demurely.

She was indeed exceptionally brilliant. Ignoring my mischievous comment, she said to me, “Enough of your mischief now! First show me what gift you have brought.”

I went near the wicker baskets while laughing, and picked up one of the lids. It was filled with big pearls to the brim. The Yadava fishermen had taken those out of the shells. Pleased, I picked up a handful of pearls and walking gently came closer to Rukmini. Emptying my palms in to her palms I said, “You are an original beauty. Wear some ornaments made of these pearls; it will enhance your beauty. The lustre of gold and the fragrance of sandalwood will be united then!”

Her cheeks flushed red. She kept staring at the pearls in her palms for a moment. Then shaking her head as if she was talking to herself she said, “No, my lord, these pearls look more beautiful in your palms than mine.” She poured the pearls from her hands in to my palms, and gave me a mischievous smile while glancing at me from the corner of her eyes that confused me. Looking at the pearls in my palms I asked her, “I didn’t get what you said just now. A whip or a sword will look good in my hands! Maybe the Paanchajanya conch, but the pearls...?” She gave me an innocent smile, and fluttering her thick, long eyelashes, in her ambrosial words she said, “You should observe the pearls in your hands carefully, my lord. They reflect the bluish colour of the sky in your hands. In my hands, they reflect a mere crimson fair shade. The blue colour of the sky assimilates all other colours in itself. Do I really need to explain this to my lord?”

So, that was it then! Before I could say anything to her she turned briskly and pushing the veil aside, she disappeared. Why did she leave so hurriedly? It was because she knew that only by looking at her feet I had come to know

that she was having her menses. Our family life had begun.

With Rukmini's arrival in my life a colourful chapter of 'family life' had begun. As per my instructions the artisans had inserted one more step in the golden staircase. The fifth step – added after the steps of both fathers, and both mothers. In the name of Rukmini!

Rukmini's arrival made my heart's Dwaraka blossom with iridescent colours of emotions. It reflected the same marvellous freshness that Rukmini's feet reflected today.



**Rukmini**

**A** woman's life is a potential core with tremendous power of creation. She never looks back in her life once she realizes her inner strength. I am Rukmini – formerly known as the daughter of Vidarbha, the Aandhrabhrytya princess of Bhoja dynasty. That Rukmini was left far behind at the border of Avanti during the duel between Rukmidada and Sri. The one who evolved here in Dwaraka is the Rukmini of Yadavas, who is seasoned by undergoing the tests of time every now and then, with the sounds of the western ocean being her witness. Rukmini of Dwaraka. Rukmini of the entire Aaryavarta.

My husband is worshipped by the entire world, but you see, how easily I could call my husband only 'Sri'. I usually addressed him as 'Lord, Aarya, or Yadavaraja'. But in private, while talking intimately to him, I would unwittingly end up calling him 'Sri'.

Today I am going to relate the story of my life that was in perfect harmony with Sri's. There is only one problem. His life was just like the vast ocean surrounding Dwaraka. My mind is flooded with the countless waves of his myriad memories just like the continuous and countless ocean waves. As soon as the first one subsides, the next one rises.

Putting them in a sequential order is quite a bewildering task for me. It doesn't matter anyway. I am going to tell as much as possible, as I recall, from the bottom of my heart; in my own words. I know it from my experience that how much ever I talk about Sri's life and accomplishments, I won't be able to cover everything.

I have just returned from Shuddhaksha, the eastern gate of Dwaraka, after performing a major duty of my life. Our firstborn son Pradyumna has arrived with his newly married wife Rukmavati. I have returned after doing the *Aukshan* to welcome him with Rukmavati, the first daughter-in-law of Dwaraka. Pradyumna is extremely handsome, Madan incarnate, muscular, and well built. Rukmavati is my own niece – Rukmidada's daughter. Now she has become my daughter-in-law. It was obviously Sri who sagaciously arranged this union.

So far, I have been hearing that I am the only one who possesses extreme beauty. But I was completely disillusioned when I saw Rukmavati, the first daughter-in-law of the Yadavas. She looks just as her name Rukmavati denotes – like a gold bullion!

Sri stood at the Shuddhaksha gate with Rukmavati, Pradyumna and the Yadava army. Enamoured, I kept staring at the three of them. The Yadava

trio looked exquisitely mesmeric – like the sacred *Bela leaf*!

In Kundinapura, Rukmidada and I were always at daggers drawn. We were six siblings in all. Rukmaratha, Rukmabahu, Rukmakesha, and Rukmamali were all younger than Rukmidada. I was the youngest of all. All my brothers always complied with me except for Rukmidada, probably because I was their only sister and the youngest one. But Rukmidada was always the big-headed egomaniac. He was plain arrogant. All the brothers were golden complexioned and handsome as their names implied, just like our father Bhishmaka. Our grandmother, that is our father's mother, affectionately called him 'Hiranyaroman' because of his golden complexion. He came to be known by that name later.

We had only one *kaka*, Aakrutikaka. He was master of a rare skill of snake charming. His remedial intonation of mantras was a fast-acting antidote for any kind of snake venom.

Since arriving in Dwaraka I didn't visit Kundinapura ever again. But whenever I remembered Aakrutikaka, an amusing thought would always cross my mind, that my dear Sri was also a master Charmer. Sri could easily cajole someone hell bent on opposing him with his sweet talk without that person realizing it. That was how Rukmidada, who had once fought a deadly duel with Sri, had given his beloved daughter Rukmavati in marriage to Pradyumna and made her Sri's daughter-in-law. It was the effect of Sri's charm and his ambrosial words.

My father, Rukmidada and the other brothers influenced by both of them, were against my wedding with Sri. My mother Shuddhamatidevi stood firmly by my side though. She was as innocent and pure in thoughts and actions as her name denoted. She loved me unconditionally, and always gave me courage. Even she did not get a chance to see her son-in-law, the Yadava king Srikrishna, before our wedding. But she readily approved of him as it was her daughter's choice. Later, I could keep in touch with her only through priest Sushil whom I had first sent to Sri with my epistle.

Except for Shuddhamatimata all others wondered, 'How did she choose Srikrishna as her husband without even seeing him?' That question was never answered.

It was a secret! I might as well share it with you, now that I am sharing everything openly. I had actually never seen Sri before our wedding; only heard of his abundant, pure renown reaching the corners of the world. More so, his infamy through Rukmidada's mouth! Then at exactly what moment

and how did I take this decision, so important for me in my life? It was during the first Swayamwar ceremony that dada and baba had organized, where they vilified Sri for not being a Kshatriya, and called him a mere cowherd.

Right in front of me Rukmidada agitatedly and frantically announced his rejection. He kept shouting at the top of his lungs, “We are the descendants of Mahabhoja, the forefather of the Satvat dynasty. We are Kshatriyas. Krishna’s family has lost their status as Kshatriyas, right from the time of Yayati’s son Yadu! He is a mere cowherd! We would rather die than get Rukmini married to a cowherd. She must be married to Chedi king Shishupala, a Kshatriya!

He was completely forgetting that his sister was also a Kshatriya lady. That it was her wedding, and not his own! That was the moment I resolved in my heart that I will get married to that cowherd, to Sri.

When I arrived in the never before seen Dwaraka, I was quite befuddled. No one from my parents’ home had accompanied me here. As the acclaim of golden Dwaraka had spread all over the world, so also well-known was the irascibility of the Yadavas. I was totally bedazzled the first time I saw Dwaraka. ‘How am I going to survive here?’ I wondered. A volley of questions arose in my mind, ‘How will the senior royal ladies welcome me? How will they accommodate me in their circle?’ But soon all the questions and doubts simply vanished. I cannot, till today, forget the spontaneous welcome given to me by the populace of Dwaraka the first time I arrived here. It was as spirited as the ocean waves. The senior ladies in the family included my mothers-in-law Maharani Devakidevi and Rohinidevi, and elder sister-in-law princess Revatidevi who was the wife of Sri’s elder brother Balaramadada. Devakidevi, my elder mother-in-law spontaneously held me in a deep embrace the first time I met her. She affectionately whispered in my ears, “Welcome Rukmini, my dear ‘daughter’. I have been waiting for you.”

Since then Sri’s mother Devakidevi became ‘Thorali mata’ for me. Obviously, Rohinimata became ‘Dhakali mata’ for me. I casually called Princess Revatidevi ‘Tai’ in our first meeting itself. She also reciprocated with the same affection and embraced me calling me ‘Dhakati’. I started calling Acharya Sandipani’s wife ‘Gurumata’.

The first year after our wedding flew by fast, like the ocean wind. It left behind a medley of colourful reminiscences. Some of them were quite unpleasant though.

Especially the memory at the time of Pradyumna's birth is so unpleasant that even today its very remembrance gives me the feeling of a gargle with salty ocean water!

That time I was living on the island of Queens' mansions, in my capacious golden palace. While he was still in my womb Sri and I had decided to name him 'Pradyumna'. More than me, Sri was quite sure that our child was going to be a son, that too, exquisitely handsome like Madan.

I had very peculiar cravings during that pregnancy. I constantly felt that instead of listening to the unceasing sound of the ocean, I should go to some dense forest far away and live alone in peace. But I couldn't even enjoy that imaginary privacy, for my mind would suddenly crave to hear the cacophony of musical instruments. Then suddenly I would have an urge to wear bizarre, loose dresses like the Asuras.

The eighteen families of Yadava royalty arranged an exceptionally memorable baby shower feast in my honour at this time. Countless people from various clans of the Yadavas feasted on both the islands. It was but natural. A new scion of the new kingdom of the golden city of Dwaraka was to be born. Balaramadada whom I unwittingly started calling dada instead of *bhauji* already had two healthy sons, Nishatha and Ulmuka. They were the apple of everybody's eyes, especially Sri's favourites. But this was going to be the firstborn son of Sri. Dada was more excited about it than Sri himself. Such a master of mace fighting, and a powerful Yadava, but despite his royal status he would come to the island of Queens' mansions to visit me. Leaving behind all his rowdiness he would gently explain to me with minute details how I should take care of myself during the pregnancy; just like Thorali. And he would always add, "My brother doesn't know anything at all! I know him too well! He is always engaged in the royal council, meeting the sages, warfare, politics and what not. You should not rely on him for anything. Whatever you need, feel free to ask for it to Revati!"

For some reason, I would get all giggly listening to his talk. But I would skilfully suppress my laughs and say to him, "I know him all too well, just like you do. Whatever I need I will tell it to Tai. Why her, in fact I will directly tell it to you, dada!" Then saying 'okay, okay', he would throw his neck back, and shaking his muscular chest he would laugh out loudly and innocently. That laugh would set the entire island atremble.

No matter how hard I try to forget Pradyumna's day of birth, in fact, I can't forget that entire week. Pradyumna was born exactly at midnight. All the old

and young Yadava royalty had eagerly amassed outside my delivery room. They wanted to record the exact time of Sri's first son's birth. To capture the precise time of birth many golden vessels full of water with time-measuring golden cups afloat were placed outside the delivery room. Skilled priests and astrologers sat alert under the guidance of Gargamuni.

At the exact hour of midnight, the time-keepers gave clear time-indicating tolls on the time disks. Their sound echoed in unison 'Thann....!' and dissipated in the booming sound of the ocean. The time-measuring cups in the golden vessels sank at the same time. At that exact moment, the new-born Yadava let out his first cry of life.

At the midnight hour, the island of Dwaraka looked as bright as broad daylight. On the fortification wall of Dwaraka, the four entrance gates and everywhere else in the city, not a foot of place was left without a lighted lamp of *Karanjel* oil. Ecstatic Yadavas shouted victorious cries in the name of Goddess Ida, and played *lezim*, *zimma* and danced to the rhythm of various musical instruments. Maharaja, Rajmata, dada, tai – everybody donated fistfuls of gold coins.

No one – not even Sri and the members of the royalty – was allowed to enter the maternity room to see the new-born baby during the postpartum period. That was the custom. Everybody was going to see him properly only after the first ten days. He was chubby, with thick, curly black hair and had a peaches and cream ruddy complexion. Even the gentlest ocean breeze formed a dimple in his chubby cheeks. Except when he was asleep he constantly kicked his tiny hands and legs in the air like incandescent flames of fire! 'Pradyumna' – we had chosen the perfect name for him! Pradyumna means the bright Sun!

The fifth day after the baby's birth arrived. During the last five days Dwaraka, the Yadava royal capital, was completely drenched in happiness. The fifth night descended. Tomorrow was going to be the sixth day after the baby's birth. Ubiquitous Goddess 'Satwai', mobile in all three worlds, was going to arrive secretly tomorrow to write the baby Yadava's fate on his forehead. Something that only she knew.

Yadava astrologer Gargamuni was frantically getting ready to welcome Goddess Satwai. He had invited many expert astrologers from Anga-Vanga to Kapisha and Kamboja in Dwaraka to welcome her.

The sixth day dawned. No, in fact it brought a nightmare with it! From the direction of the baby's bedecked cradle my nurse Vetra came running to my



bed, screaming at the top of her lungs and beating her chest frantically, ‘Maharani...! Terrible news! The baby prince has vanished from his cradle. Save me, save me!’

Her loud wailing startled me awake from my sleep. Upset as I was sleep-deprived for last five days I yelled at her, “What is it, Vetra? Why are you screaming like Hell has broken loose?”

“Indeed, Devi, Hell has indeed broken loose! The baby Yadava has vanished from his cradle! How can I face Prince Balarama now?” Terrified of Balaramadada’s temper she began shaking frantically. Her words struck me like lightning. Instantly throwing my blanket away I surged towards the baby’s cradle. I frantically tossed around all the baby blankets in the cradle. The baby was not there! He was nowhere! Lightning had indeed struck. Sri’s first baby, his new-born delicate baby had been abducted within a few days of his birth, in spite of the tight security!

“Oh, Ambika mata...! Ida mata...!” I screamed excruciatingly and losing consciousness I collapsed on the floor. Within moments the distressful, heart-breaking news spread rapidly in the royal family and around the entire Dwaraka city. The city that had been drenched in joy for the last five days, turned dark in instant grief. The Garudahwaja pennant fluttering atop the Sudharma royal assembly was lowered halfway down in the morning itself. Batches of Yadavas started arriving on the island to console me. The royal minister and both commanders kept them at bay.

Sri came with Balaramadada to visit me in my room. I was lying in bed with dry ginger paste smeared on my forehead, listless. My head was numb and still aching. Sri sat by my side, and lovingly put his hand on my forehead. His divine, affectionate touch gave me much courage and hope. As I opened my eyes Sri gently smiled at me. His smile was gentler than his touch. He said to me, “Get hold of yourself, Rukmini. Be assured that nothing has happened to him, and nothing will happen! He will return at the right time. Trust me.” I put complete faith in the ambrosial words of Sri and composed myself determinedly. Though our relatives were crying while visiting me, I collected myself together.

During this period dada’s loving and loquacious sons Nishatha and Ulmuka came closer to me. Just their bustling around me helped me recover faster. Of course, it was Sri’s idea to keep them in my chamber all the time. Gradually, I pushed aside the sorrow of my first son’s abduction. The citizens of Dwaraka did the same. Time is the biggest healer of any kind of pain. Isn’t it?

Apparently, the citizens of Dwaraka forgot the abducted baby, but I couldn't. After all I was his mother. He was my firstborn. I didn't even get a chance to hold him close to my heart and nurse him. His own father, Sri had not even gotten the chance to see him properly. I constantly kept wondering, who could have abducted him? Why? Such wild guessing would eventually make my head ache, but I couldn't find a single clue. Exhausted, I would then just keep lying in bed. Yet the thoughts of the baby would keep whirring in my mind like a buzzing beetle, tearing my heart apart.

The Yadavas were never the ones to surrender easily. They had come to Dwaraka after courageously and dauntlessly fighting with the Magadha emperor Jarasandha seventeen times. They strived hard to erect this magnificent city from practically nothing. They left no stone unturned in search of the abducted baby. Skilled informers in numerous disguises, left in all four directions to gather clues.

During the period of the search for the baby, inadvertently we all forgot about the Shursena kingdom of the Yadavas. It was our original kingdom.

Six months after the baby's abduction an untoward event took place in Dwaraka. It so happened that the royal ministry of the Sudharma assembly had an honourable Yadava minister named Satrajita. His wife was Viravati. Satrajita had a twin brother – Prasena, who was his lookalike. He had a stern disposition. Both brothers were prominent members of the royal assembly. This was because of Satrajita's staunch devotion to the Sun god. Religious rituals were conducted in his grand residence all the time.

His ardent devotion to the Sun god had earned Satrajita the invaluable 'Syamantaka' jewel. It possessed exceptional qualities like that of the *Paras* stone. The place where it remained, automatically flourished with vigour and prosperity. When worshiped with proper rituals and the incantation of mantras, it would turn any piece of iron into gold. On the strength of this gold Satrajita had become a wealthy aristocrat. All his children grew up pampered. All of them were healthy and beautiful. Especially his eldest daughter Satyabhama was most pampered, extremely beautiful and very stubborn. The acclaim of her beauty had not only spread in the Dwaraka-Saurashtra, Anarta region, but had also reached the distant kingdom of Madhyadesha.

Hridika's son Shatadhanwa, a Yadava king of the Bhoja dynasty from the original Shursena kingdom had come to Dwaraka and requested for Satyabhama's hand in marriage. He was also the brother of Kritavarma who was a member of the royal ministry of Dwaraka. Satrajita had denied his

request vaguely saying ‘our daughter is not of marriageable age yet; we will see about it after she is ready’. Shatadhanwa took it as a probable affirmation and returned to his kingdom.

Sri did not know a single thing about all this. There was no reason for him to know it. He always thought about the Shursena kingdom and Mathura. Dwaraka was flourishing due to Sri and dada’s mettle. Its opulence kept growing day by day like the moon waxing from new moon to full moon. In Mathura, Maharaja Ugrasena was managing the kingdom with the remaining Yadavas. Due to frequent battles the condition of their treasury was not as strong as it should have been. It essentially needed a boost.

One day Sri decided something resolutely, and went to visit Satrajita at his palace along with Uddhavabhauji and minister Vipruthu. After the welcoming rituals and having some fruits and milk Sri put forth a proposal to Satrajita, “Satrajitakaka, could you do me a favour as my elder? All Yadavas basically belong to Mathura. Old Maharaja Ugrasena is desperately trying to preserve the city. We have received news that their treasury is in bad shape. All of us should assist them to recover from these conditions. Therefore, I have come up with a proposition for you.”

“Tell me, oh Lord of Dwaraka! What kind of proposition?” Satrajita vaguely suspected a probable proposal of another marriage alliance for his favourite daughter Satyabhama.

“Could you please hand me over the invaluable Syamantaka jewel in your possession in front of the Sudharma royal assembly? I will dispatch it with Uddhava and Gargamuni to Maharaja Ugrasena in Mathura.” As usual with a smile Sri discreetly presented his proposal.

Satrajita was taken aback by the proposal. He was completely perplexed. He looked at his administrator and said, “What kind of request is this? Even you wouldn’t have agreed to such a demand, Lord of Dwaraka, if you were in my place. Forgive me, but this is not possible!”

Sri heard that clearly humiliating reply, and yet responded with an aloof smile, “All right. As you wish!” But Uddhava *bhauji* was hurt deep down by the humiliating treatment given to his brother by his own elderly relative. Everyone fell silent. They were all ready to leave the chamber. Nobody was saying anything. Just then a royal lady entered the hall hastily, arguing with the groom of her horse. She had just returned after a lesson in horse riding. She was startled to see Sri present in person at her residence along with minister Vipruthu, Uddhava and a few other Yadavas. With ladylike

modesty, she composed herself and silently left the scene. The sensational drama of the Syamantaka jewel had begun!

A few days passed by. The royal city of Dwaraka was occupied in the daily routine. Meanwhile, one day Satrajita's brother Prasena began preparations for a hunting expedition with a troop of chariots and horse riders. As per the Yadava tradition he began his expedition with pomp and vigour. His hunting troops left from the Shuddhaksha gate and descended in Aanarta, sailing in small boats. Of all the days, today Prasena had the urge to wear the Syamantaka jewel resembling the stunning Kaustubh diamond. He wore it around his neck, strung in fancy gold chains. His hunting troops entered the thick, dense forests of Mount Hrikshawana. This mountain also had a large colony of lions just like the one on Mount Raivataka. Brandishing his spear, riding on his horse, Prasena started chasing an excited wild boar with huge tusks. He was so engrossed in hunting that he lost track of time.

Suddenly a huge roaring lion pounced on him from among the dense trees. A breathtaking tussle took place between both of them, in the solitude of the dense forest. How long could a mere human, albeit brave and muscular, stand against a wild beast like a lion? The lion growled at first and then roaring thunderously he severed the body of Prasena within half an hour. The Syamantaka jewel that Satrajita loved as his own life, lay in the pool of blood in the dense forest of Mount Hrikshawana. Evening was approaching. A Nishadha king called Jambavan was returning to his cave in the forest along with his Bhilla friends. On his way back, he came across the lifeless, mutilated body of Prasena, but none of them could recognize him as the 'Yadava warrior of Dwaraka'. One of them washed the Syamantaka jewel in the nearby spring water and handed it over to his leader Jambavan. They prepared a funeral pyre in the forest and cremated Prasena's remains.

Weeks passed by, yet Prasena did not return. Satrajita got concerned first and finally got suspicious. Rumours started spreading around his palace, among the attendants and the overseers that Prasena has been treacherously killed by Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka! He has also secretly appropriated the Syamantaka jewel that he wanted!

Satrajita put forth a demand to Maharaja Vasudeva to summon a special session of the Sudharma royal assembly. On a certain day, at a given time the royal council assembled. In front of Maharaja Vasudeva, infuriated Satrajita directly accused Sri in sharp, offensive words. He burst out, "Maharaja, are you going to exempt this crime only because the criminal happens to be your

own son and the Lord of Dwaraka? My dear brother Prasena was captured alone in the forest and gruesomely assassinated. The auspicious, divine Syamantaka jewel in his possession has been cunningly snatched away. Your younger son Srikrishna, who puts on airs of being the only one shouldering the responsibility of Yadavas' welfare has committed the heinous act of robbery. He has also murdered a Yadava! He is the assassin of my brother! This royal assembly should prosecute him in a just and impartial manner. He should better return my Syamantaka jewel to me. The criminal should be punished severely!"

The entire royal assembly trembled at that vehement verbal assault. Only because Satrajita was a senior royal minister and extremely opulent could he dare to accuse Sri of such a heinous crime. The Yadava assembly was abuzz with whispers. The whispering kept escalating moment by moment. Commander Satyaki arose first, holding the hilt of his sword, looking contemptuously at Satrajita with his fire-breathing eyes. Balaramadada tightened the grip on the handle of his mace.

"This is a lie. Srikrishna himself is the jewel of the Yadava clan. How dare a mere possessor of a single jewel accuse him of such an atrocious crime? He should take the accusation back with an apology, or else get ready to face the consequences. Down with him!" Angry remarks were hurled from all sides. It was hard to figure out exactly who said what and from where.

The eyes of the entire assembly were fixed on our seats now. I was totally rattled to witness this unforeseen spectacle in the royal assembly. A storm of doubts and questions arose in my mind. Knowing well that I was shaken, Sri looked at me with his usual cheerful glance and rose quietly with a smile. His efficacious, ambrosial speech began flowing melodiously.

"Oh, Yadava warriors, calm down and keep quiet! First of all, let me congratulate respectable Satrajitakaka, a senior minister of the Sudharma royal assembly!" This totally unexpected and strange beginning of his speech instantly silenced the assembly. Everybody listened attentively to the exceptional words of Sri. Sri's mesmerizing speech left the Sudharma assembly stunned and amazed one more time.

"I congratulate Satrajitakaka for he has laid the foundation of a fearless, new tradition in the matters of the state today, that of speaking out against injustice clearly and without any fear, in a fully occupied assembly, even against a person of high ranking. My guru Acharya Sandipani has essentially taught me the same. It is my privilege that he is present in this

assembly today.

“In the presence of Acharya Sandipani I pledge in the name of Maharaja and Rajmata that I have not committed the atrocious crime that I am being accused of. Never will I commit any such crime in my life ever. I do not wish to possess any precious, divine jewel at all. I have no reason to harbour such temptation!” Sri purposefully stroked the Kaustubh diamond on his chest.

“True....Right....” many exclaimed in response. As Sri raised his hand the assembly fell silent. Sri’s ambrosial words began to flow again.

“Warriors of Yadavas! In memory of Maharaja Yadu and Kroshtu and with the promise in the name of family deity Ida I announce that I will search and obtain the Syamantaka jewel of Satrajitakaka that is as dear to him as his own life, from wherever it is even if it has reached the netherworld. I will present it to him in the same assembly hall.

“I would like to take this opportunity to explicitly tell all Yadavas that jewels, gold or wealth are only means. They can never be the ultimate goal of life. That ultimate goal is only Love! Love, Premayoga, is greater than any kind of Dhanayoga, that is wealth.

“I didn’t wish to do this, but since I have been accused in front of the entire royal assembly, I must disclose one truth that was unknown to the assembly before.

“I had requested Satrajitakaka to present the Syamantaka jewel to me. It was not for my sake at all, but to improve the dire economic conditions of the people of Mathura. It is due to the misconception of my actions that he is accusing me of this crime. At this time, I want to make it explicitly clear that there have been many misconceptions about me before, there will be many in the future too. What am I going to gain by stealing the Syamantaka jewel anyway?”

“Nothing at all. You better apologize, Satrajita, apologize!” impatient Yadavas roared uncontrollably. Sri raised his hand to calm them down and putting all in a quandary he bore the same pleasant smile on his face. He said, “That is not necessarily the entire truth, my friends! Actually, I am going to be hugely benefited due to the Syamantaka jewel! Even Satrajitakaka himself doesn’t know it yet. But eventually all will come to know about it.”

As the minister raised the royal sceptre to indicate the dismissal of the royal assembly the assembly dispersed.

It was crucial that the promise given to Satrajitakaka in the assembly, was fulfilled. Sri immediately gave necessary instructions. The next day itself he

landed in the forests of Mount Hrikshawana along with both commanders, *maharathi* Satyaki and Anadhrishti. A unit of hunting and combat expert Yadavas joined them along with forest-dwelling informers who were thoroughly familiar with the region. I was confident that now Sri wouldn't return to Dwaraka without the Syamantaka jewel.

A week passed since the day Sri left for Mount Hrikshawana. News like 'He has reached Mount Hrikshawana, the informers are spreading throughout the forest, a thorough search for Prasena is underway', began to reach Dwaraka one after the other. Around the end of the second week, finally the rapturous news arrived in Dwaraka. Sri who never settles for anything less than success, is returning after the fruitful expedition, along with the precious, auspicious Syamantaka jewel.

Maharajababa, Thorali and Dhakali mata, dada, tai, the royal ministry and the entire city of Dwaraka assembled at the Shuddhaksha gate to welcome Sri. Even Satrajita was among them. I arrived in original Dwaraka from the island of Queens' mansions with my attendants.

First, the leading troops of guards reached Dwaraka announcing the arrival of the Lord of Dwaraka along with the Syamantaka jewel. Ecstatic slogans of victory erupted from millions of Yadavas gathered at the gate, 'Victory to triumphant leader of the Yadavas Maharaja Srikrishna'. Following that, select members sitting under the golden canopy on an elephant in a huge ship, descended at the Shuddhaksha gate.

Accompanied with seven 'Suvasinis' I came forward and first performed a ritual to cast away any evil. Oh, how radiant and triumphant his face looked! I wet my fingers with the water in a golden vessel, and touched his closed eyes with it. A hero, my husband had undauntedly cleared himself of the charges of appropriating the Syamantaka jewel. Oh, how proud I felt of Sri!

A mischievous smile with a dimple, which I was so familiar with by now, momentarily flashed on his face. Definitely there must be some catch behind his smile. Unwittingly I became alert.

Holding the arm of a dark complexioned, healthy woman standing behind him he pulled her forward and casually said, "One more jewel of a lady has come along with the Syamantaka, from Mount Hrikshawana. Not I, but the Syamantaka has brought her with itself. Syamantaka could not have reached here, if she would not have come with it!" As usual Sri threw a web of a riddle on me.

I looked at the shy, bewildered, youthful lady standing in front of me. She

was a beautiful, curvaceous lady with dark complexion and thick, long hair. Looking at her dress I immediately assumed that she was a woman of the forest; a young native woman. She was bewildered by the opulent riches of Dwaraka. Fluttering her thick eyelashes, she kept staring at me like a scared bird.

“Rukmini, I have brought her as your companion and my wife in a Gandharva wedding, only because I had full confidence in you. Her name is ‘Jambavati’. She is the daughter of the Nishadha king Jambavan from Mount Hrikshawana.”

Sri said...casually... as usual, but for me it was another moment like that of my firstborn son’s abduction. For a moment, the Shuddhaksha gate spun around me rapidly. But only for a moment. The next moment I composed myself. “Come, Jambavati, my dear sister, give me a hug.” I spread my arms open to make the wild beauty comfortable. She immediately clung to me as if she was eagerly waiting for that moment only and whispered, “I don’t understand anything here. Please take me under your wings, tai.” Patting on her back I calmed her down.

Sri introduced everybody to her father Jambavan who had come along. When I held Jambavati in my embrace the people of Dwaraka accepted her as the second queen of Sri. That very moment I noticed Sri letting out a sigh of relief.

Jambavati entered Dwaraka with her auspicious feet amidst the welcoming slogans of millions of ecstatic Yadavas, ‘Hail Yadava Queen Jambavatidevi!’

So, how did this improbable came to be after all? It so happened that on Mount Hrikshawana Sri had discovered that the Syamantaka jewel was in the possession of the Nishadha king Jambavan. He had hidden it securely in his cave in the forest. The Yadava army surrounded that cave. Commander Satyaki and Anadhrishti presented Nishadha king Jambavan in front of Sri, as a criminal, tied up with wild creepers. When Sri demanded the Syamantaka jewel from him, he got perturbed and said, “I do have that jewel, but I would not hand it over to you just like that even at the cost of my life. I want an assurance from you.”

“What kind of assurance?” Sri was pleased with the fearless reply of the Nishadha king. Jambavan caught him in the trap of a Nishadha tradition and said, “I have a gem of a daughter – Jambavati. She is my only daughter. If this Yadava leader of yours accepts her hand in marriage, only then will I



bring out the hidden Syamantaka jewel. Otherwise I'd rather die than give it to you!"

Who knows what Sri thought, but he accepted the bizarre condition. A Kshatriya from the *Chandravansha* accepted a tribal woman's hand in marriage with due respect. Such a thing had never happened in Aaryavarta before. And no one could tell if it would happen again in the future. Only 'Sri' had dared to do something like this.

I was surprised at myself while embracing Jambavati. A strange thought flashed in my mind while I was in her embrace. Would any of the kings gathered for my 'Swayamwar' in Kundinapura, including the self-proclaimed Emperor Jarasandha who humiliated Sri as a mere cowherd have had the courage to act so? Would at least one of them have accepted a tribal lady as his wife?

Jambavati's blessed sylvan feet brought such things in my life which I would have never imagined. She had a clean, innocent mind like a wild stream. She did not have a clue whatsoever about the Yadava royal assembly, their *Rasa* dance, hunting, royal games, festivals, weddings, their traditions, costumes, jewellery, social etiquettes and so on. Yet she instantaneously picked up whatever I told her about the royal life with her innate sagacity, like a female starling swiftly pecking millet. Now I began enjoying the hours I spent to teach her the niceties of royal life. I was enjoying because while chatting with me she also unknowingly shared the rare subtleties of the forest with me. While sharing memories of the forest she would honourably mention her mother, Hriksharadni Vyaghri. It would arouse my curiosity and I would end up asking her various questions. She would share plentiful details of the flora and fauna of the forest with me. Listening to her I would keep laughing to myself, thinking, what am I going to teach her? She herself has become my Guru, teaching me about the forest.

Looking at my smile she would cut short her talk and say to me, "Tai, I like your smile very much!" Her words would always instantly arouse Sri's memory in my mind and I would say to her, "Jambe, my smile is nothing. You should closely observe your husband's smile. You will see many shades of that captivating smile, which induces the Smile itself to smile." Both of us would then keep giggling for a while like silly young girls, just by uttering Sri's name.

Now that Sri had obtained the Syamantaka jewel, he instructed minister Vipruthu to summon a special session of the Sudharma royal assembly.

Addressing the special council, the royal minister said, “Valiant citizens of Dwaraka, Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka has made each one of us feel proud today. Senior Yadava Satrajita had wrongfully accused him of abducting the auspicious, divine Syamantaka jewel, in the same assembly hall.

“After many unexpected twists and turns, and a battle with the Nishadha king Jambavan, Srikrishna has safely and securely brought the jewel back to Dwaraka. Pleased by his valour, Jambavan offered him his daughter Jambavatidevi’s hand in marriage. First of all, we all should honourably recognize her status as the second wife of Srikrishna after Rukminidevi.” The royal minister raised the jewel-studded royal sceptre to alert the assembly. The assembly erupted with slogans of acclaim – Hail Queen Jambavatidevi! Hail Nishadha king, Maharaja Jambavan! Hail Maharaja Srikrishna! Hail Maharani Rukminidevi!

The minister continued, “The Lord of Dwaraka is going to present the Syamantaka jewel to the senior Yadava Satrajita, in the presence of this royal assembly.

Sri stood up. In his hand, he held a small decorative wooden casket containing the Syamantaka jewel. From the circle of royal ministers, Satrajita approached him, trembling. Smiling his usual gentle, ingenious smile Sri handed over the casket to him and humbly bowed down to offer his respects to him. Amidst a thunderous round of applause, the Sudharma royal assembly reverberated with slogans of acclaim, ‘Hail Goddess Ida. Hail Maharaja Vasudeva, Maharani Devakidevi!’

Satrajita was feeling contrite now, remembering his imprudent accusation of Sri in the same assembly hall. He was feeling ashamed. He held the casket in his trembling aged hands, and said in a shaking voice, “Though I am old in age and his senior, Srikrishna should forgive me in front of this royal assembly. I don’t have appropriate and enough words to express my feelings. But, as a father, I can do only one thing. At this moment, I am offering my beautiful daughter Satyabhama’s hand in marriage to Srikrishna! I humbly request that he should graciously accept her as his third queen along with the Syamantaka jewel.”

“Oh Lord of Dwaraka, Maharaja Srikrishna, please accept this second gift along with the Syamantaka jewel. You deserve it rightfully.” Combatant Yadavas in the assembly started shouting continuously in unison. I was sitting next to Sri. He just kept looking at me intently. So many questions

were hidden in that look! As if he was silently asking me, ‘What should I do? What do you suggest? Should I accept both the jewels? Do I have your approval, beloved?’ I silently nodded in affirmation. Still, he kept staring at me momentarily. He shook his neck as if in disagreement with something. Then he rose peacefully. The Sudharma royal assembly echoed with thunderous applause and victorious cries of acclaim.

Sri spoke slowly and determinedly, “Dear Yadavas, have no illusions! I accept not both but only one of the jewels – the jewel-like lady. I never had any longing whatsoever for the Syamantaka jewel, and will never have it in future. I am honourably returning it to the senior Yadav Satrajitakaka in front of the Sudharma royal assembly, acknowledging his rightful ownership of the same. I request him to accept it and continue his Sun worship uninterrupted, and take care of it for the welfare and prosperity of Dwaraka.” Sri returned the casket to Satrajita. Now I came to understand, why he shook his head in response to my affirmation a few moments back.

The second act of the Syamantaka jewel drama was concluding after bringing the second co-wife in my life and the third wife in Sri’s life.

I could easily take Jambavati under my wings. But it was the toughest job to do so with Satyabhama. After all she was the daughter of a Yadava. As the daughter of an affluent father, she was greatly pampered at home and had grown up to be an opinionated, stubborn Kshatriya lady. Indeed, she was incredibly beautiful and also bold. That is why she was so full of pride. Notably, she wasn’t even aware of her pride. That was the most difficult task for me. She would never listen to anybody; sometimes not even to Sri. But somehow, in front of me, she was always compliant.

I had understood quite clearly that it wasn’t going to be easy for Sri to handle her. I also came to acknowledge that I would have to take the initiative to mellow her down. It was my duty to do so as the Maharani of the Yadavas. I was also confident that she would never answer me back.

Three edifices on the twin island of Queens’ mansions were now occupied by the three of us. They were now alive with the constant coming and going of the attendants. Nowadays, I had come to realize that the other five edifices were still vacant. Both my co-wives had not yet realized that. It was also up to me to take the initiative and make them aware of this fact at the right time.

When I first bowed to pay obeisance to the architect Gargamuni, he suggestively blessed me saying, “Senior Maharani of the Yadava dynasty, may your life be full of fortune. May you be blessed with eight sons! It is

your right after all. But I would like to give you a special blessing – May you be the guardian of the eight mansions of the Queens!”

He had erected the eight mansions on this island with full planning for the future. It was a well-organized colony of palaces with two rows of four palaces facing each other and the towering, grand palace of Sri in the centre. All the palaces had a view of the ocean. Sri would come to stay on this island as far as possible. Sometimes he would stay in the original Dwaraka. We didn't see him for months once he crossed the ocean and went out of Dwaraka. Then life would be on hold, waiting for him and listening to the sounds of the ocean.

Sri's daily routine on both islands was fixed. Half an hour before the '*Brahma Muhurta*', bards would begin reciting hymns and eulogies from the four Vedas accompanied by melodious tunes of Rudravinas. Sri would arise exactly at the '*Brahma Muhurta*'. After waking up first he would gaze at his palms with his fish-shaped expressive eyes. He would observe the lines on his rosy palms which looked like threads. His face would instantaneously reflect many subtle shades of smiles while observing the royal symbols like the pennant, the chakra, the lotus, the fish and the *swastika* on his palms. Next, he would look at the floor and addressing the earth with innate humility he would say, 'Forgive me for stepping on you'. Then he would dip his fingers in the fresh water in the golden chalice and run them over his eyes. Sitting on his bed in the Padmasana posture, he would meditate for some time with his eyes closed. At the same time, he would recall the divine mantras of Sudarshan in his mind. At such times, I would occasionally get a rare glimpse of him. How radiant his face looked while meditating with closed eyes! Then he would clean his already very white teeth with the powder of medicinal herbs like Hirada and Behada mixed with Neem leaves, rinse his mouth with water made fragrant by 'Khus' grass. For some time, he would do some 'aasanas' for the whole body, practising control over breath. A few of his loyal male and female attendants would serve him at that time.

His bathing was a big ritual. In huge golden vessels, hot, warm and cold water from various rivers in the Aanarta region would be filled. Many small and big golden bowls would be filled with a variety of aromatic cleansing powders. Nourishing red soil brought from the mines of Govardhan, sifted and kneaded in buttermilk and *Karanjel* oil would be there. To scrub his neck, chest and heels thoroughly, dark black stone chips brought from the bed of the river Gandaki would be available. After applying the cleansing

powders and the soil on his body he would bathe in the water blended with 'Khus' grass. Then immediately on the wet body he would get *Abhishek* of the freshly drawn milk of the cows from Kathiawar, mixed with the gold water. In the end the attendants would give him *Abhishek* of aromatic, cool water from a golden jar while singing the folk songs of Saurashtra.

Many a times I have heard his bathing attendants whisper among themselves that, 'Maharaja Srikrishna looks like the *Shivapindi* in the shrine of the Somanath temple while receiving the *Abhishek* over his head.

To me he often looked like the sun god rising from the western ocean when I saw him like this, fresh after the bath, wearing his royal attire, freshly woven, fragrant, white Vaijayanti garland on his chest and bearing the peacock-feathered golden crown on his head.

After the bath, he would first visit his parents and other elders. Then he would perform the *Sandhya* prayer and drink the freshly drawn milk to his heart's content. As the priests chanted mantras he would offer oblations into the fire. Next, he would worship the rising Sun god visible from his meditation chamber. He would sit on the grass mat and with full concentration, he would humbly recite the *Savitru* mantra in the Gayatri meter. Then 'Tarpan' water would be offered with mantras, to the gods, forefathers and the sages of the dynasty. After that the offering of charities would begin. Initially, only I sat by Sri's side during the charity-offering session. Then I came to realize that I should make both my co-wives also participate in that session. Two golden seats then started being arranged for them at the time of the charity session. Then, Sri would dress up in the armed royal attire of the Sudharma assembly. At such times, he would carry the Ajitanjaya bow on his shoulders. On his back, would be the quiver full of arrows. Sometimes he would carry the polished, dark black, tall, Saunanda pestle made of black wood. At times, there would be the gold-plated, rounded, elegant Kaumodaki mace made of iron. At other times, he would leave with only the Nandaka sword in its scabbard tied around his waist. I loved watching him dressed up in a variety of armed attires and it gave me immense pleasure.

Before leaving for the Sudharma assembly both of us would follow the ritual of looking at the reflections of our faces in the mirror of liquid ghee in a big golden platter. Then we would take seats in the porch outside and listen to the complaints of the citizens, servants, warriors, and troop leaders. We would satisfy their demands according to their needs.

During this meeting session with the citizens I would always strongly sense an exceptional quality of Sri – that of abundance of Love, that of unconditional affection.

Thus, after performing the morning routine and rituals he would leave for the original Dwaraka to go to the Sudharma assembly. I would not accompany him every time. But whenever a special council was arranged I had to go. He was always invariably accompanied by Balaramadada, Uddhavabhauji, commander Satyaki or Anadhrishti, and minister Vipruthu. Occasionally, one of them would be absent due to some reason. His place would be taken by some unknown guest. At times, some sages like Asitadeval, Yajnavalkya, Katyayan, Gritsamada, Yaaja, and Upayaaja, who were close to him, would be there. Sometimes he would be accompanied by an artist like a singer, dancer, instrument player, or a sculptor. Occasionally, the leaders of the surveillance team of Dwaraka spread all over Aaryavarta would whisper in Sri's ears. They would inform him about any important secret news in a short and precise way and cautiously collect further orders and instructions from him.

His dear charioteer Daruka would bow down to him and request him to board the Garudadhvaja chariot. Before he could bow down completely and touch his feet Sri would hold Daruka's hands in his rosy palms with warm affection, and hold him in a deep embrace. Then he would call the four pure white horses of his chariot by their names, Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Sugriva and Shaibya. He would give a heavy thump on the thick nape of one of the horse's neck. It would raise goose bumps on its body and the horse would immediately respond by pricking its ears. That is when Sri would start the incomprehensible 'Ashwagita' as if talking to himself. Those mute, innocent animals with their ears pricked and energized while listening to Sri, looked very different to me. Many a times I have observed that fascinating, extraordinary scene without blinking my eyes, from the window of my palace. Sri's bluish muscular hand resting on the nape of the pure white horse's neck was indeed captivating.

Once Sri boarded the chariot and signalled by raising his hand in the air, Daruka would pull the reins and give an inspiring call to the horses. My mind would then fill with an inexpressible yet strongly felt gloom in anticipation of the dullness that would engulf the island of Queens' mansions till the evening. The Yadava king would be busy for the entire day in the daily routine of the Sudharma assembly.

In the evening, many tweeting ocean-birds would return to their nests. The sun would be about to set. The sound of the ocean that was surrounded by a variety of other sounds during the day would become clearer now. Sri's chariot would return to the island. Daruka would take it to the stable. Sometimes Sri would have some political predicament on his mind. At such times, he would tell a Yadava fisherman to take a small boat out into the sea. Usually Balaramadada, Vipruthu, Satyaki, Anadhrishti, Kritavarma whoever was associated with that particular problem would accompany him at that time. In any case Uddhavabhauji would accompany him without fail. That time a pure white, triangular pennant visible from far away would fly atop that boat. The sound of a conch resembling the sound of the ocean, blown by the fisherman before pushing the boat in the western ocean would reverberate in the vicinity of the island. It would clearly indicate that, 'The Lord of Dwaraka is busy in an important, secret political council'. The details of such council would never be revealed to anybody else.

On other evenings, he would practise sword fight, archery, horse riding, elephant riding and charioting. At sunset, he would again sit on the grass mat for the evening '*Sandhya*' prayer. After the prayer of Goddess Ida, the traditional prayer of the Yadavas, Ishastavana, would begin. Following that would be his dinner time. He loved dishes made from curds and milk. He would savour apupas, soft cooked rice, rotis made from Sattu and chutney. He would also taste the meat of the prey hunted by dada and Satyaki in the Aanarta-Saurashtra region. No matter whatever kind of dinner it was, he would personally pay attention to others to make sure that they were served plenty of delicious dishes. He himself, however, would never eat a single morsel extra.

After dinner, he would converse with the family members and share their joys and sorrows. He would exchange his views in detail about any topic as per the occasion, such as the Vedas and Vedanta, Shastras-Puranas, dance-music etc. with the aacharyas and the priests. With baba, Thorali and Dhakali mata, Balaramadada, tai, Uddhavabhauji, he would discuss any religious or family functions scheduled for the next day.

The time-keeper in the central square of the island of Dwaraka would give the toll on the time disk indicating the beginning of the second quarter of night. At that time, wherever Sri would be, he would give a sweet smile to people around him, and joining his palms together he would say to them, "The karmayoga of this day has come to an end. I am not yours anymore."

His smile would be so enchanting that he never needed to say any more. While going towards his bed chamber, there would be no tinge whatsoever on Sri's face of the joyous or doleful events of the day. At least to me he seemed like the sun god at dusk, about to immerse in the ocean.

The entire Aaryavarta nation now considered the Dwaraka kingdom as the puissant and dominant imperial capital. Revatitai and the three of us along with our attendants began living happily on the island of Queens' mansions. Thorali and Dhakali mata stayed in the original Dwaraka due to old age. Along with the original Dwaraka the acclaim of the island of Queens' mansions had spread all over. This island was now being called as 'Maharani Rukmini's island'. All kinds of amenities and luxuries were always available at our fingertips here. But for me looking at Sri's face every day was the highest joy of all. The company of the newly arrived co-wives, Jambavati and Bhama, was assuring. Both were like sisters to me. Still, the memory of our lost son would occasionally flash through my mind like the sharp wail of a female lapwing. 'Sri has told me that nothing has happened to him. I have full faith in his words. He will return at the right time. Then where would he be now? How old would he have become?' I would be overcome with questions like these. But I never talked about my heartache with my two new companions.

Sometimes Revatitai would come to visit my palace, along with both her sons, Nishatha and Ulmuka, who were not far apart in age. She would always talk a lot about her Raivataka kingdom and more so about Mount Raivataka. She was very loquacious, simple and good-natured. She would highly praise her bhaujis – Gada and Sarana.

Once while chatting tai mentioned a very important thing. Her father, Maharaja Kakudmin always cordially received a sage from Prayaga of Madhyadesha. He had actually built a well-equipped aashrama on Mount Raivatak afor that sage. It was said that the sage was a former Yadava descendant from Mathura. Word was that he was very closely related to Sri and dada by blood. Nobody else except Maharaja Kakudmin knew about it. This Yadava descendant who had renounced family life went to the Himalayas, devotedly served Sage Angirasa and was inducted as his disciple. Since then this Yadava senior who was originally a Kshatriya had now become an Angirasa. He was well known as 'Ghora Angirasa' in the region of Prayaga.

Tai and I were very fond of Subhadra as she was the youngest among the



ladies. She was indeed admirable. Sri himself had suggested the name Subhadra knowing her qualities. She was the apple of his eyes. He always respected her feelings. Sometimes he would tell her stories of his other favourite sister in Gokul – Ekananga. He would insist, ‘Subhadra, you should go to the Gokul in Vraja once with dada and meet Ekananga; chat with her freely, and bring her with you when you come back.’ Simple Subhadra would listen to him, and just nod her head in affirmation. But when I heard Sri telling the same thing to Subhadra two-three times, once I interrupted saying, “Why only dada should accompany Subhadra? Sri himself should take her to Gokul, and visit all his beloved people once. You yourself should bring your dear sister Ekananga to Dwaraka.”

Sri would unmistakably deduce that my words were pointing towards Radha and say with a smile, “How can I ever go to Vraja now? This enormous kingdom of Dwaraka needs me!” He would usually be in a jolly mood, but if there was even a fleeting mention of Gokul, a minute expression of feeling lost would momentarily linger on his face. I would immediately sense it. At such times, looking at Sri I would strongly feel that I should go to Sri’s beloved Gokul on the banks of Yamuna at least once and meet Sri’s friend Radhika there. See Nandababa and Yashoda mata who nurtured Sri in his childhood. Touch their feet and pay obeisance.

Sri had four *aatyas*. They were Rajadhidevi, Shrutashrava, Shrutadevi and Kuntidevi. The senior Maharaja and Sri had a soft spot for Kunti *aatya* among them. That is why dada also held her close to his heart. There was a genuine reason for that. Kunti *aatya* had been courageously facing many improbable obstacles and calamities right since her childhood. I had never met any of Sri’s *aatyas*.

One day an unbearable, heart breaking news crossed over the western ocean and reached Dwaraka shaking the cheerful Dwaraka to its roots. ‘Rajmata Kuntidevi, along with the five Pandavas has fallen prey to wildfire in the Varanavata forest. Six completely charred bodies of a mother and her sons, which were beyond recognition, have been found in the burnt down house where they had resided. As they were in no condition to be brought to Hastinapura, they have been cremated in Varanavata itself. The corpse of Purochana, their only faithful attendant was also found in the same house. He has also been cremated there. With Prince Duryodhana’s initiative the present Maharaja Dhritarashtra, will perform their funeral rites on the banks of Ganga.’

This news brought Yadava's mighty pennant Garudahwaja halfway down on the flagpole. A mournful Sudharma royal assembly was held. Nobody was in their right minds to talk about anything with anybody. The senior Maharaja, Vasudevababa, had not even come to the council due to the hear-breaking news of his dear sister's demise. As he did not come, the Rajmata also did not come. Distressed and numb, both of them sat in their royal palace. Sri had first consoled them and then arrived at the council hall along with dada. Tai had remained behind, in service of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. I was also thinking of doing the same. But when Sri told me to go along with him, I sat in the chariot and went with him. While going, he said to me in a low but firm voice, "Rukmini, I don't think there is any truth in this news! Maybe this is some kind of cunning, unsuccessful political machination of Duryodhana and Shakuni in the name of Maharaja Dhritarashtra. No, I simply cannot visualize the fiery flames that would burn the mace maestro Bhima alive."

While listening to his words, even in such an unpleasant situation, I wondered about how thoroughly Sri was informed about Hastinapura, the royal capital of the Kurus.

In the Sudharma royal assembly of the Yadavas, who had familial ties with the Kurus, minister Vipruthu raised the royal sceptre and put forth a brief proposal – 'Our Maharaja Vasudeva's sister, Rajmata Kuntidevi, and her five sons have perished in an accidental fire in the forest of Varanavata. Due to their sad demise, this royal assembly will now observe the mourning period. On behalf of all Yadavas, Prince Balarama and Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka will leave for Hastinapura to attend the funeral rites. This assembly is dismissed now.' The royal assembly was dismissed within minutes. Dada and Sri immediately left for Hastinapura along with Daruka.

One week passed by. I kept thinking about the doubt that Sri had expressed in the chariot. 'There is no truth in this news about the Pandavas and their mother.' Why would he say such a thing? And if he believes that there is no truth in this news then why should he keep all the Yadavas of Dwaraka in the dark about this? I just couldn't understand.

Only recently we had received the very optimistic news that guru Drona had organized a grand seasonal championship contest of the Kauravas and Pandavas in spring. During that contest the fresh young gutsy Kauravas and Pandavas had performed extraordinary feats gratifying the citizens of Hastinapura. Guru Drona had put the championship garland around Arjuna's

neck. Then suddenly a radiant youth entered the contest arena and directly challenged Arjuna for a duel. That was Karna, a charioteer's son. Drona's brother-in-law Kripacharya raised a question, 'How can there be a conclusive duel between a Kshatriya and a charioteer's son at all?' Duryodhana immediately took action and instated Karna as the king of the Anga. Thus, the rivalry between the Kauravas and Pandavas deepened even further.

Following that news, we had received this shocking news – that Kuntidevi had been consumed by fire in Varanavata along with her five sons. Sri left for Hastinapura along with dada and Uddhavabhauji to carry out the religious duty of performing the last rites of the deceased Pandavas and their mother. This was Sri's first visit to Hastinapura. I spent that entire week thinking about what would happen during this visit. I was experiencing a void due to the shocking news and then Sri's departure right after that. I went to original Dwaraka, consoled the senior Maharaja and Devakimata, and returned. It was true that though both of them were senior to me, whenever I told them something sincerely they listened to me. They treated me with tremendous respect and honour. Within a short time, they had become as close to me as my own parents. This was one of the main reasons among many others why being in Dwaraka for me was like being at my parents' house. Besides, there was another reason. My aged in-laws had got the insight to examine the character of a person as a result of the tremendous calamities they had endured in their lives. Jambavati - the tribal daughter, had succeeded in getting closer to their hearts though not as close as I was. But Bhama had been still unsuccessful in doing so. I wondered about it and would say to myself, 'How is this Bhama going to get along?'

One day Bhama entered my chamber wailing loudly, beating her chest with both hands in such a way that it made me shudder from top to bottom. The human mind is so given to apprehensions! I momentarily had a terrifying suspicion, numbing my entire body. My heart froze. 'Did something happen to Sri who had gone to distant Hastinapura?' Initially I didn't even understand what Bhama was saying. She lamented continuously, "Rukminitai! Betrayal...Yadava Maharani. What should I do now?"

I held both her arms tightly and chided her, "Bhama, get hold of yourself. Tell me properly what has happened." She momentarily suffocated due to uncontrollable sobs. Then word after word she broke the heart-wrenching, terrifying news - "Tai, that traitor has viciously murdered my father in his sleep. He broke into our palace and that scoundrel stole the Syamantaka jewel

and escaped right under the nose of our warriors and commanders. If he wanted to steal anything at all, that scum should have only taken the Syamantaka. Why did that creep murder my beloved Satrajitababa....despite being a Yadava?"

Even I felt awkward listening to her words. While breathing a sigh of relief that Sri was safe, my breath choked for Bhama accepting the bitter truth of Satrajita's assassination. As a Maharani, I intensely felt one thing – never before had such a heinous crime taken place in our newly built kingdom – the murder of a Yadava in his sleep! Within moments, unknowingly, the Maharani in me rose. I held Bhama's arms tightly again and shaking her vigorously I asked her, "Who is the culprit? When did it happen?" She embraced me tightly and spoke slowly, "Shatadhanwa! Last night!"

I went numb listening to the bitter truth. I was truly proud of each small and big heroic exploit of the Yadavas. I genuinely felt proud about the tenacity they showed while facing Jarasandha's seventeen attacks. Many Yadava warriors had sacrificed their lives in those wars. Sri was the reason and inspiration behind their sacrifice. This was the first shock for me that any Yadava, no matter whoever he was, can commit such a heinous crime – theft and murder at the same time! Indeed, I felt it very deep as the consort of Sri and as the Maharani of the Yadavas.

My usually operative intellect was not being of much help while consoling Bhama. I kept patting Bhama with great affection, and felt lost as if Satrajita was my own father. I simply kept saying to her, "Be quiet. Calm down. Behave like the courageous Yadava daughter of your father. Stay calm. Let Sri come back to Dwaraka. Believe me, he will definitely find out that scoundrel and punish him severely."

"No tai, my whole body is burning with fury. I just can't wait. Send Vipruthu with me. I am directly going to Hastinapura! I will return to Dwaraka with him only!" Bhama said, determinedly controlling her emotions. Leave alone me, nobody was going to be able to stop her now.

I properly instructed Vipruthu and sent him with her along with the chariot, a charioteer and some travel accessories. She left along with a troop of guards. She took only one charioteer with her. At times, she herself was going to drive the chariot to give him a break. She entrusted me with the responsibility of performing the final rites of Satrajita.

This unforeseen calamity that had befallen the Yadava royal family made one thing clear to me. I came to know what kind of an iron-willed, resolute

Kshatriya lady Bhama was. I myself realized that a competent Maharani capable of taking decisions resided within me.

A few days passed by and Bhama returned with Sri, as she had resolutely said. As an emissary reported the arrival of Sri, dada and *bhauji*, I immediately presented myself at the Shuddhaksha gate to welcome them. I approached the Yadava king descending from the Garudadhwaaja chariot along with others. Due to the recent events in Dwaraka we were not going to be able to talk at length. I felt relieved as I saw him. The first time when our eyes met, then itself he gave me such a smile that only I could understand the deeper meaning of it among all the people present there. It meant that Kunti *aatya* was safe and sound along with her sons.

While walking towards the Sudharma royal assembly he asked Anadhrishti, “Commander, were the final rites of Satrajitakaka performed as per the tradition? Do one thing. Spread the news everywhere that I am still in Hastinapura. Within four days I should receive all the minute details about Shatadhanwa’s whereabouts. Send his brothers Hardikya and Kritavarman to meet me immediately, send Akurakaka too.” I was surprised when I heard that only the two of them had not come to receive Sri at the Shuddhaksha gate as they usually did. Sri had unmistakably noticed it. It clearly meant that both of them were up to something. Another thing was equally clear that no matter wherever Sri went out of Dwaraka he was receiving minute details of each and every event happening back here. Indeed, he was the ‘Lord of Dwaraka’ though he was not enthroned on the royal throne of Dwaraka.

Now the hunt for Satrajita’s assassin began in full swing. When Sri wanted to chase the truth, he had his own special ‘Srineeetee’ – strategy that nobody else could think of otherwise, of spreading his web everywhere.

The search to find the assassin moved one step further. First Sri called Kritavarman in his private chamber and inquired about the Syamantaka jewel. Kritavarman was Shatadhanwa’s brother. Both were the sons of the senior Yadava Hridik. He was an honourable minister in the royal ministry of Dwaraka. Shatadhanwa was meddlesome. He lived in the distant Shursena kingdom. He had desired the valiant and beautiful Satyabhama, though he was not worthy of her. He had put forth the marriage proposal to her father. Satrajita had astutely avoided it. Sri knew nothing about this. Satyabhama was married to him because of the Syamantaka jewel. Impressed, Satrajita had offered her hand to Sri in the Sudharma assembly. Shatadhanwa felt deeply offended by this act and hence had resorted to the heinous act of

murdering him.

His brother Kritavarman was well aware of the consequences of what had taken place, before he came to visit Sri. He entered Sri's chamber, determined in his heart to present whatever facts he knew in front of Sri. Sri welcomed him hospitably and offered him fruits and milk with saffron. After having a general chat, he asked Kritavarman directly, "Kritavarma, it is quite possible that our Maharaja and the Sudharma assembly might give you the charge for the search of the Syamantaka. What are you going to do?" Kritavarma shuddered due to the diplomatic strategy used by Sri which caught him off-guard and confused him. He instantly replied, "I know who has the Syamantaka presently! My brother Shatadhanwa has thoughtlessly murdered Satrajita like an idiot. Presently he has sought asylum with the king of Kashi. He has handed over the Syamantaka jewel to Akrura for safety, in front of me. You should ask for him and check out the truth."

Sri got another clue leading to the truth of Satrajita's assassination. Now the wheel of the search was going to move further. It was an unexpected, shocking truth that the Syamantaka had gone into Akrura's possession for the sake of protection. A more shocking truth was soon revealed. As soon as the honourable elderly Akrurakaka who now possessed the Syamantaka jewel heard the news that Sri had invited Kritavarman to visit him, he suddenly absconded from Dwaraka along with the jewel.

There was no way of knowing how many problems this Syamantaka jewel was going to create now, and how many people were going to be affected by it.

By this time Satyaki had become a close, loyal *maharathi* among the trusted few of Sri. It was as if there was an unwritten arrangement made between him and Anadhrishti about the responsibility of the army. They both had accepted the agreement on their own. Anadhrishti took charge of protecting both the islands of Dwaraka kingdom. He vigilantly kept an eye on the borders of Dwaraka reaching up to Saurashtra, Bhrgukachchha and Aanarta. Satyaki would accompany Sri within the Dwaraka kingdom and outside throughout Aaryavarta. The external military strategies were designed under his guidance.

As soon as Sri came to know the whereabouts of Shatadhanwa, he left Dwaraka again, along with Satyaki and the four-fold army. Balaramadada accompanied him as usual. That is why I was not at all worried about this expedition.

The army left, and after that the news of their journey kept arriving in Dwaraka one after the other – Sri’s army has travelled along the banks of the Narmada and passed through the city of Mahishmati in Avanti kingdom. Sri has reached the Chedi kingdom along with the Yadavas, crossing river Vetravati. Though it was the kingdom of his *aatya*, Sri has skipped Shuktimati, the royal capital of Chedi, keeping in mind Shishupala’s fanatical behaviour and travelled further ahead.

Finally, the expected news also arrived. Sri has reached the borders of the kingdom of Kashi along with dada, and has beheaded Shatadhanwa in the battle. Shatadhanwa had formed an alliance with Subahu, the king of Kashi and had arrived at the border coming from Varanasi. The king of Kashi ran away after the battle, Maharaja Srikrishna chased him and directly invaded Varanasi. Balaramadada and Satyaki remained at the border. The king of Kashi surrendered after his defeat. As a tribute, he offered a lot of riches at the feet of the venerable Yadava. Sri took leave of the king of Kashi and returned to the Yadava army. Here again an undesirable dramatic event took place due to the Syamantaka jewel.

Balaramdada was never interested in wealth and riches as such. He never even visited the treasury of Dwaraka. But that troublesome Syamantaka jewel had bred irresistible curiosity in the mind of this valiant Yadava warrior. As Sri appeared in front of him he smiled and said, “Dhakalya, let us at least see that Syamantaka jewel once. We have come following it such a long distance from Dwaraka. Now all hurdles in our path have also been cleared. Our Satyabhama has lost her father for the sake of that jewel. A look at it would make her feel a bit better. Come on, show me the jewel!”

Sri shrugged his shoulders, smiled and said, “I don’t have it. It is with Akrurakaka. First, we will have to find him, and obtain it from him. Only then you and I will be able to take a look at it!”

Usually, Balaramadada never had any misunderstandings about Sri. Unfortunately, it happened that day at the border of Kashi kingdom, in the army camp. He expressly kept saying again and again, “Just show me that jewel, only once. I have no desire for it.” Sri kept trying to convince him, “I really don’t have that jewel with me, at this moment.” Suddenly dada lost his temper and said angrily, “That mere stone of a jewel means more to you than your respectable elder brother. Keep it with you then! I am leaving right now, and will go wherever my feet take me! I don’t want to see your face anymore!” And just as he said it, Balaramadada picked up his mace and left

the base in a fit of fury. His Yadava followers went after him. They crossed river Ganga, river Sharayu and reached the banks of Gandaki. He directly reached Janakapuri of Mithila.

Thus, for no fault of his the Syamantaka jewel had given Sri a solid emotional blow! That of the misunderstanding of his beloved elder brother and his heart-breaking separation!

After punishing Shatadhanwa, victorious Sri returned to Dwaraka. But this time Balaramadada was not with him. Even the troublesome Syamantaka that was the reason of the rift was not with him. The Yadavas in the royal capital strongly felt both the things. Yet they welcomed Sri joyfully, as usual. The Yadavas loved Sri more than themselves. Sri also loved all of them unconditionally. But I just couldn't comprehend the fact that dada had left in anger. I simply couldn't digest it. I could not remain without meeting Revatitai immediately. But it was she who consoled me. She instantly reduced the heavy burden on my mind saying, "You are worrying for no reason, Rukmini. The prince won't go anywhere. He will return soon. He can't live without Srikrishna *bhauji*."

It looked like Sri's imperial life didn't have any stability. It was just not meant to be. That was the reason why minister Vipruthu presented him with the news, in front of me. It made one think really hard. A group of women from the Kamarupa kingdom on the east of Aaryavarta had met him. That group presented a story of the dire life conditions for the women of Kamarupa and the surrounding countries in front of the Yadava minister. They expected some kind of response from him. In Pragjyotishapura, the royal capital of that kingdom, the life of women, especially beautiful and healthy women was in danger. There the king Narakasura alias Bhaumasura had forcibly imprisoned not just one or two, but sixteen thousand beautiful women of Kamarupa to use and exploit them physically to satisfy his own lust. New women were being added regularly in the prison.

'Is there any saviour at all, in the entire Aaryavarta, for thousands of these innocent women? Is there any valiant man who will protect the basic right to live for these powerless women?' They asked such heart-piercing questions and demanded to visit Sri and were waiting to meet him.

This was a unique problem. It needed to be handled delicately and adroitly. For that purpose, one would have to cross over the entire Aaryavarta region and attack the Kamarupa kingdom which was thousands of *yojanas* away. I was fully confident in my mind, that Sri would definitely accept this



challenge also. And that is what happened. His face brightened with the same unique radiance it reflected when he meditated in the wee hours and when he recited the divine mantras of Sudarshan. He resolutely uttered only one sentence to the minister. I will go to Kamarupa kingdom, to Pragjyotishapura, to emancipate my sisters!

According to his instructions the minister arranged an urgent council of the Sudharma royal assembly. Only Sri addressed the council. It was his exclusive, unparalleled speech expounding his own views about the essence of femininity. I can never forget it. He said, “My dear Yadava warriors, no matter whatever accolades virility achieves, it is conceived in a woman’s womb! A manhood that cannot honour and respect the feminine, is futile. Narakasura has been brutally abusing women. That is precisely why I have taken the decision to attack Narakasura along with the four-fold Yadava army. I am confident that you all will comply with my decision.”

A public announcement was made in Dwaraka that ‘Yadava king Maharaja Srikrishna is planning a military attack on Narakasura, the brutal, arrogant king of Kamarupa. Fearless young men from the regions of Saurashtra, Bhrigukachchha and Aanarta were recruited to the Yadava army. Training camps guided by expert commanders and troop leaders were organized throughout the kingdom to get them trained in weaponry and ammunition. The size of the combative Yadava army already numbered in millions, kept burgeoning. The proficient spies of Dwaraka had spread out in kingdoms such as Avanti, Chedi, Dakshina, Kosala, Magadha, and Videha, that were located on the way from Dwaraka to Pragjyotishapura. Secretly keeping in constant touch with each other they started collecting information about the enemy’s capacity, and conveyed it to Dwaraka promptly.

The Yadava craftsmen got just as busy day and night as they were at the time of the construction of Dwaraka. This was a vast undertaking, quite challenging and was going to test the limits of the Yadavas adept in war. Dwaraka had no association whatsoever with the Kamarupa kingdom. This was the preparation for a war to protect an eternal truth, to fight for the protection of womanhood that was oppressed anywhere. No shortcoming could be left in such a matter. Sri constantly travelled throughout the kingdom, along with both commanders and other companions such as Uddhavabhauji, Shini, Kritavarma, Avagaha, Aahuka, Satyaka, Chitraka, Devabhaga and Devashravasa. He got absorbed in getting the four-fold army thoroughly equipped and ready for the war.

Acharya Sandipani and Gargamuni found out the auspicious time to begin the Narakasura venture. Everywhere only one thing was being discussed, that Prince Balarama should have been present in this huge army. I had the same feeling initially. But Sri met me privately and all my doubts vanished. I had full faith that Sri would win this war and return successful. Two more individuals who loved him as dearly as me had very different reactions though. It was as unexpected as it was shocking. Both of them insisted on going along with Sri – Uddhavabhauji and Satyabhama!

Though he was brave and a Yadava, Uddhavabhauji was not a warrior by nature. In fact, he always fearlessly propounded that conciliation was better than war. Had those words come from somebody else's mouth, even Sri along with other Yadava leaders would have dismissed them. But everybody used to listen to Uddhavabhauji quietly, including Sri. His personality was very unique and different from other Yadavas. His character was more like that of Ghor Angirasa who, in spite of being a Yadava had renounced the worldly pleasures and had become a *Sanyasi*. That is why he was as respected in Dwaraka as Acharya Sandipani.

Such an Uddhavabhauji had insisted on going along with Sri on this particular mission. Everybody was surprised. I wasn't. I knew that he was going only to fill dada's absence. I was surprised about Bhama's decision. I felt a bit of envy too! The news that Bhama was going with Sri obviously caused me to react. I also intensely felt like joining him. It was indeed my right as the Maharani of Dwaraka. I expressed that wish of mine to Sri in privacy. He was more adept than me at consoling others and at convincing things that were not easily agreeable. As usual he gave me a lovely smile and said, "Maharani, Satyabhama is coming with me, not because she has come closer to me than you are. She is skilled in charioting. She thinks that I have done her a 'favour' by punishing Shatadhanwa. She is going to repay that debt as a Kshatriya lady by serving me in the war! Do you know how to drive a chariot? If so, you can come with me too. Do you consider any of my actions as a 'favour' done to you? If so, you can come too. Do you consider yourself an 'indebted Kshatriya lady' 'like her'?"

Realizing that now he was going to whip me with such questions and drag me along, I stopped him and said, "Okay, okay, that's enough! I am not interested in being a Kshatriya lady like her! Both of you go happily and come back safely. That will be more than enough for me!"

Sri came to meet me after obtaining the blessings of the senior Maharaja,

both the matas, acharya and other elders. Along with Jambavati I performed the ritual of 'Aukshan' for Sri, Uddhavabhauji and Bhama. With smiles on our faces we bade farewell to them. War drums and trumpets blew. With Sri, Uddhavabhauji and Bhama at the forefront, the mammoth fourfold army of the Yadavas along with Satyaki got ready to march. It left from the Shuddhaksha gate. It crossed the island creek in huge ships and united with the neighbouring army that was already camping on the ocean shore. The platoons of elephantry, cavalry and infantry marched in order, fluttering the grand, golden-bordered saffron coloured Garudadhwaaja pennant, from Dwaraka in Aanarta to Pragjyotishapura in Kamarupa.

Now my only task was to listen to the incoming news for at least the next four months. As both the commanders were not present, Balaramadada was also not there and major charioteers and warriors had left with Sri, automatically, my responsibility as a Maharani had indeed increased considerably. It was necessary to assist the aged Maharaja and Devakimata, in looking after the kingdom. Therefore, I appointed Jambavati as the caretaker of the island of Queens' mansions and came to original Dwaraka. Here too I had a palace for me as the Maharani. I started living in that palace. I began keeping a keen eye on the execution of the Sudharma royal assembly operations along with Revatitai and Rohini mata. Within fifteen days of Sri's departure a warrior sent by Satyaki arrived at the Shuddhaksha gate along with a royal lady guest. She was Mitravinda, the princess of Avanti, the daughter of Avanti king Maharaja Jayasena and Sri's *aatya* Rajadhidevi and a sister of princes Vinda and Anuvinda.

Sri's army had entered the Avanti kingdom during their journey. At the same time the Avanti king had organized the Swayamwar ceremony of his beautiful daughter. They assumed that the Lord of Dwaraka had arrived for the Swayamwar! Prince Vinda and Anuvinda sent a humiliating message to Sri through their emissary, 'You cannot participate in this Swayamwar. You have lost your Kshatriya status! That is exactly why you have not been invited for this Swayamwar.' Avanti's Maharani Rajadhidevi was Sri's *aatya*. This was a family dispute. God only knew if the Yadavas were ever going to clear such familial complications!

Sri possessed an innate diplomatic skill of turning a messy situation to his advantage. He sent a return message to Vinda-Anuvinda. 'We haven't come here for the Swayamwar at all. We are going to Kamarupa to attack Narakasura. It is essential to obtain the blessing of our elderly *aatya* and her

husband. It is our duty. Therefore, Sri will arrive in the royal capital of Avanti.'

This was a solid slap that left Vinda-Anuvinda nonplussed, and they had to welcome Sri in the royal capital with festivity. They could deny admission to a cowherd in the Swayamwar ceremony. How were they going to deny him the blessings!

Sri ushered his team prepared for the grand mission towards the royal capital of Avanti. At the last moment, he took a planned entry into the Swayamwar pandal along with chosen warriors. While all the invited guests of Jayasena kept gawking at him he forcefully abducted Mitravinda and brought her to the chariot. Powerful Satyaki and Anadhrishti took on infuriated Vinda-Anuvinda, and kept them engaged in battle. Sri immediately dispatched the Avanti princess Mitravinda to Dwaraka along with a troop of armed warriors and faithful charioteers. This was done without giving any inkling to Bhama! The expert charioteer himself told me about the entire episode. I welcomed my third co-wife, Mitravinda too with a smile.

I myself brought Mitravinda to the twin island, and got her settled in one of the eight palaces. I let her choose her own attendants. Mitravinda had a temperament that was a combination of Jambavati and Bhama's temperament. As she had Yadava blood in her, she was also proud like Bhama, but her pride was not as blatant as Bhama's. She was perceptive and curious like Jambavati, but her inquisitiveness was not as innocent as Jambavati's. Now she too began awaiting Sri's arrival just like Jambavati and me. And so, I came to realize that she had accepted Sri as her groom in her heart. Now very soon her attachment to her parental home, the Avanti kingdom, was going to wane automatically.

At last, after two months the news that we had been desperately waiting for arrived at the victorious Shuddhaksha gate of the Dwaraka kingdom. The entire Aaryavarta was thrilled with this news, even more thrilled than the Shursena kingdom after Kansa's execution.

'Maharaja Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka executed Narakasura, the king of Kamarupa on the battlefield of Pragjyotishapura!' For that, the great Yadava Srikrishna had to fight a thrilling battle with four governors of Narakasura and his commander, Mura. This victory was the culmination of Sri's warfare skills. Under the leadership of commander Mura, the Asuras had laid a sturdy safety net in the thick meadows of Pragjyotishapura, the royal capital, with six thousand hidden snares with weapons. Mura himself

stood guard, all armed with weapons and ‘Astras’, to protect this net along with his sons Tamra, Antariksha, Shravana, Vibhavas, Vasu and Aruna. This very first wall of defence of his adroit war strategy was difficult to break. As gallant Yadava warriors stepped forward, the invisible contrivances under their feet automatically released javelins hidden in the net that was spread in the meadows. Those javelins would rapidly strike the warriors. They didn’t even realize from where the javelins were coming. Pierced by the javelins, crying out the name of Goddess Ida, the Yadava warriors were quickly falling down in the meadows, without any resistance. Tall, towering mountains stood behind these nets. Hiding in the mountains were Narakasura’s armed governors Hayagriva and Nishumbha along with the army. That was the second wall of defence. Beyond it two more governors, Virupaksha and Panchjana, were hiding on the Maniparvat, all set to give a tough fight along with their armies. This was the third wall.

In this situation, first it was required to fight with the *Asura* commander Mura standing at the first wall of defence. It was hard to defeat him owing to the cunning formation of his army and the deceitful war strategy.

For the entire first week, gallant Yadava warriors fought desperately to break the deceptive first wall of security. Many sacrificed their lives in that hilly region. Courageous Satyaki, Anadhrishti, Shini and Avagaha also became disheartened. They didn’t know what to do. In the encampment of the army everybody sat in front of Sri, hanging their heads in worry. For quite a long time, many strategies of counterattacks were discussed. Bhama was also involved in the discussion. Even here, at first Uddhavabhauji did not say anything as per his nature. Ultimately with determination he said, “Dada, I don’t need to say this. You understand everything. I don’t understand why you aren’t taking the decision. Mura *Asura* is using deceptive strategy to fight this war with you. Every day Yadava warriors are losing their lives in vain due to the hidden javelins. Why don’t you project your divine Sudarshan at this time?”

Everybody in the camp started looking at Sri with hopeful eyes. Sri eyed Uddhavabhauji with a smile and closed his eyes. His face blossomed like a sunflower, with splendour. He had recited the unique, divine mantras of Sudarshan. Instantly a divine instrumental melody began echoing in the encampment leaving everybody present entranced. Sri automatically got up and stood erect with his eyes still closed. His right hand got raised gradually. In a trice, a rapidly revolving, dazzling radiant chakra with twelve spokes

appeared on his index finger. Its extraordinary brilliant light blinded everyone. In the rising incantation of mantras Sri projected the divine chakra. It left, buzzing with the thrilling rhythm of music to destroy the magical net of weapons. Everybody simply kept staring. The dazzling chakra dashed forward while destroying the hidden weapons in the thick, grassy meadows. It beheaded commander Mura who had paced forward gritting his teeth, brandishing his mace, as well as his six sons, and returned. It came back on Sri's index finger and steadied itself. It revolved around itself and just as it had appeared, it disappeared. Everybody who was present there was never going to forget this appearance of Sri. Especially Uddhavabhauji and Bhama.

Hearing this news, first and foremost I realized the importance and value of Bhama. She was indeed fortunate and a blessed consort of Sri, who was the first of his wives to see his divine form holding the Sudarshan chakra. I had seen him only while fighting a duel.

I was excited to hear the detailed report from the emissary who had arrived from Pragjyotishapura. I felt extremely proud of Sri as the Yadava Maharani and as his wife. My heart brimmed with pride, especially as a woman.

The obstacle of Mura was overcome. Sri encouraged the Yadava army along with Satyaki and Anadhrishti. They broke down the next two walls of defence of Narakasura's army. They beheaded the governors Hayagriva and Nishumbha from the second wall of defence. At Odaka on the Maniparvat the governors Panchjana and Virupaksha from the third wall of defence confronted them fiercely. Sri beheaded them too and ended their opposition. These four governors and commander Mura were Narakasura's major defenders. They had forcibly abducted thousands of Kshatriya women from the Kamarupa kingdom on the east of Aaryavarta and the neighbouring kingdoms of Manipura, Tripura, Vanga, and Anga, and imprisoned them in Pragjyotishapura. The number of these imprisoned women had reached sixteen thousand. The original prison of his kingdom had the capacity to hold five thousand prisoners. As soon as it was fully occupied the evil commander Mura put huge, sturdy wooden fences like the ones around the aashramas or the Gokuls, around the open grounds outside the prison. Those were made impregnable by troops of armed soldiers guarding them. Almost ten thousand Kshatriya women were confined in the open on that fenced ground like helpless cows. Five to six thousand were confined in the prison. This was not a prison at all. It was like a colossal byre of imprisoned women behind the fence. Even the cows need to be tended to get milk from them. But that was

not in the destiny of these unfortunate women in spite of being born as human beings. Even none of the Gokuls in Aaryavarta had such colossal cattle pen that could hold sixteen thousand cows together. This colossal prison in Pragjyotishapura was a huge stigma on Aaryavarta.

Once the Yadava army broke through the three defence walls, there was uncontrollable war fever. Thousands and millions of combative Yadavas penetrated the borders of Pragjyotishapura, shouting continuous slogans reaching the sky in the name of Goddess Ida. Bhama herself steered Sri's Garudadhwaaja chariot with the saffron coloured pennant fluttering atop, and brought it right in front of Narakasura's chariot. Daruka stood next to her. Bhama wore iron armour and war attire today. She did not look like a woman, but like one of the Yadava warriors! A fierce battle took place between Sri and Narakasura. On the battlefield, the Yadava warriors and the *Asura* warriors fought fiercely against each other.

This was the ultimate battle of Justice with Injustice. It was not going to conclude very soon. First there was a deluge of rocks through the Bhrushundi rockets. Then there was a fierce battle of bow and arrow between Sri and Narakasura. The day kept progressing hour by hour but as both the warriors were powerful, neither of them was retreating. Finally, both of them descended from their chariots for the final decisive duel. Their clangorous, hair-raising mace duel began. Sri had tucked his yellow silk dhoti tightly and balanced his 'Kaumodaki' mace easily; he roared 'Hail Goddess Ida', and circling gracefully he attacked Narakasura. Both of them forgot about the surrounding battlefield and the warriors. They looked fearless like a soaring falcon while striking hard to kill. The thick-bladed grass of Kamarupa was getting trampled under their feet. Some of these blades got doused in the blood that was trickling from the wounds of both the warriors. Spellbound and transfixed, Bhama and Daruka in the chariot kept staring at the thrilling battle in front of them.

It was almost evening. The white, long-winged birds – Himapakshi on Mount Mainaka were returning to their nests. The sun touching the distant mountains was about to set. This was the time for Sri's daily prayer of the sun. For a few moments, under the pretext of taking rotations while balancing the huge mace, Sri had a good look at the sun. The next moment he planted his feet firmly on ground and took a stance and fainted at Narakasura, who had been fainting at the world so far, in such a way that he was not able to see the cowherd in front of him. He didn't realize when the cowherd went behind

him. As the mace struck hard on his stout, demonic back that had backed innumerable evil deeds, he fell down face forward. For an instant the brightness of many suns flashed in front of his closed eyes. He turned on his back while moaning. That day, with the setting sun of Kamarupa as his witness Sri's first decisive strike pounded on his unjust chest shattering it. Then the strikes followed one after the other on the arrogant, unjust, callous chest of Narakasura!

Fountains of demonic blood spurted out. The thick grass of Kamarupa got doused in it. That was the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Ashwin!

Triumphant Sri left with Satyaki and Anadhrishti on both sides, followed by Uddhavabhauji and Bhama. Troops of ebullient and victorious Yadavas accompanied him shouting war-slogans. All of them arrived at the prison – the pivot of Narakasura's base of abuse. The armed soldiers here had already vanished. Only the clamour of the women confined behind the sturdy fence was dimly audible. As Sri gave him a smile Satyaki moved forward and hit the first strike of his mace on the wooden gate of the strong fence. Following his actions, the victorious warriors broke it down with whatever weapon they could get hold of. That sound caused the clamour of the women inside to stop completely, as if someone had pressed a thumb on their throats. The terrified women inside thought, that as usual, this was an onslaught of Mura and his governor friends led by the shaggy Narakasura.

They were completely baffled when they saw the remarkably radiant Sri in the circle of Yadavas, standing in front of them. Understanding their bafflement Sri raised his blue, muscular arm in assurance without saying a word. He just glanced at Uddhavabhauji. He promptly came forward. Raising both his arms he said, "My dear sisters of Kamarupa! Don't look at us with fearful eyes. The despotic Narakasura who had been oppressing you for years has been killed today! This dear dada of mine has killed him. This is the Lord of Dwaraka, the leader of the Yadavas, Maharaja Srikrishna! With his consent, I assure you and declare that from today onwards you are free to go anywhere you want!"

It took them some time to digest the truth of Narakasura's death. For a while they didn't even realize that they were free!

Uddhavabhauji who had the knack to promptly read people's minds, realized it. Straining his voice chords, he declared again in a loud voice to assist them to comprehend the truth, "You are really free! Not prisoners



anymore! You are free to go anywhere. Narakasura has been killed.” Now that ocean of women came to their senses. Some of them whispered amongst themselves, trying to convince each other, while pointing fingers to the broken gate and Sri. Their words were vaguely audible, ‘Free... released... to go anywhere!’ A bold, young woman among them came forward. Raising her arm, she let out a cry of freedom....’Hail Lord of Dwaraka, Maharaja Srikrishna!’ Thousands of women joined her, ‘Victory....victory!’ Within moments these women for whom the prison life had become unbearable, left joyously, chattering in groups, brushing against each other, through the broken gate. The efficient commanders also freed the women captive in the royal prison.

After releasing all the women from both prisons, Sri arrived at the open square in front of the royal palace of Pragjyotishapura along with the royal council. Here the infantry troop leader presented a young royal prisoner of war in front of him. He was Narakasura’s son Bhagdutta! He was scared to death due to the unexpected precipitous events that had taken place. As usual, Sri had already gathered information about him. He was not at all involved in the subjugation stint of his father and his commanders. He was righteous from birth. But now he was terrified, thinking that he was going to be executed as a punishment. Sri discussed him with Uddhavabhauji. Then he stepped forward and affectionately put his hand on Bhagdutta’s shoulder. He immediately bowed down and held Sri’s feet. Sri patted him and pulling him up, held him close to his generous heart, and said, “Bhagdutta, let go of your fear. You are the one who is going to look after this kingdom. Not the way your father did, but in your own way. Cremate your father on the banks of the Brahmaputra.” Sri gave on the spot orders to the army commanders, “As the Asuras don’t follow the tradition of the mourning period, organize the coronation of this *Asura* king, Bhagdutta, tomorrow itself in the main square of the city. I am going to crown him with the royal crown of the Asuras in presence of the *Asura* citizens. Announce this all over the city.”

That night after dinner Sri was resting and discussing things with Uddhavabhauji and Bhama in the capacious encampment erected on the banks of the Lohitganga. The *Karanjel* oil torches were burning dimly inside. Armed guards were walking outside. Uddhavabhauji said, “Dada, as per your nature you will easily forget it, but I will never forget this blessed day.”

Just then, first the whispering of seven-eight women was heard. Followed by that, intimidating words of the Yadava guards to stop them were heard. Sri

only glanced at his brother. Catching that signal his brother went outside the pavilion. In a short while he returned with a group of seven-eight women and said, “They want to say something. I have heard it. Their problem is difficult indeed. Dada should hear it directly from them.”

The young woman who had courageously stepped forward earlier said, “Maharaja, we all are indebted to you, with a debt that could never be repaid. You have given us the light of freedom that we never even imagined. You have kind-heartedly given us the freedom to go anywhere. But...but...” she hesitated. She didn’t know how to say what she wanted to say. “But what? Don’t hesitate to speak freely. Don’t be afraid.” Sri comforted her.

She gasped and gathering courage, said, “Some of us live here, in the city of Pragjyotishapura itself. When you freed them they joyously rushed back to their homes. But ...” she stopped again.

“But what? Speak ...” A subtle crease, never seen before, appeared on Sri’s forehead.

“But Maharaja, their own family is not ready to accept them because they are disgraced, defiled. You freed them, but their own families did not accept them. If the society doesn’t accept us, where should we go? We can’t even go back to the *Asura* prison as it has already been destroyed. You have killed *Asura*. Where should we go? How should we face the world? What should we do?” She was Kasheru, the sixteen-year-old daughter of king Twashtta. She bent her head and started sobbing with agony.

Sri went around in the pavilion with his hands behind his back. He muttered something to himself. Then with the same beautiful smile on his face as usual he said to his brother, “Udho, present all these women tomorrow in the main square of the city, at the time of the coronation. Let’s offer justice to them too. The problem that you perceive is not a problem at all. It will be solved in my own way. Take them back to their group.”

The next day the central square of Pragjyotishapura was packed with men and women of Kamarupa. In the centre of the square a spacious coronation altar had been raised under a tall canopy. All the material needed for the ceremony was neatly placed on the altar. Citizens had come out in great numbers to welcome the new youthful king. Half an hour before the *Muhurta* the hilly musical instruments reverberated. As per Uddhavabhauji’s instruction the sixteen thousand women liberated from the prison were also present. The mammoth crowd was encircled by the Yadava warriors. As the *Muhurta* of Bhagdutta’s coronation drew close, Sri arrived in the adorned

Garudadhwaja chariot along with Bhagdutta. As the high-pitched instruments began playing for their welcome the murmur died down. Keeping Bhagdutta on his right Sri began walking on the carpets spread on the ground, offering greetings to the citizens of Kamarupa with utter humility. Behind him were Uddhavabhauji, both commanders and Bhama. Citizens standing on both sides showered flowers on the royal league walking towards the altar.

Sri took Bhagdutta with him and ascended the altar along with others. A welcoming round of applause followed.

The priests began intoning the mantras in a deep voice. The moment the first jar of sacred water was poured on Bhagdutta's head he felt purified inside out. No one in his *Asura* dynasty, including his father, had had such luck. Their way was to usurp the kingdom by betrayal.

After the *Abhishek*, Bhagdutta donned the traditional *Asura* royal costume. It was mostly suitable for mountain life. He had fastened a deer skin over his loin cloth as was their tradition. He wore pearl necklaces around his neck along with colourful necklaces of wild beads. The insignia of the *Asura* dynasty, a roaring tiger face on copper medal, was hanging on his chest.

The royal priest brought Bhagdutta near the elevated royal seat placed in the centre of the altar. The time-measuring earthen cups floating in the copper vessels placed in the four corners of the altar were about to sink. The chief priest who carried the platter with the traditional crown of the Asuras, came in front of Sri and bowed down to request him. Sri got up and approached the elevated royal seat in the centre, adorned with garlands. Before picking up the crown, he held the Paanchajanya that was tied skilfully in the shawl around his waist, in his lean-fingered hands. He raised his head high and with all his might blew such a divine tune of the conch that the *Asura* priest chanting the mantra and the local instruments stopped right away as if they were turned off. The amassed crowd of men and women inadvertently moved towards the altar. As the time-measuring vessels were sinking, Sri placed the royal crown of Kamarupa on Bhagdutta's head. While showering fistfuls of flowers over the altar millions of voices cheered, 'Hail Lord of Dwaraka Bhagvan Srikrishna Maharaja! Victory! Victory!! Hail king of Kamarupa Bhagdutta Maharaja – victory – victory!'

Bhagdutta sat in the Virasana pose near Sri's feet in front of everybody. He took off his crown and humbly put it down near Sri's feet, and overwhelmed with emotions he put his head on Sri's feet with gratitude.

Sri picked up the crown in one hand and pulled him up with the other hand.

He put the crown on Bhagdutta's head and embraced him.

Bhagdutta's minister moved forward and raising both hands, he silenced the crowd. He said, "Bhagvan Srikrishna Maharaja will now give his blessings to our new Maharaja. We have only heard a lot about him, especially about his ambrosial speech. At this auspicious moment, we request him to give us the privilege of hearing it and feeling grateful and blessed."

Sri casually rested his hand on the golden lion head that was engraved on the right hand-rest of the royal seat and stood up. He started speaking in a voice as melodious as the Vina, "Brothers and sisters of Kamarupa kingdom, I am officially pronouncing this great *Asura*, Bhagdutta, as your new king from today! You all have experienced and know very well how brutally and dissolutely his father ruled the kingdom. I believe that this new king of yours will never follow that route. He will hold the ideal of the high mountains of the Kamarupa kingdom in front of him. He will look after his subjects like his own children with the understanding that growth and progress are the key attributes of life. My blessings will always be with him. The Dwaraka kingdom will also support if required.

"Oh citizens, I consider Bhagdutta like my own son. Therefore, right from this moment, I consciously and gladly take it upon me to rectify whatever sinful act his father Narakasura has committed putting the human race to shame. The Yadavas and I have freed thousands of these Arya women whom Narakasura had forcibly imprisoned and who have suffered innumerable atrocities at his hands. I have come to know that the society obsessed by superstitions is not ready to accept them. It considers them as disgraceful, unchaste and shameful. What is their mistake in all this? Nothing at all. Therefore, at this moment I, Srikrishna, the son of Maharaja Vasudeva of Dwaraka from the Vrushni-Andhaka dynasty, am publicly granting an assurance of safety to all of them.

"With the assistance of the Kamarupa minister and warriors my dear brother Uddhava stayed awake the entire night and has made thousands of Mangalsutras with a single 'Black Bead' woven in a thread. I will touch the platters full of these Mangalsutras declaring that I have accepted all of them as my wives and assure them safety. With the assistance of the warriors, brother Uddhava will give one of those to each one of you. Wearing it around your neck, you should fearlessly tell anybody anywhere in the entire Aaryavarta with your head held high that you are the wife of Maharaja Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka!

“You belong to Dwaraka from today. Consider it as your own parental home and live freely. Just as I rehabilitated millions of Yadavas in Dwaraka I am doing the same for you. Indeed, from today, right from this moment, you have become truly free and will remain free!”

Now huge ships full of Kamarupa women began crossing the creek and arriving at the Shuddhaksha gate of Dwaraka. The leader of the troop of guards accompanying them had already shared this news in detail with me. As the Maharani and Sri’s wife I accepted those women and proved that the faith which Sri had placed in me was right. Prior to this I had already welcomed three women like my own sisters. With that same affection, I welcomed these thousands of women now. As per Sri’s message I braced myself and got engaged in the mission of their rehabilitation.

Now I was waiting to see Sri in person. Hearing all the news about Bhama I was really eager to meet her and listen to all the heroic exploits of Sri. But the troop leader who came, brought news which conveyed that I would have to wait one more month to meet Sri. Sri had gone to the Kosala kingdom of King Nagnajita along with Bhama. From there he was directly going to Himavana. He was going to fulfil his long-cherished desire to visit the self-existent *Himalinga* in the cavern of Amaranath. I could understand that he was going to see the *Himalinga*. But why he went to the Kosala kingdom, was a puzzle. That is why I tried to dig some information out of the troop leader. But he also didn’t know the reason.

I had heard a lot about the self-existent Shivalinga of Amaranath. I too had a strong urge many a times to see it at least once. Now as a wife I was going to have to see it only through Satyabhama’s eyes. For that reason, I was waiting so eagerly to see her. After a fortnight, the news of Sri’s heroic feat in the Kosala kingdom arrived in Dwaraka. He hadn’t gone there for no reason. Nagnajita had dispatched an exclusive royal envoy to Pragjyotishapura and challenged Sri’s status as the Lord of Dwaraka. His message was, ‘It is easy to marry sixteen thousand imprisoned women, especially after emancipating them. But it is challenging to win the princess of Kosala after fulfilling the condition of the Swayamwar. The challenge is for a brave Kshatriya who can put the nasal bridle on the seven robust bulls of my kingdom in front of all the citizens and yoke them to a bullock cart. If you have the guts to fulfil the condition then come to Shravasti, the royal capital of the Kosalas on the banks of Gandaki!’

Sri was not going to stop after hearing such a message. He dispatched his

own messenger along with the Kosala envoy and sent a message to Nagnajita, 'From childhood I am used to reining robust, intoxicated bulls back. I am a gopa-cowherd inside out. How can a cowherd be afraid of a bull? I have also put reins on many impudent male bulls among the citizens since becoming the Lord of Dwaraka! I am a gopa in that sense too!'

As per the message he sent, Sri reached the Kosala kingdom along with the army, passing Vanga kingdom on the left and crossing the river Kaushiki. The Magadha kingdom was just adjacent to it. Sri had kept a keen eye on the military movements of Jarasandha there. While going, he had astutely avoided the Magadha kingdom, passing by its southern border. While returning, he had again avoided it, passing by its northern border. During the reign of Shrirama, Kosalas' royal capital was Ayodhya on the banks of Sharayu. Moving to the east it had now become Shravasti on the banks of Gandaki. Gandaki was also called Sadnira. It carried clear white water just as its name denoted.

The news of Sri's arrival to fulfil the condition of the Swayamwar of Kosala daughter Satya reached the open-air game arena marked for the Swayamwar. At once the amassed men and women of Kosala began running. They hurried in flocks towards the Garudadhwaya chariot as if pulled by some force, to take a look at Sri.

Sri entered the Swayamwar arena in the Garudadhwaya chariot surrounded by the roaring crowd of the Kosala citizens. Bhama and Uddhava were also in the chariot. As soon as Sri saw the seven robust bellowing bulls in a secured wooden enclosure in front, he descended from the chariot, highly charged. A big-wheeled sturdy bullock cart adorned with garlands stood in the centre of the rink. Ten-twenty nasal bridles made with saffron coloured ropes decorated with designs of creepers made with golden threads were laid on the colourful seat of the cart. Near the vacant cart with its yoke resting on the ground, seven hefty humped Kosala bulls were bellowing and moving around insolently, ready to ram in to anybody they saw. Sri instantaneously tucked his yellow silk dhoti tight. While everybody watched flabbergasted, in the midst of the instrumental sounds he descended in the secured arena shouting, 'Hail Goddess Ida'. He charged at the seven bulls. Then the only thing visible was the fierce fight between fleeting lines of the charging bulls of different colours like white, reddish and black and a single bluish line dodging them with agility. The citizens of Kosala got a glimpse in person of how Dada and Sri had defeated the giant Kuvalyapida elephant of Kansa in

Mathura. No one understood how the nimble, blue line in front of them dodged each bull swiftly and exhausted them one after another and when the nasal bridle lying on the seat of the cart was inserted in their already drooping, dripping, fretting nostrils.

Just within half an hour Sri put the nasal bridles on all seven bulls. As he yoked them to the bullock cart standing next to them, and went around the game arena at top speed, the shower of thunderous applause, inspirational shouts reverberated. ‘Hail Srikrishna – gopa king of Gokul, Lord of Dwaraka – the macho one among the kings – victory to him! The son-in-law of Kosala, venerable Yadava Srikrishnadeva, victory.... victory!’

By this time the foam and streams of saliva dripping from the muzzles of the tired and exhausted Kosala bulls had dropped on the ground. One of the four snow white horses of Garudadhwaya, who was continuously staring at the huffing, terrified bulls for the last half an hour, neighed, shaking its tail. At that same moment, Satya, the daughter of Kosala had put the white flower garland around the neck of the gopa of Dwaraka. River Sadnira witnessed the blessed event that took place on its bank and was now flowing gently.

Obviously, it was going to be me who would have to fulfil the duty of welcoming Sri’s fifth wife arriving with one of the troop leaders. I prepared my mind for that. How did this Kshatriya lady, Satya, from the foothills of the Himavana look like, behave like, and how would she get used to the life in Dwaraka? Such thoughts kept rising in my mind constantly.

A few days passed in this. Suddenly one day in the welcoming chamber of the Shuddhaksha gate where various musical instruments were played, a specific tune of the kettle drums and flutes ensued which was well known to me. It was meant only for Sri’s wives on the island of Queens’ mansions. I myself had purposefully instructed the chief there to include many flute players so that it would be easily recognized.

Today this tune was being played continuously and at a high pitch. I surmised that Satya had arrived.

Just two days ago, I had arrived in original Dwaraka from the island of Queens’ mansions along with Jambavati and Mitravinda. Here both of them lived in my palace. I took them with me and with great curiosity I arrived at the Shuddhaksha gate to welcome Satya. I was completely astonished to see Satyabhama herself assisting Satya to get down from the chariot, among the huge crowd of the Kamarupa women and Yadava men and women. Satya was going to come definitely. But how did Bhama come with her? She was in

fact going to Amaranath! This puzzle was not easy to solve.

I instantly brushed aside all the questions and welcomed both of them. As soon as she saw me Bhama threw her arms around my neck. Satya kept staring at both of us. I was really eager to ask Bhama so much about so many things.

After we arrived in my palace in original Dwaraka, Bhama told me at leisure the reason why she returned without going to Amarnath with Sri. The Amaranath cave is located on a high peak of Himavana, way higher than the Kosala kingdom. The initial phase of the journey was going to be along the base of the Himalayas. They would have to go sometimes through snowy regions and at times through thick forests. Immediately after completing this first phase the second phase of sharp ascent of Himawanta begins. It is full of difficult twists and turns of snowy passes. Sri had convinced Bhama initially by telling her ‘It is possible to win the world with the army, but not Mount Himawanta!’ and afterwards how the arduous journey would not be possible for a woman. While listening to that I stopped her in the middle and asked her teasingly, “He may have done his best to convince you, but how come you let go of your usual attitude of being insistent and conceded only in this matter?”

She also would not let go. She said, “Maharani I tried my best, telling him that I will not bicker, I will bear all the difficulties patiently, but I do want to go to Amaranath! Take me with you. But didi, as usual he threw his ‘Krishnajala’ over me without saying anything more!” He said, “Bhama, it looks like you really don’t want me to go and see the *Himalinga*! I should better just cancel my plans to go there! But...but I feel...” I got confused when he said he is cancelling his plan. Still I asked him with determination, “But what is it that you feel?”

Then, as usual, smiling sweetly he gave me the perfect reason which made me refrain from my stand. “What do you think he told me?” She asked. Even I started thinking. Really, what kind of intelligent move did Sri make which left Bhama speechless and forced her to retreat? After some time, I snapped my fingers and as if talking to myself I said, “Let me tell you Bhama, he must have said, ‘If I would have told the same thing to Rukmini she would have agreed immediately! She wouldn’t have raised any objections ever. My mistake, I should have known that you are not Rukmini!’”

Hearing that, Bhama widened her large eyes adorned with *Kajal* in astonishment. She held both my arms tightly and screamed in wonder, “Oh



Rukminitai that is exactly what he said. That also in exactly the same words! Not a difference of a single letter between what you both said! How did you guess it so perfectly?” I just smiled.

Then I kept talking with her at large about the many events since she left Dwaraka and till her return. While talking to her I felt deep in my heart that it is only Uddhavabhauji who is the most beloved to Sri among the Yadavas. After all he had left out even Bhama and taken only Uddhavabhauji to Amaranath along with him!

A few days after Satya’s arrival in Dwaraka senior commander Anadhrishti returned along with the Yadava army. He had brought along the enormous herd of animals that Bhagdutta had offered which included twenty thousand male elephants, forty thousand female elephants, eighteen thousand horses, and eighteen thousand milk-yielding cows, safely to such a faraway distance. Dwaraka was now full of bustle with the millions of Yadava men and women already living here, thousands of Kamarupa women and thousands of domestic animals! The ministers and members of the Sudharma royal assembly were finding time insufficient to make arrangements for all of them. The abundant gold, variety of diamonds, and the Kamarupa styled mountain jewellery offered by Bhagdutta as gifts were deposited in the treasury of Dwaraka.

Religious Yadavas who believed that all this wealth had come due to the good fortune of Satya, started giving her lot of respect. In no time, she became a part of the royal ladies’ circle. She had a specialty – she was very proficient in dance. Even though she was a princess she had never missed a single day’s practice of this difficult art, in laziness.

A month passed by. Sri reached the borders of Panchala via the shores of river Ganga, crossing the rivers Sharayu, and Gomati. He dispatched the entire Yadava army sailing in ships to Kampilyanagar, the royal capital of Panchalas. He himself selected a few assiduous Yadava warriors who would be able to survive in the cold region of Himavana to go along with him. With the assistance of Panchala king Drupada, commander Satyaki was going to arrange for the army to cross over Yamuna and towards Saurashtra through the Kuntibhoja kingdom. He himself was going to return to join in Sri’s service. *Maharathi* Satyaki left as decided.

The borders of the Kuru kingdom that Sri frequently referred to in his talks were also going to fall on the way during this journey. But Sri was not going to visit their royal capital Hastinapura as the Pandavas were no longer living

there. In fact, he took all the precaution to prevent the blind king Dhritarashtra from receiving any news of his passing by the kingdom. It was easy for him to keep this secret as the enormous Yadava army was not accompanying him. On the way, they reached a juncture in the Himalayas from where a turn leading to Mount Gandhamadana started. During their stay at that spot, Sri looked at the summit of the towering Himaparvat and said to Uddhavabhauji, “Uddhava, if possible I would have gone right away on Mount Gandhamadana along with you. I don’t know why but during this stay I am getting a strong feeling that there is a deep-rooted connection with this mountain. Srirama, the pride of Ayodhya had resided on the banks of the river Alakananda of this mountain. Notably, all the Pandavas of Kunti *aatya* were born on this mountain.”

Both the brothers and some select Yadavas crossed river Ganga from the borders of the Kuru kingdom and travelling along its coast they reached the holy place Hardwar. As decided they camped there waiting for Satyaki. The commander arranged for the Yadava army to leave for Dwaraka and along with a few warriors he united with the troop of Sri. Now this troop consisted of three chief Yadava warriors and a few tough companions.

Eager to see the *Himalinga* in the Amaranath cave Sri now crossed the river Saraswati and descended into the Mattamayura kingdom, and arrived at the border of the neighbouring kingdom of Panchananda. He travelled through the kingdoms of Vahika, Kekeya, and Madra located on the banks of rivers Vipasha, Shatadru, Iravati, and Chandrabhaga. Finally, he reached the Kashmir kingdom of the Gonardas and arrived at the base of the steep ascent of the Himawanta. Now ultimately the tough journey towards the cave of Amaranath began.

The tough Yadava warriors that Sri had taken with him dropped one after the other on the first few twists and turns. In the sojourn during the second phase of the journey, one day Sri came out of the tent. While he was looking at the sun on the snow-clad eastern horizon he suddenly smelt a strong, sweet, enchanting fragrance. Sri closed his eyes and breathing deeply he filled his chest with that fragrance and made a precise prediction about it. In that desolated, snow-clad region he said, “Udho, brother, somewhere in a nearby lake the flowers of *Brahmakamala* must have bloomed recently! If you could go with Satyaki and collect some *Brahmakamala* buds and a few flowers, then we can worship Shiva with elaborate rituals. These flowers are not ordinary. When you go take a garment with you to cover your nose. The

intoxicating fragrance of these flowers is so strong that it doesn't allow anyone to come close to pluck them off! It leaves one unconscious! To pluck a *Brahmakamala* in full bloom and offer it to the self-existent *Himalinga* while chanting Shiva's hymn is indeed an exceptionally rare opportunity of worshiping Shiva with devotion. These fully blossomed flowers will last for a minimum of one month. They disperse their fragrance continuously. Nature itself has gifted these unique snow-flowers with such power!

Uddhavabhauji took two Yadava warriors who had so far sustained this journey in the snow and started towards the lake following the trail of the sweet fragrance. Everybody had covered their noses well with garments. Still they could smell the strong fragrance of the snow-flowers. Uddhavabhauji would otherwise have never agreed to do such a daring thing for anybody else, but he always surrendered in front of his dear dada. His brother's word was final for him. The *Brahmakamalas* were nothing compared to it. By evening Uddhavabhauji returned with some fully blossomed, some half-blossomed *Brahmakamalas* wrapped in a shawl. Sensing the fragrance of the *Brahmakamalas* approaching his tent Sri was already standing at the door with his hands on his waist. Seeing Uddhavabhauji return successfully he moved forward and said with a smile, "Uddhava, my heart is telling me that in the final phase of this journey towards Shiva only you will sustain and remain with me!" Satyaki who was resting in the tent couldn't have heard this dialog.

Finally, it happened just as Sri had said. The two-three Yadav warriors who had resolutely sustained so far and even *Maharathi*, commander Satyaki retreated in the last phase of the journey to Amaranath. Only the two brothers kept going. It was getting strenuous for Uddhavabhauji to take the ascending, winding turns as he was holding the bunch of wet lotus flowers wrapped in a shawl under his arm. Sri made him stop and gently patting his shoulders Sri himself carried the bunch. Spreading his right palm in front of Uddhavabhauji he said, "Take my support, and keep walking with me fearlessly." While giving his hand in Sri's hand with a smile Uddhavabhauji said, "I will surely see Lord Shiva now. This hand carries the Sudarshan chakra – I won't be a burden to it at all!"

Ultimately, surmounting all the trying twists and turns in the last patch of Himavana both the brothers finally stood in the Amaranath cave in front of the self-existent *Himalinga* about six feet tall. Uddhavabhauji let out a big sigh of relief. As Sri saw the crystal white, moist, dripping self-existent

Shivalinga, he took out the *Brahmakamalas* from the shawl and offered them one by one on the *Himalinga*. He also told his brother to offer some. He spoke to himself, ‘If dada would have been here he would have put a garland of these flowers like the snake-garland around the neck of Shiva!’ Sri’s bright, long, fish-shaped eyes closed automatically. His long blue fingers came together in prayer. The hymn of Shiva started transpiring vaguely through his rosy, lotus petal-shaped lips in the divine, holy silence. Lord Shiva himself was listening to the prayer.

In the desolate cave on the towering Himavana, the Lord of Dwaraka remained in a meditational trance for a long time in front of Lord Shiva, with his palms joined in prayer. Uddhava *bhauji* also imitated him. But after he feasted his eyes on the *Himalinga*, he just lost himself observing how his dada looked in front of the *Himalinga*. He turned his body that was facing the Shivalinga towards his dada, and he was also lost in the meditation.

After feasting their eyes on Shiva to their hearts’ content both brothers started on their way back. While returning, *bhauji* was in front on the descending slope and Sri was at the back. On the first turn itself Sri said, “Don’t run Uddhava! Hold my hand. Stay with me! Tell me, what did you feel about the self-existent Shivalinga of Amaranath? What did you ask Shiva for?”

Uddhavabhauji who had gone ahead, stopped on hearing that. Staring continuously at his dada he said, “I was excited while looking at the fresh, six-feet-tall *Himalinga* dripping with snow water. But when I realized that the moist, white Shivalinga started looking as if it was covered in a faint blue shawl because of you standing in front of it, for moments it felt like Shiva had covered himself with the sky itself! After that I turned towards you and kept looking at you. My eyes closed automatically while listening to your singing of Shiva’s hymn. I could see only one scene. That of a towering, snow-clad, white mountain summit penetrating the cerulean sky. It had merged into the sky. Both had become one! That scene made me forget completely that I was supposed to ask Shiva for something and also that I wanted to tell you something.”

While coming back, both the brothers took along the Yadava companions who had stayed behind at various camps and started towards Dwaraka. Continuous news of their arrival kept reaching the Shuddhaksha gate. The entire city of Dwaraka as well as the subjects became eager to welcome them.

Finally, Sri stood at the Shuddhaksha gate along with Uddhavabhauji with a

triumphant look on his face, after completing the famous mission of Narakasura's annihilation. A large army of the warriors that was gifted to him stood behind. I was already waiting eagerly for Sri in the original Dwaraka. My four sisters – Jambavati, Satyabhama, Mitravinda, and Satya had joined me from the island of Queens' mansions and were with me. The five of us, Sri's consorts, performed '*Aukshan*' for Sri and Uddhavabhauji with five brightly lit lamps, amidst the sound of musical instruments. The entire city of Dwaraka was delighted. The citizens erected decorative flagpoles atop their houses, hung festoons at each intersection of the royal highway, flung fistfuls of vermilion in the air. The Kamarupa and Yadava women were so engrossed in playing 'zimma-fugadi' locking their hands in each other's, that they were unaware of their feet striking off the Rangoli designs that they themselves had drawn in their front yards. Innumerable tiny bright lamps had illuminated the fortification wall surrounding Dwaraka. Senior Maharaja, both the matas, tai, ministers, all members of the Sudharma council, commander Anadhrishti and millions of Yadavas had assembled today at the eastern gate with overflowing enthusiasm. I threw a glance around and strongly felt one thing – the absence of Balaramadada and Akrurakaka!

Because of Narakasura's annihilation, the acclaim of Sri's fame was reverberating through the entire Aaryavarta. This event in the eastern kingdom of Kamarupa had already reached Mithila. It had reached sullen Balaramadada who was residing in the Janak city. From Pragjyotishapura Sri had immediately descended into the Kosala kingdom. He did it intentionally thinking that as the Mithila kingdom is adjacent he would surely meet Balaramadada in Satya's 'Swayamwar'. But that didn't happen at all. Balaramadada was very unrelenting. Once he said yes, he meant yes. But once he said no it would be a determined no. Even if Sri would have been acclaimed as the Lord of the three worlds Balaramadada would not have returned to Dwaraka at all.

I disliked seeing Sri without dada and Uddhavabhauji. As the trifoliate compound '*Bela*' leaf is incomplete with one leaflet missing, nowadays this usual threesome of Yadavas seemed incomplete as the right-hand leaf of Balaramadada was missing. It constantly bothered me. It made me feel all gloomy.

That is why in the resting chamber of my palace after dinner one night I decidedly broached this subject in front of Sri. I said, "Sri visited the Shivalinga in the Amaranath cave with Uddhavabhauji. I had thought that if

not directly me, at least through Bhama's eyes I, means Bhama, would get to see Lord Shiva. There must have been a '*Bela*' leaf on that *Shivapindi* offered by some devotee. But to me today something is missing, as the southern leaflet on that *Bela leaf* is not present. That is why I have a request for Sri."

"Wait Rukmini, listen to me before you present your request. Today itself I have dispatched minister Vipruthu and Uddhava along with Chitraketu and Brihadbala out of Dwaraka on a special mission." He said.

"Such missions of Sri will never be over. I am quite aware of your habit to keep others around you constantly engaged. I am the Maharani of Dwaraka, only for namesake. Here I have become a mere hostess that welcomes the special guests of Sri! But I will feel true joy in welcoming only one person that I haven't felt in receiving anyone so far." I said.

"At least listen to me Maharani. Minister Vipruthu has gone to the kingdom of Mithila. To Janakpura. He is going to bring Balaramadada along with him on the strength of his brilliance and convincing skills. To make this difficult task easy for him I have played a small trick. Of course, I am not as intelligent as the Maharani! Now you only guess what could be the one thing that I have sent with the minister? I have also sent a small message, what could that be?" Smiling, he casually spread his Krishnajala.

I was confused. I thought for a few moments and said, "Sri must have sent the Prince's favourite mace along with the minister. And the message must be that this mace looks worthless without him. The prince's throne in the Sudharma council looks desolate. Come back with the minister to honour both."

He smiled and said, "Oh, where do I have that kind of intelligence? The thing that I have sent with the minister is just my favourite peacock feather in a closed casket! The message is that I have kept it in the casket since you left. If you come back and tuck it back in my crown, only then all Yadavas will get to see it. Or else this golden coronet of the Lord of Dwaraka will remain desolate without the peacock feather. Please remember the days in the Ankapada aashrama and come back right away along with this peacock feather!"

Now I realized that Sri had indeed not worn his peacock-feathered crown ever since dada had left. Wonderstruck at his intellectual genius I kept staring at him. I became cautious now and asked, "Then where have you dispatched Uddhavabhauji along with his brothers? And why? I had thought of suggesting his name as the most appropriate person for this job."

“You are wrong. If dada would have seen Uddhava in front of him he would have simply dismissed him in a single sentence saying, you are even younger than ‘Dhakata’. Go back with this casket right away. Why didn’t he come himself? That is why I have chosen the senior Yadava minister Vipruthu for this task. Through him this is an appeal to the prince who resides within dada. He would never be able to deny it. As his ‘Dhakata’ I have also sent my own appeal to him reminding him about the Ankapada aashrama. Let us see how maturely he handles it. Or else I will have to go to Janakpura myself!”

“Then where have you sent Uddhavabhauji? And for what? I was totally baffled now. But he smiled affectionately as usual as if nothing had happened and said, “Uddhava has gone to the kingdom of Kashi. To convince Akrurakaka who has the Syamantaka jewel. In his own sweet way, he is going to convince Akrurakaka that he himself should present the jewel in the Sudharma assembly only once to convince everyone that it is not in the possession of the Lord of Dwaraka. After that, if he wishes so he can return to the Kashi kingdom. Dada insists that he should spend the rest of his life in Dwaraka. But dada shouldn’t be forced go to the Kashi kingdom again only for the sake of the mere jewel!”

I was stunned to hear that keen diplomatic maneuver of getting a thing done in a roundabout manner. Still I tenaciously asked one last question, “Then why has Sri sent Uddhavabhauji’s brothers Chitraketu and Brihadbala along with him? Or does the Lord of Dwaraka intend to keep an eye on Uddhavabhauji himself for the sake of the Syamantaka jewel?”

“Wrong again Maharani! Akrurakaka will never give the Syamantaka jewel to Uddhava. I anyway never yearned for it at all. I know Uddhava better than anybody else. He is less of a warrior and more of a philosopher. More than that, he is my ardent devotee with crystal clear thoughts inside out. Therefore, I must take precautions for his safety. Uddhava’s brothers are older than him. They are expert warriors. I have told them whatever is necessary.”

With every single word of his I felt that the one who is standing in front of me is not the Lord of Dwaraka at all. But it is a cerulean ‘*Brahmakamala*’ of words! I thought I should not be waiting here till I feel forced to cover my nose with a shawl and left the resting chamber immediately.

Those days in Dwaraka were indeed colourful like a peacock feather. Not only for me, but for all the wives of Sri and also for all the citizens of Dwaraka. The five of us had arrived in Dwaraka from five different

directions. Obviously, everyone had a different temperament. Are the five fingers of a hand ever identical? Yet don't they form one strong fist? I knew very well that I held the control switch of this fist in my hands. The four of them respected me greatly as the Maharani. I would make them aware of the fact through my actions that I was not just the Maharani but also the most senior among them without saying so explicitly. That too, very casually. For that purpose, once I used a remedial strategy in front of the other three to surprise Bhama. She loved to get an intricate red-dye design drawn on her crimson feet by the maid who helped her to get adorned.

Once while the five of us were together this red-dye colouring was going on. Her maid, skillful in drawing such designs was engrossed in her work, forgetting everything around her including us. I had heard Sri say a lot of times in private, "Forgetting oneself in any kind of karmayoga is as good as worshiping God! No karma is big or small. It appears so, due to the beholder's big or small outlook."

Looking at Bhama's maid engrossed thus I strongly felt that this was the perfect opportunity to show all my sisters that I am more than just the Maharani and their elder sister. I intentionally asked the maid, "How do you draw such intricate red-dye design? That too without any mistake! Will I be able to draw one just like you?"

She didn't understand my intention at all, and said to me, "It is not that hard Maharani. You can try it!"

I quickly followed her suggestion and moved forward. Moving her aside I held Satyabhama's crimson foot in my hands. And put it gently in my lap. I held the bowl of red-dye in one hand and tilting my neck, holding the golden stick in the other hand I began drawing a design intently.

All four of them kept staring at me agape. I continued to draw the design. I completed the design, put the stick back into the bowl and put the bowl down. I tilted my neck couple of times to check if the design I had drawn on Bhama's foot looked neat or not. With wide eyes, all four of them almost screamed, "Oh! Well done! It's beautiful! Nobody ever knew that Maharani possessed this skill too."

My job was done. An intricate design of sentiments about me was drawn on the minds of all four of them, which was never going to be erased. All four of them had got the message that I was Sri's perfect first wife who just like Sri never considered any work below dignity. All this, without my saying anything at all!



A month passed by like this and an envoy brought the news that minister Vipruthu and Uddhavabhauji sent by Sri on the special mission, had succeeded and were returning at the Shuddhaksha gate. Prince Balaramadada and Akrurakaka were also returning with them. Though the end of monsoon was approaching Dwaraka blossomed again. This happiness of Dwaraka was indeed very unique.

I was happy for two reasons. The first was that Sri's staunch supporter, our dear, mighty dada had let go of his anger and was returning to Dwaraka. The second was that Sri would be cleared of the accusation of stealing the Syamantaka. Except for Bhama all four of us had never got to see that jewel. We never even had the urge. Now we were going to see the Syamantaka jewel in person that begot one after the other dramatic events. At this time, I was also curious about one thing. With whom in Dwarka would Sri decide to keep this jewel that had stayed out of Dwaraka for such a long time?

The Yadavas of Dwaraka gave a grand welcome, suitable to their status, to Uddhavabhauji, both his elder brothers, Balaramadada and Akrurakaka. At the Shuddhaksha gate, in the presence of their father and mother when Sri bowed down to touch dada's feet, dada didn't allow him to do that and passionately held him in a deep embrace. The moment Rama met Sri, thousands of emotionally overwhelmed Yadavas roared ecstatically, 'Hail Balarama-Srikrishna!' The trifoliate Yadava *Bela leaf* in my heart was complete now. I felt totally contented.

The very next day a grand Sudharma royal assembly was held to welcome dada and Akrurakaka. I sat next to Sri as usual. All my four sisters sat in the reserved section for the royal ladies. Seeing both their sons together after such a long time the faces of Vasudevababa and Devakimata sitting on the royal throne and Rohini mata in the reserved section, were brimming with affection and happiness. It had made them forget their ages. Since the prince had left in anger even Revatitai had determinedly not come to the royal assembly. She was also stubborn. She had been upset with her husband. Seeing both their seats occupied today, energetic Yadavas were whispering among themselves. Pleasant-faced Acharya Sandipani and enlightened, radiant-faced Gargamuni had taken their seats. Both the commanders, nine prominent ministers and various troop leaders, and the surveillance chief were present in the assembly. The commotion of the energetic young, middle-aged and elderly Yadavas sitting in the ranks below them fell totally silent as the royal minister raised the royal sceptre high and pounded it on the

ground near his feet.

The minister introduced the agenda for today's meeting to the council of the Dwaraka kingdom, "Honourable Yadava ministers of the Sudharma council! Today's special meeting has been organized to honour the joyous occasion of the return of two distinguished senior Yadavas back to the kingdom. This kingdom joyously and honourably welcomes Prince Balarama and minister Akrura. On behalf of all the citizens of Dwaraka I welcome and pay obeisance to the consorts of the Lord of Dwaraka, Satyabhamadevi, Jambavatidevi, Mitravindadevi and Satyadevi who are attending this royal council for the first time. I announce as per the exclusive instruction of the Lord of Dwaraka that the young and old citizens of this kingdom will give due respect and honour to the sixteen thousand women of Kamarupa whom the Lord of Dwaraka wedded openly assuring them security. No one will disrespect them at any time even unintentionally. If such behaviour is noticed, the concerned Kamarupa woman will remain in the royal capital itself with honour. But the guilty Yadava associated with such crime will have to leave the island immediately. And such a Yadava once banished from the island will never be able to re-enter the royal capital through Shuddhaksha or any other gate. Valiant Yadava Prince Balarama wishes to give a gift to the Lord of Dwaraka for their reconciliation after such a long time. I request him to carry out his wish." Now the assembly hall got curious about what gift dada was going to give Sri.

Dada got up from his seat. He directly came in front of our seats, carefully holding the wooden, decorated casket in his hands. With wet eyes, I kept staring at that marvel from my seat. Hefty dada gently opened the casket. Even more delicately than that, he lifted the fresh, iridescent peacock feather as big as a palm out of the casket. I could clearly see his big, innocent eyes filled with tears. Holding it in his strong, muscular hands he raised it higher and moving in a half circle he showed it to all his Yadava brothers. Bending forward dada tucked it into Sri's shining golden crown. At that moment, Sri also got up from his seat amid a loud round of applause that pierced the roof. Sri had beautiful eyes, but rarely did they get teary. Today Sri's eyes were moist while looking at his dear brother. He was about to bend down to obtain dada's blessings when dada held his broad shoulders tightly and pulled him in a deep embrace. He patted Sri's shoulders with a lot of affection. At that moment, the royal council exploded with continuous applause and unrestrained cries of joy. Dada touched his dear brother's golden crown to

offer his blessings and returned to his seat without saying a single word. Interlocution was not his forte after all.

The minister introduced the most important topic of today's council after pounding the royal sceptre. Akrurakaka who used to sit in the minister's circle before, sat awkwardly as a common Yadava guest on a mat in the guest square in the front. He himself was the cause of his downfall. He had brought the casket of the Syamantaka jewel along with him in the Sudharma council today. In Mathura, he had witnessed Sri pulling down his own mama, Kansa from the royal altar. Today he was quite petrified of the verdict that Sri would announce.

Minister Vipruthu pointed towards him and said, "As per the command of the Lord of Dwaraka I also welcome former senior minister Akrura. Something that should not have happened has happened due to a mere jewel. Due to misunderstanding a disagreement arose between our venerable Lord of Dwaraka who is as good as the most precious Kaustubh jewel for thousands of Yadavas and his elder brother, Prince Balarama. Akrura should show the jewel to the entire Yadava assembly from his seat itself. That way everybody will be convinced that it was never with Maharaja Srikrishna. He should submit it at the feet of the Lord of Dwaraka in front of everybody. That is its rightful place." Following the command Akrurakaka got up. From his location, he turned around in a half circle and showed the radiant jewel to the council once. Then he approached Sri and put the casket at Sri's feet. He bowed down to Sri and went back to his seat. The minister continued, "Now whatever verdict the Lord of Dwaraka announces about the Syamantaka jewel, it will be acceptable to the Sudharma assembly. I request him to offer his invaluable guidance to this assembly with regard to not only the Syamantaka jewel but also about wealth in general." As Vipruthu pounded the royal sceptre as usual the Sudharma royal council of thousands of honourable Yadavas fell utterly silent with extreme curiosity. The only sound audible was that of the western ocean.

Before getting up Sri threw a glance at me. How bright his fish-shaped, dark black eyes looked with the brilliance of his illuminated self. He smiled slightly. The joint tooth near his chin flashed momentarily from behind his rosy lips. The next moment he got up, easily handling the casket with both his hands. Casting a hawk-eyed glance casually over the assembly Sri began his melodious speech,

"My dear Yadavas! This is a very important day in your life more than

mine. In the same assembly, my late father-in-law, senior Yadava Satrajita had accused me of a contemptible act of stealing the Syamantaka jewel. This extraordinary jewel also raised a doubt about me in my dear elder brother's mind.

“Both these doubts are cleared today. I never longed for the Syamantaka jewel. Not just this but I will never have a desire for any other jewel too. Wealth is a mere means to assist the running of life. It can never be the only goal of life. When that happens one has to face unimaginable calamities. The society sees an upsurge in inconceivable crimes. Then the kingdoms associated with such people face staggering hurdles. The real wealth of mankind is the intellect. A healthy intellect disciplined properly by ethics is the real jewel, it is the real wealth. That is what takes life forward even if by an iota. That is what develops life.

“This Syamantaka brought many a storm in our new kingdom. There was a discord due to the misunderstanding of my elder brother. I was intently following this Syamantaka jewel only because I wanted to clear that misunderstanding. Once it was cleared from his mind everybody else's doubts were automatically going to be cleared. The misunderstandings of elders are even more damaging than the worst curse. Now all the misunderstandings are cleared completely. That has made me happy.

“Right now, as your Lord of Dwaraka I need to make it clear that I completely disapprove the selfish actions of senior Yadava Akrurakaka and Kritavarman for obtaining the Syamantaka. They conspired against a senior and experienced Yadava like Satrajita who was a valuable member of Dwaraka's advisory ministry, and got him killed by a distant Yadava like Shatadhanwa by coaxing him. I give both of them a strong warning against such an unforgivable offence!

“It is beyond comprehension especially why Akrurakaka behaved so strangely after getting hold of the jewel. He was the one who had cautioned me on the night before bringing me from Gokul to Mathura to visit Kansa. I have never forgotten that kindness of his in the past and I will never forget it in the future. Why would the Yadava minister who cautioned me that time, himself behave so recklessly? Clearly it is the greed for wealth! Therefore, it is necessary to tell you all right now that this new kingdom will never survive on greed. No matter whatever heights of puissance it reaches, it will sink due to uncontrollable greed. It will survive only on unlimited sacrifice; on boundless devotion towards duty.

“To give him that opportunity, on behalf of everybody I request Akrurakaka to leave his seat and come to sit among the ministers again. I have intentionally kept his seat vacant among the ten ministers since the day he left. He should accept his post again and also the Syamantaka jewel. He himself should look after it as a trustee so that henceforth no conflict will arise among the Yadavas due to this jewel. He should donate all the wealth he obtained from the Syamantaka in the Kashi kingdom, and maintain his sublime title of a ‘philanthropist’. He should never forget that due to the presence of the Syamantaka and charity Dwaraka will remain opulent. Due to all this, his health will also remain safe and sound.” Sri gave the casket in his hands to an attendant and sent him towards Akrurakaka.

Overwhelmed Akrurakaka got up amidst a thunderous round of applause. He walked slowly towards his vacant seat among the ministry and sat on it again.

Now Sri concluded the council while looking at his dear brother. He said, I don’t even have appropriate words to tell you what I feel about your prince and my elder brother. What

if dada wouldn’t have returned to Dwaraka respecting my message? ...”

Sri intentionally waited for a moment to assess the reaction of the royal assembly. That question stirred up restless whispers and anxiety among the Yadavas. When Sri saw that the restlessness was escalating, he raised his blue, muscular right arm and propelled the Sudarshan of his unwavering words. “If dada wouldn’t have returned then – then placing his sandals on his royal seat I would have looked after the Dwaraka kingdom! Though we belong to the lunar dynasty we can never forget Srirama and *Bharata* from the *Suryavansha*!”

That day while returning from the Sudharma royal assembly, a single thought mingled with the distant sound of the ocean made me feel glad that today all Yadavas know the truth that I already knew – Sri’s heart is as big and as deep as the western ocean.

In monsoon Dwaraka, the royal capital of the Yadavas got fully drenched in the showers of rain. The surging, roaring, constant waves of the western ocean began dashing directly on the Aindra gate on the west. That gate was now going to be closed for four months, covered by grass layers from outside. The transport of ships and boats coming to the port of Dwaraka had completely stopped now. The naval commander had ordered to stop lighting the giant *Karanjel* oil torch on the distant stone lighthouse ‘Kroshtu’ located

in the ocean, that used to burn throughout the remainder of the year. That stone lighthouse named Kroshtu was also getting constantly doused in the surging, foamy waves. The fishermen, who would otherwise go deep into the ocean for fishing, preferred staying at their homes.

As soon as monsoon was over, freezing winter embraced Dwaraka. Misty clouds rising from the surface of the ocean encircled the four gates of Dwaraka in a thick layer. For at least two-three months now we were going to have to satisfy ourselves with just a few glimpses of the sun god, visible only sometimes through the thick fog.

All Yadavas treated my second pregnancy as if it was the first one and organized a feast to celebrate as affectionately as before. A long time had passed by since the abduction of my first son. The Yadava relatives felt the agony about it even more than me. For that reason, they had organized absolutely faultless celebrations. Sri told me that the name of the son to be born should be 'Charudeshna'. I heard him and asked, "What does Charu mean?" He smiled as usual and said, "Charu means beautiful."

"And what if a daughter is born?" I teased him.

He said, "No, it will be a son only. And his name will be Charudeshna! In case a daughter is born, we will answer that what-if question at that time only." But I was preoccupied in the thought of the name I should give if a daughter is born.

Not a single word came out of Sri's mouth any time that was untrue. By this time through self-experience I had come to realize that if any word came out of his mouth unwittingly even in his sleep then that word itself would strive to make its existence meaningful.

I delivered a son indeed. He was named Charudeshna. He looked as beautiful as his name denoted. He removed the pain from everybody's heart caused by my first son's abduction. Vasudevababa and both matas came along with aacharya and the priest and blessed Charudeshna. Dada came on the island of Queens' mansions along with his brothers Gada, Sarana and Rohitashwa and his sons Nishatha, Ulmuka and Vipula to admire him. Revatitai also came along with Subhadra. Now that Subhadra had come of age, she looked very attractive and beautiful. After Charudeshna's arrival the season of spring descended on Dwaraka. Various trees on the streets of the royal capital blossomed with colourful flowers. Tiny raw mangoes hung on the sprawling mango trees. The royal capital Dwaraka bustled with the chirping of migratory birds with elongated, white feathers and tails. The high-

pitched wooing sound of the male cuckoos began resonating. The Yadava family tree also blossomed with the rising sun of spring as its witness.

After me Bhama delivered a son. Fair like his mother, radiant like the sun. He was named Bhanu. Within a fortnight, Jambavati also delivered. She came as Sri's wife before Bhama, but became a mother after her. Jambavati and Sri both had darkish complexion, but the son born to them was fair. Though he was a son, he looked like a daughter. Jambavati's father's deity was Shankara. He was called 'Samba' in his wild form by the people in the forest. In his memory, this son of Jambavati was also named 'Samba'. Soon Avanti's daughter Mitravinda also delivered a son. He was named 'Vrika'. Towards the end of spring Satya from Kausala also gave birth to a son. He was named 'Vira'. Sumptuous gifts from the parental homes of all four of my sisters arrived in Dwaraka, congratulating them on their delivery. I was not going to receive any gifts from Kundinapura. I didn't even expect that. My family members were still upset with me!

While all five of us mothers were engrossed in nurturing our children, important news reached the Sudharma royal council. The infamous, gluttonous and hideous demon named 'Bakasura' in a jungle called Vetravan in the Panchala kingdom near the Ekachakra city had been emphatically killed by a Brahmin boy just as huge as him.' While delivering this news Daruka also told me a subtle thing that he noticed. He said, "As soon as Sri heard this news his face had illuminated brightly. He had called for the surveillance chief and ordered him to dispatch a pair of expert spies to Vetravan immediately." I was not surprised that Sri's face got illuminated after hearing the news. He always liked it when the annoying harassments of the Asuras, Danavas, Barbaras, Rakshasas and Mlenchchhas were reduced. But I didn't understand why he immediately sent spies so far away for such news. A lot of his dealings were incomprehensible even to dada, both the matas,baba and me, in spite of being his first wife. There was no chance of others understanding it.

Due to dada and Sri the Dwaraka kingdom had now achieved a respectable status in the Kshatriya circle. Because of that and because the Panchalas had good relations with Aacharya Sandipani and Sri, a significant invitation had arrived in the Sudharma royal council of the Yadavas. It was for the Swayamwar of Panchala king Drupada's daughter Yajnasena, also known as Draupadi!

I had heard a lot about this Yajnasena and her *Yajna* brother

Dhrishtadyumna. A word was that the Yajnadeva who himself manifested from the fire of the '*yajna*' pit had offered both these children to King Drupada and his wife Sautramani! They also had a son named Shikhandi, born before the '*yajna*' and eight more sons born afterwards – Sumitra, Priyadarshana, Chitraketu, Dhvajaketu, Suketu, Viraketu, Suratha and Shantrunjaya. The glory of Draupadi's dark complexioned, fragrant beauty and luxuriant hair had spread in the entire Aaryavarta.

The Yadavas were getting ready to go to the Panchala princess' Swayamwar along with the army. Located beyond the Yamuna, the Panchala kingdom was enormous. For the sake of convenience in governing, it was divided into two parts – southern Panchala and northern Panchala. The royal capital of the northern Panchalas was Ahichchhatra. The boundary of this kingdom had extended through Brahmavarta on the north and directly touched the boundary of the Hastinapura city of the Kurus. The royal capital of southern Panchal was Kampilyanagar. That was where this Swayamwar of Draupadi was going to take place. This Swayamwar was going to drastically change the destiny of the entire Aaryavarta. Many kings of Madhyadesha didn't know it then, but an intense desire for the elegant and fragrant Draupadi had taken hold of the heart of every king participating in the Swayamwar. It would have been a wonder if the Yadavas didn't try their best to win such a lady! Balaramadada, both the commanders, Uddhavabhauji, many Yadav warriors and yes, Sri himself were excited to leave for Kampilyanagar. While all this was happening, a completely unexpected and unimaginable event took place, which filled Dwaraka with euphoria.

One day, unexpectedly, my first son who had been abducted many years ago, stood at the Shuddhaksha gate of Dwaraka! He had many *Asura* warriors with him. He had come from Yadava's original kingdom, the Shursena kingdom, from the thick forests of Mount Govardhan. Holding some kind of a grudge in his mind Shambarasura had abducted my newborn son on the sixth day of his birth many years before. Shambarasura and his wife Mayavati had vigilantly brought him up while instilling the *Asura* values in him. They had taken thorough precaution to not let him remember the Yadava family.

But all their efforts had failed. The moment he came to know that he was a Yadava from Dwaraka and the son of Sri himself, his Yadava blood got the better of him! He had fought a fierce battle with Shambara and had come only after killing him. He had left Mayavati, and taking a few loyal Asuras



with him directly reached Dwaraka. He had dispatched his *Asura* emissary to inform us in Dwaraka.

This son of mine had been very attractive since birth. Madan incarnate! As he had grown up in the carefree atmosphere of the forest of Govardhan he looked exceptionally tall, healthy and so handsome that he could become anybody's envy. Sri himself went with dada to the Shuddhaksha gate and welcomed him. He held his strong, broad shoulders tightly, stared deep into his blue eyes, regarded him with a scrutinizing eye and only then took him in a deep embrace. All four of my sisters, Vasudevababa and both matas and I stood next to them. I was completely baffled when after so many years my firstborn son bowed down to take my blessings. I couldn't believe that he was my own son. If he wouldn't have cautiously sent an informer ahead and if Sri wouldn't have embraced him then indeed I would have been totally in doubt accepting him in spite of actually being his mother.

I held him in a deep embrace. The tears that I had restrained for twelve years flowed effortlessly. Exactly at that time Sri's visionary, prudent words fell on my ears, "First of all it is difficult to be a mother. On top of that being a good mother is as tough as practicing Premayoga! Rukmini, you have to follow the toughest task of wiping out the *Asura* sanskaras on his mind from today itself. Just like you transformed Jambavati into a Yadava royal lady, with her assistance transform this son of yours into a Yadav *Maharathi*."

The royal priest of the kingdom performed a formal naming ceremony for our first son who had arrived. In everybody's presence he was named 'Pradyumna' just as we had planned before. Shambara had actually named him as 'Shaambara'! The Yadavas left for Kampilyanagar along with the fourfold army for Panchali's Swayamwar after having the satisfying delicious ceremonial lunch.

The young, handsome Pradyumna was a new addition to the already selected Yadava team. Sri had purposefully taken him along. The intention was to show him the Kshatriya tradition of Swayamwar in person. But that circulated a rumour among the Yadavas in Dwaraka and other kings around that it was for his firstborn son Pradyumna that the Lord of Dwaraka was going to Kampilyanagar. However, while leaving he clearly told me. "The Panchala invitation is for the Lord of Dwaraka! Who knows I might have to step in to fulfil the condition of the Swayamwar! The condition is also very bizarre. It is going to thoroughly test one's skills of archery."

After hearing that I said, "I am all ready to welcome the Panchala daughter

as the fifth sister! But what is that test of archery that even Sri finds tough?” Sri usually didn’t utter words like impossible and difficult. I had experienced it myself that many times he had quickly, easily and neatly handled the situations which others deemed as hard and difficult. My curiosity was awakened.

Sri presented a detailed picture of the Swayamwar pandal and the condition to be fulfilled, set by Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna as if the pandal of Panchali’s Swayamwar was right in front of his eyes. While coming closer to me, in his own Krishna style, he rotated his right index finger and said, “The Panchalas have erected a spacious, neat circular stone pond in the centre of the pandal. It is filled to the brim with the water of seven holy rivers. A narrow path going east-west leads to the centre of the pond. A round seat for the archer is located at the point where it begins. Adjacent to the seat is the groove for the huge Shiva-bow that the Panchalas worship, adorned with garlands. Near that is the seat for quivers. Many quivers full of Suchi arrows would be placed there. Shooting only five of these arrows the archer has to pierce the eye of the fish rotating in a device near the roof. With only five arrows!” I kept circling my eyes with the movement of his finger. He slowly pointed his finger towards the roof, and while listening to him I naively kept looking at the roof. With wide eyes, I was trying to find the rotating eye of the rapidly rotating fish in my imagination. I muttered unknowingly, “Indeed it is very difficult to fulfil this condition. It is hard to even catch a moving fish; then how can one precisely catch its eye? That too with a single arrow out of five!”

At that moment with his other hand Sri turned my neck downwards and with his innate mischievousness pointing to the rotating reflection in the pond with the same rotating finger he said, “The eye has to be pierced indeed. That too with one out of five arrows only, not by looking directly up at the rotating fish, but by looking at its reflection rotating in the pond, looking downwards, neck bent down, piercing the eye up, by showing such unparalleled expertise of skills!”

Seeing my confusion, smiling mischievously, Sri further said, “At least for now only one warrior of Hastinapura has such skills. Karna – the charioteer’s son. Karna had performed all the feats that Arjuna performed in the spring contest organized by Guru Drona, and had also challenged him for a duel.

“Frankly, only Arjuna had the capacity to fulfil this condition. But... but...” His big, smooth forehead wrinkled momentarily which happened rarely while

solving a complicated problem. Then he directly bid farewell to me saying ‘Goodbye’. He went to Kampilyanagar along with the Yadava team. But he left one question hanging in my mind. He had mentioned the names of two archers who had the ability to pierce the fish-eye. But he hadn’t mentioned himself as the first one. However, I was fully confident that no matter how hard it was, Sri was the one who was going to fulfil the condition! The sixth palace on the island of Queens’ mansions was going to belong only to the Panchala daughter!

I was actually sentimental and credulous, how much ever he himself called me an intelligent Maharani, I was in fact very naive. I kept thinking. How did Panchala’s fragrant *Yajna* daughter Draupadi look like in person? I had heard of the fragrant *Brahmakamala* as in the description of Sri’s travel to the Himavanta. Word is that she is fragrant too! What would this fragrant lotus of a lady look like? It is said that she is very proud. This sister of Dhrishtadyumna – Yajnasena – Shyama! How would she treat me? Like Bhama or Jambavati? The number of Panchalas at her parental home alone would be equivalent to the manpower of my four sisters’ parental homes put together. The other four arrived after me. They respected and treated me as the Maharani from the bottom of their hearts. Would she behave similarly? Or would she overpower me?

Who knows, maybe eventually she herself will become the Maharani of the millions of Yadavas! As it is she is extremely beautiful, statuesque, with long and thick hair! To top that fragrant like the *Champaka flower*, a Kshtriya lady born out of *yajna*! She must be brilliant as she was born out of the *yajna*. Could she be more intelligent than me? Sri has bluish-dark complexion, she is dark complexioned, both are brilliant – seems like a perfect match!

A month passed by. The Lord of Dwaraka returned along with dada and Uddhavabhouji. They had returned just as they had left. Panchala daughter Draupadi had not accompanied them as I had surmised. What accompanied them were the ample gifts her father had given to the Yadavas. How did this happen? I was extremely curious. To verify it I caught Sri in his chamber while he was alone.

As he saw me he scurried forward and exuberantly holding both my arms tightly he said, “Rukmini, Maharani of Yadavas, the Pandavas are alive! Virtuous, serene-faced Yudhishtira, his incomparable, muscular, wrestler of a brother Bhima, the winner of the Swayamwar, invincible archer Arjuna, our Pradyumna’s lookalike - Nakula, the horse expert Sahadeva, who reminds me

of Daruka... all the Pandavas are alive. I have returned after meeting them along with Kunti *aatya* and Draupadi too at a potter's house in Kampilyanagar. Maharani, Arjuna is alive. Many of my resolutions will be accomplished.

“Dear Rukmini, keep it in mind and understand well that a new chapter in my life has begun because of this Swayamwar. Your dear Uddhavabhauji will provide you all the details of the happenings in Kampilyanagar.”

That night Uddhavabhauji came to pay obeisance to me and put forth each small detail of the Draupadi Swayamwar as if drawing a picture of the whole event in its entirety. I too noticed the same subtle details in it that he had noticed. He said, “Among those present to fulfil the Swayamwar condition Duryodhana had come along with his brothers such as Dushasana, Durmarsha, and Dussaha. To compete in the Swayamwar on his behalf, Karna the king of Anga had come along with brother Shona and son Sudamana. Gandhara king Shakuni, his eleven brothers, Magadha king Jarasandha, Shishupala, Dantavakra, and Paundraka who identified himself as the real Vaasudeva, Shalya, the king of Madra, Saindhawa king Jayadratha, Balhika and Chitrangada were also present. We Yadavas, dada, Balaramadada, both commanders, Akrura, Chief Minister and Pradyumna were also there. About one hundred kings had gathered in Kampilyanagar for the Swayamwar.

“On behalf of the Panchalas Prince Dhrishtadyumna welcomed all the kings along with their commanders and armies. He vividly described his sister's beauty and merits and presented the purpose of the Swayamwar. He explained the necessary details and rules that demanded the fulfilment of the difficult condition. The fish device was activated on the holy *Muhurta* recommended by the priests after paying obeisance to the family deity of the Panchalas and the *Yajna* goddess. After that Shiva's bow was brought in by many Panchala warriors. The luck of many valiant kings of Aaryavarta also began to rotate rapidly along with the fish rapidly rotating parallel to the roof!

“Along with the fish its reflection also began rotating rapidly in the serene water of the pond. Many kings came forward puffing their chests proudly, accepting Dhrishtadyumna's challenge. Some failed to pick up the heavy Shiva-bow of the Panchalas, some picked it up but were unsuccessful while tying the bowstring to it. Many had already caved in. Hours passed by. Even Madra king Shalya and Jayadratha were unsuccessful. Whispers started spreading in the pandal. Following that one could hear the words ‘Magadha

emperor Jarasandha!’ At that point weighty, muscular Magadha emperor Jarasandha rose from his seat. The golden, royal medallions and laurels on the royal attire on his muscular chest were shining. With a loud round of applause, his Chedi and Magadha supporters in the pandal gave out continuous ecstatic cries of ‘Hail invincible Magadha emperor Maharaja Jarasandha... victory.... victory! King of Girivraja, invincible wrestler, master of archery, Emperor Maharaja Jarasandha, victory to him!’ A few impatient Magadha citizens also pushed in the joyous cries of ‘Hail Magadha Queen Yajnasenadevi!’

“The moment he got up the first thing that Magadha emperor did was to throw a contemptuous glance only at dada, the Lord of Dwaraka! As if he was there not to wed the sister of Dhrishtadyumna but the sister of Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka! And he wanted to tell him silently – you, runaway coward of Mathura, a cowherd, I will put Draupadi on my shoulders and take her to Girivraja in front of your eyes! You escaped from the inferno of Mount Gomanta. But after this Swayamwar I am going to strap you with a rope and take you too to Girivraja!”

Jarasandha reached the Shiva-bow stomping his feet on the narrow path with his chest puffed up with pride. He sat in the Virasana pose near the Shiva-bow and holding the bow at midpoint he picked up the heavy bow. So far nobody had succeeded in doing that before him. Therefore, Magadhas got excited and the Panchala pandal reverberated with their ecstatic shouts. ‘Victory... victory!’ Sitting in the Virasana pose itself Jarasandha pulled an arrow from the quiver and touched it to his forehead. He remembered the family deity of the Magadhas and was about to mount it on the bow string when he lost his balance and with a loud thud collapsed from his seat. The entire pandal stood at once in shock. The spectators, who were anxiously waiting to watch Jarasandha win Panchali’s Swayamwar, helplessly watched him trapped and struggling under the heavy Shiva bow. That powerful, tyrant emperor who kept more than eighty kings confined in his prison was himself confined, weighed down by the heavy Shiva-bow. A desperate moment came when Jarasandha was about to die struggling.

“As Karna, the king of Anga stood up at that moment, dada looked at Pradyumna sitting next to me and smiled. They both looked so similar! Karna smiled at Duryodhana and slowly walked to the Shiva-bow. He also sat in the Virasana pose. He picked up the Shiva-bow very skilfully just like he would pick up his Vijay bow. Jarasandha was free. He picked up the Magadha

crown that had tumbled down, put it on his head, went back to his seat fretting and fuming and sat down quietly. The moment Karna picked up the Shiva-bow the pandal reverberated with victorious cries in his name ‘Hail Karna the king of Anga! Victory victory!’ I kept staring at him. He looked exquisitely handsome just like our Pradyumna. Maybe I was hallucinating. Even in that pose he was staring only at dada’s feet.

“He easily mounted the arrow in his hand on the bow. He gracefully turned his neck like a pigeon and began searching for the fish eye in the pond. The entire Swayamwar pandal held its breath and waited for him to pierce his target. Just then Draupadi, who had her head turned down till then and was holding the white lotus Swayamwar garland in her hands, raised her head for the first time. The scathing, determined words of a Kshatriya lady tartly resonated like lightning leaving the pandal atremble, ‘Wait ...! You cannot participate in this Swayamwar! I will not be a wife or a daughter-in-law of a charioteer. Never!’

“The Shiva-bow held high in Karna’s muscular hands trembled momentarily. His Virasana pose broke in an instant. At once the arrow mounted on the bow string was shot. Taking many twists and turns it pierced dada’s big toe. Dada still smiled and pulled it out. Karna laughed out loudly, raising his neck towards the sky. The kings in the pandal got terrified even by his laugh following the words of Draupadi. The next moment he violently threw the bow down and went back to his seat next to Duryodhana.

“Yajnasena Panchali again started looking down like a cultured lady. The one who talked was Yajnasena Draupadi and the one who listened was the Sun god’s devotee Karna, hence the kings in the pandal felt numb now. They began whispering among themselves. The fish in the device kept revolving, provocatively teasing all macho Kshatriyas. The atmosphere in the pandal was extremely tense now. Dhrishtadyumna, the *yajna*-son, got up again. Glancing at all the assembled kings he roared, ‘Am I to take it that not a single eminent king of Aaryavarta possesses the strength to win my *Yajna*-born sister? Is it that all archers here are devoid of valour? Is the elegant, virtuous Draupadi, dear daughter of the Panchalas not going to have a suitable match in her life? Why have all these kings gathered here? Is it for the Kumbha mela or for the chariot race? Are they here to surrender in front of a mere fish device? Shame on the Kshatriyas of Aaryavarta who boast of their sky-high gallantry! Shame on those who claim to be the descendants of the *Suryavansha* and *Chandravansha*!’ Indeed, these were no simple words

of Dhrishtadyumna but were the fiery sparks from a blazing *Yajna* pit. Hearing these words some of the kings actually covered their ears with hands. Some felt so insulted that they were about to draw their weapons out.

“Now my dear dada sitting on my left, Yadava’s Lord of Dwaraka, Srikrishna stood erect. The moment he stood up, Yadavas, assembled kings and other invitees shouted ecstatically, ‘Hail Yadava leader Sharangadhara, Lord of Dwaraka Srikrishna Maharaja, victory!’

“Hearing the acclamations being shouted in his name the eyes of everyone present including Jarasandha, Panchala king Drupada and Maharani Sautramani were riveted on his unparalleled handsome figure. Not just that, I saw it clearly that the bride, Panchala’s daughter Yajnasena Draupadi who was standing with her face turned down so far unwittingly looked up and observed dada intently.

“It was as if the roof of the pandal was going to blow off with the ecstatic victorious cheers. Meanwhile, making his way through the assembled kings a tall, extremely radiant Brahmin youth came forward walking with his head held high, his chest puffed up and stood near the pond. No one in the pandal knew his name, who he was and from where he had come. But he came with such agility and confidence that the din in the pandal stopped instantly. I observed the youth dressed up as a Brahmin, with a keen eye. For a moment, I thought dada himself was standing near the pond in a Brahmindress! How is it possible? Now I too began looking at him intently. He moved forward in the same slow gait and with full confidence. He went close to the archer’s seat located at the centre of the pond. He had emphatically grabbed the attention of everyone in the pandal.

“He took an elegant, spectacular Virasana pose, and a big round of applause resonated through the pandal. I also stood up at once while clapping. Then I heard dada’s familiar whispering words, ‘Udho, brother, this is the same Virasana! The one that I saw at Kurukshetra near the Suryakunda on the day of the solar eclipse! Udho, he is nobody else but the son of Pandu and Kunti, Arjuna himself!’ I kept staring at dada, wonderstruck. Now he had forgotten himself and was joyfully clapping away lightly and rhythmically. I had never ever seen him like that before.

“Meanwhile the saffron-clad Brahmin youth had picked up the Shiva-bow, mounted an arrow on the bow string and checked the reflection rotating in the pond. In a flash, he pierced the fish-eye in the very first shot itself. The fish device had stopped. Right from that moment the wheel of improbable,

innumerable events had begun rotating. Panchala daughter Draupadi moved forward and with a demure smile she put the white lotus garland in her hand, around the neck of the Brahmin youth. Exactly at that moment dada patted my shoulders and whispered vaguely, ‘She is the third one! The first one was of Gokul, the second one of Dwaraka, this is the third one from Kampilyanagar!’ I was confused to hear that. I couldn’t resist asking him, ‘Third who?’

“He gave me a very affectionate smile and said, ‘The third sister! In Gokul there was Ekananga, in Dwaraka there is Subhadra, and this Yajnasena from Kampilyanagar is the third one!’

“Only he could act and speak like this. My brother, who was about to participate in the Swayamwar a moment ago, easily took the fragrant, elegant Kshatriya lady for his sister.

“The moment Draupadi put the garland around the neck of the Brahmin youth the Kshatriyas in the pandal got agitated. Jarasandha roared, ‘Is this ordinary Brahmin going to take away a Kshatriya lady, the Panchala daughter in our presence?’

“‘We will never tolerate it.’ Many kings supported him and brandished their bows, maces, and swords. Within a moment, the pandal of the Swayamwar got transformed into a battleground. Another hefty youth came closer to the pond to protect the Brahmin youth. Immediately dada said to me, ‘Uddhava, this is indeed mighty Bhima, the son of Vayu!’ Dada unmistakably recognized the three young men who followed him. They were Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva. They were the sons of Pandu – the Pandavas.

“With Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva the huge and roaring Bhima dealt with the many kings including Jarasandha, who fell on Arjuna with their weapons. Arjuna fought a war of archery with Karna, Duryodhana, Karna’s brother Shona and Karna’s son Sudamana using the Shiva-bow laid out for the Swayamwar. Stunned Draupadi rushed towards her brother Dhrishtadyumna for shelter. The Panchala king Drupada raised both hands and tried to control the unruly invitees in vain. With one arm Dhrishtadyumna was trying to restrain the invited Kshatriyas. With the other hand he held his sister Draupadi’s arm tightly to keep her from getting caught in the ruckus.

“I was surprised to see that dada was extremely calm. He brought his face close to my ear so that I could hear clearly amidst the furore in the pandal and



commanded, ‘Uddhava, Pandavas are going to win this Swayamwar battle for sure! Once it ends Draupadi will follow her husband out of the pandal. Follow both of them, and find out exactly where the Pandavas and *aatya* Kuntidevi are staying.’

“It happened exactly as he said. In the ongoing battle, Karna’s young son Sudamana got wounded and collapsed due to a moon-faced throat-piercing arrow of Arjuna. Karna immediately threw away his bow and rushed to him. Sudamana had been killed by Arjuna’s arrow! All the kings encircled Karna who was sitting dispirited next to his dead son.

“There, Arjuna offered his respects to King Drupada and Maharani Sautramani and started leaving the pandal with his four brothers following him. When Draupadi’s parents and brother gestured her to follow them, Draupadi started walking behind Arjuna with her face turned down. She had formally become his wife as he had fulfilled the condition of the Swayamwar. I intently observed young Arjuna who was full of the radiance of a ‘Kshatriya’. Let me tell you *vahini*, he and dada are so similar! Their complexion, figure and height are exactly the same. I am quite sure that even you would get confused between them if you saw them from behind! While observing keenly I felt that dada may be a tiny bit taller than him. He must be!

“As per dada’s command I too left the pandal and followed the Pandava brothers. They were staying at a potter’s place on the border of Kampilyanagar. No one had recognized them so far as they had disguised themselves as Brahmins, immediately after leaving Varanavata, and had taken precaution not be seen together ever. Seeing the valiant Pandavas alive and together like five mountain summits, I felt extreme joy just like dada.

“As soon as I returned and informed dada about the whereabouts of the sons of Pandu and their mother he immediately started, along with Balaramadada and me to meet his venerable *aatya* Kuntidevi.”

Uddhavabhauji had been narrating in such an expressive way that it made me feel as if I myself was present with Sri, dada and *bhauji* in Kampilyanagar, in the pandal itself. Now an irresistible curiosity took charge of my mind about the looks of Draupadi who was the cause of all this. More than that, I tried to visualize Sri’s and her first visit, but was not satisfied with it. With a girlish curiosity, I asked sweet-spoken Uddhavabhauji, “Then how did both of them actually meet? Please tell me something.” Uddhavabhauji had sincere and great regard for me as his *vahini*, as the wife of his dear

brother, and as Yadava Maharani. Probably that is why sometimes he would let go of his usual sombre attitude and tease me playfully. He was quite naughty indeed! As if pacifying me with both his hands he said, “Okay, okay, have patience. I will tell you. Pandava’s mother, *aatya* Kuntidevi was completely surprised when she saw dada standing in front of her. She didn’t even let him pay obeisance properly and at once holding him in a deep embrace she said, ‘So, now you remembered us... hmm? I heard that you went to Hastinapura and performed our final rites too. What blessing should I give you for such a heroic feat?’ Thus, she rebuked dada as soon as she saw him. Dada, who otherwise would never oblige anybody, pinched both his ears and said to Kunti *aatya*, ‘My mistake, dear *aatya*! Forgive me for that. But the Dharmashastra that I have heard says that if final rites are performed for persons who are actually alive they live longer and successful lives! Besides, it was a diplomatic strategy too. Performing your final rites was going to keep you safe.’ Dada had asked for forgiveness in his own style indeed. After that of course *aatya* Kuntidevi gave plentiful of her blessings to dada, Balaramadada and me.

*Aatya* Kuntidevi who was initially jubilant to see dada, afterwards showed a bit of anxiety and said, ‘Srikrishna, I have committed the biggest blunder just now! Arjuna returned with his wife, and said, ‘Mother, I have brought stupendous alms today!’

“Hearing the zest and excitement in his voice I surmised that he had brought food as usual, but in larger quantity today.

“While I was still inside I said, ‘If it is stupendous then share it among all of you!’

“My obedient Arjuna and his brothers have taken my wish as my final decision. They have decided to share this Panchala daughter – Draupadi among themselves as their wife. I have a nagging feeling that I have made a mistake. I am feeling restless. Have I done injustice to her, whether knowingly or unknowingly, in spite of being a woman? You travel throughout Aaryavarta. You easily solve challenging problems for others. Tell me whether I am right or wrong. Put yourself in place of Arjuna and tell me the truth after due consideration.”

*Aatya* thought her *bhacha* would stumble and hesitate. But dada instantly said, ‘Arjuna has taken the right decision! Besides him all four sons of yours have developed a desire for her. When you said ‘share the alms amongst all five of you’, that wasn’t said unknowingly at all. You are so attached to the

joys and sorrows of these five that unwittingly your mother's heart spoke the truth prudently.

“Now, you yourself think carefully about it and answer my question oh, mother of the Pandavas, tell me the truth that if you put yourself in place of your elder son Yudhishtira, wouldn't you have desired this Panchali?”

Now it was the experienced, mature *aatya*'s turn to get baffled. She had always been covering up for all her sons and showered her affections on them. That unyielding Kshatriya lady who had suffered so much in her life said, ‘Definitely, I would have desired her! Arjuna and these four have indeed taken the right decision!’

“Now, that's like my *aatya*! That's exactly what I wanted to say. Only if these five brothers are united like a powerful fist and stay together physically and also in thought, can they raise their voice and make others listen to them and agree with them. They will establish their legitimate rights even if they need to snatch them out of the jaws of death.

“This ravishingly beautiful Draupadi could have first become the cause of a rift and then a ravine of disparity among these five. That is what you have prevented from happening. Only you could think of such an instruction of sharing the alms. But I am thinking about this Panchala daughter Draupadi.’

“Speaking thus he stood right in front of Draupadi, who was lost in looking intently at dada, in their very first meeting and directly asked her. Listening to his question she must have felt as if it was her own father King Drupada standing in front of her. He asked, ‘Draupadi, do you agree from the bottom of your heart to accept these five as your husbands? If yes, how exactly did you arrive at that decision?’

“Now all five Pandavas along with Kunti mata listened expectantly wondering what could be the answer. I noted that even Balaramadada's face displayed curiosity. To tell you the truth *vahini*, even I pricked my ears.

“The Panchala daughter Yajnasena answered staring at the iridescent peacock feather in dada's crown. When I first heard her voice, it sounded as if it was coming from a distant place, somewhere from the *Yajna* pit of the sun's nucleus in the skies. It was incredibly sharp and yet melodious. It was resolute, compelling one to listen. Just like dada's voice. But it had less of the sweetness of Venu which dada's voice has. Really *vahini*, the first thing I remembered while hearing her was your voice! I realized it for the first time that your voice ranged somewhere between these two voices!

“Draupadi's answer suited her character. She said, ‘Hrishikesha, I accept

these five brothers as my husbands from the bottom of my heart. Madhava, you know well that they appear to be five but exist as one from within. Even I believe the same. They may be five to the world, but for me they are one.

“Achyuta, I have heard a lot about you. I feel it is my great luck to see you in person today. Now I would like to ask you what you think of me.’

“Now all of us started staring at dada with curiosity, wondering how he was going to answer that question. Without wasting a moment, he said, ‘Friend, my beloved friend! The world will call you my sister. I already have Subhadra as my sister. But you are my friend!’

“Draupadi also nodded in affirmation. She moved her eyes from the peacock feather to dada’s feet and in a clear voice she said, ‘Then give this friend of yours a suitable blessing.’ She instantly touched dada’s feet with her lean-fingered hands adorned with decorative red-dye design.

“Till today he had been quickly answering many difficult and puzzling questions. But while blessing his beloved friend his bright fish-shaped eyes closed slowly. He raised his right hand to bless her, a hand on which he bore the Sudarshan chakra many a times. The Pandavas heard his serene, peaceful words. He blessed her, ‘You will reach the zenith of conjugal purity and chastity in spite of being the wife of five husbands! Your name will be worth remembering in the morning prayers for ages to come. Just like the boundless sky becomes clear after the rain showers of Mriga your purity will be maintained in the service of your five husbands. It is only you who will grace of the lives of these five sons of Pandu just as the *Shivapindi* looks sublime adorned with the *Bela* leaves, and my crown looks elegant with the peacock feather. Your mother-in-law will be like your mother and at an appropriate time you will experience that. All seven of you will be remembered forever.’

“After Draupadi’s Swayamwar the entire Yadava group returned to Dwaraka along with Sri. While leaving, he had said to me, ‘A new chapter of my life is going to begin after this Swayamwar.’” Even I agreed with him while listening to the account that *bhauji* gave me.

After a few days, Sri had to go to the Panchanada region. King Brihatsena of the Madra kingdom in Panchanada had organized his daughter’s Swayamwar, possibly taking inspiration from the Panchaal king Drupada. Her name was Lakshmana. The condition to be fulfilled for the Swayamwar was the same as Draupadi’s Swayamwar – piercing the eye of the rotating fish in the roof while looking at the reflection in the water below. Vahika and Madra kingdoms were adjacent to each other. The invitation for this

Swayamwar also arrived in Dwaraka. The Panchanada region was politically very significant as it bordered with Brahmavarta, Kurujangal and Madhyadesha. One of Vasudevababa's sister, Shrutakirtidevi had been married to the Kekeya king – Maharaja Dhrishtaketu in this region. Shakalnagar was the royal capital of the Madras. The royal capital of Kekeya was Girjaka. It was located on the banks of river Iravati. Shakalnagari was located on the banks of river Chandrabhaga. The Panchanada region, inclusive of Vahika, Kekeya and Madra was well known for its invincible, pugnacious warriors. Due to the recent Draupadi Swayamwar the Kurus and Panchalas had developed hostility between them. As the invitation for the Swayamwar of Lakshmana, the daughter of Madra king Brihatsena, arrived the Sudharma council of the Yadavas was held. In this council, initially an opinion of Balaramadada, minister Vipruthu, and commander Anadhrishti was that if there was going to be any probability of enmity getting generated during the Swayamwar, it wouldn't be wise for a new kingdom like Dwaraka to offend the pugnacious region of Panchanada. Our foremost enemy was the insolent, self-proclaimed emperor Jarasandha of Magadha who uprooted the Yadavas out of Mathura completely. Therefore, it would be wise not to attend this Swayamwar.

Some Yadava warriors were of exactly the opposite opinion. Some senior Yadavas from the ministry were among them. Satyaki, Kritavarma, Avagaha, Shini supported them. As the council was divided into two groups with regards to the invitation of Lakshmana's Swayamwar, Acharya Sandipani and royal priest Gargamuni implored Vasudeva to take the final decision as the king. Maharaja Vasudeva who had suffered many hardships in his life, who was experienced and mature, resolutely presented his royal decision, "I think that as your leader the Lord of Dwaraka should respect the invitation of the Madra king, Brihatsena. As my son, Srikrishna should visit my sister Shrutakirti who lives in the Girjaka city in this region. I would get the satisfaction of meeting my sister, if not in person, but through my son's eyes. I will also get to know about her welfare from him."

Sri stood up. This time he spoke just a few words, "My dear Yadava warriors! I absolutely respect the Maharaja's command. Hence, I will go to Shakalnagar for sure. Along with Balaramadada you all should accompany me without any doubts in mind. I am going there for a prospective mission while keeping the pugnacious warriors of Panchanada in mind. On coming back, I will also deliver the news of the wellbeing of Maharaja's sister –

Shrutakirti *aatya*. The Yadavas in the Sudharma assembly unanimously shouted in his honour – ‘Hail Vasudeva’s son, Lord of Dwaraka, Leader of all Yadavas. Victory to Maharaja Srikrishna – victory!’

The Yadavas left for Panchanada fully prepared. Warriors like dada, Uddhavabhauji, both commanders, Kritavarman, Inshumana, Bhankara, and Devavata accompanied Sri during this journey. The disciplined fourfold army also accompanied. Sri had especially taken minister Vipruthu along with him on this journey. He had appointed young Pradyumna in his place and had instructed him to faithfully follow the advice of aacharya and the royal priest along with me, Vasudevababa and all the elderly people.

He bade farewell to all and left through the Shuddhaksha gate. Sri crossed the creek of original Dwaraka with huge ships. He began his journey in his grand Garudadhwaaja chariot with the saffron-coloured, golden-bordered Yadava pennant fluttering in the air, with the disciplined Yadava army following him.

He reached the base of Mount Arbuda after taking many sojourns along the base of Mount Raivataka. This was the border of the Matsya kingdom. Their royal capital Viratnagar was located within a few *yojanas* from here. Matsya leader Virata was the king here. Till today Sri had travelled from Karvir and Gomanta in the south to the Pragjyotishapura of Kamarupa in the east to the Himalayas. He had also visited Kampilyanagar. Hearing his acclaim as the ‘Lord of Dwaraka’ many kings on the way had offered him plenty of gifts wherever he reached and welcomed him joyfully. Everyone longed for Sri’s unconditional love.

But in the Matsya kingdom the exact opposite happened. Through Uddhavabhauji Sri summoned the minister in his tent and instructed him, “Uddhava, you go with the minister to Viratanagar with two gift platters. Offer one to the Matsya king Virata and send the second with the minister as a gift to his commander Kichaka. You yourself talk to Virata and tell him, ‘I am Uddhava, brother of Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka. Consider that it’s not me but Lord Srikrishna himself has come here, and accept the gift. Always keep the cordial relations of the Matsyas strong with the Yadavas of Dwaraka.’

He instructed the minister, “You should offer the second platter as a gift to commander Kichaka, and talk to him yourself. In your communication with him mention the numbers of elephants, horses, camels and infantry and don’t forget to tell that the gift is from the entire Yadava army!”

Both of them returned completing their tasks successfully. The Yadava army reached the banks of river Saraswati after crossing river Yamuna twice. This river was as divine as the divine land of Kurukshetra in which it flowed. The three brothers bathed in the holy bed of her crystal-clear waters, and gave away charities. The mammoth Yadava army now descended in the Mattamayura kingdom. They rested there for two-three days after a long stretch of travel. In the end, crossing river Vipasha, along with Sri, the triumphant, invincible Yadava army reached the Vahika kingdom. This was the beginning of the Panchanada region. This is where Sri began executing his agile, diplomatic military strategy. He dispatched various competent emissaries with missives of cordial relations and platters full of valuable gifts to the royal capitals of Ambashtha, Trigarta, *Audumbara*, Kulinda, Madra and Kekeya. The most proficient emissary went to Brihatsena's Shakalanagar. Minister Vipruthu himself went to Kekeya king Dhrishtaketu. He presented gifts to Sri's *aatya* Shrutakirtidevi and her husband Dhrishtaketu in the name of Vasudevababa and Devakimata. He didn't forget to deliver the message, 'Lord of Dwaraka will come to visit in person'.

The main emissary who returned from Shakalanagar gave detailed information to Sri, 'Preparations are going on in full swing for Madra daughter Lakshmana's Swayamwar. Magadha king Jarasandha is coming to participate in this Swayamwar along with the king of Ambashtha. Master archer Arjuna is also coming with his four brothers who have left from Viratanagar and are travelling to Hastinapura.'

Hearing that news Sri smiled mischievously as usual, and naughtily said to Uddhavabhauji, "He won't be participating in the Swayamwar. He won't get that chance. I will be the very first one to participate. If at all the Madra bow falls on my chest he will come forward to pick it up, and free me from it!"

Uddhavabhauji was such a mind reader that from that sojourn itself, he dispatched a carrier with a message for me, 'Honourable *vahini*, Madra daughter Lakshmanaadevi is coming as one more sister of yours. Be prepared to welcome her!'

The Swayamwar took place in Shakalanagar located on the banks of river Chandrabhaga. Most of the kings who were present for Draupadi's Swayamwar were also present for this Swayamwar. Arjuna had also come along with his brothers. New kings from Panchanada region like Ambashtha, Trigarta, and *Audumbara* were also present. Major amongst them were kings like Jarasandha, Chekitana, Paundraka, Jayadratha, Dantavakra, Bhagdutta

and Bhurishrava. No one had arrived from Hastinapura of the Kurus. The reason for their absence was unknown. As a matter of fact, the Kurus of Hastinapura, especially Duryodhana and his brothers, Shakuni and his brothers would never decline such a challenging invitation. The blind king Dhritarashtra looked after the kingdom of Hastinapura as the king. The eldest Kaurava, Duryodhana had become extremely insolent, arrogant, and deceitfully ambitious. He hungered for the kingdom and the power, and hence didn't respect anybody. He was turning a deaf ear to the affectionate and valuable advice of his own mother, Rajmata Gandharidevi who had chosen to blindfold herself for the sake of her husband. He was also disregarding the valiant, sacrificing, noble, and virtuous grandsire Bhishma who was the last Kuru. He was not paying attention to the austere, pious, and duteous Mahatma Vidura. He didn't even take notice of Gurudeva Dronacharya – the master of *Dhanurveda*, and the senior family priest Kripacharya. Like an insolent bull he was discarding the cautious warnings and advice given by all repeatedly. His mama Shakuni's word was the final word for him in every aspect of life including politics, warfare, justice and family disputes.

Shakuni had held this live ember called Duryodhana of the Kuru dynasty in his fist so skilfully that it was out of sight of others. But he made sure to be able to bring it into the open or keep his fist closed whenever and wherever it suited him. Once its unbearable heat turned the surroundings to ashes, he should be able to hold it back in his fist. And for that reason, the highly crafty Shakuni had pulled an invisible thick skin over his palms before holding this live ember in his hand! It was of the complex and delicate relation of a mama and *bhacha*.

King Brihatsena welcomed all the kings invited for Swayamwar and on the *Muhurta* he ordered the craftsmen to turn the fish device on. Madra daughter Lakshmanaa modestly stood next to her mother and father, holding the Swayamwar garland in her hands. In this Swayamwar, Sri didn't give any opportunity to anybody to raise any objections at all.

The Swayamwar pandal raised in the Madra royal palace in Shakalanagar was completely occupied with the invitees. Sri was the first one who began walking towards the pond of water in the pandal for fulfilling the Swayamwar condition. At that point, river Chandrabhaga flowing nearby also felt excited with the continuous applause and cheers of victory from the invitees and the Yadavas.



Sri picked up the Madra bow easily. He took the eye-catching pose of Virasana near the edge of the pond, his neck as graceful as that of a pigeon. He mounted the Suchi arrow on the bow string and pulled it. This was the very first arrow. The eyes of hundreds and thousands of people of Panchanada kept shunting up and down between the tip of the arrow and the eye of the fish rotating rapidly on the roof. All invitees held their breath, eagerly waiting to watch the unerring shot that would pierce the eye of the fish. And for some reason Sri gently lowered the bow! This caused the people in the pandal to release their breaths. A murmur spread among the invitees. Master archer *Dhananjaya* who was sitting in the company of his brothers stood up at once as if lightning had struck. The Madra king Brihatsena moved a few steps forward with a face full of anxiety. Madra daughter Lakshmanaa forgot that she was the bride and raising her head she glanced questioningly at the fish device, Sri and the Madra bow.

Only Uddhavabhauji was lost in looking at the palm-length peacock feather in Sri's shining, golden crown. Even at that moment Sri looked at only two people in the pandal with a smile. First, at Uddhavabhauji then at Arjuna. Then he smiled gently as usual. Uddhavabhauji had also stood up like Arjuna. Sri signalled both of them with his eyes, 'to sit down quietly.' Both of them sat down obediently following the signal.

Sri gently put the Madra bow down. He took off the golden crown on his head, and momentarily put it in his lap. He gently removed his beloved peacock feather out of the groove in his crown. He eyed it with a smile once, and put it gently on the edge of the pond. He placed his crown back on his head again, and picked up the Madra bow as easily as before. He took the elegant Virasana pose again. After that nobody knew when he twanged the bowstring and mounted the Suchi arrow on it, when he filled his chest with a deep breath, when he shot the Suchi arrow and how and when he pierced the eye of the fish!

A big round of applause followed when the fish device stopped. After that a round of victorious acclaim echoed, 'Victory to the invincible, master archer of Aaryavarta, Sharangadhar, Lord of Dwaraka, and groom of Madra daughter Lakshmanaa, Maharaja Srikrishna ...! Victory to him ... victory! Tossing their shawls in the air, and raising their hands high many citizens of Madra hurried towards the pond to offer their congratulations.

Maharaja Brihatsena brought Lakshmanaa near the pond where she put the white Swayamwar garland around Sri's neck. Ecstatic Uddhavabhauji rushed

towards his dear brother and embraced him tightly. Then he softly picked up the peacock feather from the edge of the pond, wiped it delicately once and tucked it again in the groove of his brother's crown. Arjuna also approached Sri along with his brothers. Sri bent down to pay obeisance to the elder Pandava Yudhishtira, but Yudhishtira didn't allow him to do so. In the meantime, Arjuna who was innately polite had already touched Sri's feet and paid obeisance. Even in that hubbub Sri sincerely inquired about Kunti *aaty*a and friend Draupadi. All of them were leaving for Hastinapura. Sri instructed them to meet him in his pavilion on the border of Shakalanagar.

Uddhavabhauji was done with the account of Lakshmana's Swayamwar with all its details. But my inane mind was still lingering there, caught in the riddle of the peacock feather which Sri had removed in the middle of the event. I couldn't stop myself and asked Uddhavabhauji, "All this is just fine. But why did Sri put down the already raised bow and remove the peacock feather in his crown and put it aside?"

Uddhavabhauji teased me with a smile and said, "Didn't you get it *vahini*?! How did you become dada's favourite wife? The Yadava Maharani! Now one of the new *vahinis* should be offered your place indeed!", he said playfully.

Giving him a mock angry look I said, "This kind of naughtiness suits only Sri, and not you Uddhavabhauji! You better tell me, or should I leave now?" By this time in my life Uddhavabhauji had already acquired the place of my brother whom I had lost forever.

When I said this, he himself took the Virasana pose and demonstrated with gestures why Sri put down the peacock feather at the last moment. He said, "No one in the pandal understood that the peacock feather was keeping dada from piercing the eye of the fish unerringly. The reflection of that peacock feather fluttering on the cool breezes of Chandrabhaga, wobbling continuously over the reflection of the fish device was obstructing the view! Even that small peacock feather was distracting his concentration! That is why he removed it first."

With those words, I let out a sigh, and unknowingly said, "A mere peacock feather obstructed Sri. Didn't it?"

Immediately correcting me *bhauji* said, "Yes *vahini*, a peacock feather indeed, but not any ordinary peacock feather! It is from dada's crown!"

The Madra son-in-law stayed in Shakalanagar along with the army, for one week. Maharaja Brihatsena showered generous hospitality in Panchanada style on everyone.

Sri left to keep his promise given to the senior Pandava Yudhishtira in the Swayamwar pandal. He arrived at the Pandava base on the border of Shakalanagar to meet *aatya* Kuntidevi. Yadava warriors such as Balaramadada, *bhauji*, both commanders, royal minister, Inshumana, Bhankara, and Devavata accompanied him.

*Aatya* Kuntidevi herself came along with her new daughter-in-law Draupadi to welcome Sri. The five Pandavas stood behind them. Sri inquired about aaya's health and touched her feet to pay obeisance. Draupadi who had met Sri for the first time after Kampilyanagar, also bowed down to pay obeisance to Sri. At that time Sri insisted, "Draupadi, I call and consider you as a '*Sakhi*', my dear friend. You need not follow these formalities every time we meet. You should always talk and behave freely with me, just like Subhadra."

Then, at the base on the shores of Madra's Chandrabhaga Sri had a special council with the Pandavas, their mother and *Sakhi*. The main topic of the discussion was the justified right of the Pandavas over the Kuru kingdom of Hastinapura!

Maharaja Pandu had inherited the kingdom of Hastinapura. Due to a curse inflicted by a sage named Kindam, Maharaja Pandu had to renounce the kingdom and go to a forest. Since his elder brother Dhritarashtra was blind from birth, the royal ministry of the Kurus had disqualified him from inheriting the royal throne before.

Maharaja Pandu went to the forest. The royal ministry was left with no choice but to request blind Dhritarashtra to take charge of the Hastinapura kingdom as a guardian. Grandsire Bhishma who was selfless, veracious, and a celibate for his life, was actually the last scion of the Kuru dynasty. He had to hand over the royal authority to blind Dhritarashtra according to Mahamantri Vidura's advice.

Duryodhana, the eldest of the hundred sons, Dushasana who was like his shadow, Durmarsha and his many brothers, his wicked, conniving mama Shakuni and his eleven brothers who always supported him and obeyed his every word – all had joined hands. Destiny had brought together minister Kanaka and valiant Karna who had become Duryodhana's friend after he was made the king of Anga kingdom on the occasion of the Vasant Purnima contest. On the strength of all these, blind Dhritarashtra had grown a hundred eyes dreaming of making the impossible possible. Due to that blind Dhritarashtra's psyche had become chaotic and complicated. Valiant Bhishma and Mahatma Vidura were gradually being sidelined in Hastinapura.

Sri had regularly picked up detailed information about this truth in Hastinapura from his sharp informers. It was not easy to help the virtuous, valiant and noble Pandavas who were suffering due to the circumstances, to acquire their fair right over the kingdom. Keeping that in mind Sri cautiously started taking measures. He commenced the current meeting saying, “Kekeya king Maharaja Dhrishtaketu is my *aatya*’s husband. He has earnestly invited me to his royal capital Girjaka, along with the army. Therefore, I will be going there.

“Yudhishtira, you brothers are also his *bhache*. But the Kekeyas have no idea that you have come here. The news about the Swayamwar in Kampilyanagar must have of course reached them. You will have to gather support from all big and small powers to protect your rights in Hastinapura. I propose that you also come along with me to Kekeya’s royal capital Girjaka to visit *aatya* and the Kekeya king and obtain their blessings even though you are not officially invited.”

Then throughout the night a lot of deliberations took place. The Pandavas had never disobeyed their mother Kuntidevi’s word. She concluded the council with a single sentence, “My sons and their wife will obey Srikrishna. We will leave for Girjaka along with the Yadavas tomorrow.”

While taking leave of the Madras, Sri gave a confusing instruction to Uddhavabhauji. “Uddhava, as per your habit, send your special messenger to Dwaraka from here itself. Give a message to your dear *vahini*, that two more guests of yours are coming! Get ready to welcome them.” *Bhauji* respectfully replied, “Yes, I will send such a messenger today itself.”

The Madras had gifted their son-in-law animals, birds, sacks full of food grains, vestures, jewellery and hundreds of embellished, broad-backed, pure white, brown and black horses that were available only in their kingdom. Along with those they sent a messenger to Dwaraka with the news of Lakshmanaa’s arrival.

Accordingly, two special people arrived in Dwaraka eventually. But they were not Sri and Madra daughter Lakshmanaa as we had imagined. In addition to Sri two more special guests were there! Kekeya daughter Bhadra arrived in Dwaraka as Sri’s wife following Lakshmanaa!

*Aatya* Shrutakirtidevi was overjoyed when Sri arrived in Girjaka along with Pandavas. She was expecting to see only the *bhache* from the Yadava side of the family. But Pandavas, her *bhache* from the Kuru side of the family also stood in front of her. She welcomed her sister Kuntidevi along with

everybody else. She talked with Sri, her dear *bhacha*, and convinced him in her own Yadava style, “Srikrishna, your Dwaraka kingdom is new. Our Panchanada kingdom has more manpower. We have formed strong familial relations with every neighbouring kingdom here. If Dwaraka also forms such a bond with us, the entire Panchanada region will automatically support Dwaraka.”

Sri heard *aatya*’s whole plan of domestic diplomacy quietly with a smile. He very well understood her intention, but pretended as if he hadn’t. Sri casually drew her attention to her Kuru *bhache*, the Pandavas who had come along with him, and asked his dear *aatya*, “What you are saying is true. You are a true politician, more than Maharaja Dhrishtaketu! Just say what your wish and order is for me, for all this. I will do it. You should also do one thing for me.” He just left it at that.

At that the prudent Maharani of the Kekeyas moved forward and patting Sri’s shoulder she said, “Srikrishna, why don’t you become the son-in-law of the Kekeyas! Then automatically you will be the son-in-law of the entire Panchanada! I want to get our daughter Bhadra married to you. Tell me clearly, what you think about it. Don’t put forth any political hitchin front of me like others!”

Sri lovingly held both hands of his dear *aatya* and patted them. Giving her the respect due to her seniority Sri still put forth a political deal unbeknown to her. He said, “*Aatya*, your wish is my command as I am younger to you. I will do as you say. I will become the son-in-law of the Kekeyas. Now I understand why you urgently sent a special messenger to Vasudevababa in Dwaraka when you came to know that we are going to visit Panchanada! And why he told me to visit you in any case! So, your wish and his command will prove beneficial for the Dwaraka kingdom. I am usually a mere excuse! I will be one this time too!”

Sri unmistakably seized the moment of *aatya* Shrutakirtidevi’s gratification and gently disclosed the political motive in his mind. He said, “Maharani of Kekeya, do only one thing for this son-in-law of yours. My *aate bandhus* and your *bhache*, the Pandavas, have come along with me. Consider them in my place, and whenever they seek your support make sure that the entire Panchanada region stands behind them! Will you do it?”

With affection *aatya* cracked her knuckles on her temples as per the custom to shoo away the evil from her dear *bhacha*, in front of every one. She said, “Whatever you say will be done, my dear son!” They raised a grand pandal

on the banks of river Iravati that flowed around their royal capital and got their daughter Bhadra married with grandeur.

This was Sri's seventh wife, Bhadra.

Lakshmana and Bhadra, both daughters of the Panchanada region arrived together in Dwaraka along with commander Anadhrishti and the Yadava army. The populace of Dwaraka offered them a ceremonious welcome. Garagmuni hired expert woodcutters and plasterers to extend the Srisopana in Sri's royal palace in original Dwaraka. Golden stairs in the names of the six wives of Sri who came after me and a few more were added. Now the Srisopana looked much wider, taller and grander than before. It got splendour due to the golden stairs.

As the days passed by my responsibility as the Maharani kept increasing. Meanwhile with dear Jambavati's assistance I had transformed Pradyumna into a cultured *Maharathi*. My six sisters loved him immensely. He also treated all of them with respect. He wouldn't let anybody feel Sri's absence in Dwaraka. Nishatha, Ulmuka and Vipula were always around him. In the fresh oceanic atmosphere of Dwaraka Sri's family tree flourished abundantly. It kept growing.

Now the chapter of the Pandavas in Sri's life had begun in the true sense. He had sent Lakshmana and Bhadra directly to Dwaraka from the Viratanagar of the Matsyas. Sri himself had proceeded towards Hastinapura along with Balaramadada, Uddhavabhauji, Vipruthu and Satyaki taking Kunti *aatya*, Pandavas and Draupadi and a select Yadava army with him. They crossed river Yamuna near the thick Khandavavana and had reached Hastinapura in the east which was located near the banks of river Ganga.

From the borders of the Kuru kingdom, precious gift salvers were dispatched to Maharaja Dhritarashtra through minister Vipruthu and Uddhavabhauji. Uddhavabhauji was given cautious instructions to meet with Mahamantri Vidura, grandsire Bhishma, and minister Vrishavarma in private while coming back. He was told that he should astutely observe their exact reaction and that of the citizens of Hastinapura about the fact that the Pandavas were alive and were actually coming to Hastinapura. He should check if the citizens of Hastinapura had totally forgotten Maharaja Pandu or they still remembered him, and he was to collect exact information about the people's opinion of Pandavas' mother Kuntidevi. He should also meet Maharaja Dhritarashtra, eldest Kaurava Duryodhana, Shakuni mama, all the brothers of both of them, Kanaka, guru Drona, Drona's son Ashwatthama,

Aacharya Kripa, chief charioteer Sanjay and Karna, the king of Anga.

The minister and *bhauji* returned after successfully accomplishing their political mission as per Sri's wish. During this important visit, after a long time, Pandava ladies – Kuntidevi and Draupadi – were going to stay in the chamber of Maharani Gandharidevi. By nature, Gandharidevi was truthful and tenacious. She still loved Kuntidevi and the Pandavas dearly as before. She was eager to meet all of them. It was the ill luck of the Kuru dynasty that Duryodhana was born to her and all his brothers considered him as their ideal.

The news of the Pandavas' arrival produced conflicting opinions among the royal family of the Kurus. Maharaja Dhritarashtra's psyche had become the most complicated one. The blind Maharaja of the Kurus was clearly divided into two Dhritarashtras. The first one was the pretentiously dutiful Maharaja Dhritarashtra and the second was the selfish father who always kept scheming, political machinations in his mind for the love of his own son.

He was getting all this done quietly, remaining behind the scene. A father entangled in the natural love for his son, who, with his mind's eyes dreamt of seeing his firstborn son Duryodhana ascend the royal throne. The father who was dreaming of his son Dushasana, born after Duryodhana, becoming the commander of the Kurus. He wanted to eventually replace the Mahamantri Vidura by useful Kanaka, his political adviser. Maharaja Dhritarashtra had harboured this sweet dream in his mind, but outwardly he highly praised the valour of his brother Pandu, and the character and virtues of the Pandavas, Kuntidevi and Draupadi. He never spoke in simple sentences without adding quite a few undue, exorbitant accolades for the five Pandavas. He never forgot to defend wicked Duryodhana with the royal armour of his fatherhood, under the pretext of being blind and helpless. He never refrained from a display of false respect for the extraordinarily valiant, senior grandsire who was the last Kuru. But in private, he didn't forget to weave complex nooses of political intrigues with his blind eyes yet alert and crafty brain, throughout days and nights along with Shakuni and Kanaka. Everybody in the royal palace of the Kurus had five sense organs. He had gained a sixth sense organ, that of hunger for power! For that reason, he had completely forgotten the fact that his younger brother Pandu had appointed him as a 'caretaker' of the Hastinapura kingdom. He strongly felt that he was deprived of the royal throne in spite of being the eldest son only because of the blindness and that was indeed an injustice done to him! Now that Maharaja Pandu had passed

away, and he had become old, it was his firm belief and opinion that due to his seniority, his eldest son Duryodhana was the rightful heir to become the prince initially and the king subsequently. Time and again whenever he got an opportunity he was indirectly trying to convince it to Mahamantri Vidura and grandsire Bhishma. But those dauntless royal men were not giving in to him at all.

They were of the opinion that Yudhishtira is the firstborn among both Kauravas and Pandavas. His father, Maharaja Pandu had temporarily appointed Dhritarashtra to look after the kingdom. Now as per his royal duty Dhritarashtra should honourably return the kingdom to Yudhishtira – the eldest son of Pandu – who is now an adult. Yudhishtira must be crowned the prince. Yudhishtira should be offered the throne of Hastinapura after Dhritarashtra as the king. That is just and according to *Dharma*.

Thus, two groups with distinctly different opinions were formed among the royal ministry of Kurus about who should hold the right over Hastinapura kingdom. One group supported the Pandavas and the other backed the Kauravas. Hastinapura was not a kingdom ruled by a single ruler like Magadha. The third group in this democratic kingdom was that of its citizens. That was the most important group. The citizens still remembered Maharaja Pandu unanimously. They were eager to meet and welcome his virtuous sons, the Pandavas, rajmata Kuntidevi and Pandavas' wife Draupadi.

The news of the Lord of Dwaraka, the leader of the Yadavas, Maharaja Srikrishna bringing the Pandavas with him spread throughout the city. Entire Hastinapura bloomed with a vibrant energy. Thousands of Kuru men and women heartily welcomed the Pandavas along with Sri, with showers of vermillion and flowers.

Sri had been to Hastinapura once before. But that was a sad occasion, for the last rites of the Pandavas. Today he was entering Hastinapura along with dada, Uddhavbhauji, Chief Minister and select Yadava warriors in a very different atmosphere. The five Pandavas were with him in person, like five mountain summits.

A mammoth crowd of Kuru men and women assembled at the western gate along with grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura, Chief Minister Vrishavarma, and minister Sanjaya welcomed the Yadava-Pandava warriors. But Maharaja Dhritarashtra, his sons, Shakunimama and Kanaka were not present in the welcoming congregation. Vidura had come as he loved the Pandavas and Sri. Actually, only one representative of the entire Hastinapura



kingdom was present there. That was Chief Minister Vrishavarma, who had come to deliver the order of the king!

Sri stepped onto the land of Hastinapura from the Garudadhvaj chariot. The one who received him was the incredibly valiant, tall and well-built grandsire Bhishma, with his, thick white beard pulsing on his broad chest. As Sri saw him he started to bend down to touch his feet with respect when moist-eyed Bhishma spread his muscular arms wide and held him in a deep embrace saying, ‘Vaasudeva’ meeting after so many days! May your feet bring joy and peace to Hastinapura, this royal capital of the Kurus! Achyuta, it’s now only up to you to guide all of them on the right path! I am tired.’

Uddhavabhauji was the first to realize that the son of Ganga, disciple of Parashurama, the one and only Kuru by blood, grandsire, had addressed Sri as ‘Vaasudeva’. He moved forward and bowed down to touch grandsire’s feet and said, “Grandsire, this is the moment I was waiting for. When the right person will address dada as ‘Vaasudeva’! That moment has arrived today. You addressed him as ‘Vaasudeva’ – the highest honour, most precious epithet for the Yadavas. We feel blessed.”

Then the pious, fair, round-faced Uddhavabhauji did something very uncharacteristic, he raised his fist in the air and exclaimed with inspiration. All present on the holy land of Hastinapura responded to it, “Hail Venerable Yadava, Lord of Dwaraka, Vasudeva’s son Maharaja ‘Vaasudeva’! Victory to him...victory! Hail Venerable Kuru, Son of Ganga, grandsire Bhishma!” Amidst the acclamations and the flowers showered by the citizens of Hastinapura Sri started walking towards the royal palace of the Kurus along with Bhishma, Vidura, Sanjaya and the Pandavas. Just then Balaramadada who rarely spoke, said to Sri with a smile while bearing the flower petals on his body, “Dhakalya, this is a great achievement. The grandsire himself called you ‘Vaasudeva’. Vasudevababa and both our matas in Dwaraka would be happiest about this. You have become Vaasudeva, what about me?”

“Whether I become Vaasudeva or somebody else, may I always be under the protection of your brotherly love my dear dada. Please never ever think of deserting me.” Sri bound dada emotionally.

“Even if I try to go away from you, I am sure you will never let me go! I know very well that you still have the knack to attract everybody, even though your name ‘Mohana’ from Gokul has been left behind and you are Vaasudeva now.” Dada said.

“I got the epithet of ‘Vaasudeva’. You are wondering what you got, I will

answer that in Dwaraka to Revativahini. Remind me.”

“As an elder brother, I can make you, the Vaasudeva of the world, listen to whatever I say. But there in front of Revati I can’t say anything!” Saying thus on the royal path of Hastinapura Balaramadada laughed heartily throwing his neck back and shaking the mace on his shoulder vigorously.

The royal party of the Yadavas and the Pandavas stayed at Mahamantri Vidura’s residence. Sri enquired about Maharaja Dhritarashtra’s welfare and sent a message to him through minister Vipruthu – ‘The sons of Pandu have arrived along with their mother to claim their fair share in the Kingdom. I request you to organize a royal council of the Kurus to listen to their appeal. Make your judgement impartial so as to avoid any long-term enmity among the family of Kurus.’

The Maharaja sent a reply through his minister Vrishavarma. That was also loaded with political sagacity. It addressed Sri as ‘Vaasudeva’ just like the grandsire had called him, and enquired about the welfare of Vasudevababa, Devakimata and the royal family of the Yadavas. It also offered the explanation that he couldn’t come to the western gate of Hastinapura to welcome them only due to his ‘blindness’ and also gave a clever justification that minister Vrishavarma was sent in his place. No mention of Duryodhana and Shakuni at all. It contained a hypocritical promise that, Pandavas who were regarded as his own sons and not just *putane*, will be judged impartially in the royal council of the Kurus tomorrow. Sri heard the message with a smile.

That night the ancient skies of Hastinapura heard two different discussions in two parties, with a detached and stoic mind. One party was that of the Maharaja of Hastinapura, Dhritarashtra himself. The political deliberation in his council chamber lasted well till midnight in the light of burning *Karanjel* lamps. The attendees were Shakuni and his brothers, Kanaka, Duryodhana and his ten brothers, Dushasana being one of them from among the hundred brothers, and the minister Vrishavarma. Grandsire Bhishma who shouldered a major responsibility in the Kuru kingdom was not involved in this council. Even Mahamantri Vidura was not there, as Sri and Pandavas had stayed at his residence. Though he was Duryodhana’s best friend even Karna, the king of Anga was not there, as he was not considered reliable due to being a son of a charioteer. For the same reason Sanjaya was also not there.

Finally, at midnight the political deliberation reached a conclusion. That of coercing the Pandavas to accept the desolate region of Khandavaprastha and

Khandavavana having thick forests full of wild beasts. It was decided to take thorough precaution, to avoid their association with the royal capital Hastinapura in any way.

Kanaka, who was an equal match to Shakuni in matters of state, seconded the idea. He said, “Khandavavana is so thick that it will be one big war-like task to make the sunrays reach its land. Pandavas will fall prey to wild beasts while fighting that war. Even if they are spared from that, the wild tribes of Khandava vana like Naga, *Asura*, Danava, Nishadha, Vyadha, and Barbara will kill them for sure. In the end, this council concluded in the early morning, after finalizing the decision and consuming goblets full of saffron mixed milk.

In the council arranged under Sri’s leadership at Vidura’s residence the same topic of Pandava’s fair share in the Hastinapura kingdom was up for discussion. The major attendees were Mahamantri Vidura, Balaramadada, Uddhavabhauji, Satyaki, and minister Vipruthu. The highlight was that Pandava’s mother Kuntidevi was also present along with her five sons. Only Draupadi was not there. She was discussing some family matters with Vidura’s wife Parasavi in the inner chamber. In the discussion minister Vipruthu and Vidura were insistent on dividing the kingdom along the shores of river Ganga that coursed through Hastinapura; the eastern side to be given to the Kauravas and the western to the Pandavas. As the Panchala kingdom related to the Pandavas was located on the eastern side, Yadava commander Satyaki was trying to suggest to them a division with the eastern side to the Pandavas and the western to the Kauravas. As Sri was present in the council all the five Pandavas were not speaking at all. They were only listening.

Finally, exactly at midnight Sri gently tapped Arjuna on the shoulder, and while leaving the council he said, “Whatever you are discussing and guessing today, nothing of that sort is going to happen in the royal council of the Kurus tomorrow. Grandsire Bhishma, who is the last senior Kuru will be making the final decision. I am going to accept his offer. May I? What do you brothers think? Think properly and tell me.” With his fish-shaped eyes Sri stared at the eldest Pandava, Yudhishtira.

“As you say Vaasudeva. But I think we should also take into account Kunti mata’s opinion about this.” Yudhishtira responded in a manner suitable to his disposition.

“You need not worry about her opinion. She will agree with whatever I say. What do you say dear *aatya*?” Sri openly asked *aatya*. She also looked at the

peacock feather in Sri's crown, just like Arjuna and smilingly said, "Vaasudeva, things will be carried out only in your way and just as you say!"

"Yudhishthira, tell me the decision of all of you." Sri didn't let go of the original point. At that moment, Bhima spoke fearlessly as usual and stated his opinion, interrupting in the middle, "When you speak on our behalf, you should insist on the division along the borders of Ganga's course."

Sri looked at Arjuna. He silently bent down and touched Sri's feet. The very first royal council of the Pandavas in the council chamber of Vidura's residence, held under Sri's leadership was concluded, entrusting the decision with Sri.

The next day the royal council of the Kurus was held in Hastinapura. Today's main topic was the systematic division of the Hastinapura kingdom among the Kauravas and Pandavas. The news of Sri's arrival in Hastinapura along with the Pandavas, and that he would be present in the royal assembly with the Pandavas had spread like wildfire. Therefore, the citizens of Hastinapura had gathered in groups in the royal assembly. They were all eager to see the virtuous Pandavas and their courageous mother along with Sri in person. After many years, the royal assembly of the Kurus was fully occupied.

Silence prevailed as Chief Minister Vrishavarma pounded the royal sceptre as per the tradition. The assembly proceedings commenced. First of all, on behalf of Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi, Mahamantri Vidura welcomed Sri, the Pandavas with their mother and the assembled citizens. He announced the purpose of the council in a few words. In that speech, he earnestly reminded everyone of the valour of his dear brother Pandu in a picturesque manner. He made everyone aware of the complicated problem the kingdom of Hastinapura was facing. In the end, he said, "The one and only senior heir of the Kuru kingdom, grandsire Bhishma should present the final and just decision about this problem in front of the assembly. Everyone should honour it." Vidura fulfilled the duty of an experienced Mahamantri.

Today, on the right of the royal throne in the assembly, grandsire Bhishma was seated first, then Duryodhana, Karna, the king of Anga, Dushasana and his five brothers, Shakunimama and two of his brothers, Kanaka, Karna's brother Shona, then remaining Kauravas, Shakuni's brothers and leaders of various units were seated. On the left of the royal throne the members of the royal ministry such as Aacharya Kripa, Guru Drona, Mahamantri Vidura,

minister Sanjaya, Chief Minister Vrishavarma were seated. Next in line after them Balaramadada was first, then Sri and Uddhavabhauji, and all Pandavas were seated. After them were the Yadava warriors like Satyaki and Vipruthu. Next the Panchala minister and the commander, who had come to show their support to the Pandavas were seated. Pandavas' mother Kuntidevi and Pandavas' wife Draupadi were sitting in the reserved section for the royal ladies along with other Kuru ladies.

*Dhanurveda* incarnate, grandsire Bhishma who was the most senior in the entire assembly spoke. His speech was pure, virtuous, fluent and weighty like the Himaganga. Due to meditation and constant contemplation about Kurus' interests, it had become profound like the sound of the ocean. It compelled the audience to introspect and think deeply. He said in a firm voice, "Venerable Yadava Vasudeva's son Vaasudeva, Lord of Dwaraka, Srikrishna is present in this ancient royal assembly of the Kurus for the first time, along with his elder brother Balarama and younger brother Uddhava. I feel that this is the moment of greatest honour for us Kurus of the *Chandravansha*. I welcome him with joy.

"The last time he visited Hastinapura, he didn't come to the royal assembly. He asked for my blessings at that time which I deliberately hadn't given. Yesterday also I didn't give my blessings. It is true that I am senior to him in age. But just the seniority of age never indicates quality of life. Accordingly, I am not senior to him in any other capacity except age.

"Even though he lives far away in Dwaraka, he knows very well in his heart how highly I regard him. That is why with that respect in mind, at this critical juncture of life, I am going to speak from the bottom of my heart about this kingdom of Hastinapura that I have nurtured devoutly with my life. I request everybody to listen to it quietly.

"First of all, I am elated that the Pandavas who have suffered a lot, are alive. I am going to perform rituals to ward off all ill effects that must have been caused due to the *Tarpana* rites performed for them. At this moment, my mind is brimming with innumerable joyous memories of their father Maharaja Pandu. Valiant, victorious Maharaja Pandu, who spread Kuru's reputation throughout the world. Today, the Pandavas have returned with their mother to the royal capital of their late father. I welcome them from the bottom of my heart and offer them my blessings.

"All the Pandavas and Kauravas should come together with determination. If that happens, then under the guidance and support of venerable Yadava

Srikrishna, the Kurus can teach a good lesson to the self-proclaimed emperor Jarasandha, who has put eighty Kshatriyas in his prison. I have no doubt at all that under Yudhishtira's composed leadership, with Srikrishna's eternally pragmatic advice and by getting associated with his kingdom Dwaraka, my one hundred and five Kurus themselves will achieve the glory of being honourable emperors.

“The valiant sons of Maharaja Pandu, officially crowned king of this kingdom, have returned now. Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas is the rightful heir of his father who was enthroned as the King. King Dhritarashtra who was taking care of this kingdom of Hastinapura as a guardian after Pandu, should honourably restore it to Yudhishtira now.

“All the remaining Pandavas and all Kauravas should come together under his leadership and keep the pennant of Hastinapura's glory fluttering forever. This is my final and impartial verdict as the last senior Kuru. As a king, Yudhishtira should appoint the eldest Kaurava Duryodhana as the chief commander and both should establish new standards of valour in future.”

The entire royal assembly of the Kurus fell silent as they heard the clear-cut decision of just and truthful grandsire Bhishma. He had left no ambiguity behind. Maharaja Dhritarashtra was dumbfounded to hear his final decision. Tightly clasping in his fists the lion faces carved on both sides of the royal throne he went through unbearable anguish for a moment. He muttered as if he was talking to himself, ‘meaning I – I – should get down from this – this royal throne?’ Noticing his agony and hearing his murmuring the eldest Kaurava Duryodhana got up at once from his seat. He spoke in a clunky sound like that of a mace, “Looks like the grandsire has forgotten the service of the Maharaja to the royal throne so far. There is no question of appointing the prince till he is alive. As it is, the undeclared prince-hood already belongs to the Kauravas – the eldest among them – meaning me. What the Pandavas can do at the most is to ask for their share in the kingdom. If the Maharaja is ready to offer it to them then they should silently accept whatever he offers.”

Shakuni, the son of Subala, who always supported his *bhacha* vigilantly, stood up suddenly. He spoke in his usual sly, sarcastic, deceitful tongue, “The grandsire is indirectly suggesting the Maharaja to go to the forest for *Vanaprasthashrama*! The truth is that actually his beloved Pandavas were born in the forest. They are fond of forests. Therefore, my advice to the Kuru royalty is that if at all they wish to give the Pandavas a part of the Hastinapura kingdom, they should offer them the region of Khandavavana.

As long as the guardian Maharaja is alive there is no question of appointing a new king or prince!”

“Shakuni, nobody has asked for your advice. King Dhritarashtra should announce whatever his decision is.” Grandsire desperately tried to restrain Shakuni. Now the assembly hall was abuzz with whispers. It went on for quite a while. Duryodhana stood up and stopped the whispers by strong words of reproach, “Pandavas have nothing to do with the royal throne of Kurus in any way! They may be the sons of Kunti and Madri, but in no way are they ‘Pandavas’ – the sons of our *kaka* Pandu! All the citizens know very well why our *kaka* Maharaja Pandu had left Hastinapura. Grandsire need not support the Pandavas so much. He should not ask for the entire or half of the kingdom for the Pandavas at all. The Pandavas should quietly accept whatever part this Kuru assembly offers them.”

Now Sri clearly realized what Duryodhana was getting at. He was entering the mysterious jungle of Pandavas’ birth by the ‘*Niyoga*’ custom. Till today he had solved the problems of the Shursena kingdom of Mathura, the kingdom of Karvir, Pragjyotishapura and many more, in a perfectly righteous manner. But this dispute of the Kuru kingdom was indeed tricky. It was apparent that Duryodhana was going to make a big issue of Pandavas’ birth and deprive them completely of the fair share of their venerable father Pandu’s kingdom. At that point Sri rose from his seat determinedly. Immediately the Kuru council fell silent for a few moments. All attendees were well aware of the power of Sri’s speech as they had heard about it. Shakuni and all Kauravas including Duryodhana panicked. They thought that with his eloquence and mesmerizing speech Sri will persuade Maharaja Dhritarashtra within moments. But the unexpected happened. Sri spoke calmly and deliberately, “Dear Kurus! I agree with the impeccable thoughts of grandsire about the kingdom of Hastinapura, but whatever he has said may not happen. Listening to Duryodhana’s speech I have come to realize that the unity of Kauravas and Pandavas is an improbable prospect like that of a day and a night coming together.

Shakunimama has unerringly noticed the merits of Pandavas. It is true that they are very fond of forests. Forests are dear to me also. I have complete faith in the dauntless capability of the Pandavas. On behalf of the Pandavas I declare to Kuru Maharaja Dhritarashtra, all the Kauravas, Shakunimama, all his brothers, and all the members present here along with venerable grandsire Bhishma that the Pandavas are ready to accept the region of Khandavavana

that Maharaja Dhritarashtra is so generously offering them as the share of their father!”

The Kuru council including grandsire Bhishma was astonished at this firm decision of Sri that was so unexpected even to the Pandavas. There was only one person, that too a lady, in that fully occupied assembly who was not astonished, not startled at all. She was our *aaty*a Kuntidevi, the mother of the Pandavas! The Pandavas had given complete power to Sri to take a decision on their behalf, as decided in the council the previous night. And yet Bhima grumbled. There were whispers among the Pandavas trying to console him. To contain those whispers, the cunning minister of the Kurus, Vrishavarma, raised the royal sceptre in his hand and firmly pounding it he said, “Venerable Pandava Yudhishtira, do you accept the region of Khandavavana as your share of the kingdom? Any complaint later won’t be tolerated.”

Following a nod from Sri as a signal Yudhishtira rose quietly and declared his decision, “I agree to accept the region of the kingdom offered by the Maharaja of Kurus as our father’s share in the kingdom. I hereby humbly accept the region of Khandava vana while paying obeisance to Grandsire, my venerable father Maharaja Pandu, honourable Maharaja, Maharani, all valiant late kings of the Kurus since Maharaja Hasti, brothers Srikrishna and Balarama along with Kunti mata”. Very politely he further said, “All we want are the invaluable blessings of all. Citizens of Hastinapura should feel assured that in memory of Maharaja Pandu, with the blessings of Lord of Dwaraka Vaasudeva Srikrishna and Kunti mata we will raise a new and prosperous kingdom in Khandavavana.”

‘Well said, well said, Hail Maharaja Pandu! Hail Srikrishna, Lord of Dwaraka! Hail eldest Pandava Yudhishtira!’ Many had surmised that there definitely would be a lot of feuding in the royal assembly of the Kurus. But Sri had accepted the region of Khandavavana on behalf of the Pandavas and concluded this most important council very skilfully, leaving everyone astonished. Uddhavabhaiji constructed a picture of this special assembly of the Kurus of Hastinapura, with a detailed account in his interesting speech.

During this visit to Hastinapura Sri stayed for one or two days at the residence of his staunch devotees Mahatma Vidura and minister Sanjaya and gladly accepted their hospitality. Grandsire attended one of the meals at Vidura’s residence on the outskirts of the city. Though Mahatma Vidura was Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharaja Pandu’s brother, he was an illegitimate



son born to a maid. He was a simple and unselfish person. Though he was a minister in the royal assembly of the Kurus he lived in a simple house with his wife Parasavi and his family, on the desolate border of Hastinapura. He was well known everywhere as being a staunch devotee of Sri, even more than being famous as the minister of the Kurus and as a noble person in Hastinapura and the region around it. However, nobody knew where he and Sri first met. Even I didn't. But just as Sri had deeply embraced Uddhavabhauji, Daruka and Arjuna in their very first meeting, he did it with Vidura too.

Similarly, Sanjaya, the special minister of Maharaja Dhritarashtra in Hastinapura also was a devotee of Sri. He was the chief of the special charioteer-troop of Dhritarashtra. Even he was loving and versatile. Just like my Aakrutikaka in Kundinapura possessed a rare vidya of charming, this Kuru minister Sanjaya also possessed a rare vidya – a vidya that allowed him to see distant things! He would go into a meditative trance just while sitting. The exact picture of whichever events and places hundreds of *yojanas* away that he would think of, would take form in front of his meditative eyes. He could pass on minute details to the audience of the scene that he visualized by his inner vision, in his melodious voice. Hearing Sanjaya's miraculous story from Sri I often felt like meeting him once! When that would happen, I would offer him sweet saffron-flavoured milk, and would persuade him to tell me about the many different appearances, forms and manifestations of Sri he saw with his inner vision. I was confident that even Sanjaya with the special vision must not have seen as many various forms of Sri as I had seen with my inner vision.

After leaving Hastinapura Sri went along with the Pandavas to survey the Khandavavana region that they had received as their share of the kingdom. A small town named Indraprastha was located here. Sri got a spacious sturdy cottage built for the Pandavas on the outskirts of this town. While leaving Hastinapura, Sri also arranged for the Pandavas to get some plasterers, woodcutters, ironsmiths and architects with the assistance of Vidura and Sanjaya. He had also urgently dispatched special envoys and ordered famous architect Mayasura, his assistants Taraksha, Kamalaksha, Vidyunmali and the one and only master architect Twashta to be present in Khandavavana immediately. They already had the experience of the creation of Dwaraka.

During this period, Sri used to go to river Yamuna that flowed through the thick forests of Khandavavana for his bath and morning *Arghya*. One such

beautiful morning, he came to the stone steps on the banks of the gently flowing Yamuna along with Uddhavabhauji and a few select Yadavas. It was the time of daybreak. Sri saw a woman in the Yamuna in front of him, her back was facing Sri. She quietly stood in waist-high water, like a sculpture. She had tightly tied her thick black hair on her head, with a string of white jasmine flowers. She was wearing a white vesture with a white bodice. She had already performed her *Arghya*, *Namana* and *Vandana*. Now she was meditating with her eyes closed. The reflection of her fair and graceful upper body that was above the water was gently undulating on the waters of the Yamuna. Sri stood transfixed as he saw her. He said to Uddhavabhauji who was with him, “Udho, brother, who is this ‘Jalakanya’? Go, find out everything about her.”

*Bhauji* smiled. He went up to the river Yamuna, and slowly descended the stone steps built by the Kurus. Cultured *bhauji* couldn’t bring himself to disturb the Jalakanya engrossed in meditation and stopped there. Just then a long-winged wild peacock came from somewhere producing a high-pitched cry. Fluttering his long plumage with golden, blue, green eyes he gently alighted on the banks of the Yamuna, and began drinking water. The fluttering of his plumage broke the trance of the Jalakanya. Ripples rose on Yamuna’s water. Jalakanya offered the last *Arghya* to the Sun god, smiled at the peacock and got out. She picked up an earthen pot full of water from the step near the shore, carried it on her waist and began walking. The marks of her delicate, wet, lotus-like feet started imprinting in line, on the stone steps. Uddhavabhauji moved forward at that moment and in his cultured Yadava style he humbly said, “Forgive me Devi. Who are you? Where are you from? Do you come here every day? Who do you meditate on and worship?”

The Jalakanya from Khandavavana got startled for a moment or two. Then looking at Uddhavabhauji’s innocent face and polite expression she smiled and said, “I am Kalindi. I live here, in this Khandavavana. I am awaiting Krishna of Dwaraka ever since I remember. I meditate in his name, and worship him. I have offered my entire life to him! Who are you?”

“I am Uddhava. The one whom you worship and in whose name you meditate, is my elder brother, Srikrishna of Dwaraka, and he has come here in person! See there!” *Bhauji* pointed to Sri standing on the topmost step. The eyes of the Jalakanya and the Jalapurusha met! Sri slowly climbed down the stone steps. Kalindi gradually climbed up the steps of life on the strength of her worship!

The king of birds, the peacock, flew far away with a joyous cry. It depicted a multi-coloured romantic tale while leaving!

I had to go to the Shuddhaksha gate to welcome my seventh and last sister, after Sri's Hastinapura visit. While taking her in to my embrace and patting her, I let out a sigh of relief. Kalindi was the eighth wife of Sri. Sri wedded her on the banks of Yamuna itself by the Gandharva manner of marriage. She was quite different from the seven of us. The last palace on the island of Queens' mansions raised by Gargamuni, was occupied with her arrival now. Though she was a daughter of a Kshatriya she looked, seemed and talked like a Brahmin daughter. She easily mingled with the seven of us.

Dwaraka had transformed into a populated Gokul now. I had noticed that since meeting the Pandavas, especially after bonding closely with Arjuna, Sri's mood had changed quite a lot. He always looked happy. Each task that he performed was with brimming enthusiasm. He breezed through the palaces of the eight of us as easily as the fragrant air in a garden. I don't know if my seven sisters felt the same or not, but to me it felt as if he was always in my palace, even if he was in any other palace.

Nowadays when Sri talked, not a single moment passed without a mention of the Pandavas in some or the other context, and without their praise. Especially when he was speaking about *aatya* Kuntidevi he spoke with tireless and exceeding enthusiasm. He would be in a special mood if Vasudevababa and Thorali mata were there during chitchat over dinner. He was well aware that *aatya* had suffered a lot throughout her life, and Vasudevababa regretted it deeply in his heart. That is why in his sweet tongue Sri would describe how Kunti *aatya*'s third son Arjuna is a possessor of all good qualities. He would say – "He looks, talks and behaves exactly like me". He is even more valiant than me. His name itself is Arjuna! The one who gathers all the knowledge that comes his way and stores it. When people see us together they can't figure out who is who."

While speaking, Sri would sometimes unwittingly refer to him as *Dhananjaya*, sometimes *Partha*, or *Kaunteya* or at times *Gudakesha*. I would get lost while hearing him speak about Arjuna. Sometimes, to me, Sri himself would seem like Arjuna. I would pinch myself and get to my senses. An intense urge would well up in my mind to meet Sri's dear *Dhananjaya* at least once.

*Sakhi* Draupadi occupied a bit of more space in Sri's heart than Arjuna. Only I knew that with all the details. That way Radha from Gokul was also

Sri's *sakhi*. This Draupadi was also his *sakhi*. But there was a subtle difference between both of them. And I was the only one who was aware of that. Radhika was like the sun disk before the solar eclipse. Milky white! Draupadi was like the sun disk after the solar eclipse. Curd white! Radha was lovely, fragrant like the bud of a *Champaka flower*. Draupadi was like the enticing bud of a *Brahmakamala*. Radha was like the silent streak of lightning that flashes in the sky from one end to the other after the rain of Mriga. Draupadi was like the roaring, thunderous lightning that resounds through the firmament during the downpour of rain in Mriga. Both were equally dear to Sri. Maybe that was the reason that I would feel an uncontrollable urge to meet both of them.

Sri would talk about the other Pandavas in few but precise words. He would say, "Yudhishtira is the perfect elder brother of the Pandavas. The other four Pandavas are like roaring, foaming oceans. Around them is the quiet shore of Yudhishtira's controlled and broad mind. All the other Pandavas respect Yudhishtira absolutely. Bhima is like a catastrophic gigantic ocean of mammoth strength. He appears to be quiet and peaceful but in his mind, he keeps bubbling constantly. His hunger and sleep patterns perfectly suit his burly body. Though Nakula and Sahadeva are twins there is no similarity in their disposition. Nakula looks extremely handsome, like our Pradyumna. Our Uddhava also looks like Nakula and Pradyumna, but he has a completely different nature. He is like the high peak of snow-capped mountain that has pierced the sky and has attained peace. Sahadeva possesses unmatched skills of assessing horses. He is alert and cautious like a horse.

"The Pandavas are like the five fingers of a hand. Five fingers with different shapes and skills, which are always active. Draupadi is the rare woman who brings these five fingers together like the Aadishakti. Kunti mata is the supreme power that inspires their unity! Each word uttered by her, each dream..."

I just loved to keep on listening to Sri when he talked about the Pandavas with such intensity. He had tested the Pandavas in every possible way he could think of. He would compare the Pandavas' family priest Dhaumya rishi to Gargamuni of the Yadavas. He would give an upper hand to Dhaumya rishi for his excellence. And then to avoid any misunderstanding immediately he would place him lower to Acharya Sandipani.

A new chapter in Sri's life began as the cords of Sri's emotions got entangled with those of the Pandavas. That chapter was the Pandavaparva.

Now Sri had only one thing on mind and that was to raise the puissant, populated royal capital of Pandavas, Indraprastha. He immensely loved such constructive, creative Karmayoga. Now he focused his attention on the creation of Indraprastha, from Dwaraka itself.

In the resting chamber above Srisopana, he held many councils through days and nights, with Maya and his assistants Taraksha, Kamalaksha, Vidyumali and Maya's sons Mayavin, Dudumbhi, Ajakarna, and Kalika, also many more expert, professional architects along with Vishwakarma, Twashta, and Gargamuni. They all already had the experience of the construction of Dwaraka. The sinewy horse riders of Yadava's surveillance team spread in the four directions. They hired skilled craftsmen from any places they could and dispatched them towards Indraprastha. The skilled craftsmen from the eighteen workshops of Yadavas got engaged in a huge undertaking. Dwaraka reverberated again with the sounds of construction in various workshops. Many construction materials like neat wooden planks of teak, rosewood, Katahal, large sacks of burnt limestone kneaded in the lime mills for weeks, polished iron and copper pillars, moulded golden and silver domes of royal palaces and temples were carried in large bullock carts, and on the backs of elephants, and dispatched towards Khandavavana from Dwaraka. A continuous line of bullock carts, camel carts and elephants could be seen moving from Dwaraka to Khandavavana.

One day a horse rider arrived in Dwaraka along with Yudhishtira's message from Khandavavana. Pandavas were struggling hard to remove the thick forests of Khandavavana, but they were not getting the expected results. At this pace, it would take twelve years just to clear the forests of Khandavavana. The five brothers had reached a point of frustration and remembered Sri, not knowing what to do. Now it was mandatory for Sri to go to Khandavavana again. The Pandavas had now become like Sri's breath in his daily life. He shared deep emotional ties with them. Sri immediately left for Khandavavana, taking along with him the special troops of diligent Yadavas who were trained for the Dandakaranya expedition. This time he took neither Balaramadada nor Uddhavabhauji with him. Instead he took young Pradyumna and his troops of youth along with him. Experienced Satyaki also accompanied him. This undertaking of the construction of Indraprastha lasted for a long time.

In the meantime, many seasons passed by. On the banks of Yamuna, Indraprastha, the royal capital of the Pandavas was flourishing. Here in

Dwaraka Sri's Yadava family was blossoming. Sri's only daughter Charumati and sons Charudeva and Sudeshna were born to me. Charumati was very beautiful just like her name denoted, and since she was the only daughter of Sri at that time, she had become the apple of everybody's eyes including Sri. Her complexion was like that of the *Jaswanda flower* and she had chubby cheeks, and thick, dark, curly hair. She would keep looking at everyone who picked her up with utter curiosity. She was Pradyumna's most favourite sister. My delicate daughter Charu was not much seen in my chamber. One or the other of my seven sisters would pick her up and take her to their chamber. Satya, Bhama, Kalindi, in whosever chamber she was, there itself her feeding for the day was taken care of. Sri would hold her in his arms and lovingly pull the tip of her nose saying, "You are just like our Eka in Gokul."

During this time, Satyabhama also bore three sons – Subhanu, Swarbhanu and Prabhanu. These three sons of Bhama had luscious complexion like their mother and looked radiant like Bhanu, the sun.

The palaces of the Panchanada daughters Bhadra and Lakshmanaa were also blessed with the buzz of sons. Bhadra gave birth to three sons – Sangramajita, Brihatsena and Shura. One of them, Shura was named after his great grandfather, Vasudevababa's father Shursena. Meanwhile Lakshmanaa too gave birth to three sons – Praghosha, Gatravata and Urdhwaga. Uddhavabhauji gave the name Urdhwaga. Jambavati who was from the forest, also bore a daughter during this time. But she was born after the birth of two sons, Sumitra and Purujita. As her first son was named Samba because her father Riksharaaj Jambavana was an ardent devotee of Shiva, just so this daughter was named Girija. Satya, the daughter of King Nagnajita of Kosala kingdom, was also called as Nagnajiti by all. She also gave birth to three sons during this period. They were named Vira, Chandra and Ashwasena. Mitravinda, the sister of Vinda and Anuvinda from the Avanti kingdom near Dwaraka had also become the mother of three sons. She went to her parental residence in Avanti kingdom to give birth to each child. Her three sons were named by the people of Avanti – Vrika, Harsha, and Anila. Khandavavana daughter Kalindi's three sons born during this time were named as per her own wish. They were named Shruta, Purnamasa and Darsha. All her three sons were good-looking, chubby, and mainly calm and fair like the Ketaki flower.

During this period of six years both islands of Dwaraka looked like the full

moon of Purnima in the month of Chaitra. Sri sometimes mentioned the huge *Bhandirvriksha* in Vrindavan while speaking. During this period, even Dwaraka blossomed like that big tree, with the bustle of young and old Yadava family members, day and night. Many attendants were there to serve my sons as well as the sons of my seven sisters. Many sages, hermits and yogis from various places frequently came to visit the two islands of this populated Dwaraka kingdom. Sri and dada would honour them appropriately in the Sudharma assembly in the presence of Vasudevababa, Thorali and Dhakali mata. Many of them were respectfully made offers to settle in Dwaraka. Such renown of Dwaraka had spread far in all directions.

One day my priest Sushil humbly presented me with some news. He said, “A Brahmin from Saurashtra has arrived at the Shuddhaksha gate. He is scrawny and very tired as he has travelled from so far. He is pleading to see the Lord of Dwaraka. What should we do?”

As the Maharani of Dwaraka I was used to such news by now. I told the priest, “Arrange his stay in the guest chamber. Look after all his needs properly. Tell him that Sri will meet him once he returns to Dwaraka.” Sushil bowed, offered obeisance and left to follow the orders.

Within a few days, the news of Sri’s arrival reached Dwaraka. Sri had returned only after completing the construction of Pandava’s royal capital in Khandavavana. But this time he arrived in Dwaraka at night by boats. The entire Dwaraka was asleep when he arrived. For that reason, Sri had instructed the Chief Minister and other assembly members who had come to receive him at the Shuddhaksha gate to not arrange any formal welcome and keep it quiet. Even I didn’t come to know when Sri arrived in Dwaraka at night! But this arrival of his showed me a new side of Sri’s character. Sri considered sleep very valuable, whether it was the sleep of human beings or other animals, and he took extra care to not disturb it. He called sleep Nidrayoga. He had complete control over his sleep. His dear disciple Arjuna also had such control.

The next morning, I performed all morning rituals and sat for the daily charity offering with Sri. My seven sisters had taken their seats by my side. I had urged Sri to have all of them present during this session. He had also happily agreed with me.

Sri looked delighted as the construction of the Pandavas’ royal capital in Khandavavana had been concluded to his satisfaction. As he sat on the golden seat for the charity session, first of all he looked at me and smiling

pleasantly he said, “Rukmini, Pandavas’ royal city has been built splendidly. Pradyumna’s youth troops cleaned the thick forests of Khandava vana with the assistance of Agni. Indraprastha is indeed slightly superior to Dwaraka.

“Arjuna and I had to fight a furious battle with Varuna, the king of the forest, while cleaning Khandavavana. Varuna attacked us fiercely with his army saying, ‘This forest is our residence, we won’t let you Kurus - Yadavas burn it. The cutthroat battle lasted for many days. Ultimately, he had to concede defeat. He acknowledged Arjuna’s prowess, and happily offered Arjuna his auspicious bow named ‘Gandiva’ along with the quiver that has an inexhaustible supply of arrows, and his well-built, well balanced chariot named Nandighosha.” I had already guessed that it was Sri’s favourite topic as it was about the Pandavas. Though I knew he was going to talk a great deal about Khandava vana and the battle with Varuna, and though I was also eager to hear it, I was trying to say something to him as the duty of the Maharani.

But Sri started offering charities while talking to me and his seven other wives, about the Khandavavana. While Sri was picking up a handful of pearls from the cane basket, I gently said to him, “A Brahmin from Saurashtra is here! He is pleading to visit you. He is waiting in the guest chamber.” With an astonished look in his eyes he asked, “Who? From where did you say he has come?”

“A Brahmin – from Saurashtra.” As Sri heard my words his handsome face blossomed with ecstasy. His fish-shaped eyes sparkled; he let go of the pearls in his palms in the basket again and muttered, “That’s him, my dear Sudama!” The twin tooth behind his rosy lips flashed with his delightful, pure smile.

He instantly began walking towards the guest chamber, leaving us behind, saying, “I’ll be back soon, Maharani! You finish the rest of the charity session.” As usual Uddhavabhauji who was standing nearby followed him.

Our charity session continued without any break. As it was coming to an end we saw Sri and Uddhavabhauji gently supporting the scrawny Brahmin, holding his arms on both sides and bringing him into the charity chamber. He had a gaunt frame and a shabby appearance; he was wearing a ‘*Barabandi*’ dress from Kathiawar, a red-bordered dhoti covered his legs halfway, a cap covered both his ears, there were dots of sandalwood paste on his forehead in between the eyebrows and on his high cheeks, he held a crooked, dry staff of the *Bela* tree in his hand, his untidy shoulder bag reached down to his waist, and he was barefoot. Really, how did the pitiful fellow look standing in the



royal capital of the Yadavas, the golden Dwaraka? He looked like a black fly sitting on a shining Pushkaraja jewel set in a golden ring! Dumbfounded, all of us kept gawking at the bizarre ‘exploit’ of Sri and *bhauji* in comparison with the feat of the burning of Khandavavana. I was utterly speechless.

Both the brothers carefully brought their friend from Kathiawar and actually seated him on Sri’s golden seat. That completely flustered the Brahmin from Saurashtra. He just kept staring everywhere with his eyes wide open.

As soon as Sri seated his dear friend from Kathiawar on his golden seat, he ordered priest Sushil, “Please bring the golden salver that is used for the daily worship. Also get some Prajakta flowers in it.” The priest rushed and fulfilled the order of the Lord of Dwaraka. A big golden salver consisting of big and small gold plates used for worship was placed near the small golden footrest in front of the seat on which the Brahmin was sitting. Now the chamber was fully occupied with all the members of the ministry, both the commanders, many a troop leaders and Yadava warriors. Even Balaramadada entered the chamber along with his brothers Gada, Sarana, and Revativahini behind him, and all his sons – Nishatha, Ulmuka and Vipula. Acharya Sandipani came after him with gurumata and his son Dutta. Crowded Yadavas automatically made way when they saw our revered Vasudevababa in person with Thorali and Dhakali mata arriving in the chamber in the end.

Sri was so much engrossed in the ‘Snehayoga’ that he wasn’t at all aware of who had gathered around him, and what they were doing. Sri put a golden salver on the footrest in front of the Brahmin, and requested his dearest friend to put his soiled feet on it. Sri had already asked for the golden pitcher of Gangajala from among the holy waters of the seven rivers brought from various places and kept in the chamber of gods. He let a stream of the Gangajala fall on his dear friend’s feet, just like the stream of *Abhishek* and wiped them gently with his shawl. He adorned them with a dot of sandalwood paste. He put haldi-kumkum on them and offered a palm full of Prajakta flowers. He picked up a fresh garland of white lotuses from the big worship salver, put it around the neck of his dear friend and glanced at Sudama with such affection that he got overwhelmed with emotions. As he got teary-eyed he couldn’t see Sri standing in front of him. Sri held his lean shoulders and pulling him up held him in a passionate deep embrace. The garland on his chest clung to the Vaijayanti garland on Sri’s chest. The hearts of two friends met. Sri picked up the golden bowl in the platter, took a small

piece of the sweet saffron and ginger-mixed delicacy made of milk and put it in his dear friend's mouth.

The sweet and delicious taste of the prasada started lingering in his mouth and at the same time tears began streaming down his friend's eyes.

Now the entire chamber of charities was overcome with emotion. It was as if the black clouds amassed in the sky had got dissipated by a strong whiff of the western wind. All the thoughts of disgust about Sri's favourite friend when I saw him for the first time had disappeared totally. There was not a single corner of my heart left empty to even feel the guilt about it.

Sri released his friend from his embrace and coming back to senses now, first of all he looked at me. I was well acquainted with the silent language of his eyes. I immediately stepped forward. Seating Sudama *bhauji* on the seat I requested him to put his feet in the platter on the footrest. I also worshiped his feet in the same way that Sri had done for this large-hearted *bhauji* of mine from a faraway country. After me of course the seven wives of Sri came forward according to seniority. They also did the same for *bhauji*. After that Sri affectionately asked his friend, "Sudamana, friend, you haven't been speaking at all since a long time, your left arm is constantly touching your shoulder bag. Tell me, what is in that bag?"

"What else could be there?" Saying so Sudama *bhauji* put his hand in the shoulder bag getting sentimental. The curiosity of all the gathered Yadava men and women heightened. Everyone's eyes were fixed on his shoulder bag. Sudama *bhauji* instantly pulled out a pair of sandalwood slippers, about nineteen inches long. He looked at them with emotional eyes as if he owned the three worlds. In a moment, he touched the sandalwood slippers to the tilak of the sandalwood paste on his forehead with loving respect.

I had heard that Sri and this *bhauji* were the disciples of Acharya Sandipani in the Ankapada aashrama. I obviously thought that those were acharya's slippers! Acharya himself was present in the chamber. Sudama *bhauji* was so overwhelmed that he hadn't even noticed him yet. As I got overwhelmed and moved forward, he looked at me with utter respect and handed over the wooden slippers to me. I touched them to my forehead believing that they belonged to acharya, and returned those to him. Sri was simply watching all this with his mischievous smile. Meanwhile Sudama *bhauji* noticed acharya and his wife. He approached acharya and put his head on acharya's feet. Acharya momentarily patted his lean shoulders and put his hand on *bhauji*'s head to offer blessings. *Bhauji* also took blessings

from aacharya's wife.

Now both the friends held aacharya's arms with respect, brought him honourably towards the golden seat of the charity session and seated him on it. His wife, who was walking behind him, sat on my seat. His devoted disciples sat near aacharya's feet, facing each other. Meanwhile Balaramadada came forward with Revativahini, offered obeisance to aacharya and his wife, and sat next to Sri. As she saw me Revativahini came to me. By this time, minister Vipruthu brought forward Vasudevababa and both matas, who were left behind in the Yadava crowd, and seated them on the empty seats of my sisters. Seeing them dada and Sri began to get up to pay obeisance to them. Vasudevababa commanded them with a gesture of his hand to sit in their places. Respecting his command both sat down. Now all eyes were fixed on only aacharya. Aacharya had closed his eyes. He had already gone into a meditative trance. Sudama *bhauji*'s left hand still kept moving towards his bag. With his gaze fixed on aacharya's face, Sri brought both his palms together in prayer and said with utmost respect, "Aacharya, I hope to hear something precious at this moment."

Listening to these words aacharya's white beard and moustache quivered momentarily. Utter silence spread in the room so much so that even the sound of the ocean around Dwaraka was clearly audible.

Aacharya smiled and said with his eyes closed, "Yes Srikrishna, I will. First, let Sudama complete a formality. Oh Sudama, friend of Srikrishna, without hesitating or feeling diffident in the presence of all, give your friend the gift of love that you have brought in your bag."

Now, ultimate curiosity spread in the Yadava circle. Everybody's eyes were fixed on Sudama's bag. Sudama's right hand went into his bag twice, and came out empty. Then the Guru spoke again, "Sudamana, poverty is not a flaw – but poverty of the heart is indeed a fault. Just give your gift in front of all!"

Sudama *bhauji* determinedly pulled out a small bundle from his bag. It was tied in soiled cloth. With trembling hands, he put it on the rosy palms of the lord of Dwaraka.

Sri gently opened the bundle. There was plain, dry, puffed rice in it! It was a simple gift of love that *bhauji*'s wife had packed in a hurry when her husband told her, 'I have to give a gift to my friend, pack something'.

Sri's eyes, sparkling like the Pushkaraja jewel, kept staring at the dry, puffed rice in his palms, with utter joy. Looking at that incredible gift of love

his fish-shaped bright eyes brimmed with tears. Sri picked up couple of grains of the puffed rice and first he offered them at aacharya's feet. Then he relished a couple of grains fondly while smacking his lips and held it in front of me. I also picked up couple of grains and put them in my mouth. They were indeed delicious. Now, Sri got up and distributed the 'Prasada of love' with affection to Vasudevababa first, both the matas, dada, Revativahini and my seven sisters.

Sri requested aacharya again, "Please let us have the Prasada of your divine, ambrosial advice, aacharya."

Aacharya Sandipani spoke very little but it was remarkable. He said, "Oh citizens of Dwaraka! Today is a golden day in the life of Dwaraka. Srikrishna and Sudama, both are best friends and my best disciples. I have already told them. Today I repeat it for your sake – pride of any kind, of power, wealth, beauty, strength, and knowledge – whatever it is, it ultimately destroys the human being. The pride of power, authority and wealth is bad anytime. But above all, the pride of knowledge, of spiritual knowledge, is the worst.

Srikrishna – Sudama, I am proud of both these disciples of mine. The essence of life is Love. You should cherish and spread it throughout your lives. Just like the loving gift that Sudamana brought and Srikrishna distributed. ...!"

Sudama *bhauji* stayed in Dwaraka for a week, and having talked with his friend to his heart's content, returned to his village. Immediately after that Sri called for minister Vipruthu in the discussion chamber. He must have been giving him a lot of instructions about something. When I went there, I just heard the fleeting words of Sri, "... once everything is completed, announce the name of the city as 'Sudamapuri'. Also, announce the same in the kingdom of Dwaraka." I surmised that a new city like Indraprastha was going to be built in the name of Sudama *bhauji*.

Once, the drums at Shuddhaksha gate boomed to announce the arrival of a special guest. I was in the original Dwaraka. My seven sisters would come to Dwaraka only occasionally. They were all engrossed in their family lives. But as the Maharani I had to come frequently. I saw Sri leaving his chamber as he had heard the sounds of the drums and also received the news in person. He left a message for me hurriedly, to get ready to welcome the special guest, and taking a troop of armed Yadava warriors along with him he promptly left for the Shuddhaksha gate. While leaving, he also gave some instructions to the minister, both the commanders and the troop leaders. I kept thinking.

Who is such a special guest arriving in Dwaraka today that the lord of Dwaraka himself is going to receive him?

I was even more stunned when I reached the Shuddhaksha gate with Revativahini. Everybody was standing there and awaiting somebody's boat. Balaramadada, Uddhavabhauji, minister Vipruthu, both the commanders, senior Maharaja, both the matas, Gargamuni and yes, Sri's Acharya Sandipani was also present among them. A rare thing was that today his wife – Sri's aashrama mata was also present there with her son Dutta. My curiosity was stretched to the limits to see such a crowd of Dwaraka's Yadavas that so far had never gathered even in the Sudharma assembly. Who is coming? Who is this grand welcome for? I just couldn't understand.

After about half an hour's wait the naval chief of Dwaraka slowly docked a huge boat embellished with garlands and festooned with flags, near the fortification wall of the Shuddhaksha gate. A tall, white-bearded, white-haired, radiant elderly man wearing a white loincloth descended on the land of Dwaraka from the ship. He had covered his lips with a white strip of cloth and tied it securely at the back of his neck. The moment his feet touched the land of Dwaraka Sri promptly moved forward along with venerable Acharya Sandipani. Both aacharyas embraced each other tightly. At that moment, various musical instruments resonated making a great sound. While innumerable men and women of Dwaraka were watching, Sri knelt down and put his head on the divine feet of Ghor Angirasa, who travelled throughout Aaryavart. The moment Sri's head touched his feet Ghor Angirasa immediately held his shoulders, pulled Sri up, and took him in a deep embrace saying – "No... Hrishiksha".

So, he was rishi Ghor Angirasa then! I had heard a lot about him from Acharya Sandipani many a times. The story of this great rishi's life that I had come to know from Acharya Sandipani was indeed amazing.

He was originally a Yadava from Mathura in our Shursena kingdom and was related to Sri distantly. In his youth, he left his home and family, to become an ascetic and went to the Himalayas. He had humbly submitted himself at the feet of the renowned rishi Angirasa; became his disciple and had performed severe penance. The original Angirasa had thoroughly assessed him through difficult tests and appointed him the heir of his family aashramas. After him this Angirasa had raised many aashrama branches at various places in Aaryavarta. The main branch was near Prayaga, a few branches were in the Himalayas and many other branches had spread

throughout Aaryavarta. Now he had developed an inclination towards the thoughts of a former philosopher Rishabhanatha and his principles like non-violence, self-control and renunciation. He had given up his saffron clothing and had started wearing white clothing. His disciples knew him by both the names Ghor Angirasa and Arishtanemi.

A grand procession in embellished golden chariots was organized to welcome Ghor Angirasa in Dwaraka. The citizens of Dwaraka gave him a grand welcome showering him with flowers and acclaim. This venerable rishi stayed in Dwaraka for one whole month. Sri had arranged his stay in his own chamber near the Krishnasopana. Sri himself, Uddhavabhauji, myself, Revativahini, Subhadra, dada – we all were at his service. My seven sisters from the island also came to original Dwaraka to visit him and take his blessings. Every day the venerable rishi and Sri spent hours in discussions in Sri's chamber. The great rishi was a possessor of Divine Knowledge. That was indeed something Sri would never miss. Sri would pester him with many questions on different subjects. I always received the detailed information about their discussions from Uddhava *bhauji*.

Sri would ask questions to rishi Angirasa sometimes about ethics, politics and at times about warfare, and would get engrossed in listening to his answers with full concentration. Whichever Shastras they were discussing, Sri would inadvertently take him into the deep, thick forests of Divine Knowledge.

Initially Acharya Sandipani and Uddhavabhauji would also participate in those discussions. Afterwards both of them would just listen. Sometimes Ghor Angirasa would be unable to answer a keen question asked by Sri, and so he would hold both his earlobes with his fingers and close his eyes! He would automatically go into a meditative trance. During Ghor Angirasa's stay in Dwaraka, neither did Sri pay attention to any administrative duties, nor did he leave the island of Dwaraka to travel to any place else. He commanded all his wives and children to come to original Dwaraka to get the blessings of the venerable rishi. Then occasionally he would visit the twin island along with the rishi. Sometimes at Bhama's, Jambavati's, and Mitravinda's and sometimes at Bhadra's the rishi was respectfully invited and offered cordial feasts in the palaces of all the wives of Sri. Some feasts were organized in Balaramadada's chamber. Those arrangements were looked after by Revativahini and Subhadra. Sri's sons would ask many questions to the rishi. He would also become a child with them and answer all the questions with a

smile, without getting bored. Once my daughter Charu asked him such a question that even the rishi with Divine Knowledge was left nonplussed. She asked him, “Maharaja, you are one of us Yadavas, then tell me how you would punish Jarasandha if he destroyed your aashramas seventeen times?”

He kept silent as he couldn't answer that unexpected question. Then answering the question herself, Charu said, “It is very easy, just kill him!”

At that time, Sri who was listening to their conversation had turned quite serious by that answer. During rishi Angirasa's one month stay in Dwaraka, Revativahini's father, King Kakudmin came to Dwaraka two-three times to visit him. The rishi conversed with him for hours. I would get to hear some of their conversation while serving milk and fruits to them through the attendants. It was very captivating and meaningful.

King Kakudmin would always talk about *Ashwamedh-yajna*, universal conquest, warfare with complete engrossment. He would emphatically assert that Valour is the only Salvation for the Kshatriyas. Rishi Angirasa would listen to him calmly. Then slowly, in his honey-sweet words he would explain to him that non-violence, self-control and renunciation are the ultimate principles of Moksha. In the end, Kakudmin would humbly request him to bring his holy feet to Raivataka kingdom once.

The rishi would bid farewell to him saying, “Let us see when it happens. But once I will visit Mount Raivataka for sure.’

Sri would get quite influenced by the discussions with him. Sri had urged him to visit Dwaraka only to become his disciple. Once he also opened that topic with the rishi in the presence of Aacharya Sandipani and Gargamuni. Holding both his palms together Sri said to the rishi with utmost humility, “Bhagvan, I have spent more than half my life in performing all Kshatriya duties with dedication. Now I feel like surrendering the divine Sudarshan at the feet of an appropriate person and searching for the ultimate essence of life. I humbly request you to take me as your disciple and give me your blessings.”

At that point Ghor Angirasa laughed like a small child and said, “The ultimate essence of life? And am I the one who should teach it to ‘you’ Achyuta? Looks like your mischievous, impish disposition from Gokul has not vanished yet! If you say so I will become your Guru; that too, for my eternal fame – but not now – sometime later – when the time is right.”

Sri organized a grand ceremony in the Sudharma assembly to felicitate and honour Aacharya Ghor Angirasa, to show all the Yadavas in Dwaraka, how a

Yadava amongst them can reach the zenith with intense penance.

During the grand felicitation ceremony of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa Sri presented him with fine white vestures and a grand garland of white Ananta flowers at the hands of Vasudevababa. He also made Balaramadada declare, in the capacity of a prince, a gift of milk-yielding cows, sacks full of food grains, armed warrior guards and packs of agile dogs to guard the aashramas spread all over. Notably, Sri also declared his heartfelt wish to become the disciple of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa in the fully packed Yadava assembly.

As it is Sri was eloquent, nobody could compete with him in that domain. His speech in the Sudharma royal assembly on every occasion was engraved on my heart forever like a sculpture. Yet whatever he spoke while felicitating Aacharya Ghor Angirasa was unparalleled.

The essence of his speech was – “Just as the day and night are eternal forms of nature, valour and asceticism are the eternal principles of life. Oh, Yadava brothers, just like you, Aacharya Ghor Angirasa, a former Yadava, has performed valiant feats with weapons. Today he has come to Dwaraka to visit you and me, wearing white, peace-denoting vestures of an ascetic, over that valour. I implore him to oblige me by accepting me as his disciple and bless me.”

Even Aacharya Angirasa, who had such a balanced disposition, who had reached far beyond life, was moved by Sri’s humility. He set aside the reserved attitude that went with his white vestures and responded in his candid language, “Dear Yadava brothers, I belong to you indeed. It is because of your virtuous deeds of many lives that you have obtained a remarkable, exceptional mentor like Srikrishna. I earnestly advise you from the bottom of my heart never to disobey him, even mistakenly. It will never benefit you.

“He is imploring me in front of all of you, to accept him as my disciple. It is only with his blessings I am telling you that though I am senior to him in age, I have not yet reached the status to make ‘him’ my disciple. Whenever the time comes only then by his wish I will certainly fulfil that duty.”

Aacharya Angirasa bade farewell to Dwaraka and proceeded towards the north, leaving everybody desolate, including Sri. With his conduct, he had compelled the hot-headed, volatile Yadavas to think about life in a new light. He had given millions a new vision to look at Sri. It had been a month since the sage left, yet the people of Dwaraka kept talking about him.

Once again, the ensemble of musical instruments at the Shuddhaksha gate resounded just as it had for welcoming the rishi. For a moment, the citizens



of Dwaraka wondered whether rishi Ghor Angirasa had returned to Dwaraka, enamoured by Sri's charming Premayoga. But that was not the case. Venerable Pandava *Dhananjaya* – Arjuna, whose acclaim Revativahini, Vasudevababa, Thorali and Dhakali mata and I had been hearing was entering Dwaraka for the first time along with Dhaumya rishi. He entered Dwaraka in a huge boat. Sri was leaving his palace without waiting for anybody just as he had left immediately to meet rishi Angirasa. But *Partha* didn't give him that chance and presented himself promptly at Sri's feet. I hurried with my maids to see him in Sri's chamber near the sopana. I was baffled to see him in the Virasana pose at Sri's feet. For a moment, I thought that Sri himself was sitting in the Virasana pose!

Even I couldn't make out who was Sri and who was Arjuna when both of them embraced each other instantly!

But the moment he saw me he broke away from Sri's embrace and started walking briskly towards me to obtain my blessings. At that moment, I relaxed with joy that I had found a quirk to correctly distinguish both of them from each other.

Broad-chested, tall Arjuna was walking towards me; balancing his shapely body on his robust feet, like a warrior. My Sri was also a warrior, an archer holding the Sharanga bow. A mace champion brandishing the Kaumodaki mace. A sword champion wielding the Nandaka sword. A Chakradhara launching the Sudarshan. But I had never ever seen him walk like this – balancing his body on both feet. He always walked easily like a zephyr! As if drifting gently, like a tune of the flute!

Within moments venerable Pandava *Dhananjaya* – *Partha* stood in front of me; he knelt down and putting his head on my feet he said, "You need not have climbed the Srisopana. I was coming to visit you." At that moment, I smiled broadly. He thought that I was smiling because I was pleased to see his humility. But that smile was due to the fact that I had found another quirk when I heard him speak and that was his voice. Arjuna's voice was loud and clear, like an arrow hitting a rock. Sri's voice was sweet and charming like a flute. No matter when and how many times one heard it, one was never satiated. They indeed had distinct voices.

Pandu's son Arjuna had come to Dwaraka to formally invite all Yadavas to his elder brother Yudhishtira's coronation. He presented himself formally along with Dhaumya rishi, in front of Vasudevababa and Thorali mata and placed the invitation at the feet of the Yadav Maharaja and Maharani. Arjuna

who usually spoke in a loud and clear voice, spoke in a gentle and humble tone while presenting the invitation. He said “Maharaja, both of you, along with the prince and princess, Srikrishnadada, Rukminivahini, Maharaja Uddhava and all my brothers, are requested to join us at Indraprastha for the coronation ceremony of my elder brother, venerable Yudhishtiradada.”

Vasudevababa was impressed with his sincere humility. He got up from the royal throne and held Arjuna in his embrace and asked him, “Oh *Partha*, son, how is your mother, my sister Kunti doing?”

Arjuna was not only an expert archer but was also clever. He said, “Both of you should oblige us by coming to Indraprastha, at least to see her in person. She is doing well.”

The Yadava royal circle, ministers, all troop leaders and Yadava men and women packed in the Sudharma assembly were impressed and fascinated by the strong resemblance between Pandu’s son Arjuna and Sri in looks, behaviour and speech. They all started shouting acclamations in his name continuously. One Yadava lady sitting in the royal ladies’ chamber behind the soft curtain that was quivering on the waves of the acclamations was not only fascinated, but also mesmerized. She clearly saw the tall son of Pandu, even through the sheer curtain. She fancied him, approved him, and at that moment in the heart of her hearts she chose him to be her husband! She was Sri’s sister, Balaramadada’s favourite sister Subhadra. My dear Bhadra.

Arjuna stayed in Dwaraka for a week. During this time the citizens of Dwaraka witnessed many of his wonderful and extraordinary feats with his Gandiva bow. At that time, I chuckled in my mind to see the response of Subhadra sitting near me, to the archer holding the Gandiva bow. Poor Subhadra was not even aware of the fact that we were sitting in the gallery for the women spectators. As soon as the gaze of all the ladies in the gallery shifted from each arrow that Arjuna shot from his Gandiva bow, it would automatically turn to Subhadra cheering with a speed faster than the arrow itself. Our Subhadra had a crystal-clear heart, was extremely beautiful and was dear to all. But nobody had so far tried to find out what plans Balaramadada had for her.

Now there was excitement in Dwaraka to go for the coronation ceremony of Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas.

Vasudevababa was going to stay back in Dwaraka along with Thorali and Dhakali mata. For the protection of Dwaraka my brave, handsome son Pradyumna was going to accompany him.

The chariots of Balaramadada, Sri, Uddhavabhauji, Vipruthu, commanders Satyaki and Anadhrishti were going to leave last. As usual, Sri and Uddhavabhauji, Bhama and I were going to travel in the Garudadhwaaja chariot and Daruka was going to steer it. Today Daruka had adorned Garudadhwaaja exquisitely even without any instructions from Sri. He had mounted it on a huge boat and sitting in it he was waiting for all.

At the time of departure Vasudevababa himself came to the Shuddhaksha gate along with Thorali and Dhakali mata and Pradyumna. We bade farewell to all and left for Indraprastha.

A few halts were taken in the kingdoms of Marusthala and Dasharna. One stopover was on the borders of Viratanagar in the Matsya kingdom near Mount Arbuda. Everybody thought it will be a short one, but it was extended for two days on Sri's command. In Viratanagar he went to meet King Virata along with dada and Uddhavabhauji, carrying gift salvers. Balaramadada immediately noticed it, though nobody else realized it. As usual, pulling his dear brother's leg he asked, "My dear Lord of Dwaraka, are you thinking of becoming the son-in-law of the Viratas also?" Sri smiled sweetly as usual and said, "Now it is only the fulfilment of duty that I am married to. Who knows, if not the Yadavas, but the Pandavas may get connected to the Viratas through familial relations some time in future? Dada, everybody walks on the well-trodden path. Very few explore a new path." Sri was duly welcomed in Viratanagar. I met a new friend in Virata's wife – Maharani Sudeshna. Our last halt was on the banks of river Yamuna in Indraprastha kingdom. One fine evening we reached here. The next day, even before dawn Balaramdada entered Bhama's and my tent. He said in an apprehensive tone, "Rukmini, Dhakatyia and Uddhava are not to be seen anywhere. It's been a while. Where have they gone? You should look for them."

I smiled and said to him, "Don't worry at all dada, they must be here close by, probably giving instructions to somebody." Then straightforward dada laughed and said, "Usually I don't worry about anybody or anything at all, but I can't stop worrying about him. After all I am his dada!"

Bhama's and my laughter dissolved in his words. In a short while, a panting Yadava messenger entered our tent. He said, "Maharani, Kalindidevi has left from the next encampment to see the Lord, but she has not reached this encampment yet. We searched a lot for her, but we don't understand where she has gone in between!"

Now Bhama and I became anxious. Many search troops were sent in all

four directions in search for Kalindi. Nobody thought of looking for her near the steps of Yamuna. Half an hour passed by. A beautiful morning dawned on our encampment. Somehow, a few citizens of Indraprastha got wind of the Lord of Dwaraka's arrival on the banks of Yamuna. The crowd there kept growing every moment. Now it was getting harder to look for Sri, *bhauji* and Kalindi. All of a sudden, we saw Sri and Uddhavabhauji coming in plain vestures, surrounded by a few citizens of Indraprastha. We felt relieved. Seeing Kalindi in white clothes, coming after them, our worries faded away. They all were coming from the ghats of Yamuna.

Later we came to know that as soon as we camped on the banks of Yamuna Sri called for Uddhavabhauji at night and shared a special idea with him; that only both of them will go to Yamuna early morning the next day, to swim to their hearts content. He had purposefully excluded dada from this scheme, because if he would have come the secret dip would have become a grand display! Kalindi had returned from the next encampment, that too to fulfil a vow that she had made along with Sri some time back. She had very skilfully accomplished that virtuous task. Among my seven sisters Kalindi was intelligent like Jambavati.

I was completely wonderstruck when I stepped onto the holy land of Indraprastha with Sri, dada, *bhauji* and Bhama after we entered the city in ships with the Garudadhawaja. The western gate of Indraprastha named 'Kuru' was crowded with the citizens who adored Pandavas. To welcome Sri, Rajmata Kuntidevi was present in person along with all five Pandavas and Draupadi, their family priest Dhaumya rishi, Panchal king Drupada, Maharani Sautramani, Prince Dhrishtadyumna, commanders of both armies, chief minister, and sages Yaaja, Upayaaja, Asitadevala along with many disciples. Sri took a good look at everyone with his keen eyes. Not a single Kaurava of Hastinapura was present.

The ensemble of Indraprastha's musicians raised a loud chorus of musical instruments to welcome Sri. Formalities were completed by putting a garland around his neck and paying obeisance. Rapturous citizens of Indraprastha showered vermilion and flowers on Sri, dada, *bhauji* and Daruka.

Amidst the continuous acclamations by the citizens of Indraprastha, the Garudadhawaja chariot of the Yadavas and the Nandighosha chariot of the Pandavas began moving slowly one after the other. The welcome procession had begun.

Spellbound, I simply kept looking on both sides. As if somebody had gently

lifted the beautiful Dwaraka surrounded by the western ocean and placed it here on the banks of Yamuna.

Indraprastha! The royal capital of the Pandavas! An unmatched sculpture raised by indomitable manly prowess! Well-built, lofty edifices, capacious temples with decorative domes, special practice arenas for various kinds of combats, stables full of horses and camels, fenced pits for goat and cock fights, grand intersections connecting four paths, well-polished iron statues of valiant warriors in different costumes and different war-poses located at those intersections, gardens bustling with sprawling trees covered with creepers and the cacophony of chirping birds, and the crystal clear springs visible from far away. I kept looking at the royal city without blinking my eyes. I found this royal city a tiny bit better than even Dwaraka.

There was only one thing lacking here – the continuous roaring sound of the ocean was not audible here like in Dwaraka. That is why I felt that Indraprastha was very quiet. For me each word uttered by Sri was true, like the mantras of the Vedas. He had said many a time during the creation of this city, “Rukmini, you will see, as long as the sun and moon exist Indraprastha will be renowned. It will be perpetually famous for some thing or the other. This royal city of the Pandavas will be immortal.”

The formal coronation ceremony of Yudhishtira lasted for an entire week. During this time, many kings of various kingdoms stayed in the Pandava royal palace with plenty of chambers. The wide bed of Yamuna was full of the boats that they had brought and anchored at various places. Many royal pennants with different colours proudly fluttered atop their masts. The royal altar of Indraprastha continuously echoed with the chanting of mantras by the sages who were well versed in the Vedas and came from different kingdoms.

All the initial formalities were completed. *maharathi* Yudhishtira and Draupadi were looking a little thin as they had kept a fast for the rituals. But the radiance of the supreme contentment spread on their faces was very unique. Actually, I had met and talked with Draupadi as soon as I came, but that was not enough for me. It was not even possible this time. In our first meeting itself, I felt strongly that though dusky she was indeed extremely beautiful, statuesque and graceful. She had thick hair, fragrant skin, a sharp and determined voice, bright, black, large eyes. And yes, she indeed possessed such a proportionate figure that could have appealed to any macho man.

The day of the enthronement of the eldest son of Pandu, *maharathi*

Yudhishtira on the grand golden royal throne of Indraprastha dawned. The proposed king Yudhishtira and queen Draupadi finished their ritualistic baths amidst the loud chanting of mantras. Everybody got ready wearing exquisitely fine royal attires and golden ornaments. The five valiant brothers entered our chamber together to meet Sri and me and seek our blessings. Arjuna looked so handsome today that he could have been susceptible to an evil eye.

After seeking our blessings, while all the brothers were engaged in pleasantries with us, the commander of Indraprastha came almost running. He bowed down to Sri instead of Yudhishtira or Arjuna and presented important news. He said, “Venerable Lord of Dwaraka, grandsire Bhishma from Hastinapura has arrived in Indraprastha, to offer blessings to the eldest son of Pandu. Mahatma Vidura and minister Sanjaya are also with him.”

Sri listened to the news and to confirm it, asked him, “Who else has come?”  
“Only the select army of grandsire. Nobody else.”

Sri listened to it and smiling sweetly as usual Sri exclaimed, “Commander, come, let us go to welcome grandsire.”

Accordingly, he left for the northern gate named ‘Shursena’ on the banks of Yamuna, along with Uddhavabhauji.

It was good that the proposed king Yudhishtira was going to get the blessings of the grandsire at least.

On the given *Muhurta* the coronation took place in the royal assembly of Indraprastha named ‘Harikripa’. The chief of the *Abhishek*, family priest of the Pandavas, Dhaumya rishi removed the twisted turban of the Kurus from Yudhishtira’s head and replaced it with the golden royal crown engraved with tracery, amidst loud chanting of the mantras. A small triangular, similar kind of queen’s diadem engraved with tracery was placed on Draupadi’s head. At that moment, the royal assembly ‘Harikripa’ reverberated with the sound of many royal instruments. The assembled kings and the jubilant men and women of Indraprastha showered their king and queen with flowers and vermilion. An acclamation in honour of the new king arose, ‘Hail the Lord of Indraprastha, the pride of the Pandava clan, Maharaja Yudhishtira’. Thousands of voices repeated it. Even the agile ripples on the waters of Yamuna were thrilled to hear it.

Rapturous Indraprastha got engrossed in dancing, singing and playing various games in the squares of the city for the entire day. That evening our Subhadra who had returned after taking a tour of Indraprastha – the royal city

of Pandavas, seemed very different to me. Her face looked as if hundreds of pigeons were about to soar from it. I questioned her persistently, “Subhadra, I hope you have not left out something to be seen or assessed in Indraprastha! Clever Subhadra answered, “Sushri, I have seen the entire Indraprastha. Nothing left out at all.”

It was obvious that she had returned after touring Indraprastha in the Nandighosha chariot. I gently patted her on the back and said, “Some women are fortunate enough to be a queen even without being crowned as such.” She smiled so sweetly at that time.

Yudhishtira’s coronation ceremony that became famous throughout Aaryavarta got over. The invitees began returning. Though Maharani Draupadi was occupied in bidding farewell to all, she was meeting Sri under some pretext or the other. She kept asking him many questions like a small girl.

Listening to their easy conversation for hours was an inexpressible joy. I immediately realized one thing through their conversations. Draupadi was talking to Sri freely and addressing him simply without attaching an honorific. In Sri’s case, only the elders could do that. I could have never talked to him like this, leave alone my other sisters in Dwaraka.

Just as I had deduced about Arjuna and Sri in Dwaraka itself, so I did about both Radhika and Draupadi here in Indraprastha. Radha, whom I had never met, was the pleasant image in Sri’s mind of the ideal hardworking village woman. Draupadi was the pleasant image of the ideal royal woman.

Draupadi always honoured and respected me earnestly. Taking advantage of that nowadays I was meeting Draupadi, always accompanied by our beautiful and playful Subhadra, before leaving Indraprastha. Draupadi greatly admired her as Sri’s sister. If at all, for any reason, any elderly woman spoke a little harsher with playful Subhadra, Draupadi would immediately stand up for Subhadra and silence the other woman. I would smile at such times, and say to Draupadi, “Oh Pandava Maharani, please don’t praise this Yadava daughter so much. Sometimes things appear simpler from a distance than they actually are. I invite you to come to Dwaraka once with your Archer. Then you will see her qualities.”

Sri’s councils with Pandava-Maharaja Yudhishtira and Rajmata Kuntidevi automatically increased before leaving for Dwaraka. In one such council Sri put forth a proposal to Kuntidevi and all the Pandavas; a simple one and agreeable to all. Sri said, “Now the acclaim of the Indraprastha kingdom

would pervade through the entire Aaryavarta. You gallant brothers should embark on a world conquest by every one of you conquering one direction each and expanding the glory of Indraprastha in all directions. Leave it to your new Maharaja to decide who will go with the army in which direction.

A grand ceremonial coronation of a kingdom's ruler is not sufficient. The royal throne on which he is enthroned should be honoured everywhere. There is only one way to achieve this. Grand heroic exploits! For that purpose, Dwaraka will always be there to supply Indraprastha, which is a close ally of the Yadavas, with the four-fold army, elephants, horses, weapons and wealth.

The most important thing right now is the protection of your newly built kingdom! That is why I am presenting a proposal with foresight. I have no doubt that all of you are valiant. Yet the responsibility of the protection of Indraprastha is eventually going to fall more on the shoulders of only two – Arjuna and mighty Bhima.

Therefore, to become incomparably skillful in mace fighting and wrestling, Bhimsena, who is already well versed in those skills should be sent right away as the disciple of our Balaramadada who is a maestro in those skills.”

On that, Maharaja Yudhishthira glanced at Rajmata Kuntidevi in the council, in expectation of a decision. As she nodded affirmatively Maharaja gave his word to the Lord of Dwaraka – “As per Srikrishna's wish Bhimsena will go to Dwaraka. We will leave Indraprastha for the world conquest, as soon as he returns after completing his training. I request Balaramadada to train my brother. Also, I request Srikrishna to give us his blessings for the world conquest.

We bade farewell to all in Indraprastha and returned to Dwaraka along with dada, Sri and Uddhavabhauji as decided. This time the mighty Bhimsena was also there in dada's chariot. A mammoth crowd awaited us at the Shuddhaksha gate as a messenger was sent ahead to Dwaraka to deliver the news. A bigger crowd of Yadavas of Dwaraka had come to see Bhimsena in person, than they had come to see Pandu's son Arjuna earlier.

Till today I had respectfully regarded Balaramadada as incomparable in physical strength. But looking at Pandu's son, mighty Bhimsena sitting in his chariot, I felt that just like Arjuna can be the shadow of Sri, Bhimsena can become dada's shadow. To see both of them together was like seeing Mount Kailas and Mainaka in a single glance. As soon as they saw the mighty, muscular, ruddy fair physique of Bhimsena, the already eager Yadavas excitedly showered flowers on him.



After the arrival of gurudeva Angirasa, Dwaraka had experienced a wave of energy, of sacrifice and worship of wisdom. When Arjuna arrived, another wave arose in Dwaraka – that of archery, of seeing Sri’s shadow in person. With Bhimsena’s arrival a wave arose in Dwaraka – that of wrestling – of clanking mace fights – of unprecedented joy to get to see Balaramadada’s shadow in person.

Now it was as if the entire Dwaraka had turned into a grand wrestling pit and a huge battlefield of mace fights. Expert, mighty wrestlers from the neighbouring kingdoms such as Aanarta, Saurashtra, Sauvira, and Bhrigukachchha who had come to stay in Dwaraka, were seen roaming everywhere. Skilled ironsmiths who could manufacture different kinds of maces arrived in Dwaraka.

In Indraprastha the entire Pandava family settled down after the coronation ceremony of Yudhishtira. The Pandavas along with Kuntimata and Draupadi had decided upon the rules of conduct for the family, in a secret council. One of the rules decided which days Draupadi would spend with which husband in privacy. During that period, none of the remaining four brothers were permitted to enter the private chamber. One such time while Yudhishtira and Draupadi were in the private chamber a Brahmin’s cows were being abducted. Arjuna needed his Gandiva bow to protect the cows of the Brahmin. Arjuna had no alternative but to enter the private chamber in the night to obtain the Gandiva bow which was left there at night. As per the rule he had to face the consequence of going on a pilgrimage for one year. The news of Arjuna’s departure from Indraprastha as a pilgrim arrived in Dwaraka. Sri became solemn initially on hearing the news. Then smiling his charming smile as usual he said to me, “Surely, Arjuna will visit us within a year now.”

Balaramdada now got engrossed in the gymnasium for Bhimsena’s training in both the skills. He was so occupied in it that he couldn’t even take out some time to meet and pay obeisance to Vasudevababa, Thorali and Dhakali mata except in the morning and evening. Not only that, he was not able to meet Revativahini except for meals twice a day. Nowadays Sri also started having continuous discussions with commander Satyaki and Anadhrishti in the Sudharma assembly. As per what Uddhavabhauji had conveyed to me those discussions were only about Jarasandha – the Magadha emperor of Girivraja. Both the brothers were not paying any attention at all towards their sister Subhadra who had come of age. Both were still treating her like an

innocent young child. Now it became my responsibility to make them realize that she was of marriageable age and it was necessary to find a suitable groom – a life partner for her at the right time. To me Subhadra was like my daughter Charumati. Therefore, I sincerely took the task upon me. I chose the day of Gurupournima for that purpose. I specially invited Acharya Sandipani along with his wife and son Dutta. Through Uddhavabhauji I brought both dada and Sri together for a luncheon on the island of Queens' mansions.

As a Maharani, that day I also made arrangements to bring together the entire royal family including Vasudevababa, both Maharanis, and Revativahini. Everyone finished their gourmet meal in the midst of dada's hearty laughter and Sri's gentle humour. Finally, it was time to eat betel leaves. At that time, I skilfully instructed Daruka to get Garudadhvaja ready to drop off acharya and his family in original Dwaraka. I instructed Bhimsena to accompany acharya and Subhadra to accompany acharya's wife. I also took care to send Kalindi and Jambavati along with her so that she wouldn't feel lonely. Now the dining room was the way I wanted it to be. Then I presented the topic of Subhadra's wedding in front of the royal family. Revativahini seconded me as if we had already discussed the issue. I rarely found the entire family at one place. Today I found that opportunity and I decided to take full advantage of it. I said, "I should not speak in the presence of Vasudevababa, both rajmatas, dada and *vahini*. But forgive me for speaking as I have waited long enough and now I cannot be reticent.

You all are elderly, valiant and wise. You rehabilitated thousands of women of the Kamarupa kingdom in Dwaraka. What about family though? Our Subhadra has come of age. What about her Swayamwar? Is anyone of you ever going to get some time to pay attention to her at all?"

As he heard my appeal Vasudevababa immediately said, "What Rukmini says is right. But we are tired and old. Now Prince Balarama should take the initiative to get this done. He should choose a suitable groom for Subhadra. Srikrishna should help him in every possible way to that effect. Srikrishna will definitely look after her welfare. Our blessings are with him."

By this time Balaramadada who was laughing loudly so far turned pensive when he heard the commanding voice of baba. With determination, he said, "Subhadra is our most favourite sister. Vasudevababa need not worry about her wedding. I have already chosen a perfect groom for her! I am sure Rukmini will also like and approve of him. And once she approves then there is no question of Dhakata objecting to it! Right Srikrishna?"

Naïve dada put Sri in a quandary in front of all without even mentioning the name of the groom. But Sri was one up! Without any delay, he smiled and asked a counter question, “Dada, you are seeking my approval without even mentioning the name of the groom. Will even Revativahini be able to answer, if she is asked about the position of the sun before dawn?”

Dada immediately realized that now his dear brother was going to bombard him with such questions and corner him. He became wary and hastily put forth another question again like a puzzle – “The groom is from the Kuru family. He is valiant. Now you tell me Dhakatyā – who could he be?” He put forth another question again.

“From the Kuru family? Valiant? Who else could it be but one of the Pandavas?” Uddhavabhouji interrupted.

“When you speak Uddhava, I take it that Srikrishna has spoken through you. The groom that I have chosen for Subhadra is from the Kuru family, but not one of the Pandavas. He is one of the Kauravas – he is the prince. Soon he will be formally crowned king of Hastinapura. The groom I have chosen for Subhadra is the son of Maharaja Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura – Prince Duryodhana!”

Hearing dada’s choice the entire family fell silent. Dada continued further under the misconception that everybody was bedazzled after hearing the unexpected name – “Duryodhana is my disciple in mace-fighting. He came to Mithila and obtained this Vidya with diligence and humility after serving me well. In my opinion, if at all I understand anything about mace-fighting, then Duryodhana is an unmatched mace warrior in the entire Aaryavarta. Our Dwaraka kingdom will gain more strength if we form familial relations with the Hastinapura kingdom. I have complete faith, that my favourite disciple Duryodhana will never disobey my word. Therefore, as a suitable match for my dear sister I have chosen Duryodhana as her groom. What do you say Srikrishna? Share your honest opinion about the groom with all, in this council itself. I want no confusion later. I am asking you because you have a tendency to create confusion at the last minute. I am a wrestler from the red soil, outspoken and open-minded. You are a wrestler of diplomacy – crafty and cunning!”

Dada’s direct question left the family council shaken, and silent. Everybody began staring at Sri in anticipation of how he was going to answer that question. Only Sri said with a smile, without getting disturbed at all, “Dada, how can your choice of the groom for our dear sister be wrong at all? After

all you are the senior – the prince; your choice is bound to be perfect. How can we disobey your word? Even I have heard that the valiant Kuru warrior Duryodhana is the ultimate in mace-fighting. He is unmatched in the entire Aaryavarta. But it is Subhadra’s Swayamwar; not yours or mine! Taking the meaning of ‘Swayamwar’ into account shouldn’t we at least ask her if she has anybody in mind whom she would like as her groom? If it is the Kaurava prince Duryodhana itself, then there is no problem at all. In that case, tomorrow itself we will get our dear Subhadra married with great pomp. What do you say?” Everyone spoke in unison responding to Sri’s perfect solution saying, “What Srikrishna is saying is right.” I breathed a sigh of relief, in satisfaction that I had sensibly made Bhimsena and Subhadra leave after today’s luncheon.

Oh, how naive I was! Even after taking so much precaution the news of Subhadra’s wedding spread throughout Dwaraka within no time. Curious Yadavas began whispering in low voices on the streets ‘Groom – Duryodhana, Subhadra’s husband – Duryodhana’. Somehow the news reached Subhadra too. After all she was also a Yadava daughter. She stormed into my chamber and said, “Sushri, what’s all this that I hear? Are all of you going to forcibly marry me off to that insolent, egotistical son of a blind man? Have I become that much of a burden to the Yadavas? Sushri, I am explicitly telling you to tell both my brothers firmly that I will never go to Hastinapura as the daughter-in-law of the Kauravas! If such a time ever comes, I will take shelter in the womb of western ocean!” After all she was also a Yadava by birth! Even more obstinate and headstrong than Balaramadada.

In Indraprastha itself I had recognized that she had given her heart to the archer – *Dhananjaya*. Still, acting as if I had no clue I said, “Subhadra, why are you acting so silly? You will be the Maharani of Hastinapura tomorrow. Have you even realized how wealthy and powerful you will be?”

Usually she would talk to me with respect, but since I touched her sore spot, the ‘Yadava’ woman in her awoke. She stared at me and said, “Then why didn’t you choose to be the Maharani of the Chedis? Why did you choose to spend the rest of your life with a cowherd?” She spoke intensely in her outburst, and then on her own she realized that she had called her dear brother a cowherd. Instantly she hid her face in her palms, which reddened with her sobbing.

I affectionately embraced her and said while patting, “Bhadre, be calm, be quiet. Your heart’s desire will be fulfilled. Do only one thing – if

Balaramdada asks you, tell him that you will get married to whoever your Srikrishnadada approves. Don't keep crying like a weakling henceforth, and stay closer to Sri. Listen carefully to whatever he tells you and follow it precisely. Your wish will be fulfilled for sure." She became sentimental now and embracing me tightly she spoke while sobbing, "Forgive – forgive me Sushri. I spoke wrongly with you. How come I behaved like an insolent person while calling somebody else the same!" She couldn't even weep properly as her love and respect for me was outpouring in heaving sobs.

Then without speaking a word, I gently kept patting her and consoled her just like I would do for my Charu. After some time when she regained her composure I said, "Bhadra, Sri is indeed a matchless cowherd whom I love, the best one in the entire Aaryavarta. Just now I shared with you a few of his thoughts that I was lucky to have the opportunity to hear. Even I have no clue as to how many more such thoughts that extraordinary cowherd carries with him! For the same reason, as his wife I am always extremely proud of him. You are his sister after all. What can I tell you?"

Now Subhadra put her head on my shoulder and kept weeping. I continued patting her like her own mother Rohinimata.

Now in Dwaraka the drama of Subhadra's wedding, of the beautiful and virtuous daughter of all the Yadavas, got more and more intriguing.

Soon Bhimsena's training was over. The Yadavas felicitated him in a grand celebration in the Sudharma assembly to bid farewell to him. Muscular, mighty, well-built Bhimsena was honoured in an overcrowded hall. Sri himself put a six-feet-long, fresh, red lotus garland around his muscular neck. A huge mace which dada had gotten moulded like his own, was charmed with chanting of mantras that imparted energy. Amidst the continuous applause of thousands of Yadavas, dada put the shining mace on Bhimsena's shoulders as strong as an elephant, and embraced him deeply. Dada, who usually did not speak in the assembly couldn't hold himself back today. He signalled to Sri and got up. Speaking expressly, he said, "From today Pandu's son Bhimsena has become my disciple who has successfully completed training in wrestling and mace-fighting. Actually, Duryodhana, venerable Kuru prince, the son of Dhritarashtra, is my first disciple. There is no doubt that both of them are equally proficient in these skills. Yet it is true that as my first disciple I love Duryodhana a bit more. Soon I am going to forge a bond of relations between the Yadavas and Hastinapura. I believe that Duryodhana and Bhimsena will always support the kingdom of Dwaraka. I give my

heartiest blessings to valiant Bhimsena for the journey of his life. May all be well with Pandu's son Bhimsena, may victory be with him!"

This time Sri was not going to speak, but the eyes of thousands of amassed Yadavas were stuck only on him. First there were whispers. Then there was a clear demand – “Arise oh Lord of Dwaraka, speak. Give your best wishes to dear Bhimsena.” At that point Sri looked at me and Uddhavabhauji sitting next to him with a smile and got up. As he raised his right hand and lifted the index finger the assembly fell silent. The twin tooth shone, and rosy lips smiled. Selected but meaningful luminous words were showered in the Sudharma assembly – “Dear Yadava brothers, as long as our dear mace warrior and wrestler Balaramadada is there, I don't think Dwaraka will ever be in need of Bhimsena's assistance. On the contrary the newly built Indraprastha kingdom may need the valour of dada, if at all. I can understand dada's inclination towards Duryodhana as his first disciple and as a prince like himself. At this moment, I wish to say only this much – mighty Bhimsena's invincible strength will always be required – but for a very different reason! Hence, I have a plan for a future bond of relations with Indraprastha. Even today Bhimsena is our relative, our *aate bandhu*. Soon he will be much more closely related to us. For that, I give him my heartiest best wishes. Hail Bhimsena. May victory be with you!”

Bhimsena bade farewell to the Yadavas of Dwaraka and left for Indraprastha.

Balaramadada had now reached the decision to form a marriage alliance with the puissant Kuru kingdom of Hastinapura. He had shut his eyes to Sri's frequent, straightforward or indirect suggestions of 'seeking Subhadra's approval'. He had already dispatched minister Vipruthu and his loyal brother Gada to Hastinapura in order to get Subhadra betrothed to the Kuru prince Duryodhana. After all Sri was younger than him. Dada was the prince. Sri was indeed very clever, but this familial situation had put him in a predicament. I immediately realized how stifling the situation was for him. Now, first and foremost, faster moves had to be made to halt the Duryodhana-Subhadra wedding. Otherwise our virtuous, dear Bhadra was going to droop in the company of Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers like a delicate creeper slumping in a windy storm.

Nowadays, Sri talked only to me about Subhadra in a low, whispering voice. This was indeed a war of intellect – against the mace warrior prince. Revativahini was obviously going to support dada as his wife. What to do?

Restless Sri once said to me, “There is no clue where that master archer *Dhananjaya* is wandering throughout Aryavarta for his pilgrimage. Our best spies have hunted for him in all directions.”

What was I going to suggest to him after all? I couldn’t keep quiet and said, “You always visit the holy place of Prabhas for your peace of mind. You should try it this time. The charities and bathing in the holy place will calm down your mind. Then you will be able to think better.”

Hearing my suggestion Sri laughed cheerfully, and said, “Rukmini, you are such a mind reader! Even I was thinking about the holy place of Prabhas.”

Sri gave orders to prepare for the journey to the holy place. Then Sri went to meet his brother and urged him, “Dada, you also come to the holy place of Prabhas. Subhadra’s royal wedding is due. So, let us offer some charities and bathe in the holy water.”

Dada lovingly patted his shoulders and said, “You go and perform all the rituals on my behalf. I cannot move from here. Prince Duryodhana will be in Dwaraka any time now for the betrothal ceremony.”

Sri left alone for Prabhas along with select Yadava warriors. I had estimated that he won’t be back for at least a fortnight. But something unexpected happened. He returned immediately from Prabhas, with complete peace of mind! As soon as he came he met me in private in our inner chambers and said, “Rukmini, I met *Partha* at Prabhas! Everything has become easy now. He is dressed up as an ascetic in saffron vestures. He is not easily recognizable as he has grown a beard. I have instructed him to come immediately to the Shiva temple of Somanath near Veravala. Uddhava will leave tomorrow itself for Somanath. He will return with joyful news for the citizens of Dwaraka that an ascetic ‘Shivayogi’ who has performed penance in the cave of the Himalayas, has arrived in the Shiva temple of Somanath to make up for the lack of such an ascetic here. The citizens of Dwaraka will believe this blindly as it is going to come from Uddhava. Men and women will form queues at Somanath to visit the Shivayogi. You should also go with Subhadra to meet him! How does that sound?”

The drama of Subhadra’s wedding was now going to take place across the region of Prabhas, Somanath, Dwaraka and Raivataka. The main stage of this drama was going to be Mount Raivataka and the family deity temple of the Raivatakas.

Now I started getting a very rare glimpse of Sri that I had never experienced in my life. He was the courageous one who determinedly

punished the unjust and insolent ones. He was an expert ruler who immediately put his plans into action. A brilliant philosopher who discussed philosophy with great sages. A Premayogi who loved all young and old people of Dwaraka from the bottom of his heart. Was there any quality that he did not possess? He was a brave commander, a maestro of music, an expert in the war of maces, daggers, bow and arrows, an inspiring orator who left the audience of Sudharma royal assembly spellbound and captivated. He was an accomplished expert of all fine arts, skills and Vidyas. But these days I had started experiencing that in the matters of our delicate, familial issues he had become a fine actor. Even I was astonished to see that.

He would welcome Balaramadada in our chamber with a broad smile on his face. He never explicitly told Balaramadada, 'You are making a big and irreversible mistake by betrothing Subhadra to Duryodhana'. Had he said so, it might have been a blow to the honour of his elder brother that he had been respecting since childhood. He didn't want that to happen at all. He had already realized that Subhadra had given her heart to Arjuna. Her life was to be saved from getting nipped in the bud. He had already knew in his heart that only Arjuna was the perfect groom for his sister Subhadra.

I went to the Shiva temple at Somanath with Subhadra as per Sri's plan. I visited and paid obeisance to Lord Shiva. Subhadra visited and paid obeisance to Lord Shiva as well as the Shivayogi. I waited outside the temple, listening to the sound of the western ocean so that both of them could talk freely. At that time, I strongly remembered the urgent epistle that I had sent from Kundinapura so many years before. Subhadra was also standing at a similar crossroads of her life. But I had full faith that Subhadra was indeed going to be Arjuna's wife.

On Revativahini's insistence and as per the Yadava tradition Subhadra was to travel to Mount Raivataka as the new bride to be. She was going to visit the mountain goddess and seek blessings for her future life. That was exactly when Arjuna was supposed to abduct her. The Raivataka king Kakudmin was going to be the major hurdle in this process. Kakudmin was renowned for unerringly capturing huge roaring lions alive in the hidden traps placed by his hunting troops. It was impossible for saffron-clad Arjuna to escape from his army. Above all, ascetic Arjuna didn't even have the much-needed armed chariot that he could have placed at the base of the mountain to abduct Yadava-daughter Subhadra. He didn't have any armed guards essential for this thrilling act. The distance between Mount Raivataka and Indraprastha



was also quite a bit.

It was a specialty of Sri that in any campaign he would first try to anticipate what all could possibly go wrong or be a hindrance and with his transcendental genius he would find perfect solutions well in time.

He himself had suggested the ‘abduction of Subhadra’ which Arjuna on his own could have never thought of. He had also smilingly removed all doubts from Arjuna’s mind.

The news arrived that Prince Duryodhana had begun his journey for Dwaraka from Hastinapura for the betrothal ceremony. An informer presented the news in the council of Balaramadada and Sri that the mammoth four-fold army of the Kurus was accompanying him. Then the Prince ordered elaborate adornment of the four gates including Shuddhaksha. Dada did not let Satyaki and Anadhrishti rest even for a moment. Sri was directing their attention to the subtle details of dada’s commands. Exhausted, Balaramadada sat down after giving detailed instructions about the preparations for the welcome. At that time, while ordering his attendants to make preparations for his visit to the ocean Sri casually presented an idea. It seemed very attractive and was going to be effective.

Sri presented himself in front of dada and bowing with respect he said, “Balaramadada, sometimes we miss the big things inadvertently; things easy to think of and applying while otherwise taking care of every small detail. Once the time is gone, however, we end up regretting not doing them.”

Exhausted and drained Balaramadada smilingly said, “Dhakatya, why are you talking in riddles? Whatever it is just say it freely. Do you think there is something missing in our preparations for the welcome of Prince Duryodhana?”

“I have a humble request. See if you agree with it, dada. There is nothing amiss actually. What could possibly be lacking when you are the Prince of Dwaraka? But still I think that we should invite your father-in-law, Raivataka Maharaja Kakudmin along with his army, to welcome the puissant Kuru prince Duryodhana. Prince Duryodhana will be elated to see both of us and him to welcome him. I think it will be as wonderful as gold and fragrance put together.

Hearing that, dada who was sitting tired and exhausted, stood up at once and said, “You are right. I am not good at such subtleties. I will send Satyaki with the invitation to Raivataka today itself.”

Sri gave a very charming smile and said, “Also convey my humble

obeisance to Maharaja Kakudmin through him.” Sri left for a swim in the ocean.

The very next day, after confirming that commander Satyaki has left for Raivataka, carrying gift salvers for the Raivataka king from the prince’s chamber, Sri also dispatched his special informers in two directions. One of the troops left to visit all those kingdoms lying between Raivataka and Indraprastha which Arjuna and Subhadra would be passing through in a chariot. They were going to offer gift salvers sent by the Lord of Dwaraka to kings of countries like Anarta, Dasharna, and Matsya and deliver a special message to them. The message was, ‘Our *aate bandhu*, Arjuna along with our sister Subhadra is passing through your kingdom towards Indraprastha, in a chariot with the Kapidhwaja pennant. Please offer your heartiest support to him and strengthen the friendship with Dwaraka’.

The second troop was led by Sri’s most loyal brother – Uddhavabhauji. It was going directly to the Shiva temple of Somanath, with an embellished, armed chariot with Arjuna’s Kapidhwaja pennant on its flagpole. The chariot also carried royal attire and weapons for Arjuna.

Sri told me all this in detail. I invited Subhadra to my chamber and explained it to her thoroughly. Subhadra had transformed a lot in the meantime. Her face glowed with resolve. Seeing her in front of me, I thought whether I looked the same when I sat in the chariot with Sri. Sri had planned everything thoroughly; still I was getting more and more anxious every moment, due to only one fear. Once Balaramadada comes to know all this, will Sri once again be left bereft of his love like before? Will the peacock feather of brotherly love that once was tucked into Sri’s crown in front of all remain intact or will it come loose?

It was indeed my duty to assist Sri in this mission as much as possible. Therefore, I started visiting Revativahini’s chamber under some pretext or the other. She realized that and said to me, “Oh Rukmini, I see how much you love Subhadra!”

Maharaja Kakudmin arrived in Dwaraka as per the invitation. Uddhavabhauji also returned after finishing his important task.

Now the climax of the drama began. The news arrived that Prince Duryodhana would soon be reaching the Shuddhaksha gate. Subhadra also left for Mount Raivataka along with Revativahini, a bevy of maids and a troop of guards. The ascetic devotee of Shiva in the temple of Somanath blessed all devotees of Shiva and changed his saffron clothing. The year of

his pilgrimage was also over. During this time, though he was a pilgrim he had wedded the Naga-daughter Uloopi by the Gandharva custom of marriage, on the banks of Ganga in the north. Uloopi was the daughter of the Naga king Kauravya, and she was a child widow. Her father-in-law Airavata had granted permission for the Gandharva marriage. Arjuna was also wedded to Chitrangada – the daughter of Chitravahana – the king of Manipura. Notably, Arjuna had conveyed all these details to me through Uddhavabhouji. He had also not forgotten to request that all these details be conveyed to Subhadra and see if she was still ready for this marriage. I had already done that at the right time.

I shared all these details with Subhadra in private. After hearing all this she fell silent for a moment. She was lost in thought. At that point alerting her I said, “After all Arjuna is your Sri dada’s *aate bandhu*. More than that, he is Sri’s most favourite disciple. What else is he going to do but follow in his Guru’s footsteps? You are lucky, that he has only three previous wives. Like me...”

At that point she immediately raised her head and breaking her silence she said, “Sushri, I am not worthy enough to be compared with you. I have considered only you as my idol in my life. No matter what, I will get married to the son of Pandu.” She had left no doubts at all. She had left for Mount Raivataka only after expressing her firm resolve.

The temple of Raivataka’s family goddess was at the base of the mountain. On the fixed *Muhurta*, Subhadra descended the mountain to visit the goddess, along with Revativahini, female attendants and a troop of guards. Many sages and Brahmin priests had gathered at the entrance of the temple. As soon as Subhadra entered the temple with Revativahini Arjuna brought his Kapidhwaj chariot inside the temple area. Subhadra paid obeisance to the goddess and was coming out of the temple with *vahini*. At that time, as per Sri’s instructions the Brahmin priests surrounded Revativahini for Dakshina, chanting acclamations in the name of Maharaja Kakudmin. Arjuna grabbed this opportunity and blew his Devadutta conch from his chariot, raising his head high. Subhadra picked the signal of the conch and keeping her eyes on the Kapidhwaja she briskly walked towards the chariot. Arjuna also leapt down from the chariot, approached her, and lovingly offered his hand to gently take her into the chariot. Instantly he tugged at the reins and signalled the horses to run. Immediately the four bright white horses galloped from the base of Raivataka towards Indraprastha, carrying the Kuru archer and the

Yadava daughter.

Subhadra's abduction was successfully carried out without any hurdle, as per Sri's plan. I breathed a sigh of relief when the news of the successful mission arrived at Dwaraka. But a furore erupted amongst the Yadavas of Dwaraka. Still, Sri climbed up onto the charity platform to offer golden jewellery and cows in charity on the occasion of the wedding of his sister. Kuru prince Duryodhana who was travelling towards Dwaraka and had reached Saurashtra, became uncontrollably furious. He could not send any harsh message to dada who was his Guru. Therefore, he just sent a message 'We are returning to Hastinapura' and returned along with his army, fretting and fuming. At least for now he was out of luck with regard to his arrival in Dwaraka and being honoured by the Yadavas. Getting Yadava-daughter Subhadra was out of the question!

Enraged, Balaramadada directly approached the platform for charities. With eyes glaring he roared furiously, "Dhakatya, what's all this drama? Who do you think you are?" He couldn't even speak further as he was shaking with anger. Sri quietly gave him a charming smile as usual, and first touching Maharaja Kakudmin's feet and then dada's feet, he pulled out his ultimate weapon that left everybody stunned. Looking at Maharaja Kakudmin with a smile he said, "Respected Maharaja, I request you to explain to this prince of the Yadavas that Subhadra has selected her own groom of her own accord. Master archer *Dhananjaya* has abducted her as per the tradition that the Kshatriyas are proud of. I have nothing to do with this – I am not at any fault at all. Still, of my own accord I am going to leave Dwaraka before he gives me any punishment as the prince. Just as he had abandoned me and gone to Mithila, I am going to Indraprastha leaving Dwaraka and him, forever. Henceforth, for any kind of problem, he should consult you as his father-in-law!"

This strong dose abated Balaramadada's royal fury instantly. He was totally shaken. Aged Maharaja Kakudmin moved forward, patted Sri's shoulder and said, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, only you have the sole right to offer any consultation to your prince-brother. We the Raivatakas approve of Subhadra's choice. I will return today itself, and send gifts to the newlywed couple. I believe that this will help resolve the dispute among you brothers." He silently preached dada how to treat his brother. Dada didn't speak a word and mutely accepting Subhadra's abduction he went to his chamber.

Now our Subhadra was going to receive a grand welcome on the borders of

Indraprastha. I was confident that Subhadra who had found her inner feminine strength, was going to obtain an honourable position among the Pandavas.



**Daruka**

I am Daruka! Just a charioteer! Of Lord's Garudadhwaaja chariot. The first time I met him was in Mathura, after the execution of Kansa. Even today I remember that moment very clearly, as if it happened only yesterday. Before meeting the Lord, I was a shy charioteer who was just an errand boy. Since meeting him I transformed gradually, unbeknownst to myself.

I was a charioteer but just in name. The Lord was the real charioteer. He always said – a chariot of thoughts gallops along with every human being at all times, even in slumber. The Lord not only steered the chariot of thoughts of thousands and lakhs of Yadavas throughout his life, but also of lakhs on the rival side, wherever he went. I was fortunate enough to be the charioteer of this epoch-maker who steered the thoughts of millions; that too not for a day or two, but from ever since we met till his final moments!

The chariot of the Lord's life resembled his own chariot Garudadhwaaja. He just loved speed. I can recall one of his thoughts verbatim as I heard it frequently. He used to say, "Remember, growth and development characterize life". I ended up asking him once impatiently, "Doesn't growth itself mean development?" He gave a charming smile as usual and said, "Daruka, growth is outward, the increase in the size of a body whereas development is the broadening of the mind through Sanskaras." I thoroughly experienced this life-principle of his. I could feel a drastic change in myself ever since I met him.

The Lord silently initiated me into going to the depth of things in any quest. That is why I tried to find out the roots of our charioteer family as much as possible before starting my duty as a charioteer in the Shursena kingdom of the Yadavas. Those clues led me to the region around river Ganga in the Magadha kingdom. I could never forget the knowledge of the Ashwagita that the Lord imparted to me.

Whenever I said, 'The horse is the fastest animal', the Lord would smilingly correct me and say, 'Brother Daruka, the human mind is faster than the horse. Disciplining the human mind and keeping it under control is true charioting. Don't forget that horses also have a mind of their own! They express their feelings through their eyes, ears and by swishing their tails. To understand that language is true charioting.'

My wife Hayamati accompanied me throughout my life like my shadow. She was the loving mother of our sons – Daruki, Hayaketu, Hayagriva, and Darukaksha. Our eldest son Daruki was a little older than the Lord's firstborn

son Pradyumna. He became the charioteer of Pradyumna later. We had only one daughter named Darukaa. She became a close friend of the Lord's daughter Charumati.

It was due to the Lord's way of thinking and affectionate demeanour that everybody would get drawn to him automatically. He was striving to make the newly built kingdom of Dwaraka well renowned all over. For that purpose, he constantly travelled in his Garudadhwaaja chariot throughout the entire Aaryavarta – from Sindhu-Sauvira in the east to Anga-Vanga in the west and from Kashmir to Vanavasi, from north to south. I was fortunate enough to offer my services as a charioteer during this journey, and because of that I came to know how thoroughly pure and flawless Maharaja Srikrishna – the Lord of Dwaraka is. Just as there is a difference between charioting for a daily seashore ride, covering the distance between the royal capitals of two kingdoms at a constant pace, and steering a chariot on the actual battlefield, in the same way, the Lord's life has different shades as a family man, as a social leader, as a great Yadava on the battlefield and as a disciple of Sandipani lost in contemplating on philosophy in the company of sages and hermits.

The rain descends in many rhythms, coming down heavily as if from a jar, drizzling and swaying on the wind, intermittent and the rain in the month of Shravana that plays hide and seek with the sunrays, and in many more ways. The life of Lord Srikrishna was also like that.

I am going to try to hold all the reins of this narration in my hands and see if I can steer this chariot. Will I be able to do it? I must try though. Oh, how can I catch the epoch-maker Yadava with my charioteer's eyes? He is as vast as the sky! I am going to attempt to see as much as I can of that sky-high man through the window of my charioteer life. Whatever I see I will present in front of you. It will be only a small glimpse of the Lord and not the complete view. He himself had convinced his beloved wives Rukminidevi and Satyabhamadevi at the time of his 'suwarnatula' when he was weighed with gold that, 'If offered with true devotion and piety, even a leaf of holy basil can weigh me out'. This narration is just like that leaf of holy basil.

Rukminidevi had a nature and disposition that was very distinct from the other seven queens. The moment I would see her, I would automatically be reminded of the Lord. She was like the shadow of the Lord. 'Love' was the innate mantra of the Lord's life. As his wife, the innate mantra of Rukminidevi's life was also 'Love'.



Nowadays the island of Queens' mansions was full of bustle with the chatter of the Lord's sons and daughters. By this time his eight queens had begotten ten sons each. The number of Yadava children had surpassed eighty. Charumati had also got a few half-sisters.

Since the first time my Lord met the Pandavas and their mother Kuntidevi at Kurukshetra on the day of the solar eclipse, his behaviour had changed drastically. He had been safeguarding the Pandavas much more than his own eighteen families of Yadavas. As an important part of that policy we recently travelled from Dwaraka to Upaplavya. From there, along with the Lord, in the Garudadhwaja, commander Satyaki and I went to Hastinapura of the Kurus accompanied by a troop of chosen warriors. I can never forget the enthusiasm with which the citizens of Hastinapura welcomed us this time. This visit of the Lord was very valuable. This was the moment that could have led to war due to the disagreement between the Kauravas and Pandavas on the burning topic of the division of the kingdom. This visit of the Lord was for the royal mediation in Hastinapura. I somehow escorted him to the assembly hall of the Kurus. He was almost besieged by the citizens of Hastinapura, who had gathered in large numbers. Not just the Kurus and Yadavas, but also all other countries of Aaryavarta, were eagerly awaiting the result of this arbitration.

I escorted the Lord to the assembly hall of the Kurus and waited outside in the impenetrable circle of commander Satyaki and armed warriors. I couldn't know the proceedings of the assembly on that day. But after about half an hour my Lord, Maharaja Srikrishna – the Lord of Dwaraka came outside along with venerable Kurus – grandsire Bhishma, Mahamantri Vidura, minister Sanjaya, *maharathi* Karna and minister Vrishavarma. His face looked very different today. It had become determined after taking a stern and difficult decision. Usually he would walk easily like the gentle breeze of wind. Today he walked like Bhima the wrestler, balancing his body and as if planting each step in the ground. I pulled the Garudadhwaja chariot near him. The Lord signalled commander Satyaki to board the chariot at the back. Unexpectedly for all, the Lord who was sitting in the chariot stretched his left arm and held it in front of only Karna – the king of Anga, and said, "Come, I want to talk to you about something." *maharathi* Karna also boarded the chariot readily, without any reservations. Then the Lord ordered me, "Daruka, take the chariot to the outskirts, and don't stop anywhere now."

I called the names of the four horses and signalled them to run. The chariot

sprinted forward. The chariots of Satyaki and other warriors followed us. I had already guessed that the Lord wanted to say something important to Karna – the king of Anga. He was looking for privacy. I was fortunate enough to carry my Lord with this *maharathi* who was a philanthropist, possessor of the Brahmastra and had achieved the title of the king of Anga in spite of belonging to our charioteer community.

I dropped off both the gallant warriors under a sprawling banyan tree on the outskirts of Hastinapura. I waited far away in the shade of a tall Khadira tree along with the Garudadhwaaja chariot.

After some time both the valiant men returned and approached the Garudadhwaaja. The Lord looked at me and ordered, “Daruka, drop the king of Anga at the assembly hall in the royal capital.” Now the philanthropist held the Lord’s hand and pressing it for a moment or two he said, “No need Madhava, I will walk.” He turned his back and started walking.

My Lord whispered like talking to himself, “The war is indeed inevitable now! Daruka, let’s go.”

I have been thinking since the Lord has returned after meeting Karna. How all these twists and turns came to be between the Kurus, Pandavas and Yadavas! So much water had flowed over the wide beds of the Ganga and Yamuna, which I had crossed so many times with the Lord.

The most significant turn in this journey was the execution of Jarasandha, the self-proclaimed emperor of Magadha.

I am talking about the time when the Pandavas had settled down in Indraprastha. It happened while the venerable Pandava Yudhishtira was planning to organize the Rajasuya *yajna*. The venerable Pandava informed our Lord about his wish to perform a proper Rajasuya *Yajna* along with all the rituals and the incantation of mantras. By this time the valiant Pandavas had returned after finishing the conquest in all four directions of Aaryavarta. Along with them they had brought to Indraprastha milk-yielding cows, immense wealth, herds of elephants, horses and camels, and male and female attendants gifted to them by various kingdoms. The conquests of valiant Bhima and gallant archer *Dhananjaya* became well known for many thrilling battles. We had heard the news of the victories of all the Pandavas while in Dwaraka along with the Lord. Indraprastha had now become a prosperous, booming royal capital. Dwaraka had also rejoiced with the expansion of the Pandava family. Maharani Draupadidevi had begotten five gallant sons, one from each valiant Pandava. They were Yudhishtira’s son Prativindhya,

Bhimsena's son Sutasoma, Arjun's son Shrutakirti, Nakula's son Shatanika and Sahadeva's son Shrutakarmana. After a few days, another son was born to Arjuna, and Dwaraka celebrated that event ecstatically. He was the son of Subhadradevi and archer Arjuna. As per the Lord's command I myself had escorted Subhadradevi to Dwaraka for her first delivery. He was the very first offspring born out of the firm familial relation between the Pandavas and the Yadavas. The Lord and Balaramdada were ecstatic to see him for the first time as his mamas. My Lord himself named him Abhimanyu with love. The five gallant warriors had spread the awe of Indraprastha throughout Aaryavarta.

Since his arrival from Indraprastha my Lord had rarely been to the Sudharma royal assembly. He would mostly go to the western gate Aindra in his chariot with Uddhava Maharaja. Sitting on the boulder there, he would discuss the Pandavas with his brother for hours on end. During these talks, they would discuss the subject of the Rajasuya *Yajna* and the possible interference in it of the self-proclaimed invincible Magadha emperor Jarasandha.

Even after many deliberations with Uddhava Maharaj for hours, the issue of Jarasandha in the Lord's mind was not getting resolved. He had become extremely restless. On one such evening the Lord was returning with Uddhava Maharaja from the western ocean after offering evening oblations to the sun god. I was awaiting them in the chariot. Suddenly an elderly Brahmin approached him from somewhere. He stood courteously in front of them with his palms joined with respect. To offer him something in charity the Lord started thinking. He instantly removed the pearl necklace around his neck and held it in his hands. Uddhava Maharaja sprinkled on it some water of the ocean waves brushing against his feet. At that point the Brahmin said, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, I am not here to ask for charity. I am here only to see you. I am blessed to see Uddhava Maharaja along with you. One may not understand the feeling of being blessed by meeting a selfless and valiant Kshatriya in person unless one is a Brahmin." Saying thus the contented Brahmin prostrated in front of both of them on the sandy field. Both of them pulled him up affectionately and bade farewell to him. I noticed that the Lord was lost in deep thought. After a few moments, he lovingly patted his brother's shoulders and muttered to himself, "Brother Udho, finally the solution for Jarasandha's problem is in sight!" Then they both kept talking and I kept steering the chariot.

The next day the Lord travelled to Aanarta along with Uddhava Maharaja in a ship with the Garudadhwaja chariot, crossing the creek of Dwaraka. I was with him obviously, and so were armed troops of chosen Yadavas. We approached the borders of Indraprastha after camping in kingdoms such as Dasharna and Matsya. As the news of our arrival had been sent in advance, the four brothers along with Yudhishtira, Rajmata Kuntidevi, Maharani Draupadidevi, and all sons of the Pandavas were present at the borders to welcome us along with the minister and the commander. We entered Indraprastha in the Garudadhwaja chariot itself amidst the welcoming sound of musical instruments, and showers of flowers and vermillion. We came to the royal palace of the Pandavas. Dhaumya rishi came to visit the Lord. The Lord whispered in his ears, “Dhaumya rishi, please train Bhimsena and Arjuna in the daily routine of a Brahmin with all its subtleties in a day or two with immediate effect. Leave no error in their training.” I or anybody else who was present there had no clue as to what he was planning.

We stayed in the royal palace of the Pandavas in Indraprastha for an entire week. Whatever I came to know from the Chief Minister of the Pandavas was indeed inconceivable. Only four of us were involved in the first phase of the scheme that the Lord had planned for the destruction of the Magadha emperor Jarasandha – wrestler Bhimsena, archer Arjuna, the Lord of Dwaraka himself and I, Daruka, as the charioteer.

I was perplexed when I heard the plan. Only four people entering Magadha emperor Jarasandha’s war-hungry royal capital Girivraja, was like entering the jaws of death willingly. Jarasandha had forcibly captured and imprisoned eighty-six kings of nearby kingdoms like Vanga, Videha, Uttkala, Kamarupa, and Manipura, as the preparations for the Shatashirsha *Yajna* of kings. Expert informers from Hastinapura, Indraprastha, and Dwaraka used to enter the kingdom of Magadha to retrieve news from the kingdom, but never used to return. The royal capital Girivraja was located in a valley of seven mountain ranges. No one could reach there. That was the place where the kings captured by Jarasandha were imprisoned.

This Jarasandha campaign was planned secretly in Indraprastha. All Pandavas, Rajmata Kuntidevi, Maharani, Pandava commander and minister and I, the only ordinary man, attended that meeting. The Lord himself had planned the scheme, of taking only two of the Pandava warriors with him to Girivraja. We were to plant informers in each sojourn of the journey. All three warriors were going to drop their royal vestures and disguise

themselves as Brahmins before entering Magadha. They were going to enter Girivraja as the formally appointed priests of Kashi, invited by the Magadha emperor Jarasandha himself for the Shatarajashirsha *yajna*. I was to be disguised as a Magadha charioteer and had to take them as close to the royal palace as possible. The three gallant warriors were tactfully going to collect the information which no informer had been able to gather till date. I was going to stay in the Magadha stable itself. Once the task was completed I was going to be informed. Then one day I was supposed to present myself in front of the Magadha royal priest and deliver a message, 'Please send the three priests of Kashi back as they are needed to perform an important ritual at the main aashrama of Kashi'. The three warriors were then going to leave Girivraja just as they came. Then the Indraprastha kingdom of the Pandavas, Dwaraka and their allies were going to unite. They were going to appeal to the citizens of the kingdoms of all those kings Jarasandha had captured and seek support from them. Then they were going to strike the final conclusive blow. This was the second phase of the campaign. The main goal was to release the eighty-six kings who were imprisoned. For that purpose, it was essential to destroy Jarasandha.

The citizens of Indraprastha bade farewell to me and the three warriors. Crossing river Yamuna, we descended into the Panchala kingdom. For one week, we enjoyed the hospitality of the Panchalas. Then crossing rivers like Ganga, Gomati and Sharayu we reached Mithila. This was our last sojourn before entering Magadha. We spent a fortnight here. This was the city of Janaka, the father-in-law of Srirama who was born a few generations ago. Our Balaramadada had also stayed here for some time. But Jarasandha had captured the Videha king, a descendant of Janaka. The subjects of Videha were tired of waiting for him. The Videha commander and Chief Minister were looking after the kingdom by placing the young prince on the throne.

Finally, we reached the borders of Magadha. As planned before, I had disguised myself as a Magadha charioteer. I wore the brick-red large twisted turban of a Magadha charioteer on my head. In Mithila, we had already mastered colloquial Magadha dialect. My Lord, Pandu's son *Partha* and mighty Bhimsena got dressed as Brahmin priests of Kashi, with the sacred threads clearly visible on their chests. The three warriors looked completely different now with their heads shaved except for small tufts of hair at the back of their heads, moustaches shaved completely and their foreheads smeared with stripes of sandalwood paste. Any citizen in Indraprastha would

not have recognized Arjuna and Bhimsena in this disguise. Even none of the men or women from Dwaraka could have recognized my Lord. I was also getting confused when the two of them were in front of me. Sometimes I just couldn't figure out who was my Lord and who was Arjuna. I found a way to figure out who was who. The citizens of Mithila had gifted us a small chariot with five horses. We made sure to keep Bhimsena's huge mace, Arjuna's Gandiva bow and arrows, the Lords' Ajitanjaya and Sharanga bow and Nandaka sword in the back of the chariot, hidden under covers. Notably, my Lord had not forgotten to wear the Vaijayanti garland around his neck even when he was dressed as a Brahmin. He made Arjuna wear exactly the same kind of garland around his neck to avoid any kind of suspicion, but that was not the Vaijayanti garland. How could I differentiate between them now? To figure that out, while steering the chariot I would casually call out the horses as 'Meghapushpa, Balahaka' and throw a glance at the back of the chariot. The one who smiled with the mention of those names was my Lord for sure!

We passed by many Magadha surveillance posts that we came across on the way to Girivraja, playing our roles quite artfully. In Indraprastha itself, the Lord himself had outlined the protocol of conduct for this journey. The three of us were supposed to obey his each and every word; not violating it even if our lives were in danger. We were not supposed to counter-question him like why, how and for what, in any case. This was indeed a very adventurous campaign that we all had planned, putting our lives at stake.

Girivraja was the invincible royal capital of the Magadhas located inside the natural ramparts of seven mountain ranges— Vaibhavagiri, Vipulagiri, Ratnagiri, Chhatagiri, Shailagiri, Udayagiri and Sonagiri. The Vipulagiri range was also known as Chittagiri. All seven mountain ranges had surveillance posts of armed Magadha warriors from place to place. The gate on the eastern range was called Chittagiri. One could see wild cheetahs roaming around roaring loudly even during broad daylight. The Shailagiri gate was located at the north and the Udayagiri gate was located at the south. The gate on the western side was called Sonagiri. Girivraja was surrounded by a river named Panakan. We went across the western mountain range known as Gorathagiri and arrived at the huge Sonagiri gate of Girivraja. This gate was even taller than the Shuddhaksha gate of Dwaraka. It was covered with sharp and strong iron nails till half its height. That is why it wouldn't have been possible for even a couple hundred mighty warriors to break it open by bashing it with huge Kikar wood pillars. Mammoth elephants could

not have attacked the iron nails. The upper half was inscribed with images of a lion, boar, and wild buffaloes ready to attack, that the Magadhas considered inspirational.

The moment we crossed this gate we immediately began putting our plan into action. The three warriors descended from the chariot and climbing the tall staircase near the gate they reached the great drum room that displayed huge kettle drums. The entire Girivraja reverberated with sudden sounds of the kettle drums that they beat. One of those drums sounded much louder, as if it was roaring and telling not just Girivraja but also to the Magadha skies overhead – ‘I have come! I am here!’ Bhimsena, the son of Vayu was beating that kettledrum!

The citizens of Girivraja had never heard such unusual cacophony of kettle drums before. It was like the all destroying boom of up-surfing seven oceans at the time of catastrophe. Many scared Magadha citizens and curious soldiers gathered at the base of the drum room. They created a racket among themselves, for they couldn’t understand how to climb the staircase leading to the drum room. As planned, mighty Bhimsena had climbed last and had blocked its entrance by putting a huge boulder in front of it. Some soldier reported this to the four commanders of Jarasandha who were supposed to guard the four directions. They came at the base of the drum room carrying their wide-bladed naked swords on their shoulders. Magadha emperor Jarasandha was under the influence of Magadha liquor and with his blood-red eyes he was engrossed in watching the dance of female dancers, in the inner chambers of his royal palace. As he heard the unnerving sound of the kettle drums which he had never heard before, the chalice in his hand slipped and fell down. With wide eyes, he commanded, “Who’s beating the drum in such a weird way? Bring him here.” The emperor’s order reached the commanders. By this time the four commanders had laboriously removed the boulder blocking the staircase leading to the drum room with the help of about a hundred soldiers.

All the four commanders of Jarasandha were utterly confused, wondering why would the Brahmin priests who are saying ‘We have come from Kashi for the Shatashirsha *yajna*’ enter the drum room and beat the drums so loudly? Within a short time, they presented the three Brahmins in front of their emperor, by shoving them. By this time the emperor’s inebriation had waned considerably. He fixed his gaze on the mighty son of Vayu and asked him menacingly, “Who are you, and why have you come here?”

The answer came from my Lord instead of Bhimsena, in a scared, faltering voice, “Oh Maharaja, we have come from the holy place of Kashi, hearing about the Shatashirsha *Yajna* that you are going to perform. All three of us are well versed in the four Vedas. We know all the subtleties of the *Yajna* rituals. If granted permission, we will smoothly perform the Maharaja’s *Yajna* with precise rituals. We will accept whatever Dakshina Maharaja will offer and give our blessings to the Maharaja and his family and return to Kashi.”

“Then why did you beat the drums so loudly instead of meeting our royal priest?” “Maharaja, we have heard the acclaim of your invincible glory in Kashi.” Arjuna said in between.

“Besides we have been fortunate enough to attend many religious ceremonies of Maharaja Kansa in Mathura. This brother of mine beat the drums loudly so that the news of our arrival would reach you directly without wasting time in the formalities. It was a mistake indeed. Please forgive us as the big-hearted, invincible emperor. Though we are the masters of *Dharma*, this is the first time we are asking for anyone’s forgiveness. It would unleash Rudra’s wrath if the emperor himself doesn’t forgive the Brahmins.” The Lord threw a web of his charming words around the emperor in his enchanting sweet tongue, joining his palms together.

Whatever intoxication was left in Jarasandha’s system vanished completely as he heard the words family deity Rudra, and *yajna*. Looking at his commanders disdainfully, Jarasandha roared “Do you think you have set a record by capturing these innocent Brahmins? Instead, if you had brought three kings from any countries to me to help complete the required number for the *yajna*, which is falling short by fourteen kings, I would have felicitated you. Take them with you. They have come here from distant Kashi. Arrange for their lodging in the guest chambers. Go.”

Now the Lord of Dwaraka, Vayu’s son Bhimsena and archer Arjuna were formally accommodated in the guest chamber, as the priests. The implementation of our campaign began smoothly. Bhimsena and Arjuna began meeting various troop leaders of the fourfold Magadha army under the pretext of the *Yajna* and started gathering precise information. My Lord began charming people with his sweet talk and hence could roam around the imperial palace without any restrictions. His observant eyes detected the strengths of the Magadhas silently. The information that the three of them gathered began reaching my ears in the guest chamber exclusively for the



charioteers. I began delivering that information to Satyaki and Anadhrishti through our informers planted in kingdoms like Mithila, Kampilyanagar, and Kuntibhojpur. An entire week passed by. Meanwhile the Lord had befriended Jarasandha's son Sahadeva. He had also got well acquainted with all major ministers in the Magadha ministry. The Lord who readily gave references from all four Vedas and *Upanishadas* in Sanskrit during casual conversations was revered by all. I would meet Arjuna in the morning, Bhimsena after lunch in the afternoon, and the Lord at the time of evening prayers. Then we would whisper in our Saurashtriyan language, and exchange information with each other.

One fine morning the Lord of Dwaraka conveyed the final decision to the three of us. Our job here is done. We will leave Girivraja very soon now. We will begin the second phase of the campaign. First Bhimsena and *Partha* will leave from here. The next day itself, Daruka and I will leave. I will soon tell you exactly when to leave. We will meet in Mithila again. The Lord gave his usual sweet smile after so many days. It only meant that this campaign was about to conclude successfully.

We scattered from the Magadha stable after this scheduled meeting. At least I felt relieved of the burden that had weighed for the last so many days on my mind, just by looking at that smile of the Lord. With new enthusiasm, I temporarily bade farewell to the now well-acquainted Magadha citizens, and told them, "Our Guru is going to perform a similar *Yajna* in the original aashrama of Kashi. We will attend it and return in a fortnight."

But...but... I will never forget in my life the evening that descended on the mountain ranges of Girivraja that day. As Jarasandha came to know that the three self-proclaimed priests from Kashi are secretly meeting the troop leaders of the army, and roaming freely in the fourfold army, he got suspicious of the four of us. So, along with his minister and the four commanders, he arrived in person, stomping his feet, at the Magadha guest chamber.

As soon as he entered the guest chamber he roared, "Where is that runaway cowherd of Mathura, the one that duped me on Mount Gomanta? What kind of *Yajna* is he going to perform here? I am going to commence my Shatashirsha *Yajna* by chopping his head off. Till date I chased him up to Mathura and Mount Gomanta. Now he has come into my clasp on his own. Commander, present him in front of me, along with his companions." One of the commanders went to the inner chamber and pulled the three priests of

Kashi outside.

The emperor of Magadha stood in front of Arjuna first, and shouted, “Tell the truth. Who are you? Are you a citizen of Kashi or Indraprastha?”

Archer Arjuna courageously answered, “I am a priest of Kashi, here for the emperor’s *Yajna* as instructed by my guru.”

At that point the emperor moved forward, caught Arjuna’s right hand and pointing to his right thumb and index finger he roared, “What are those calluses on your hand? Did you get those by offering grass bundles in the *yajna*? Liar, you are the self-proclaimed archer – the insignificant younger brother of Yudhishtira of Indraprastha.” The emperor tossed Arjuna’s hand away with contempt, and holding the sacred thread on his chest tightly he shook him violently and burst out, “You, childish archer of Indraprastha, are you ready to fight a deadly duel with this emperor?”

“Certainly! If my guru permits me to do so.” Courageous Arjuna answered calmly while straightening the sacred thread that had been crumpled.

Then the emperor stood in front of Bhimsena, and pointing to a blotch on his naked right shoulder that was caused by carrying the mace, he shouted, “What is this black patch on your shoulder? Is that caused by carrying the baskets of sacrificial sticks for the *yajna*? Who are you fooling, you voracious Bhima of Indraprastha?” Are you ready for the duel? He pulled the shawl that Bhimsena had wrapped around his neck and questioned him.

Bhimsena grabbed the throat of the emperor standing in front of him violently. He could not control his anger just as he could not control his hunger. The Lord of Dwaraka pulled Bhimsena’s hand back and smiling as usual he said to the emperor, “Oh valiant warrior, the one who captured eighty-six innocent kings for a *Yajna* sacrifice in spite of being a king himself! You self-proclaimed invincible warrior beating your own drums throughout Aaryavarta, I am the one who is your actual culprit – son of Vasudeva, Srikrishna of the Yadavas. Are you going to challenge me also for a duel?”

My Lord had cast a question in front of him anticipating his answer fully well. He had quickly whispered in Bhimsena’s ears while Jarasandha was challenging Arjuna for the duel and told him, ‘When I stroke the Vaijayanti garland, take the clue and challenge him to a duel!’

That insolent emperor who attacked Mathura seventeen times to destroy the Lord said haughtily, “I will not spare your life today, you, lowlife cowherd who killed my son-in-law! Not just you, in fact all three of you won’t be able

to get out of Girivraja now. You, wicked, black leader of the cowherds – yes, I challenge you to the ultimate duel. My ancestors will not get salvation unless you are killed.” He thumped his shoulders in front of my Lord. This was a critical moment since we arrived in the kingdom of the Magadhas. Even at this moment the Lord smiled and said, “Is the king going to fight the duel with all three of us at once or what? Or should I say that the king doesn’t even know the basic rule of a duel?”

Jarasandha was a bit confused. Yet in a loud voice he asked, “What rule are you talking about, cowherd?”

“The rule is that a deadly duel can be fought between only two people at a time. I am ready to fight a duel with you!” The Lord stroked the Vaijayanti garland around his neck with a smile. Now Bhimsena who was fuming and waiting precisely for this moment, came forward and thundered, “What kind of an invincible wrestler and emperor is this? He calls you a runaway, but he himself is a big runaway – what else did he do on Mount Gomanta? I, Bhimsena, the son of Kunti, challenge him to the ultimate duel. He will accept it if at all he is the emperor that he claims to be and if he has the power that he boasts of. Or else, he should just surrender and accept defeat.”

Fuming and grinding his teeth Bhimsena thumped his well-toned muscular arms, hard like steel and shouted, “Hail Goddess Ida... Kuntimata... Goddess Bhavani ...”

No one had ever looked in the eye of Jarasandha of the Magadhas and directly challenged him. Fretting with uncontrollable fury and his nostrils puffed, Jarasandha thumped his arms and gave a counter challenge in a roaring voice, “You, glutton of Indraprastha, I accept your challenge!” Meanwhile Bhimsena had already thrown away the shawl wrapped around his neck. He tucked in his red-bordered dhoti and was at the ready. The muscles of his burly thighs twitched with contraction and expansion. Both wrestlers retreated a few steps to prepare for the stance before the attack. Now both of them looked like stocky, bellowing bulls.

The Lord had unmistakably caught Jarasandha in his web. Jarasandha had accepted the provocative challenge of Bhimsena. No one could tell now, what was going to happen next. Both the wrestlers, with drops of sweat on their foreheads, were going to transform the guest chamber into a wrestling pit. Both of them had already forgotten where they were. They began to dare each other while thumping their arms and thighs.

Immediately, the Lord of Dwaraka moved forward and stood firmly in

between both of them and smilingly said, “Both of you are master wrestlers. Both of you know very well the consequences of a duel – either victory or death. It should not be fought like the daily practice.

“For that a formal wrestling pit should be prepared in front of the royal palace of Girivraja. Seating arrangements should be made for the Magadha citizens to watch the bout. Expert judges should be appointed to announce an impartial decision in this historical fight. Therefore, both of you will have to wait till tomorrow morning. It is not about what you wish, these are fixed rules of a wrestling bout.”

The emperor of Magadha was so arrogant but when he heard my Lord’s irrefutable words he calmed down a bit. Bhimsena was my Lord’s own follower after all. Both of them silently agreed to this ruling. The news that Bhimsena, the son of Vayu and Jarasandha, the Magadha emperor are going to fight a conclusive duel, spread like wildfire not only in Girivraja but also throughout the Magadha kingdom.

As the day began rising the populous ocean of Magadha men and women assembled around the wrestling pit in front of the royal palace of Girivraja, to witness the thrilling, breath-taking, historic duel. A racket of varied noises burst out. A few people were pointing to the seat next to Arjuna where my Lord was sitting and showing each other who ‘Maharaja Srikrishna’ was. As the citizens of Mathura were fed up of Kansa’s injustice so also the citizens of Magadha were sick and tired of Jarasandha’s atrocious, brutal regime. Around the wrestling pit in the section for the royalty, Kansa’s wives Asti and Prapti were sitting with their select attendants. Young prince Sahadeva with a well-built physique and who courageously stood up against his own father’s unjust regime was also present. It was because of this resistance that he had been disregarded in his father’s kingdom. The troop leaders of Jarasandha’s mammoth army were moving around among the assembled crowd with their weapons like sword, mace and pestle. Though they were more in number they were unable to stop the chattering of the crowd even for a moment. This day was indeed going to be an unforgettable day in this royal capital surrounded by mountains.

Invincible emperor, unequalled wrestler Jarasandha, the son of Brihadratha, stood in front of his royal circle, facing the west. He was wearing only a brick-red loincloth. The sinewy muscles of his calves, thighs, shoulders, and burly chest had been massaged by *Karanjel* oil; they were glistening and wiggling smoothly in place like a coiled snake. He warmed up his body by

doing a few squats. It made the muscles in his entire body expand, just like a lump of clay expands in water. This was indeed a rare sight of the emperor for all. He hailed the name of his family deity, shouted loudly and danced for a few moments in one place, showing his vigour. His widened eyes were breathing fire and he was staring at Bhima with utter contempt. The sight of his massive body was indeed horrendous.

The Lord of Dwaraka was sitting on a somewhat taller wooden seat in front of me. Archer *Dhananjaya* was sitting on his left. Both of them were still dressed as Brahmins. Still, their indomitable self-confidence and radiant faces captured the attention of thousands. I stood behind them. Just like everybody else I was extremely curious to see the final result of the duel.

We were on the west side of the wrestling pit facing Bhimsena. We were facing the east. Even we had not seen our 'wrestler' Bhimsena like this before. His complexion like a ripe lemon was glistening spectacularly due to a coat of *Karanjel* oil. The toned muscles of his calves, thighs, shoulders and chest were contracting and expanding even by a simple act like clearing the throat.

He also did a few squats to warm up his steely strong body. His body began expanding within moments. He looked almost twice his regular size. He moved forward and leaping with his mammoth body over the ropes tied around the pit he entered inside. Raising both his arms, sometimes balancing his body on his left leg and dancing in one place, he would go a few steps forward and stop in the middle. He circled around the pit and humbly bowed to the citizens of Magadha. A rain of applause followed from all sides after the display of his humility. He waited for a moment, then balancing his huge body on his right foot he took a few steps forward. This way he completed an entire round around the pit and took his initial place.

Arrogant Jarasandha who was always supercilious due to his being an emperor, raised both his arms and completing a circle around the pit came back to his original place.

Bhimsena roared in a sky-piercing voice 'Hail Kuntimata, hail Goddess Bhavani' and challenged Jarasandha thumping his arms loudly. The sharp thunderous sound made by the thumping made goose bumps stand on many a Magadha citizen's body. Jarasandha also thumped his arms to challenge back.

The five chief priests handed some soil to both the wrestlers to indicate the commencement of the duel. They moved away immediately. Again, the

sounds of thumping thighs and arms rose from both sides. The heads of both the wrestlers, round like pumpkins, met each other. Both gave hard blows on each other's necks trying to assess the strength of the other. A thrilling, hair-raising wrestling war began with an indomitable spirit. The ruckus quietened, everyone held their breaths and innumerable people became witness to this hair-raising wrestling war.

It was the first day of the lunar fortnight in the month of Kartika. The dense fog that had covered Girivraja had now completely lifted. One question still lingered in my mind – what could be Jarasandha's political motive behind accepting the challenge given to him by Bhima? He had not insisted on fighting this bout with Arjuna or my Lord. He was convinced that Bhimsena was the main protective armour of the remaining two. He had full confidence in his wrestling. On the strength of that, as soon as he had broken that protective armour, he wanted to arrest Arjuna and my Lord. Then he was going to dispatch an envoy to Indraprastha and Dwaraka with a special message, "If you want to see your black cowherd and his disciple alive then both your kings – Yudhishtira and Vasudeva should come to Girivraja in person." Both of them were crowned kings, and therefore fit to be sacrificed in his *yajna*! Yudhishtira, the king of Indraprastha and our Maharaja Vasudevababa would have been compelled to come to Girivraja after hearing this message as they both loved my Lord and Arjuna. Once they arrived in Girivraja he was simply going to put them in the prison where he had kept other captured kings to complete the required number of kings for his *yajna*.

The sun was shining right overhead now. First, the cacophony of the Magadha kettle drums arose. As the referee moved quickly out of their way, the two master wrestlers began their gripping fight like two roaring lions. They began fighting against each other, thumping their thighs in between and grabbing each other's thick necks in strong grips and jerking each other.

They spent the entire first day employing the Abhyakarsha and Aakadi maneuvers only. As the evening approached flocks of various chirping birds returned to their nests. As the flaming red sun disk, as big as a platter touched the mountain summit on the west of Girivraja the referee blew a huge conch facing the sky. It was the signal of the end of the day. Both wrestlers came to their senses only after hearing the conch sound a couple of times, and separated from each other.

The next day at daybreak the wrestling bout resumed amidst the cacophony of kettledrums, tabors and trumpets. The news of the previous day had spread

throughout the Magadha kingdom. As a result, more men and women were present today than yesterday. The moment the heads of both the wrestlers collided the chatter of the public died down. Both of them thoroughly knew each other's strengths now. They cautiously avoided yesterday's mistakes today, trying new maneuvers like Avarodha, and Rajakaprushtha. Grinding their teeth, biting their lips and shouting loudly they attacked each other using different strategies. Now the audience was automatically divided into two groups – the supporters of Bhima and the supporters of Emperor Jarasandha. They were going berserk alternatively shouting various encouragements to inspire their wrestler. The eyes of everyone, including me, *Dhananjaya*, the Lord of Dwaraka, the referees and assistant referees in the wrestling pit, Kansa's wives Asti and Prapti in the section of the royal ladies, Prince Sahadeva in the men's section, the chief minister, members of the Magadha ministry, all men and women spectators were fixed on both of them – on Bhimsena, the Pandava wrestler, the son of Vayu who was immersed in the fight and the Magadha Emperor Jarasandha who was giving him a tough fight. Even today as evening descended on the wrestling pit in front of the royal palace of Girivraja, the wrestling bout remained inconclusive.

Not a day or two, this combat continued for thirteen consecutive days. The number of spectators kept growing every day just like the rising water of river Shona in the great flood. That not only filled the arena around the wrestling pit but also the area outside the arena. As usual, as if out of habit, the moment the heads of the wrestlers met, the cacophony of various instruments that were being played since dawn stopped instantly. I wondered about only one thing – even though Bhimsena and Jarasandha were tenaciously fighting each other for the last thirteen days, neither of them looked even a bit tired or exhausted. All the five referees looked exhausted now after continuously covering the sweaty bodies of Jarasandha and Bhimsena with sweat-absorbing ash.

The thirteenth day also descended inconclusive beyond the mountains of Girivraja. Now every household in the royal city had only one thing to discuss – the inconclusive, long-drawn battle, and who was going to be the winner. Every night in the guest chamber I got to view a rare scene that nobody else could ever get an opportunity to watch. Every day the Lord of Dwaraka would demonstrate to Bhimsena where he fell short in the duel on that day. Listening to him Bhimsena would widen his large eyes and say, “Srikrishna, you are talking exactly like my gurudeva Balarama. I have never

seen you practise wrestling, then where did you learn all this from?" The Lord would then smile and say, "You will have to go to Gokul to know that, and meet Kelinandakaka." During this time Arjuna, who would be rubbing Bhimsena's feet with oil would listen attentively to both of them. After a cold bath for about half an hour, scraping off the layers of soil and ash on his body with a stone chip, frazzled Bhimsena would lie on his bed, close his eyes and just start snoring. The Lord of Dwaraka and I would rub his shoulders, thighs and chest on each side. That would escalate the rhythm of his snoring. The Lord of Dwaraka would shake him vigorously and try to wake him up at the midnight hour. But he would only turn his side and ignore him. Then the Lord would tell me to fetch the Panchjanya conch that was wrapped in a cloth and hung on a hook on the wall. He would look at me, wink, and with a smile he would blow the conch loudly only once. Immediately, snoring Bhima would wake up. Looking at his own body he would realize that his cousin, the Lord of Dwaraka himself had massaged his body. He would feel ashamed of himself and with a childlike shyness he would say, "Srikrishna, if you massage my body again I will not fight this duel at all. I will simply surrender myself and accept defeat."

The Lord would say to Bhimsena, "It may be okay for you Bhimsena, but not for me! I have to get many things done by you. Besides, Draupadi - the beloved wife of all you brothers, is my sister, my friend. Would she accept it?"

Bhimsena would shake his head in negation. Then my Lord would hold a large pot full of a cold, sweet, nourishing drink prepared by him. Holding the pot in his hands Bhimsena would guzzle it down, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. Then throwing his head back he would laugh loudly. The Lord of Dwaraka would let Bhimsena finish his drink and then teasingly say, "Hmmm...Bhimsena, I see that from your Gurudeva you have also well picked up this art of laughing in an unrestrained fashion while throwing your neck back!" During this campaign of Girivraja I came to witness anew a couple of qualities of the Lord. He would never lose his unwavering spirit and his fresh sense of humour no matter how tough the situation was. My Lord always believed in doing his duty – without any expectations.

Now the fourteenth day of the sensational wrestling duel dawned – the duel that was being acclaimed throughout northern Aaryavarta along with the Magadha kingdom.

The duel began in front of the bright rising sun amidst the thunderous



sounds of thigh thumping and loud challenges. Bhimsena and Jarasandha collided against each other, roaring loudly like two intoxicated wild elephants. Though lakhs of spectators had gathered there was utter silence. Both of them used new maneuvers today that they had not used before and reserved only for special occasions.

Both of them had unequalled physical strength, but now their intellectual agility was also evident. When Bhimsena used the Kilvajranipata maneuver, hefty Jarasandha nimbly replied with the Avarodha maneuver. When Jarasandha touched his huge back to Bhimsena's chest and picked him up to drop him down like a twisted cloth being flipped over by a washer man, Bhimsena disappointed him by nimbly girdling around his leg like a wild creeper wrapping itself around a Khadira tree. The lakhs of spectators watched their subtle moves without even blinking their eyes. If Bhimsena succeeded in a ploy moving his mammoth body with agility, the supporters of Bhima would rise like a wave shouting loudly, 'Hail Pandu's son – the undefeatable wrestler Bhimsena...victory...victory! Hail Balarama's disciple – the undefeatable wrestler Bhimsena...well done...well done...' When Jarasandha employed a difficult maneuver his supporters would toss their Magadha turbans in the air and shout, 'Hail invincible wrestler, emperor of Magadha – Maharaja Jarasandha victory... victory!'

With the passing hour and time, the rivalry intensified. Now the spectators started whispering amongst themselves, 'Is this duel ever going to end or not?' The sun had now descended in the third quarter of the day. Even the five judges who were tired after continuously putting fistfuls of ashes on their bodies, were sitting in a squatting position in the wrestling pit, wherever they could find a place.

The Magadha Chief Minister whispered in Prince Sahadeva's ears, 'We should bring chosen wrestlers of the royal circle in the wrestling pit one by one, and surrounding Bhimsena, imprison him directly. Otherwise something dreadful will happen here just like it happened in Mathura in case of Maharaja Kansa.' The Magadha ministers seconded him, saying, 'The chief minister is right. The chosen wrestlers should be brought to the pit immediately.' The sun was about to set now. Long and thick shadows of various trees like Ashoka, Kinshuka, Punnaga, Tala, Tamala, and *Ashwattha* spread around the wrestling pit. The Lord of Dwaraka sitting in front of me immediately noticed the restlessness among the Magadha royal circle. He stood up and gently caressed the Vajrayanti garland pulsing on the shawl

around his neck. In the last fourteen days Bhimsena had not bothered to glance at anybody else except the Lord of Dwaraka whenever he could steal a moment to do so. He understood the meaning of his action of caressing the Vaijayanti garland. All at once he stopped his nimble actions as if struck by lightning, and let Jarasandha attack him as per the plan. Jarasandha was duped, and he felt that Bhimsena is tired, he is burnt out. Moving nimbly, he touched his huge back to Bhimsena's chest dripping with sweat. With the Rajakaprushtha maneuver he threw Bhimsena's mammoth body in the soil with a loud thud. Seeing that I stood up at once. The entire field full of spectators stood up instantly as if hit by lightning. Some of them even felt sorry for him and moaned with grief, and some tossed their Magadha turbans in the air and shouted ecstatically, 'Hail Magadha emperor invincible wrestler Maharaja Jarasandha victory to you always, victory... victory!' Arjuna was already out of his seat. Seeing his dear brother caught up in a critical situation he began breaking into the wrestling pit in a fit of rage. The Lord grabbed his shoulder and with great effort held him back. Meanwhile Jarasandha reached Bhimsena's feet who was lying deathly still. He held both of Bhimsena's legs in his strong hands and began pushing them apart with all his might. At that moment, Arjun screamed with unbearable rage, as if his own life was at stake, "Srikrishna ... let me go. He is going to slit my brother into two!" The Lord of Dwaraka glared at Arjun and said in a very quiet voice, "*Dhananjaya!* Just watch what happens. You be only a witness to this historic duel. I am also compelled to do the same. Bhimsena is not Jarasandha to lose and back off.

Jarasandha could not stretch Bhimsena's legs apart even an iota, as Bhimsena had gathered all his strength into his thighs. For a moment Jarasandha got confused and stopped to wipe the sweat off his forehead. He was inattentive. At that exact moment Bhimsena moved swiftly like a fish, and crossed his legs around Jarasandha in a scissor like hold. He wrenched Jarasandha so hard that he fell face down in the soil. The Lord of Dwaraka was waiting for exactly this moment. He pulled out the Panchjanya conch from the shawl around his waist and raising his head high he blew the auspicious conch from the bottom of his heart inflating the veins in his throat. Taking a cue of that signal Bhimsena tightened his arm around the neck of Jarasandha, who had fallen face down, in the deadly Bahukantaka maneuver. Bhimsena closed his eyes tight and continuously increased the pressure of his steely strong arms in the deciding Bahukantaka hold. Giant Jarasandha's

words were muffled; he was rolling his eyes and struggling in the soil in the wrestling pit. The Panchjanya kept reverberating over and over again! The lakhs of spectators didn't even realize when the invincible Magadha emperor Jarasandha died!

Bhimsena let go of the Bahukantaka hold on the lifeless throat and stood up at once like a streak of lightning. Uncontrollable cheers erupted from all sides – ‘Hail Pandu's son, invincible wrestler Bhimsena...victory...victory!! Hail Bhimsena, the son of Kunti!’

In the wrestling pit Bhimsena was roaring, dancing on one foot, – ‘Hail Gurudeva Balarama...victory...victory! Hail Kuntimata, Goddess Ida Bhavani!’ As if drawn, the three of us started running towards Bhimsena. The sun set on the mountain summits of Girivraja. It was the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Kartika.

As soon as Jarasandha was defeated my Lord's face radiated. Everybody was curious to see what steps he was going to take next. It was mandatory to follow a royal custom as Jarasandha being Kansa's father-in-law, was a relative. His body could not be cremated unless his successor was formally announced. Therefore, the Lord invited Sahadeva, the terrified son of Jarasandha, by offering reassurance through his Chief Minister. He announced Sahadeva as the successor of Magadha in the wrestling pit itself. While advising him, the Lord said, “Sahadeva, we have no enmity against the kingdom of Magadha. We are against the unjust and vicious attitude in general.

“Soon my *aate bandhus* – the Pandavas of Indraprastha will perform the Rajasuya *yajna*. You are to dispatch a gift suitable to the status of the Magadha Empire, consisting of attendants, useful animals, and wealth and food grains along with us right away. You yourself should cordially attend the *yajna*. Who knows, maybe you will form a blood relation with the Pandavas. You may have to support them with your fourfold army in the future.”

Sahadeva was expecting a harsh punishment for himself like his father had got. Instead of that when he received complete impunity and invaluable advice beneficial for life he was overwhelmed with emotion, forgetting the grief of his father's death. He grabbed my Lord's feet and sobbed momentarily with mixed emotions. The kind-hearted Lord pulled him up and embraced him. He signalled to me and Arjuna to get going and holding Sahadeva's hand in his he started walking. The ecstatic Magadha citizens

were bathing Bhimsena in showers of vermilion and carrying him on their shoulders, they were dancing with joy. As the Lord gestured, he broke the loving circle of his fans and approached the Lord. An astounded Magadha commander put his huge mace on Bhimsena's broad shoulders. Then brother Arjuna embraced the wrestler tightly. The Magadha Chief Minister carried Jarasandha's corpse with the help of some attendants and moved aside. Bhimsena put his mace at the feet of the Lord. When he tried to bend down to prostrate in front of the Lord, in spite of being his senior in age the Lord prevented him from doing so and embraced him tightly with great pride. That made the vermilion on Bhima's body spread on the bluish body of the Lord. His body looked like the crimson blue sky on an autumn evening. Looking at the rare spectacle the ecstatic Magadha citizens cheered – 'Hail sons of Kunti – Bhima and Arjuna... victory... victory. Hail Devaki's son Maharaja Srikrishna... victory... victory. Hail Nanda-Yashoda's son, the Lord of Dwaraka... victory... victory. Hail Vasudeva's son Bhagvan Vaasudeva... victory... victory.'

As he walked, the Lord was surrounded by both the Pandavas, Magadha commanders and ministers and many sentimental Magadha citizens who were drawn to him. I also walked alongside, my chest puffed up with pride. I had just witnessed an historic event happening for the first time in Aaryavarta.

Our clamorous group arrived in front of the tightly sealed prison of Magadha. Everyone stopped short, looking at the huge lock hanging on the prison door. The Lord deliberately glanced at Bhimsena. He understood the exact meaning of this glance. Moving forward he struck only one powerful blow of the mace on the lock. All the kings imprisoned for years were free.

All the prisoner kings wearing the uniform of a Magadha prisoner couldn't believe that they were free to go and they kept staring at their emancipator walking briskly towards them. They all automatically gathered in the prison square. Many of them touched my Lord's feet and touched their foreheads with the soil beneath his feet with gratitude with teary, grateful eyes. A couple of kings amongst them were very aged. They brought their palms together and implored the Lord saying, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka Vaasudeva, we had heard your acclaim disseminating through the universe. Today we got to see you in person. Our eyes feel blessed. Now do us a favour and make our ears feel blessed too." As the Lord raised his hand, for the first time all the kings sat on the ground in front of a stone platform. My Lord walked slowly and climbed onto the stone platform. For a few moments, he moved his

glance which was an ocean of love, over everyone. His face instantly started glowing. His melodious speech befitting only him began flowing, making even the stone walls of the Magadha prison feel thrilled –

“Dear kings of various kingdoms of Aaryavarta! You have experienced first-hand how horrible an innocent prisoner’s life can be. You have suffered the unbearable imprisonment of your valour. Power is like a double-edged weapon. It can be used for constructive as well as destructive purposes. The emperor of Magadha imprisoned you under the delusion of being an unbounded emperor. He was going to brutally sacrifice all of you on the altar of the Shatashirsha *Yajna* once your number reached hundred!” The mere utterance of these words from the Lord’s mouth aroused restless murmur among the kings. The Lord further said without letting the unrest intensify, “What kind of *Yajna* is this? What if it would have indeed become a reality? I know well that none of you are afraid of death. But what would have happened to your subjects after your death? It is my duty to go wherever life gets stuck in one place. It is my life’s mission to release life whenever it is obstructed. You are free from today. The credit of this valiant feat goes to our wrestler warrior Bhima.”

My Lord possessed an innate quality – that of solving any problem from all angles. He looked at Sahadeva standing next to him and said, “This is Maharaja Sahadeva – the emperor of Magadha. He will provide each one of you a chariot full of provisions, wealth and weapons and a charioteer along with it. Once you reach your kingdom you will surely send royal gifts to the Indraprastha kingdom of Bhimsena. I am sure that you will remember your emancipation and the bond of friendship which is formed with Indraprastha as a result of it. Keeping that gratitude in your heart you will offer your instant support to them whenever need be. On behalf of the Dwaraka kingdom I offer you my best wishes for your future life. May all be well!” He stopped talking while we all wished that his speech would continue.

The next day itself the Lord went to the outskirts of Magadha along with Maharaja Sahadeva and with due respect bade farewell to all the kings who were departing in different directions in their chariots.

My Lord’s campaign of Magadh had been successfully executed. We stayed in Girivraja for an entire week. When we left Girivraja, millions of Magadha men and women along with Maharaja Sahadeva bade us farewell on the outskirts of the city. A row of bullock carts full of various gifts from the people of Magadha followed our chariot. When we came the Lord and

both Pandavas were dressed as Brahmins. Now they were wearing fine royal costumes. I was dressed in the uniform of a charioteer of Dwaraka.

The execution of Jarasandha spread the acclaim of our Dwaraka and the Pandavas' Indraprastha kingdom throughout Aaryavarta. The major obstacle in the path of the Pandavas' Rajasuya *Yajna* was removed. After enjoying the hospitality of the Pandavas in Indraprastha for a week I returned to Dwaraka with the Lord. On our way back, the Lord was welcomed with grand acclaim by the kings and subjects of all kingdoms who had breathed a sigh of relief due to Jarasandha's execution. But this time the welcome that the Lord received in Dwaraka was ultimate. Jarasandha's execution was an accomplishment even bigger and more significant than the killing of Kansa. That is why, to welcome the Lord, this time Maharaja Vasudeva had arrived in person at the Shuddhaksha gate along with both rajmatas. The Lord's seven queens were also present along with Rukminidevi. Youthful and handsome Pradyumna stood at the gate with a fistful of Prajakta flowers along with my son Daruki, with both the commanders and ministers standing behind them. The eighty sons of the Lord's eight queens stood behind them in unison. Golden-bordered grand pennants with the Garuda emblem fluttered atop all four gates – the main gate Shuddhaksha, Pushpadanta, Aindra, and Bhallata. Arches thickly decorated with assorted flowers were raised everywhere. The men and women of Dwaraka donned dresses reserved for special occasions and chattered with unending exuberance. Prince Balaramadada approached the Lord holding a coconut that was covered in golden strings. As soon as he saw the royal circle standing in front of him the Lord walked briskly towards them and touched the feet of all the elderly people – first Maharaja Vasudeva, Devakimata, Rohinimata, Acharya Sandipani and his wife. The Lord accepted the coconut offered by dada with shining eyes, and began to bend down to seek his blessings. Dada didn't allow him to do so and while holding him in a deep embrace dada muttered, "You took me with you to Mathura at the time of the Dhanuryaga for the killing of Kansa. This time you avoided me! Yet, the victory is mine, Dhakatyā. After all, it was only my disciple Bhimsena who killed Jarasandha!"

The Lord smiled playfully while releasing himself from the tight embrace of dada and said to him, "It is true that your disciple Bhimsena killed Jarasandha, but it is also equally true that he is the elder brother of Arjuna who is our Subhadra's husband!" Both brothers laughed loudly at the perfect

answer and embraced each other again. As I was standing closer to them I understood all the subtleties of this whispered dialogue between the Lord and dada. Nobody else understood it as they did not hear anything.

With a smiling face Revatidevi welcomed the Lord with bright lamps. With eyes much brighter than those lamps Rukminidevi welcomed him.

These celebrations of victory went on for an entire week. One day a disciple of Dhaumya rishi, arrived at Dwaraka along with the chief minister of the Pandavas to deliver the invitation for the Rajasuya *yajna*. The *Yajna* was going to take place in Indraprasth, near the confluence of river Ikshumati and river Yamuna, but the hustle and bustle began in Dwaraka, on the shores of the western ocean.

Select men and women were supposed to go with the Lord and Rukminidevi for the Rajasuya *yajna*. Obviously, Balaramadada was included in the list with Revatidevi. Uddhava Maharaja, Chief Minister Vipruthu, minister Akrura, and from the young generation Samba, Brahmagargya and my son Daruki were also included.

Thousands of people gathered at the Shuddhaksha gate to bid farewell to us. This time we travelled by the way of Madhyadesha. Our first sojourn was in Aanarta and the second was in Bhrigukachchha. After about a month we arrived at the Avanti kingdom. This was the kingdom of Mitravindadevi. Her brothers Vinda and Anuvinda's attitude had simmered down a bit by now after hearing the acclaim of the Lord that had spread in all four directions. Their stubbornness had been alleviated considerably. They came to the borders of the Avanti kingdom to welcome the Lord. From Avanti, we crossed the river Charmanvati and descended into the Kuntibhoja kingdom. We arrived at the royal palace of the kingdom. This was where *aatya* Kuntidevi had lived in her childhood. We came to the royal edifice where she had served the short-tempered, whimsical sage Durvasa for a particular *yajna*. The Lord himself showed Rukminidevi the entire edifice and the thatched hut built for Durvasa's *yajna*. After spending two days in this kingdom we arrived in the Ahichchhatra city of the Panchalas. After spending a few days there travelling along the banks of the Yamuna we arrived at the eastern border of Indraprastha. This time we did not come from the western side of Indraprastha as we used to do usually.

Maharaja Yudhishtira received the news of the arrival of the Lord of Dwaraka along with Rukminidevi at the eastern border. All five Pandava brothers came to the border to receive us. Rajmata Kuntidevi, Maharani

Draupadidevi and our own Subhadradevi along with Naga daughter Uloopidevi and the daughter of Manipura – Chitrangadadevi also accompanied them.

The royal capital Indraprastha gave us an unprecedented grand welcome. The royal paths and squares in entire Indraprastha were fully occupied by the invitees from various places. The acclaim of the five Pandava brothers was booming throughout Aaryavarta due to their victorious conquests in all directions. Their royal priest, Dhaumya rishi had gone to Himavana and invited many sages and hermits from various aashramas to Indraprastha. A grand pandal was raised on the confluence of the river Ikshumati and Yamuna for the Rajasuya *yajna*. Architects Vishwakarma, Twashtta, and Mayasura, who had laboured in the creation of Dwaraka, and their assistants – Taraksha, Kamalaksha, and Vidyunmali strove to build it. Indraprastha, as the name denoted, had indeed surpassed the divine royal city of Indra. A grand wondrous spectacle of architecture was proudly on display here.

The capacious pandal, about one *yojana* in circumference was skilfully erected on many pillars. The grand *Yajna* pit was right in the centre. Around it skilled artisans had drawn the rangoli designs of the important kings and events in the Kuru dynasty. The insignia of the Kuru dynasty – a full-moon image was shining on the east. A square aperture about the same size of the *Yajna* pit was kept open in the roof to let the smoke from the *Yajna* fire reach the sky without any hindrance. On the four sides of the *Yajna* pit grass mats were arranged for the learned sages who had been invited for the *Yajna* to offer sacrificial sticks in the *yajna*. On the east, similar seating arrangements were made for all remaining sages. On the west, royal seats were arranged for the royal family of the Pandavas and their relatives. Two tall, spacious golden seats were placed in front of them. Those were for my Lord and Rukminidevi. On their left, that is on the northern side of the *Yajna* pit golden seats were organized for all invited kings. On the southern side of the *Yajna* pit seating arrangements were made for all honourable men and women citizens and scholarly women invitees. The holy confluence of the two rivers was on the eastern side of the pandal.

My Lord examined the entire *Yajna* pandal with his keen eyes. He said to Maharaja Yudhishtira, “Oh venerable Pandava, your *Yajna* is going to achieve such renown in Aaryavarta as never before. You haven’t left any flaws at all.”

“This has been made possible by the grace of Bhagvan – the Lord of



Dwaraka. Oh Bhagvan, I pray to you that you always grace us five brothers with your blessings.” Since he had become the king of Indraprastha the way the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira talked to my Lord had considerably changed.

We came in front of the royal palace. The capacious square previously with only a dancing fountain in the centre was not to be seen anywhere now. In that place stood the grand, dazzling Mayasabha, full of various miracles! Ingenious Mayasura who stood at the entrance with humility showed the Mayasabha to the Lord, Rukminidevi, all the Pandavas, their royal ladies and me while providing information about the marvels.

In the Lord’s heart River Yamuna was associated with precious memories that he always cherished. In the evening, he climbed down the neat ghat on Yamuna to offer the daily oblations. I was of course with him. A select few people like Uddhava Maharaja, Dhaumya rishi and Gargamuni also accompanied us. The Lord entered the Yamuna. He was wearing only the yellow vesture around his waist. Uddhava Maharaja also followed him in.

Both of them offered oblations to the evening sun while reciting the *Savitru* mantra. The sages who had entered the waters also offered oblations. While everyone was coming out of the waters with a contented mind, suddenly a long-feathered peacock alighted on a *Kadamba tree* on the side, fluttering his wings. It gave out a cry that attracted everyone’s attention. At that moment, the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja glanced at each other and smiled very sweetly. I surmised that the Lord must have smiled thinking of the peacock feather that he always wore in his crown. Only both of them knew what the truth was.

Both the brothers came near the platters holding the royal attires. The footprints of their wet feet could be seen on the stone steps of the ghat. I scurried down the steps in order to offer my services to my Lord to get dressed. At that moment, he smiled sweetly as usual and said, “Daruka, this is Kalindidevi’s parental home. I will visit them once. Just remind me about that.”

The Lord left for an important meeting after finishing the evening worship rituals. Only Uddhava Maharaja was with him. Balaramadada was still occupied in the pandal with his disciple Bhimsena in making arrangements for the invited kings. Word was Maharishi Vyasa had arrived with his disciples in the special thatched huts settlement that was erected far away on the banks of river Yamuna. He was visiting Indraprastha many years after the

coronation of Maharaja Yudhishtira. The notable thing was that the royal priest of the Pandavas, Dhaumya rishi, had invited him along with his wife, recognizing the significance of the Rajasuya *yajna*. Maharishi's wife, mata Ghrutachidevi, had also come with him.

I pulled our Garudadhwaaja chariot in front of the thatched hut settlement of Maharishi. He and his wife were standing in front of the tallest, main hut to welcome the Lord.

With affection, the Maharishi took both the brothers by their hands and guided them inside the thatched hut. He sat on a raised seat covered with a grass mat. His wife sat on his left, but on the ground on another mat. Clad in fine royal attire both the exceptionally handsome Yadava brothers stood in front of them with their palms joined. As the Maharishi signalled they sat on the grass mats. The disciples of Maharishi stood wherever they could find a place. I also stood among them.

First, Maharishi inquired about the wellbeing of Maharaja Vasudeva and Devakimata and Rohinimata. Then the three of them had a profound discussion on various subjects such as royal precepts, justice-injustice, truth and untruth, and proper respect for womanhood. Even the Maharishi's wife participated in those discussions. While concluding the visit Maharishi Vyasa said, "Yadunandana Srikrishna, this Rajasuya *Yajna* of the Pandavas is indeed going to be a memorable event from various aspects. The eldest Pandava asked for my recommendation about who should be bestowed with the honour of *Arapooja* in the *yajna*. Who else is suitable for this task but you? I have full faith that with your blessings and your *Arapooja*, this Rajasuya *Yajna* of the Pandavas will be accomplished properly without any obstacles. You will certainly take care of any problem if at all that arises!" Maharishi Vyasa smiled from the bottom of his heart, reminding us exactly of Acharya Sandipani.

The day of the Rajasuya *Yajna* dawned. The grand *Yajna* pandal spread along the banks of the Yamuna was shining in the sunrays. Many encampments for the soldiers of the kings invited from various kingdoms were also erected along the banks of the Yamuna. Thatched huts were raised in many places for the sages and hermits coming from various places. The pennant of Hastinapura fluttered on the army camp of the contingent which had come from there. Prince Duryodhana and a few of his select brothers, the king of Anga – Karna, his brother Shona and his commander and chief minister, Shakunimama and a few of his select brothers, and the royal adviser

Kanaka had arrived from Hastinapura. Grandsire Bhishma and Mahatma Vidura had come along with Vrishavarma, the chief minister of the Kurus. Many camps for the armies and many pandals were erected for lodging various kings including the Panchala king Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna, the kings and princes of the kingdoms of Matsya, Vatsa, Ayodhya, Kosala, Videha, Avanti, Shursena, Sindhu, Sauvira, Kamboj, Kashir, Kaushika, Kamarupa, Kirata, Kuntibhoja, Ashmaka and Aanarta.

My Lord was staying in the royal palace of the Pandavas along with Rukminidevi. Both of them knew beforehand that they were going to have to perform various rituals as part of the *Agrapooja*. Therefore, they had taken a holy bath and were fasting – even without taking a sip of water.

From the camp of the Kurus grandsire Bhishma and Mahatma Vidura, after finishing their morning rituals, visited the Lord. Panchala king Drupada and Dhrishtadyumna also paid a visit. Notably, Rukmi, the prince of Kundinapura, who had learnt his lesson after the killing of Jarasandha, had also come with his brothers. The Lord's best friend, Sudama had also arrived from Sudampuri along with his wife.

As the news about the Mayasabha that Maya had constructed in front of the royal palace of the Pandavas, had spread across all the camps, huge crowds of spectators were drawn towards the royal palace. The spectators were wonderstruck after watching the miraculous optical and auditory illusions that Maya had created. Various auspicious musical instruments were being played in the entire Indraprastha since early morning itself. Similar instruments were played in the *Yajna* pandal. Dhaumya rishi was in a flurry looking after the arrangements for the *yajna*.

He was giving instructions to his disciples while moving swiftly around the pandal. Piles of proportionately cut sacrificial sticks bunched in fixed numbers, were stacked around the grand *Yajna* pit. Those holy sticks were taken from trees like *Audumbara*, *Bela*, Banyan, *Champaka*, Sandalwood, Fig, Mango and many more. Golden platters containing food grains, flowers, *Yajna* materials, and different soils were arranged in a row. There were copper, golden and silver pots filled with freshly made ghee. Their oblation in to the *Yajna* fire was going to cleanse the atmosphere. Thus, thorough preparations had been made for the *Rajasuya yajna*.

The news of a peculiar incident reached the Lord's pavilion as the evening was approaching. Duryodhana who visited the royal palace out of curiosity to take a look at the Mayasabha along with Karna, the king of Anga, was

humiliated. Due to the optical illusion, he mistook a water pond for a floor carpet and fell into it in front of all! Karna helped him recover and pulled him out of the pond. While this was happening the Pandavas' wife Draupadidevi had ridiculed Duryodhana from the balcony. Duryodhana got furious when he came to know about it later.

Though my Lord was fasting his face was shining radiantly today. Uddhava Maharaja and I helped the Lord to put on his pearl necklaces with the Kaustubh diamond, carved golden armlets, a saffron coloured golden-bordered upper garment, and a similar blue shawl. Uddhava Maharaja put the peacock-feathered golden crown on his head. After that, in the end, the Lord himself picked up the white, fragrant Vaijayanti garland and put it around his neck.

His face and eyes reflected exceptional radiance. Was it only the radiance of being a Kshatriya? Not at all. That radiance was very different. While putting decorative, golden ornaments on his slender toes Uddhava Maharaja said, "Dada, you are looking exceptionally handsome. I really feel I must perform the ritual to cast off any evil eye."

We came out of the inner chambers. All five Pandavas were waiting outside. Rukminidevi arrived from the ladies' chambers, surrounded by maid servants. She was wearing a light orange coloured attire. She was also looking radiant. As the prince of the Yadavas, Balaramadada ascended the chariot along with Revatidevi.

After him, all Pandavas except Yudhishtira climbed in a single chariot. Behind them were the chariots of Kuntidevi, Draupadidevi and other Pandava ladies. Ahead of all I took a seat as the charioteer of the Garudadhwaia chariot. In the back of the chariot sat the Lord – venerable Aarya – Maharaja Srikrishna, whose acclaim had spread across Aaryavarta even without any conquests of any kind; Rukminidevi, and his brother Uddhava Maharaja, politeness incarnate.

There the *Yajna* pandal was all set for the *yajna*. On the northern side, Maharishi Vyasa's grand seat was located in the front. Behind it seating arrangements were made for all the invited kings. On the eastern side seats were arranged for sages coming from various places and their disciples. On the southern side, Maharishi Vyasa's wife, mata Ghrutachidevi was seated in the front and behind her sat the elite men and women and select erudite women. On the west, the royal ladies of the major dynasties like Pandava, Yadava and Kurus sat. Thus, the pandal was full to its capacity.

I steered the Lord's Garudadhvaja chariot drawn by four white horses in front of the main entrance on the eastern side. Dhaumya rishi approached the Lord with his palms joined. The Lord descended from the chariot smiling and affectionately held Dhaumya rishi's right hand in his own. Maharishi Vyasa stood behind Dhaumya rishi, smiling gently. The Lord humbly touched their feet and took their blessings. He began walking slowly and steadily towards the *Yajna* pandal, bowing gently to all. Many auspicious musical instruments played in unison at that time. His blue body like the blue Anjani flower was dazzling in the soft rays of the setting sun. On his right walked Balaramadada, his brothers Gada, Sarana, and Rohitashwa and Uddhava Maharaja. On the left, I walked next to Revatidevi and RukmiNidevi, with the dutiful mind of a protector! Dhaumya rishi and Maharishi Vyasa along with their disciples, four Pandavas, Yadava commander Satyaki, Brahmagargya, all ministers of the Sudharma assembly along with Akrura, Pradyumna, Samba, my son Daruki, aged Anadhrishti, his son Yashaswi and many more Yadavas followed us.

As soon as we entered the *Yajna* pandal grandsire Bhishma approached the Lord immediately along with Yudhishtira and took him in a deep embrace. The Suvasinis of Pandavas came forward one by one and washed the Lord and Rukminidevi's feet with water. Draupadidevi and other Pandava wives welcomed both of them with lamps. On behalf of the Kurus, Sanjaya and Mahatma Vidura put thick white lotus garlands around their necks. Both of them touched the feet of rajmata with humility and sought her blessings. Everybody in the pandal arose automatically out of respect now. Only two people continued to sit – Chedi king Shishupala and Kaurava prince Duryodhana.

As we reached the *Yajna* altar Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira lovingly held the Lord's right hand in his hand and escorted him along with Rukminidevi to the grand, golden seats near the *Yajna* altar. The Pandavas' chief minister escorted Balaramadada and Revatidevi to the designated golden seats for the prince and the princess. I didn't even know when, from among the Pandava brothers the master archer *Dhananjaya* moved forward swiftly after seeing the Lord and respectfully stood to his left. The Lord casually and lovingly put his left hand on Arjuna's bare, robust shoulder. Both of them looked at each other and smiled gently from the bottom of their hearts. Due to their blue complexions, I was baffled for a moment – it seemed as if the Lord was smiling into a mirror. I noticed at this time that there was a

small difference between their gaits. My Lord walked with casual ease. Arjuna's gait displayed the awareness of a warrior walking firmly.

Maharaja Yudhishtira seated the Lord and Rukminidevi with utter respect on the golden royal seats near the *Yajna* altar. I remained standing behind their seats. After the Lord took his seat everybody in the pandal sat down. Now the sages and hermits sat in the Padmasana pose on their tiger-skin mats. Maharishi Vyasa sat right at the front, on a separate high seat – he was amidst all and yet alone.

Maharaja Yudhishtira stood near the *Yajna* pit and started speaking, “Respected Maharishi Vyasdeva, mata Rukminidevi, Bhagvan Vaasudeva Srikrishna, honourable Uddhavadeva, venerable grandsire, Yadava Prince Balarama, motherly Revatidevi, gurudeva Drona and Kripacharya, Kuru prince Duryodhana and Shakunimama, Karna – the king of Anga, Chedi king Shishupala, Madra king – Shalyamama, honourable sages, invited kings and citizens! On behalf of my brothers I cordially welcome you all to Indraprastha with a great deal of happiness. We are performing this *Yajna* for the prosperity and peace of our kingdom. It is our great fortune that Bhagvan Srikrishna is present here today with his wife as the *Yajnavetta* of this grand *yajna*. Maharishi Vyasadeva, who is not partaking in any of the *Yajna* rituals has come here today along with his wife only to give us his blessings. All of us have already welcomed all of you. As the formally crowned king of Indraprastha, on today's auspicious day I am going to wash the feet of the *Yajnavetta* couple as part of the commencing rituals. The first holy sacrificial stick of *Bela* will be offered in the *Yajna* fire at the auspicious hands of the *Yajnavetta* in your presence. I have confidence and full faith that with your blessings our Indraprastha kingdom will scale new heights.

Agnihotri rishi incanted the mantras of Pranava. A platter full of burning embers was offered in the *Yajna* pit as the Agnihotra.

Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira indicatively glanced at his chief minister. He brought a golden jar full of water made auspicious by chanting of mantras, from various rivers of Aaryavarta and a big golden platter that was kept ready. Yudhishtira himself put the golden platter at the feet of the Lord; gently picked up the auspicious feet of the Lord of Dwaraka – Bhagvan Vaasudeva and put them in the platter. With full faith, venerable Pandava Yudhishtira began pouring water from the golden jar in a single stream on the Lord's feet. The sages and hermits around began incanting mantras. All invited kings were curiously watching the extremely rare occasion, rare even

for the gods.

The Mantras were continuously being chanted slowly and steadily by a group of Brahmanas near the *Yajna* pit. After washing the feet of the *Yajnavetta*, the king of the Indraprastha, venerable Pandava, Maharaja Yudhishtira sipped a few drops of the water that was collected in the salver, like holy water. He gently wiped the Lord's blue feet with his exclusive, fine royal garment with ardent devotion. He also washed the feet of Rukminidevi.

Now the Lord arose from his seat amidst the escalating chanting of the mantras. Rukminidevi followed him, and both of them walked towards the *Yajna* pit. The Lord glanced around the *Yajna* pandal with his virtuous, divine eyes. The next moment he bent and picked up a small bunch of *Bela* sticks smilingly.

Rukminidevi touched his hand holding the sacrificial *Yajna* sticks. The Lord muttered something and was about to offer the sacrificial sticks into the *Yajna* pit when –

The Chedi king Shishupala sitting in the section of the invited kings suddenly stood up. He was the lord's aatebandhu. He pulled up the huge mace in his hand and put it on his shoulder. He shouted loudly in a tone of strong objection, "Stop...!"

Everybody stared at him, terrified and shocked. He moved his head on his thick neck left and right, looking around the pandal once. Finally, his eyes locked with the eyes of Maharaja Yudhishtira. With nostrils flared he roared loudly, "Oh Yudhishtira, a descendant of the highly-esteemed Kuru dynasty, how come you honoured this low-life son of a cowherd to be the *Yajnavetta* of this grand *yajna*? Yudhishtira, have you invited all the valiant Kshatriyas of Aaryavarta only to humiliate them?"

Balaramadada, Bhima-Arjuna, and Satyaki had already stood up in fury, brandishing their mace, bow and sword.

The Lord threw the bunch of sacrificial sticks back onto the pile of sticks and with a mere gesture of the hand he restrained all of them.

Shishupala, who noticed that nobody was objecting him, walked briskly towards the *Yajna* altar leaving his seat, and began speaking derisively whatever came to his mind, even more furiously. "What were you thinking while disregarding so many warriors in this pandal, way more gallant than this cowherd? How did you come to wash the feet of this runaway, defector cattleman in front of such gallant warriors like

grandsire Bhishma, Prince Duryodhana, Shalya – the king of Madra, Sindhu king Jayadratha, Shakuni – the son of Subala, Matsya king Virata, and Panchala king Drupada?”

Grandsire Bhishma stood up as he heard Shishupala mentioning his name. Trying to control Shishupala who had clearly lost his faculty of discretion he said, “That is enough, oh son of Damaghosha, the prince of Chedi. Control yourself and be seated.”

Shishupala who harboured deep in his heart the pain of the killing of Magadha emperor Jarasandha, the one who had made him a commander and the torment of his broken engagement with Rukminidevi, was in no mood to listen to anybody. He simply discarded grandsire’s experienced words of caution. Instead he retorted insolently, “Son of Ganga, you have become old now. You better sit down.” Grandsire Bhishma sat down, humiliated and dejected. Then Shishupala became uncontrollable like an insolent bull that has broken free from his tethers. Looking at Maharaja Yudhishtira and the Lord alternately, he shouted again, “Didn’t you notice the splendid scholarly Brahmins in the pandal like Paila, Dhaumya, Yaaja Upayajaa, Drona, Kripa, Vidura and Ashwatthama? Instead of them how could you wash the feet of a black cowherd? Oh, Son of Kunti, how come you didn’t feel even a bit of remorse while performing such a low act of putting the glory of the Kuru dynasty to shame? If you are impressed by his black-blue complexion, how come you missed gallant Karna – the king of Anga, much more attractive and possessor of the wondrous sparkling golden impenetrable Kavacha-kundala from his birth, the one who is a philanthropist?”

Shishupala waited momentarily to see if there was any objection. Karna, the king of Anga whose name he had just mentioned stood up and warning him, he said, “Oh king of Chedi, you are going overboard. Gather yourself. Be calm.” Discarding even his advice, Shishupala screamed, “I am not a cowherd like this one to listen to a charioteer like you! You better sit down.”

Now going completely berserk, Shishupala’s blood-red tongue went loose, jabbering indignations uncontrollably. “Yudhishtira, how could you forget all the elderly and valiant people in the pandal? How dare you assign a lowlife cattleman that wanders in the forest, as the *Yajnavetta* of such grand *Yajna* today? What else is this if not utter humiliation of all present?” I could not bear his utter nonsense now. Sitting on the northern side of the pandal grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, Sanjaya, the king of Anga were boiling with rage; Balaramadada, Satyakee, Uddhavadeva, Bhima, Arjuna,



and Nakula-Sahadeva who were sitting in our section stood up at once. But... the Lord made all of us sit down with only a single stern glance! For the first time, today I realized the power of his stern eyes.

Completely demented Shishupala was still ranting insanely. Intoxication by the idea of revenge is even stronger than that by liquor. Anybody would agree with this after watching the way Shishupala was frantically moving around the *Yajna* pit and the way he was ranting insanely. He wanted to take revenge on the Lord as the commander of Jarasandha who went up to Mount Gomanta, and as the humiliated rival of the Lord who returned empty-handed from Kundinapura after being unsuccessful in becoming the bride groom of Rukminidevi. That was the reason he was talking whatever nonsense came to his mind.

He began using all possible vulgar words that he could think of in an indecent language as if he had lost his mind; publicly defaming the Lord in a way that nobody had done before or heard before. “You traitor of the family that murdered his own mama, the runaway deserter who turned tail and fled, unable to face the Magadha emperor Jarasandha’s mettle. You are only fit to deliver cow’s milk from the cowshed of Mathura for this holy *Yajna* organized by the Kshatriyas and the sages, get paid for it and walk away! Why didn’t you do that? How dare you sit at all on the divine throne reserved for the *Yajnavetta*? Didn’t you feel ashamed of yourself while getting your dirty feet washed by an elite Kshatriya?”

With each word that came out of his mouth the audience got anxious with fear. My Lord’s head was gradually rising like the hood of a cobra. He put his left hand on his waist and to warn Shishupala in time he said in a stern, resolute and calm voice, “Shishupala, I have tolerated ninety-nine offences of yours till this moment. I have promised your mother – my *aatya* – that I will condone up to a hundred offences of yours. Every moment henceforth is bringing your life closer to its end! Beware and control yourself!”

“You coward, teaching everyone useless philosophy, if valour is the true *Dharma* of a Kshatriya, and if you are a true Kshatriya then come here at the centre of the *Yajna* pandal and agree to a wrestling duel with this king of Chedi! Or else, you, runaway cowherd, just get lost from this holy place!!” He threw away the mace in his hand, and staring at my Lord he actually thumped his arms.

I wanted to scream out loud and tell that arrogant, insolent, disoriented Kshatriya, ‘Shishupala, your life is over!’

At once the *Yajna* pandal began trembling with a loud cacophony of thousands of instruments unheard before. Nobody could figure out from which direction it was coming. My sight got drawn towards the Lord's face and rested there. His entire body appeared like a thousand-petal red lotus flower resting on a tall blue stem. His face that had looked like a blue lotus a moment ago, now looked blood red. His rosy lips began uttering a divine mantra. The unintelligible words of the mantra that I had never heard before kept increasing every moment. They filled the entire pandal. The Lord's right hand rose gradually. Within moments a serrated, radiant, Vajra centred, swiftly revolving chakra with twelve spokes manifested on the index finger of that hand, dispersing circles of brilliance. The words which came out of Lord's divine mouth were so intense and sharp that they broke through the cacophony of thousands of instruments, loud enough to put thundering clouds to shame. It directly penetrated the heart of every single spectator in the pandal. By this time, surmising that something inconceivable was going to happen, the entire pandal was on its feet. The Lord's words fell on their ears like they were coming from the skies – "Shishupala, your limit of one hundred offences is over! Henceforth, you won't be able to commit the hundred and first offence at all. You will not get such an opportunity ever!!"

The Lord opened his eyes. For a moment, he took an aim of Shishupala's throat. The next moment he projected that rapidly revolving Sudarshan chakra which was emitting bright light and which was charged with mantras towards Shishupal!

The entire pandal was now fully aware that the Lord of Dwaraka, Bhagvan Vaasudeva had launched the Sudarshan chakra which he does very rarely. Many invitees started running helter-skelter raising both hands in the air shouting, 'Run... help ... Sudarshan is coming... Sudarshan'. I had travelled with the Lord in the Garudadhawaja chariot throughout the entire Aaryavarta and hence was well acquainted with him. But his form today was totally unfamiliar even to me. We feel as if the sun shining in the sky is travelling with us. But when we look at his radiant disk we realize how far away he is from us. At this moment, the Lord looked as radiant as millions of suns. The effulgent glow on his face was too much to look at. I realized that he was indeed far away from us like the Sun – the Lord of the Sky. I immediately raised both my hands and prostrated in front of him. I said in my mind, "Oh Lord, please forgive me, give me shelter at your feet. Indeed, I have no ability to be your confidant. Oh, Lord Vaasudeva, save

me.” I prayed to him from the bottom of my heart. It felt like he had come close to me and was lifting me up as usual – and indeed I stood up. I became a spectator, a witness to the unfolding drama of Sudarshan.

Shishupala, who was arrogantly talking whatever came to his mind earlier, began shaking with fear now. His face that had looked fiery red with rage now turned black with fear for his life. Pandemonium had broken in the entire pandal. Unbearable brilliant bright light had spread everywhere. Making a whirring sound the Sudarshan chakra moved towards Shishupala.

Fearing for his life, trembling Shishupala now tried to block that brilliant radiance with his hairy hands. He tried to hide behind the seats of the kings in the pandal to avoid the blazing glow of the chakra. The leader of the Chedis who had called my dear Lord a deserter a moment ago was himself running for his life now. All the kings behind whose seats Shishupala tried to hide, began running helter-skelter to protect themselves from the blazing light of the chakra. Those were otherwise valiant, fearless kings who would attack their enemy in the battlefield with all their might. Looking at their dreadful experience the invited commoners had already fled the pandal. Not a single king could stand in front of the blazing chakra even for a moment. Rolling his eyes, terrified Shishupala tried in vain to dodge and hide behind seat after seat. With an uncontrollable, loud, and cacophonous sound the Sudarshan followed him everywhere just like an agile eagle goes after a snake as soon as he sees it, without giving him a chance to escape.

While running everywhere, he stumbled over his own mace that he had flung and tripped with a loud thud. There was no Chedi warrior or commander to help him get up, nor was there his Lord Jarasandha whom Bhima had already finished. Afraid for his life Shishupala now started running everywhere in the pandal like a maniac.

In the end, with his muscular chest bobbing up and down, panting Shishupala came in front of the Karna, the king of Anga, possessor of impenetrable Kavacha-kundala. The king of Anga was standing quietly. Looking at him Shishupal suddenly stopped and stay put in his place thinking, ‘when this chakra can’t do anything to a charioteer, then why is it chasing a Kshatriya like me.’ He swiftly turned around and without thinking anything he directly touched the Sudarshan chakra! But it charred his hand! The thick hair on his hand turned to ashes. As Shishupal stared at his charred hand, eyes wide with fear, his bravado

shattered.

As Shishupala realized that there was no one in the pandal, who could save him from the Sudarshan he scampered like a horse and reached the eastern gate of the pandal. He dashed out of the gate and started running for his life desperately. Every expression on his terror-stricken face started exhibiting in a variety of shades how much a human being is afraid of death. He tried in vain to seek shelter behind a boulder in his path or a trunk of a huge tree. Sudarshan wouldn't leave him alone even for a moment. Its loud whizzing kept escalating every moment. By this time many men and women were already safely back in their camps in Indraprastha. A few courageous people who stayed back were stunned and kept watching the hide and seek of life and death between Shishupala and Sudarshan with their heart in mouth. But I was sometimes looking at the Lord standing near the *Yajna* altar. His eyes were still closed – like in a state of meditation.

Shishupala who was now completely exhausted, directly entered the river Ikshumati in front of him, realizing that there was nowhere he could take refuge. To avoid the swiftly revolving chakra making a whistling sound he kept on going into the deep waters of Ikshumati. Once the water reached up to his throat he stopped, with no other way, and closed his eyes determinedly. He got ready to face the truth of his death. Chopping his head off instantly the chakra entered the river Ikshumati. Within moments Shishupala's head disappeared, floating on the bursting waves of Ikshumati. Shishupala's life was over! What remained behind were his insolent, unforgivable words spoken about my Lord! I looked at the section in the pandal reserved for the royals. The Lord's beloved wife Rukminidevi! She had not moved from her seat at all in spite of the stirring events. I wondered what she must have felt after witnessing the terrifying drama. I realized that she was indeed the one perfectly befitting the Lord. Another person who sat in his seat without moving was grandsire Bhishma. He was discussing something with Mahatma Vidura now.

I looked at the *Yajna* altar. My usual, familiar Lord stood there – smiling. I had never ever seen that smile on his face before. After making sure that the chakra had indeed disappeared, many a king of various kingdoms hurried back to the pandal and surrendered at the Lord's feet. Dhaumya rishi – the head of the *Yajna* – controlled them with great effort with the assistance of his disciples. He was worried about what was going to happen to the Rajasuya *Yajna* for which preparations were made with laborious efforts.

The Lord called him closer and resolved his problem saying, “Oh Dhaumya rishi, find another auspicious time and plan the *Yajna* soon again. The five Pandavas had already gathered around their dear Madhusudana with deep respect. Nobody even realized when dear Uddhava Maharaja came and stood on the Lord’s right in his service. Mesmerized, I walked towards the Lord near the *Yajna* altar.

So many people were gathered around the Lord, but no one dared to speak a single word. Everyone was dumbfounded. Only Uddhava Maharaja said, breaking that unbearable silence, “*Vahini* is still sitting on her seat quietly. Should I call her?”

As usual the Lord smiled sweetly and patting his brother’s shoulders he said, “No, Udho, you escort your *vahini* to the royal palace along with the Pandavas. I am going someplace else with Daruka!”

“As you wish, dada.” Uddhava Maharaja said humbly. I wondered momentarily, ‘If not the royal palace where is it that the Lord wants me to take him?’ The Lord knew the question on my mind, so immediately patting my shoulder he said, “Daruka, let’s go to the Garudadhwaaja chariot.”

“Yes, sire.” I said without asking him a single question. Still surrounded by all we came out of the pandal from the eastern gate. I had tied all four horses in the shade of a sprawling tree, and had put fodder in front of them. I untied them, patted them and brought them close to Garudadhwaaja. Only the Lord got into the chariot. I took the seat of the charioteer. The Lord bade farewell to all and we left. No sooner than we passed some distance along the bank of Yamuna he himself questioned me, “Daruka, how come you didn’t ask me where to go, as you always do?”

Pulling the reigns of the horses like a puppet I said, “Where to, oh Lord?” I halted the chariot and looked at him. He was still smiling. To me that smile appeared like the innocent smile of my son Daruki as a baby. I was already confused. Adding to that confusion he said in a teasing tone, “Daruka, was it necessary to halt the chariot just to ask a question?” What he said was indeed true.

“Daruka, come, we are going to Kalindidevi’s maternal home! To convey the wellbeing of their grandchildren!” The Lord said while smiling.

I was speechless. My Lord, as tall as the sky, the one who moments before had launched the Sudarshan chakra, was now himself going to the parents of Kalindidevi, his in-laws to deliver the news of their grandchildren’s wellbeing.

As per the Lord's instruction the Rajasooya *Yajna* of the Pandavas took place at another auspicious time, without any obstruction. The glory of the Pandavas and Indraprastha that had already spread, was further enhanced by word of mouth through the various kings present there as the result of this *Yajna* and the execution of Shishupala. Our kingdom Dwaraka now came to be at the forefront of other kingdoms in Aaryavarta.

The Lord enjoyed the warm hospitality of the Pandavas in Indraprasth for a few days and returned to Dwaraka along with all the Yadavas. As soon as he arrived in Dwaraka he had to hear shocking news. While we were in Indraprasth, Shalva– the king of Martikavati had attacked Dwaraka with his army! Our valiant Pradyumna fought with him fiercely for twenty-seven days along with his brothers and forced him to retreat. This was the very first direct attack on Dwaraka since its inception. In his heart the Lord was deeply offended on hearing the news, but he didn't disclose his feelings during the daily routine. He called his master architect Gargamuni in his chambers. While giving him the important instruction with all the subtleties he said, "Oh Gargamuni, a few stairs should be added to the staircase leading to my chambers, which I love very much. It should mainly include the steps in the honour of *aaty*a Kuntidevi, beloved *Sakhi* Draupadi, and the five Pandavas respectively. Below these stairs add one more step without forgetting, that is for my loyal attendant and dear friend charioteer Daruka!"

When I got to hear this from Uddhava Maharaja, my heart was overwhelmed with the feeling of utmost gratefulness for the Lord. My Lord himself had told me once in Mathura how he felt about me. Now it had got the seal of Lord Srikrishna.

The Srisopana leading to the Lord's resting chambers in the original Dwaraka looked much grander now. As it was made of many a golden step it easily grabbed the attention of the people visiting. The first few steps at the top of this staircase were in the names of prominent personalities in the Yadava dynasty who were very closely associated with the Lord by unbreakable emotional ties. The very first step was in the name of the Rajmata Devakidevi, the second was in the name of Maharaja Vasudevababa. The third one was for Yashodamata in Gokul, the fourth one for Nandababa. The fifth one was for Uddhava Maharaja in spite of the fact that he was a cousin. The step after that was for the Lord's *sakhi* Radha in Gokul. Then it continued with Rohinimata, Balaramadada, Revativahini and so on.

By this time the Pandavas had surpassed many Yadavas and had come closer to the Lord's heart. After the steps for the major Yadavas the next steps were for the five Pandavas along with Rajmata Kuntidevi and the Maharani of the Pandavas, Draupadidevi. But among the steps for the Pandavas only the Lord knew the sequence as to which step was of which Pandava. It was indeed my great luck to get a step in my name as a part of the Srisopana.

Shalva's armed attack on Dwaraka was not a thing to be overlooked at all. First of all, it was necessary to assess the power of the army and weaponry that he used in this assault. For that purpose, the Lord would call young Pradyumna in his chambers any time. He asked Pradyumna a lot of questions and assessed Shalva's strength. Only one conclusion could be drawn from the information that was gathered – Shalva's real strength lay in his aircraft called 'Saubha'. He could easily travel anywhere in Aaryavarta on the strength of this aircraft. It was with the help of this very aircraft that he had invited Kalayavana from a distant kingdom to Aaryavarta before. It was necessary to destroy his 'Saubha' aircraft to punish Shalva. But he was safe with his army in the royal capital Martikavati located on Mount Arbuda in Marusthali.

The venerable Lord of Dwaraka instructed chief minister Vipruthu to hold the Sudharma assembly of the Yadavas. All the ministers, chief minister and honourable citizens were present in this council. Now, not only in Dwaraka but wherever my Lord went the atmosphere would get filled with his charm and automatically get entranced.

This time the chief minister stated only the purpose of the council, which consisted of two things – to control Shalva, the owner of Saubha in time and to decide who should go to Hastinapura with gift platters for the Vishnuyaga *Yajna* as invited by the Kurus. Once he stated the purpose he struck the royal sceptre on the ground as per the tradition and waited.

There were no speculative whispers among the restless Yadavas as it would usually happen. Everyone kept looking expectantly only at the Lord. The silence was getting unbearable. So Uddhava Maharaja said to the Lord, "Dada, don't try our patience. Please give us the courage to face this problem." The Lord looked at him and smiled with inherent love. He glanced at Rukminidevi and stood up. He politely addressed all Yadav members of the assembly –

"I will go to meet Shalva myself, provided all of you grant me the

permission to do so. Because of that I won't be able to attend the Vishnuyaga *Yajna* of the Kurus in Hastinapura. The chief minister and commander Satyaki should go there along with select warriors. Before leaving they should meet me.”

When the Lord who had so many exploits in his name, politely asked for permission of the Yadava members of the council with his palms joined instead of speaking at length as usual, the entire Sudharma assembly was touched.

The Yadava warriors who were moved by his humility responded in unison “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, it is you who should command!”

The fourfold army consisting of lakhs of Yadavas got ready in a week's time. The mission of ‘Shalva – the owner of Saubha’ was underway. The Lord accepted a spoonful of curds on his rosy palms from Devakidevi, Rohinidevi and Rukminidevi at the same time and put it in his mouth.

The fourfold army of pugnacious Yadava warriors crossed the ocean creek in huge ships and descended on the borders of Saurashtra as usual. In this expedition, the Lord was accompanied by Balaramadada, Satyaki, Kritavarman, Uddhava Maharaja, Shini and Avagaha as usual. Notably, he summoned the genius, great architect Mayasura who was still in Indraprastha. He planted expert spies from Dwaraka up to Mount Arbuda much before leaving. Through them he made arrangements to spread the news everywhere that ‘The Lord of Dwaraka has received invitation from the Kamarupa king Bhagadutta and has left for Pragjyotishapura in the east. He has taken all major Yadava warriors with him. Pradyumna is in charge of protection of the Dwaraka kingdom with his step-brothers Bhanu, Samba, Vira, Sangramjita, Praghosha, Shruta and Vrika assisting him.’

The news that he was going to Pragjyotishapura of Kamarupa kingdom at the far eastern end of Aaryavarta was a rumour spread to mislead Shalva. To that effect the Lord had sent detailed instructions by his informers to Bhagadutta of Kamarupa telling him the sequence of actions that he should follow. According to that he was going to create an illusion that the Kamarupa kingdom was getting ready to welcome the Lord. He was also going to spread the news of these preparations in the neighbouring kingdoms of Manipura, Tripura, Anga, Vanga, Uttkala, Videha and Magadha, as per the Lords' instructions.

In reality, it was Shalva on whom the Lord's eyes were, who was living in the city of Martikavati, difficult to reach, in the region of Mount Arbuda in



the Matsya kingdom located in the far west of Aaryavarta. Was the Lord himself going to go there with his army? Not at all. He was tactfully going to use the Avanti and Kuntibhoja kingdoms in Madhyadesha belonging to his kith and kin to his own advantage. He had already instructed the family of Mitravindadevi in Avanti and *aatya* Kuntidevi's relatives in the city of Kuntibhoja to keep his arrival a secret. The last sojourn of our army was in the Kuntibhoja city in Madhyadesha. Here the Lord had a detailed talk with Mayasura whom he had brought along. He was the one who had gone to the city of Martikavati way back and had built the Saubha aircraft for Shalva using his genius. The Lord got from him detailed information about the aircraft – its speed, from how far away the whirring sound of the aircraft could be heard, the way it lands on the ground, and so on.

In the region of Mount Arbuda, in the city of Martikavati, Shalva's informers had presented the news to him, "Srikrishna of Dwaraka has gone to the Kamarupa kingdom along with the army and select Yadav warriors. The kingdoms of Uttkala, Vanga and Tripura have made grand preparations to welcome him. Only Pradyumna is in Dwaraka along with aged Vasudeva. A few of his brothers along with Samba and a few select Yadav warriors are with him. This is the right time to strike again and humble that nuisance of a Dwaraka kingdom that has been recently meddling in unwanted matters. Dwaraka has already become feeble due to the attacks during the previous battle that lasted for twenty-seven days. We can even dispatch part of our army through the kingdom of Sauvira and they can enter Dwaraka by way of the ocean!"

All this was happening just as my Lord had anticipated. This is how his military strategy was – beyond the grasp of all around him. Our army took rest and enjoyed the hospitality of the Bhojas in the city of Kuntibhoja in Madhyadesha, for an entire week. As it is our Uddhava Maharaja never took part in any battle. It was just not in his nature, yet he accompanied the Lord on many such ventures, like his shadow. This time too he was with the Lord.

As the news arrived that Shalva had descended from the dense forests of Mount Arbuda and was on his way to Dwaraka along with commander Kshemadhurti, our fourfold army resting in the city of Kuntibhoja began moving. Balaramadada, Satyaki, Kritavarman, Shini and Avagaha speedily cut across the kingdom of the Dasharnas in between and surrounded Mount Arbuda. This blocked Shalva's path back to the city of Martikavati now. I descended into the Sauvira kingdom along with the Lord, Uddhava Maharaja

and select Yadav warriors. This was the westernmost end of Mount Arbuda. Just as the Lord of Dwaraka had constructed a planned harbour at Dwaraka and erected the Kroshtu lighthouse in the ocean, the rulers of Sauvira had built a port on their western border. They had also erected a lighthouse. Along with the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja in the chariot, I began steering the Garudadhvaja chariot towards the port of Sauvira. A few select armed Yadav warriors followed us. Now the Lord was neither in Dwaraka, nor in Pragjyotishapura, nor in the siege around Mount Arbuda. Nobody had any clue as to exactly where Maharaja Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka was. As soon as we reached the port of Sauvira the Lord cautiously used only one strategy. The island of Dwaraka was closer by way of the ocean through this port. Through a few skilled fishermen of Sauvira he arranged to convey to Shalva, who was trying to enter Dwaraka, news that the mammoth Yadava army had surrounded the entire Mount Arbuda to destroy the city of Martikavati. He was to get the news before he reached the Shuddhaksha gate, and that would surely leave him sleepless.

Now Shalva who had reached close to Dwaraka was immediately going to return to protect his royal city. He was going to send his army back by way of land, and he himself was going to descend in Sauvira by way of air in the Saubha aircraft. From there he was going to assess the siege and the strength of our army and then plan further strategy. All this was going to happen sequentially just as the Lord had prudently anticipated.

Uddhava Maharaja, I and select armed horse riders stood behind the Lord in the port of Sauvira, facing Dwaraka in the southern direction. We waited there for a good one hour. Now the overhead sun began his descent towards the western ocean. The Lord would sometimes restlessly cast an intent gaze far away in the southern direction on the western ocean holding his left hand over his eyebrows. Now the boats of Sauvira fishermen with tall sails could be seen returning. The Lord ceaselessly kept looking at a faraway distance in the ocean and kept walking restlessly on the wet sand in the port as nothing was happening as per his anticipation. Uddhava Maharaja and I had also gotten anxious and were dragging ourselves behind him. I had never seen him so perturbed before. He grabbed the blue shawl on his chest tightly and suddenly stopping in the middle he muttered to himself, “This – this is very strange. Not the whirr of the aircraft ... but I can hear somebody shouting my name in heart-wrenching cries – Madhava, Milinda, Madhusudana...! Who could it be?”

The evening was approaching now. We could see flocks of chirping ocean birds with long wings and long tails, returning home.

Suddenly we heard a whirring sound. None of us had ever heard such whirring before. It kept increasing every moment. From the southern end of the western ocean an eagle-like figure in the sky was slowly moving in our direction. The whirring kept increasing as it came closer. Spellbound, we all kept staring at the eagle-like figure. That diverted our attention away from the Lord. What is this thing Lord? I wanted to ask the Lord, and so I looked at him. And I kept looking at him agape. Uddhava Maharaja and all the Yadava warriors accompanying us were in the same shocked state as I was. On the shore of the western ocean the Lord was now looking like he was not amongst us. The Lord had completely closed his fish-shaped eyes; he seemed taller and in a meditative trance. He was whispering something. A terrifying cacophony of war trumpets was heard. The whirring noise that we had heard just before was nothing compared to this sound. The Lord's face had turned red like the fruit of *Kokum*. The Lord who otherwise looked bluish, dusky, almost black, now started looking bluish red, golden and extremely resplendent. We could hear the words of mantras vaguely coming out of his normally rosy but now blood red lips. The right hand of the taller looking Lord was raised. The bright Sudarshan chakra with twelve spokes emitting millions of rays of light and revolving rapidly around itself, manifested instantly on his right index finger!

That brilliance dazzled us. The western ocean spread in front of us glowed in that brilliance. Because of the loud, piercing sound being emitted from the radiant chakra we were unable to hear the sound of the ocean and the strange whirring that we had heard a few moments before. The brilliance of the chakra and the cacophony of various war drums prevailed over the expanse of the western ocean. The Lord's raised right hand flexed forward a little bit. The radiant Sudarshan chakra had been projected. The super swift Sudarshan chakra shot in the direction of the approaching eagle-shaped aircraft. Within moments it collided with the eagle-shaped aircraft. A terrifying, deafening sound of a blast reverberated. The next moment that eagle tumbled into the frothy waters of the western ocean with its broken wings and shattered body. That was the 'Saubha' aircraft with Shalva, its master, sitting in it! By this time, we all had dropped down on the ocean sand. Nothing was visible. My brain was completely benumbed with the loud boom and the bright light! All I could see vaguely was that the chakra had returned. It did not settle on the

Lord's index finger as usual. Instead with a roaring sound it moved in the direction where the Lord had pointed his index finger. In the direction of Kurus' Hastinapura. Meanwhile the lustrous disk of the sun of Sauvira had touched the western ocean and was slowly sinking in the water. Throughout the night, the ruins of the Saubha aircraft wobbling on the waves of the western ocean were going to drift away slowly in the direction of the south. They were going to deliver the jubilant news to the citizens of Dwaraka and valiant Pradyumna – 'The ungrateful traitor Shalva who collaborated with Shishupala and Jarasandha and invited Kalayavana from abroad to Aaryavarta, has been finished.' With tremendous reverence in my heart I looked at my Lord and again found myself speechless. The Lord who had projected the powerful Sudarshan chakra and shattered the aircraft along with Shalva in it, looked very ghastly. He couldn't even hold the golden-bordered blue shawl on his chest, which was already drifting away on the ocean wind following the Sudarshan chakra – in the direction of Hastinapura!

My Lord had already achieved the 'Vaasudeva' appellation – the highest glory of the Yadavas way back. Grandsire Bhishma himself had spontaneously addressed him so. All Yadavas in our Dwaraka kingdom, all Pandavas in Indraprastha along with Kuntidevi, Pandavas' wives and their citizens also regarded the Lord so. The Pandava family in Indraprastha had also expanded now. In addition to Draupadidevi each Pandava had either one, two or three wives. The second wife of Maharaja Yudhishtira was Pauravidevi. They had a son named Devaka. His son Prativindhya, born to Draupadidevi was the firstborn in the second generation of the Pandavas. He was the future prince of Indraprastha.

The son born to the second Pandava, venerable wrestler and mace warrior Bhimsena and Draupadidevi, was named Sutasoma. He was well built just like his father. The notable thing was that just as the Lord had married Jambavatidevi, a daughter of a tribal king Jambavana, Bhimsena had married a Rakshasa daughter Hidimba. But Hidimbadevi lived in the jungle at her parental residence. Her son's name was Ghatotkacha. He was the most powerful among all sons of Bhimsena with rare inborn qualities suitable for war. After the execution of Shishupala the Lord wished that the Chedis should have good relations with Indraprastha. He didn't find it right that the Chedis should stand up against the Pandavas and Dwaraka. Therefore, he convinced Bhimsena to accept Shishupala's sister Kalidevi as his wife. She remained at her parental home in Shuktimati. Her

son's name was Sarvagata.

The Lords' most favourite Pandava was master archer Arjuna. Just as he called me and Uddhava Maharaja, he also called Arjuna as '*Sakha*'. The Lord's favourite, gallant *Partha* had two more wives besides Draupadidevi and Subhadradevi, called Uloopidevi who was a Naga daughter and Chitrangadadevi from Manipura. This was a rare blood relation of its kind between the Pandavas and the Nagas. The Pandavas were going to get the support of the Nagas' military strength if needed in future. Uloopidevi's son was Iravan and Chitrangadadevi's son was named Babhruvahana.

The fourth Pandava was Nakula. The Lord himself had urged him to accept the hand of Shishupala's daughter Karenumati as his second wife. This couple's son was Niramitra. As Shishupala's sister was married to Bhimsena and his daughter was married to Bhimsena's brother Nakula the two Pandavas had now become father-in-law and son-in-law to each other. This entire emotional concord and act was indeed due to the intellectual genius of the Lord.

The last Pandava was Sahadeva. He was a connoisseur in the matter of horses. He had an alert mind just like the mind of a running horse. He was the only one besides the Lord who would talk to me in detail about horses, chariots, and taking care of the horses for hours on end. I had close emotional ties with two of the Pandavas. The first was Arjuna, who was as dear to the Lord as Uddhava Maharaja, and the second was Sahadeva. He loved horses just as much as I did. I was a charioteer; he was a mighty horse-lover Pandava. Still the disparity in our status was never apparent during our discussions. This fifth Pandava had a second wife in addition to Draupadidevi, Vijayadevi, the daughter of his mama Shalya, the king of Madra. They had a son named Suhotra. Sahadeva's third wife was Bhanumatidevi. As she belonged to a Yadava family the Yadavas had formed a firm bond with the Pandavas through this marriage. This couple had no issue yet.

Just as the Lord and Balaramadada's families had expanded in Dwaraka, so had the Pandavas' family in Indraprastha. Both these royal strengths had come close firmly due to the relationships formed by marriage alliances. No matter how hard their enemies tried nothing was going to break this bond ever.

The Dwaraka kingdom for which my Lord strove throughout his life was now established. Throughout Aaryavarta it was renowned as 'the Dwaraka of

Srikrishna'. Populated by lakhs of pugnacious Yadavas, no one would now dare to confront the Dwaraka of Bhagvan Vaasudeva who had eliminated many insolent, arrogant rulers with a captivating display of his intellectual genius.

But lakhs of Yadavas and I were to be proved wrong. One day, a royal envoy arrived from a distant eastern kingdom in Aaryavarta. He had not brought any gift for Dwaraka, but an arrogant message! A daring message that directly challenged the Dwaraka kingdom and its leader, the Lord of Dwaraka. That envoy was from the eastern kingdom of Pundra. He delivered the message of his master, Paundraka to my Lord in the fully occupied royal assembly of the Yadavas. Using very arrogant and disrespectful language he delivered the message as it was given to him. He said, "My master the ruler of Pundra who is the one and only real Vaasudeva in the entire Aaryavarta has sent a message for you ..."

No royal envoy had ever behaved like this in the Sudharma assembly before. His actions left all Yadavas in the council stunned and they just kept listening to him intently.

"The message is that, 'Just because he dons the same royal attire like me; wears the same Vaijayanti garland around his neck just like me; and bears a peacock feather in his crown, no cowherd who still exudes the strong odour of cow dung can ever become a Vaasudeva! Any Kshatriya of Aaryavarta who imitates me and calls himself Vaasudeva should fight a duel with me – Paundraka – the real Vaasudeva! This is my direct challenge to the warlock of the Yadavas who calls himself the Lord of Dwaraka and Vaasudeva.'" That envoy was indeed loyal to his king, and fearless. While delivering his master's message 'as is' to the royal assembly he literally trembled with rage. But the next moment a ruckus arose among the Yadavas – 'Throw him out – capture him – kill him'. Fiery sparks of rage were being emitted from the eyes of angry Yadavas who were making an awful din.

The bloodshed that had never transpired in the Sudharma assembly from the time of its inception was about to befall.

The Lord would usually take his time to stand up, but this time he stood up at once; not because of the insolent and arrogant words of the royal envoy but because he believed that only he could control the violent Yadavas at this critical moment. He raised his arm high and roared loudly, "Wait! Drop your weapons and take your seats quietly!" His words were formidable like never before. I had never heard such intimidation from him before. I thought

something untoward was about to happen. The Lord will probably close his fish-shaped eyes and project the Sudarshan chakra on the throat of the royal envoy that was holding his mouth with his arrogant tongue, and teach him a lesson. I was terrified that for the first time our royal assembly was going to witness bloodbath, and kept looking at the Lord in fear. But ... but...

“Oh Yadavas! This royal messenger is not at fault at all! He is only a dutiful, patriotic servant of his master just like my Daruka and each one of you Yadavas. Calm down, and try to understand.

“All of you should learn an unforgettable invaluable lesson from this royal messenger- friend of mine! That of loyalty to the master.”

The next moment a command was given to the chief minister that left everyone stunned – “Vipruthu, please present a platter of my royal attire to be dispatched with this royal messenger as a gift to the real Maharaja Vaasudeva of Pundra! Don’t forget to keep a bright and large peacock feather on top of it!”

‘Your wish is my command, sire’ said the chief minister of the Yadavas and was about to leave when one more command of the Lord fell on his ears, “Please present one gift platter of fine apparel even for this royal attendant of Pundra! He has obeyed his master’s command to the word by jeopardizing his own life. I will definitely visit his master.”

Within a few moments two salvers covered by clothes with fine designs were presented in the Sudharma royal assembly, in front of Maharaja Vasudeva and Maharani Devakidevi. Both of them touched those as was the custom. The Lord also touched them after the Prince. The royal messenger felt deep regret and realized that instead of receiving fatal punishment he had received the royal gift of honour, that too from a great person who was revered as the Lord of all the people! But he had spoken in the worst possible way with the excuse of being a patriot. Tears of guilt flowed down his eyes.

Now the royal capital of Dwaraka was aroused by the ‘Paundraka Vaasudeva campaign’. It got busy with various tasks. The Lord had made the western region of Aaryavarta free of fear by killing Shalva. Now his target was the eastern region of Aaryavarta. The Pundra kingdom of Paundraka who was a self-proclaimed Vaasudeva was located near the eastern ocean, at the confluence of rivers Kaushiki and Ganga. His kingdom was neighbouring the Karusha and Vanga kingdoms. Paundraka had dispatched his royal envoy to Dwaraka with a careful thought and foresight. He had put up a front as if it

was only him who was provocatively challenging the Lord of Dwaraka by calling him a duplicate Vaasudeva. But he had secretly formed a political alliance with Dantavakra and Viduratha of the Karusha kingdom and the ruler of the Vanga kingdom. This challenge by the so called real Vaasudeva was not the challenge of his small Pundra kingdom alone. It was the challenge of the strong alliance of three kingdoms. He had no clue that he was dealing with the Lord of Dwaraka who could turn the tables with his intellectual genius.

Even before the royal envoy of the Pundras could reach his kingdom in the east, the Lord's best informers had already met with Bhagadutta of Pragjyotishapura. Detailed information collected about the three kingdoms – Pundra, Karusha and Vanga – started reaching Dwaraka. It was understandable that the self-proclaimed Vaasudeva, Paundraka, had gone against the Lord. But I couldn't comprehend why the Lord's two paternal cousins had chosen to enter the thorny forests of enmity. Why they had taken shelter under the wings of Paundraka Vaasudeva was beyond my comprehension. The Lord easily understood everything that I, many others and all Yadavas could not comprehend.

The venerable Lord particularly left both the commanders behind in this campaign of the duplicate-Vaasudeva. Instead he took all the young Yadava warriors of the next generation with him. The Lord had thoughtfully planned this campaign to mainly shape the valour of the next generation.

The background of this expedition to the eastern kingdom was a bit complicated. The Lord's paternal cousins Dantavakra and Viduratha belonged to the Karusha kingdom. Among them the elder brother Dantavakra was the ruler of the Karusha kingdom, and Viduratha was handling the military operations outside the kingdom. He was one of the kings who had returned empty-handed from the unsuccessful Swayamwar of Rukminidevi, and held a grudge against the Lord. He was also an ally in the conspiracy of the trio Jarasandha, Shalva and Shishupala to destroy the Lord completely. He had earlier joined hands with Jarasandha on behalf of Shishupala who was his maternal cousin. Naturally, he was furious with the Lord because Jarasandha had been killed.

The Lord crossed the creek of Dwaraka along with Balaramadada, Uddhava Maharaja and his armed youthful sons. The fully prepared fourfold army was already on its way to the east. Many experienced and trained informers from the adroit and efficient surveillance team of the Yadavas were dispersed in



the eastern kingdoms around the Pundra kingdom. Those included the kingdoms of Uttkala, Magadha, Anga, Kamarupa, and Manipura. From among these the Magadha kingdom because of Jarasandha's son Sahadeva, and the Kamarupa kingdom because of Bhagadutta had now turned into our allies. The Manipura kingdom was also our ally as Arjuna's wife Chitrangadadevi belonged to that kingdom. So, we needed to befriend only the Uttkala kingdom till the successful completion of this mission. The Lord had already managed to do that by sending royal apparel and gifts to Kalinga and Bhuvaneshwara – the royal capital of Uttkala.

After crossing Bhrigukachchha, our first sojourn was on the banks of the river Narmada in the Aanarta kingdom. On our way, we would have had to cross Mount Pariyatra, which was long and had dense forests. It occupied more than half the territory to the west of the Dandakaranya. My Lord had experienced the Dakshinapatha of Mount Pariyatra quite a few times before while travelling to Rukminidevi's city Kundinapura in Vidarbha. Therefore, we were now travelling towards the east by going around it, camping on the banks of river Narmada. After a few days, we arrived in the Mahishmati city on Mount Vindhya.

The citizens of Mahishmati welcomed Balaramadada, the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja with joy. Our special troop took a week's rest in this beautiful city. We crossed the big river Shona in the southern Kosala kingdom and reached river Damodara in the Magadha kingdom. Sahadeva, who was now the ruler of Magadha, gave the three brothers – Balaramadada, the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja – a hearty welcome. They offered sacks of food grains, fodder for animals, and medicinal herbs to our Yadava army that had marched ahead. Well-prepared, capacious boats were also given to us to cross the huge river Damodara. Using those boats our special troop crossed the river Damodara along with chariots and elephants. We pulled the capacious Magadha boats out of river Damodara and then we mounted them on the backs of the elephants and reached the banks of river Ganga keeping the Uttkala kingdom on our right and the Anga kingdom of Karna on the left. River Ganga flowed into the eastern ocean near the Vanga kingdom through many mouths. Flowing through the Vanga kingdom the widened bed of Ganga appeared as grand as the ocean. The sight of the river Ganga reminded the Lord intensely of the western ocean of Dwaraka roaring continuously. Even here we automatically took a few sojourns.

In the end, we were united with our mammoth army on the borders of

Pundra. By this time the Pundra leader was driven to a complete misconception by the report that his royal messenger had presented him. Based on the information that he was receiving from his informers he believed that the mock cowherd of Dwaraka who called himself the real Vaasudeva had come to visit him as his vassal! But he completely lost his sleep over the mammoth army on the borders. He panicked when Dantavakra and Viduratha who had come for his support, deserted him to protect their own Karusha kingdom. Still, putting on a false bravado of being the real Vaasudeva, he sent a message with his chief minister. It said, 'Remove the crown on your head before coming to visit. A vassal of the real Vaasudeva has no right to bear the peacock-feathered crown. Though there has been a delay, send the remaining customary gift salvers with your messenger!'

Now this had gone beyond Balaramadada's patience for the first time. He shouted at the chief minister of Paundraka, "Tell your Vaasudeva, we both are coming in person to meet him as a gift!"

They met on the banks of the Kaushiki, on the battlefield. The notable thing was that Paundraka Vaasudeva who rode in a canopy on the back of an elephant had actually come wearing the same attire as my Lord. He got down from the canopy and challenged the Lord for a battle of swords. His commander fought with Balaramadada. It was amusing to see the Lord brandishing the Nandaka sword, shouting the slogans of family deity Ida, colliding with Paundraka, dressed in the same attire as his. It was indeed a unique experience to see him in action on the battlefield. The sword in Paundrak's hand broke while bearing the strikes of the Lord's Nandaka sword. He contemptuously looked at the broken remains of the sword in his hand and threw it away, and took a huge mace in his hands. I swiftly pulled out the Lord's Kaumodaki mace that was even bigger in size and handed it over to him. The clanging sounds of the clobbering maces echoed and dispersed on the waves of Kaushiki's waters. The river Kaushiki was witnessing a very rare spectacle, that was rare even for the gods. Two big peacock feathers, almost the size of a palm, were going away from each other, were coming close to each other within moments and again withdrawing from each other fiercely. The Paundraka sun of the eastern kingdom of Pundra was about to set. In the setting sun, the Lord smashed the chest of Paundraka, who had called himself the real Vaasudeva and challenged the Lord. He lay on his back, lifeless, on the banks of the Kaushiki. Balaramadada had already killed his commander. The Lord walked

calmly towards the duplicate Vaasudeva. He delicately picked up the peacock feather in his crown that lay aside, and gently wiped the fresh stains of the duplicate Vaasudeva's blood on it with the edge of the dhoti tied around his waist. He put that peacock feather in my hand and said, "Daruka, immerse this in river Kaushiki! Whatever he was, he was a brave warrior who constantly reminded me of my being the 'Vaasudeva' even though by linking the word 'duplicate' to my epithet! He was the only king after me in the entire *Bharata* who tucked a peacock feather in his golden crown!"

'Your wish is my command, sire'. Saying thus I began walking towards river Kaushiki thinking about the new mien of the Lord that I got to see today. When I returned, the Paundraka-sun on the western horizon had set halfway. It was gratifying to see the real Vaasudeva who was offering the evening oblations in river Kaushiki and who was vehemently safeguarding the Virtues of Life in Aaryavarta, ready to destroy Untruth for that purpose. That day the sun set with a contented heart.

Now the target was Dantavakra, the king of Karusha who had attended the council arranged by Jarasandha on the borders of Kundinapura at the time of the first Swayamwar ceremony of Rukminidevi! And Viduratha, who had participated in Shalva's conspiracy of inviting the alien Kalayavana!

The most inexcusable atrocity of these two brothers was that they themselves had captured many kings and sent them to Girivraja for the Shatashirsha *Yajna* that the Magadha emperor Jarasandha was preparing for. Shishupala committed only a hundred crimes, but these two brothers had committed way more than that!

The triumphant Yadava army penetrated the borders of the Karusha kingdom shouting acclamations of Balaramadada and the Lord. The Lord sent a message to Dantavakra from the borders of Karusha – 'Balarama-Srikrishna, the cowherd sons of Gokul's Nanda-Yashoda, have come to visit the king of Karusha and his brother Viduratha! As Sahadeva, the current ruler of Magadha is a close ally of the Lord of Dwaraka he will not come to the Karusha kingdom this time. Maybe the son of Kalayavana of the Gandhara kingdom will come to assist you. So, do call that alien for your assistance now!'

The message was clear – get ready to fight with the cowherds of Dwaraka now. Dantavakra understood it. Along with his brother Viduratha he arrived at the border with the army, ready to fight, amidst the cacophony of war drums.

This was the very first instance in the Lord's life so far where he had to meet his own aatebandhus on the battlefield. The Lord, standing tall in the back of the moving Garudadhwaya chariot, pulled out the Panchjanya conch from his shawl, and holding it in his rosy palms, raised his blue neck high towards the sky and blew it at the top of his lungs. That inspirational sound prompted thousands and lakhs of armed Yadavas to attack the Karusha warriors with sky-piercing war shouts of 'Hail Idamata ... victory'. Towards the evening the Lord pierced the chest of Dantavakra, unerringly shooting five arrows in a row with the Sharanga bow.

Balaramadada killed the commander of Karusha and many Karusha warriors with severe blows of the Saunanda pestle and Samvartaka plough.

Viduratha got enraged when he heard the news of his brother Dantavakra's death. Shouting loudly, 'Show me that warlock cowherd' he brought his chariot rapidly in front of the Lord's Garudadhwaya chariot. In this battle, many Yadava warriors and I saw the Lord's outstanding bow and arrow skills. He was not just a master of the life-threatening 'Bahukantaka' maneuver in wrestling, the master of Sudarshan who projected the brilliant chakra and left the spectators bewildered; but he was also a master archer, an archer who equalled the expertise of *Dhananjaya* of Indraprastha and the king of Anga – Karna of Hastinapura. He swiftly handled bows like the Sharanga and Ajitanjaya as if they were toys. Just by touch he would unmistakably identify the kind of arrow in the quiver and would shoot it at Viduratha. First, he made Viduratha immobile in his chariot by restraining him in a cage of arrows so tight that he couldn't move at all. Then within a moment he pushed Viduratha onto the ground along with the cage of arrows around him, and left him without a chariot. Viduratha was indeed a master 'Rathi' (charioteer) as his name denoted, but at this moment he was left without a chariot. The Lord chopped off his head with a moon-faced arrow without giving him a moment's respite.

As they saw their leaders – Dantavakra and Viduratha – fall, terrified Karusha warriors fled towards the royal city. Thus, with the fall of Dantavakra and Viduratha the eastern region was also set free. The entire eastern side of Aaryavarta was now emancipated from kings like Narakasura of Kamarupa, Jarasandha of Magadha, Paundraka Vaasudeva of the Pundras and Dantavakra and Viduratha of Karush. The entire Aaryavarta had come to know about the Lord's life mission of removing the obstacles in the flow of Life and letting it flow freely.

The Lord would casually say, ‘Growth and development are the characteristics of Life.’ This was indeed the all-pervading truth.

That day our army camped on the borders of the Karusha kingdom. The next day after performing the morning rituals of bathing, charity etc., the Lord entered the royal city of Karusha along with Balaramadada and Uddhava Maharaja. He had sent a messenger ahead and requested for a visit with Maharaja Vriddhasharmana and *aaty*a Shrutadevi. Everybody thought the aged royal couple was going to deny the request, but the exact opposite happened. They sent reply, ‘Sure, come and meet us. Do not hesitate. We have a lot to speak about.’

The Lord went to visit them with Balaramadada on his right, Uddhava Maharaja on his left, and a few Yadav warriors and I behind him.

As *aaty*a came into sight he briskly walked forward leaving all of us behind, and put his pious, smooth, blue forehead at the feet of Maharaja Vriddhasharmana and *aaty*a Shrutadevi. With her trembling hands, aged *aaty*a Shrutadevi pulled her *bhacha* up, whom she was meeting for the first time. The Lord wiped the tears rolling down her eyes with his rosy palms and said in a tender voice full of sweetness, “Oh *aaty*a, consider dada and me like your own sons Dantavakra and Viduratha.” Hearing those words Maharaja Vriddhasharmana who was silent so far said in a trembling but sharp voice, “It is easy to say so. If you two would have been killed would such words have been enough to console your mother and father?”

“I have not come to console both of you at all. My battle is against the ruthless rulers of any kingdom; against their unfair lopsided views. Injustice – whoever imposes it on another, for whatever reason, is always terrible. But the injustice imposed by the ruler of a kingdom whose forefathers have sacrificed their blood to protect it, is the worst injustice of all. I have not committed a crime in killing my aatebandhus. Yet if you want to curse me instead of giving your blessings, go ahead and do so. I will accept that also readily!”

The aged couple which had experienced many ups and downs in their lives was moved from the bottom of their hearts when they heard the reasoning of the Lord who was bowing in front of them with his hands joined in request. Maharaja Vriddhasharmana held the Lord’s shoulders tightly and stared in his eyes for a moment. Don’t know what convinced him, but the aged venerable Maharaja of Karusha said, “Vasudeva’s son Srikrishna, we do regret the death of our sons. But we have realized that you had no issue of

personal honour or dishonour. I kept telling my sons time and again, ‘Go to Dwaraka once. Visit Balarama and Srikrishna.’ Their mother got exasperated trying to persuade them. But both of them never went to Dwaraka to visit you, because of their pride. Instead they took shelter under the wings of Jarasandha in Girivraja!”

*Aatya* seconded him saying, “But many a times both of us did feel like going to Dwaraka to visit you, witness your riches with our own eyes, meet Vasudevadada, Devaki and Rohinivahini at least once. But your Dwaraka is located far away on the shore of the western ocean and we were here in the eastern region.” Her eyes moistened.

“Vaasudeva, probably you sensed the desire of our hearts and came to visit us. That makes us feel better. Convey our regards to Maharaja Vasudeva and both the Maharanis.”

Witnessing this incident, my mind was tangled in confusing thoughts about the Lord. That night while trying to relax after dinner in the Karusha royal palace, I was restlessly thinking about the Lord throughout the night. I couldn’t sleep however hard I tried.

The next day our Yadava army bid farewell to the Karusha kingdom and left towards the Uttkala kingdom. I picked up the reins of the four pure white horses of Garudadhwaaja in my hands. Looking at the Lord I said, “Shall we leave, my Lord?” He gave me a very pure smile, which created a dimple in his blue cheek. Last night he must have slept peacefully but cautiously in the Karusha royal palace. Looking at me he affectionately said, “Daruka, you take the seat in the back. You haven’t had enough sleep last night. Put a few drops of cow’s cold milk in your eyes during our very first sojourn. You will be able to sleep better. I will steer the chariot!”

The Lord’s wish was indeed my command. I halted the Garudadhwaaja chariot, left the front seat without arguing and climbed in the back of the chariot. The Lord held the eight reigns of our four pure white horse friends – Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Sugriva and Shaibya. Sitting in the back of the chariot I kept thinking about his keen observation. Just with a glimpse of the mildly reddish edges of my eyes he had unmistakably conjectured that I had been deprived of sleep the whole night.

The news of the killing of Dantavakra and Viduratha had already reached the Uttkala kingdom. They welcomed the three Yadava brothers with delight. But the Lord was not ready to stay in any city of the Uttkala kingdom. He was eager to lay his eyes on the eastern ocean of Aaryavarta.

The Lord reached the shores of the eastern ocean along with the king of Uttkala, his commander and army that had come to receive our triumphant Yadava army. Here, our army camped for a full fifteen days.

When we were leaving the shores, and going towards the Kashi kingdom of Dandapani a mammoth crowd of Uttkala citizens gathered to bid farewell to the Lord of Dwaraka along with his brothers. The Uttkala king bent down to offer prostrations to the Lord. Holding his shoulders, the Lord pulled him up. The king who was impressed to see various facets of the Lord during the fortnight, bent forward a little and said humbly, “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, Prince Balabhadra, Uddhavadeva, this small town will always cherish the memories of your heavenly visit. From today we will call this nameless small town Jagannathpuri in your memory. You are indeed Jagannatha – the saviour of the world. Every year on this particular day there will be a similar Rathayatra-chariot procession – in your memory!” Listening to his words the Lord smiled with affection as usual and said, “Oh king of Uttkala, you should always remember this big brother of mine – Balabhadradada. That will be enough for me. No need to remember me separately at all.”

We bade farewell to the sentimental people of Uttkala. The Lord climbed into the Garudadhawaja chariot that I was steering. The chariots of Balaramadada and Uddhava Maharaja were behind our chariot. After them were the Lord’s sons – Pradyumna, Samba, Praghosha and the commanders in their own chariots. The army of the Yadavas and the Uttkalas that was moved and mesmerized to see the Lord, gave out loud acclamations that reached sky high – ‘Hail the saviour of the world, ‘Jagannatha’, the Lord of Dwaraka...! Hail the brother of the world saviour, Maharaja Balabhadra ...!’

We arrived at the borders of the Kashi kingdom. Here Dandapani, the king of Kashi, came to receive us along with the army. Along with him, the Lord directly went to the immaculate temple of Kashivishweshwara located in Varanasi, on the banks of river Ganga, without taking any stops in between. Just for a peaceful visit to Lord Shiva. I saw the same fervour in the Lord’s eager gait when he entered the temple with his brothers that I had seen when he went towards the eastern ocean.

In the shrine of the temple there was an immutable Shivalinga that was drenched under a continuous trickle of water dripping from the big golden vessel for *Abhishek*. The moment the Lord and Balaramadada saw it, they looked at each other smilingly. Nobody understood a word that they spoke after that. Nobody was ever going to understand it. The Lord said – “Come

dada, remove the litter and gather the soft sand. Friends, a few of you go to the forest and bring white flowers and *Bela* leaves. Some of you take some vessels and fill them with the waters of Yamuna. And some of you go and draw some fresh milk of the cows by stimulating the udders. Go, run – get to work!”

Then immediately turning towards Uddhava Maharaja the Lord said, “Udho dear brother, how much ever you wish, it is not possible to find the flowers of *Brahmakamala* here in the Kashi kingdom.” Even he responded promptly, “Now we do not even need the *Brahmakamalas* anymore. Dada, I have come to know very well that you are a *Brahmakamala* of the kind that spreads the fragrance of novel revolutionary thoughts in all directions!”

In the Vishweshwara temple of Kashi king Dandapani, the temple priests had made thorough preparations for the *Abhishek* worship in sixteen different ways. The three brothers sat on a mat near the immutable *Shivapindi* to perform the rituals.

The worship of the *Shivapindi* took place with all the rituals amidst the mantras chanted by the priests of Kashi. All three brothers offered *Bela* leaves from three directions covering the entire *Shivapindi*. Now the *Abhishek* water was dripping on the *Bela* leaves.

The three brothers closed their eyes and began chanting the hymn of Shiva.

Our mission in the eastern region was successful. We bade farewell to Dandapani, the king of Kashi, and returned to Dwaraka.

This time also the Lord had a grand welcome in Dwaraka, but something was amiss. The Lord felt it because of something noticeable. As he felt it, I and Uddhava Maharaja also felt it. Only our Balabhadradada didn't feel it. It was just not in his nature.

So, what exactly was amiss in today's welcome of the Lord in Dwaraka? It was that the aged, yet physically strong, thick-bearded Maharaja Vasudeva did not come to the Shuddhaksha gate as usual with a smile on his face. The Lord immediately felt his absence. He pulled chief minister Vipruthu aside and asked him, “Maharaja is not to be seen anywhere minister? Is his health okay?”

Chief Minister responded promptly, “Maharaj is fine physically, but... but...”

“But what?” The Lord's blue face, round like a sunflower never reflected distress. His large forehead adorned with vermilion tilak never showed a single crease. But today I saw that crease on his forehead very clearly. It got



me worried too. Uddhava Maharaja also became restless.

“The Lord of Dwaraka should take some rest first. I will present all the details in front of him later.” The chief minister said promptly.

After having lunch and taking some rest the Lord sent me to invite chief minister Vipruthu. I came to the Lord’s resting chambers to escort the Chief Minister. I surmised that he probably wanted to talk something special and secret with the Chief Minister. So, I bowed to the Lord and said, “May I take your leave, Sire?”

He came close to me, and with a smile he put his hand on my shoulders and said, “Daruka, such a mind reader you are! That is why I consider you my friend. There is no need for you to leave. Probably, your presence is required here. So, stay!” He gave me such a smile it made me feel as if I myself was smiling; that I was not looking at him, but at a mirror!

Before the Lord asked anything, chief minister Vipruthu patiently put forth each detail of the inconceivable drama of the human mind that had taken place in Hastinapura, which none of us could ever have imagined. He said, “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, something untoward has happened in Hastinapura. I am in a quandary as to how to share it with you. You and all eighteen families of Yadavas can suffer the loss of a few, or maybe hundreds of lives on the battlefield and recover from it after a while. We can understand the calamity, but when a kingdom is annihilated from its roots then one loses one’s wits, and doesn’t know what to do.”

Hearing these words, the Lord went near the chief minister and putting his hand on his shoulders he gently patted him and calmly said, “Chief Minister Vipruthu, you are experienced and aged. You have seen grandsire Bhishma of Hastinapura in person many a times. Many a times he has saved the sinking Hastinapura with sheer courage. You are also like a grandsire to the citizens of Dwaraka. So please tell us everything without any inhibitions. What has happened in Hastinapura?”

As the Lord comforted him, Chief Minister Vipruthu gathered his courage, stood in front of the Lord of Dwaraka politely with both his palms joined together and began recounting the unbelievable happenings one after the other. He was still hesitant. He said, “The Pandavas had received an invitation in Indraprastha to ‘attend the Vishnuyaga *yajna*’ from the Kuru king Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura.”

I remembered all the improbable things that had happened in Indraprastha a few days ago, at the time of the Rajasuya *yajna*. So, when I heard the word

‘*yajna*’ I pricked my ears and started listening carefully. The chief minister continued, “As per the invitation the Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira went to Hastinapura with his brothers Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva and a few select warriors. Maharani Draupadidevi and Rajmata Kuntidevi also accompanied them. But... this invitation of Kurus was not only for the Vishnuyaga *yajna*. Prince Duryodhana, Shakunimama who always fanned Duryodhana’s pride and Kanaka had planned an evil political conspiracy in the guise of the invitation. They tried very hard to involve Karna – the king of Anga also in this conspiracy.”

“What kind of conspiracy Chief Minister? Did they succeed in it? How come Karna did not participate in this conspiracy in spite of being the king of Anga and Duryodhana’s best friend? Vipruthu, tell us everything as it actually happened without any hesitation.” The Lord comforted the chief minister again.

The experienced chief minister had recovered quite a bit now; he began narrating the events rapidly. While we were occupied in the campaign against Shalva and the mission in the eastern region, many abominable and improbable events had taken place.

The Chief Minister said, “Prince Duryodhana dared Maharaja Yudhishtira to play a game of gambling even before the *yajna*. He invited Yudhishtira to a gambling hall as grand as the royal assembly. This cunning invitation was sent purposefully, knowing fully well that Yudhishtira loves gambling. It was bad luck of the Aaryavarta and the venerable Pandava that he accepted the invitation. He should have just declined, giving an excuse of ill-health or any other reason.”

The Lord said, “I have always admonished and cautioned the eldest Pandava about his obsession for the game of gambling. I always alerted him that his thoughtless gambling would lead him towards the path of destruction. He always brushed it off with a smile, offering the justification that gambling is an honourable game that befits royalty. It is not an addiction like alcoholism that thrusts one on the path of destruction.” The Lord always addressed the eldest Pandava as if equal in age. The reason for that was the venerable Pandava himself. He didn’t like the Lord addressing him using any honorific title. And because of him even Bhimsena who was older than the Lord didn’t like it. Arjuna and other two Pandavas were after all younger than the Lord.

The Lord stared at us and said, “Let me tell you chief minister,

Yudhishtira must have gambled in Hastinapura for sure. Probably as an entertainment being played in the royal palace he must have played with royal envy especially in the palace of the Kurus. And I can also tell for sure that the expert gambler and Pandava-hater Shakuni must have stroked his royal ego! Shakuni is a perfect judge of human character. He is an astute conspirator. He is not a sharp diplomat as considered by Duryodhana, his ninety-nine brothers, Kanaka and many major Kurus. I wouldn't be surprised if Karna – the king of Anga didn't participate in their machinations at all. He is different after all." While hearing this, I vaguely remembered the connection between the three Jalapurushas - king of Anga, grandsire and the Lord of Dwaraka, which Uddhava Maharaja had shared with me. I immediately noted one thing however, that he considered Kauravas' mama Shakuni as a conspirator for sure, but nothing close to a diplomat.

"So, chief minister, what was the final result of this gambling competition? What profit did Yudhishtira reap from this gambling session?" The Lord curiously asked the chief minister bringing him back to the subject.

"Profit? Not at all, oh Lord. In fact, he suffered a tremendous loss. A loss that was even more humiliating than death for a Kshatriya! Yudhishtira got so carried away with his obsession of gambling that he lost all his senses. First, he lost all the wealth in his treasury, and then all animals – elephants, horses and camels of his army. In anticipation of winning the next game and recovering his losses he kept playing further insanely. As soon as he lost all the animals in the first bet he immediately put one after the other troop leaders and the troops of his army. When he lost that too he put the puissant Indraprastha kingdom in its entirety that has been erected by his own people and the people of Dwaraka."

"What? The Indraprastha kingdom?" I couldn't restrain myself. Holding his hands at the back, moving around in disquiet the Lord was lost in deep thought. Suddenly he stopped and made the Chief Minister talk again, "He must have stopped only after losing the Indraprastha kingdom!" The Lord's increasing distress was clearly visible.

"No...!" the chief minister was scared about how to put forth further abominable happenings in front of the Lord, even as a duty. And therefore, he hesitated.

"Go ahead Chief Minister, tell me what else did he have to put at stake after losing the kingdom? What did he do?"

"He was adamant, not accepting the defeat. He put at stake each one of his

war-expert, indomitable brothers, Nakula, Sahadeva, Bhima and Arjuna, one after the other!”

“What? My beloved friend Arjuna too?” The Lord who was moving around restlessly stopped in his tracks. He kept staring at the chief minister in disbelief.

“Yes, Lord of Dwaraka. Even I couldn’t bear to witness all this. But the bitter truth is that it did happen. Yudhishtira lost all these bets too.

“Nobody could think straight. Such tremendous tension arose near the gambling board. None of the Pandavas could understand why even once the dice did not show the numbers that Yudhishtira called out! Why was it happening? How come every single time the dice turned up against them? Not a single dice displayed the numbers they wanted. What kind of magic was this? The wicked duo of Duryodhana and Shakuni had secretly retrieved the bones of late Jarasandha from Girivraja and got the gambling dice created from those bones. Except these two no one else in the game arena had any idea about this. That was the reason these two had astutely kept Karna out of the game arena till the last game of gambling. Had he been present in the game arena at the time of throwing the dice each time, the Kauravas would have lost the game. That was because once Karna had defeated Jarasandha in a duel but had spared his life. It was the name of Karna that had the most fearful impact on the bones of Jarasandha. Also, the reason why the Pandavas were losing all dice throws was the loud shouting of Bhima. When Bhima spoke every time the dice were thrown the dice made of Jarasandha’s bones would tremble weirdly with fear, and the result of the dice-throw would be the exact opposite of what the Pandavas wanted. Then all the five brothers would stare wide-eyed at the dice made of Jarasandha’s bones, with dismay. Every moment it was getting increasingly unbearable for powerful Bhima.” The Chief Minister kept talking. The scene in the gambling arena of the Kurus appeared vividly in front of my eyes.

“Subala king Shakuni was delighted and excited like the corn popping on coal embers, as he saw that his *bhacha* Duryodhana was winning every dice throw. Shakuni and Dushasana had completely lost the sense that they were in the game arena, and Maharaja Dhritarashtra was seated on the ancient royal throne of the Kurus along with Gandharidevi. Grandsire Bhishma was also present, and Drona, Kripa, Vidura and Sanjaya were sitting next to him. I wondered about one thing – Karna, the king of Anga was nowhere to be seen in the game arena. Didn’t know why and how?”

“In the end...end...Yudhishtira also forgot his coronation ceremony that had taken place in front of all the major kings of Aaryavarta. He didn't even remember the matter of fact that a crowned king is answerable to his subjects. And he put even himself at stake!” The Chief Minister bent his head in shame.

“What? The venerable Pandava Yudhishtira put himself at stake in a game of gambling?” I couldn't help asking. As per my knowledge nobody in Aaryavarta had so far put himself on stake in a game of gambling.

“Indeed. The venerable Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira put himself at stake in a game of gambling due to his insane obsession about the game. And unfortunately, he lost that bet too.”

I was completely shaken to hear that harsh, bitter truth. But my master, the Lord of Dwaraka was still calm. I was surprised to see his composure.

The Lord walked towards the chief minister slowly and calmly. He was also confused to see the Lord so calm. The Lord looked into his terrified eyes and asked him with the same extreme calmness, “Chief Minister, what happened next? Tell us without any inhibitions. One should always accept the truth like the rising sun – as it is. Speak freely.”

The Chief Minister kept staring in the void in front of him as if he was watching a great, thrilling battle. He even forgot that the Lord and I were standing next to him. He said, “Yudhishtira lost himself in the bet. Shakuni leaped instantly with joy and shouted ‘The Pandava king along with his brothers – have become the slaves of the Kurus today. Do you still want to gamble with us, slave?’

“When Shakuni called him a slave, the eldest Pandava's head dropped down in unbearable shame and he said, ‘Yes, I would have still played, but what more do I have to put at stake now?’

“Then Duryodhana stood up in excitement and shouted, ‘Mama, tell that slave to put the gambling board away now. He has lost himself along with his brothers in the game of gambling. He has become the slave of the Kurus – along with his brothers. What else is he left with now?’

“At that point Shakuni got up shamelessly and whispered something in the ears of his *bhacha* without following the code of conduct. Hearing that, Duryodhana's eyes widened with excitement and he said, ‘You slave, you still have one more thing with you! Will you put that at stake?’

“The venerable Pandava raised his head and asked, ‘What?’

“Fiery words fell on the ears of the spectators, ‘Your wife – the Maharani

of Indraprastha – Draupadi!’ Bhimsena leapt with intense rage screaming ‘No...’ Looking at his brother Sahadeva he said, ‘He will surely put Draupadi at stake. I cannot bear this. Sahadevaa, get me some fire. I will burn his hands that played this gambling game. Brandishing the mace on his shoulders Bhimsena ran towards Yudhishtira instead of Duryodhana. Arjuna controlled him with a great deal of effort. ‘If we lose this bet we will return everything that you have lost to us so far. My brothers and I will serve you. We will obey every command of yours.’

“Again, with the help of Shakuni, Duryodhana provoked the gambling addict in the venerable Pandava. As nobody in the gambling arena had heard anything like this ever before, every single person in the arena had stood up. Only two people were sitting – the blind Maharaja Dhritarashtra and the Kuru Maharani Gandharidevi who had blindfolded herself for the sake of her husband. In the commotion of the gambling arena they didn’t understand what was going on.”

I was speechless to hear the name of Draupadidevi. Still the Lord looked calm. He said, “Vipruthu, you are the Chief Minister of the Yadavas. You are not only the minister who looks after the kingdom well but you are also a senior warrior who fights on the battlefield on occasion. Don’t feel shaken like you felt while watching the events in the gambling arena of the Kurus. Tell us as it happened in the gambling arena, that though Yudhishtira had no right over his wife after losing himself in the bet, he put her at stake. And he even lost my sister – my dear friend. What happened after that?”

“Yes sire”, the Chief Minister continued, “As the venerable Pandava placed the last bet and Shakuni threw the dice for that bet, exactly at that time Karna, the king of Anga entered the arena, attracting the attention of everybody present. As the venerable Pandava lost the last bet too Duryodhana lost his senses and shouted ecstatically, ‘Maid...Pandavas’ wife Draupadi has become the maid of the Kurus. Maid! Fragrant maid!!’ Hearing that staggering chant the insane brothers of Duryodhana tossed their shawls in the air and shouted, ‘Maid servant...maid...’”

I looked curiously at the Lord to see his reaction after hearing this. He was still calm! He was staring at the roof, as if he was not present with the two of us!

Without checking whether he was listening or not the Chief Minister kept talking as if he was present in the gambling arena of the Kurus –

“Every moment after this was sickening. Duryodhana and Shakuni took

over the entire gambling arena.

“Now Duryodhana, who had gone insane in the delusion that he had indeed become master of Draupadidevi, ordered his attendant and manager of the gambling game Pratikama, ‘Go Pratikama, and present that maid of the Kurus in our service. Immediately!’ Pratikama left. The entire gambling arena kept staring agape in the direction he left. The entire arena was wondering if he was indeed going to present the Maharani of Indraprastha as a maidservant.”

I couldn’t resist asking the chief minister, “So did the attendant really present her as a maidservant then?” The Lord was still calm.

“No. The servant Pratikama returned alone. With his head bowed he said to his master Duryodhana, ‘Master, she cannot come to the gambling arena. She is wearing a single layer of clothing – she is in her menses!’

“Then Duryodhana rebuked the servant harshly and said to his brother Dushasana, ‘This is not an attendant’s job. My dear valiant brother Dushasana, you yourself go to the inner chambers and bring that maid to the gambling arena, whatever condition she is in. If she protests and says no, then drag her by force!’

“Your wish is my command, dada said Dushasana and went towards the inner chambers. Within a few moments loud screams were heard from the direction of the inner chambers that left the entire gambling arena shaken. ‘Leave me. You scoundrel, let me go. Remember you also have a mother and sisters.’

“While the Pandava noble lady was screaming, and shouting desperately, Dushasana dragged her into the gambling arena.

“The entire gambling arena stood up at once and kept staring at Dushasana, wondering what was going to happen now.”

Even I kept staring at the Chief Minister wondering what was going to happen. My brain had gone numb. I had never heard such abominable things in my life, ever. I looked at the Lord thinking that he must be extremely enraged to hear about the horrendous humiliation of his dear friend. I was shocked to see that he still sat calm with his eyes closed! I did not understand what exactly he was seeing with his closed eyes.

The Chief Minister kept talking, “The Pandava’s wife Draupadidevi was dragged over the carpet in the gambling arena.

“Her hair dishevelled, Draupadidevi – the wailing wife of the Pandavas, demanded justice from Maharaja Dhritarashtra, ‘Maharaja... you are the venerable senior in the Kuru family, my respectable father-in-law. Tell these

gambling addicts, did my husband have any right to put me at stake as his wife after he had lost himself in a bet? Didn't he lose the right of being my husband the moment he became a slave?'

"Unable to answer her, the Kuru king Dhritarashtra squirmed in his seat. With the shawl, he wiped the water that had trickled down his visionless eyes due to rotating the eyeballs. They were not tears! Meanwhile Duryodhana remembered his insult in the Mayasabha at the time of the Rajasuya *Yajna* and actually ordered Dushasana, 'Dushasanaa, strip this maid of the Kurus naked in this fully occupied gambling arena! Pull that fragrant sword out of the scabbard dangling at the hips of the weak Pandavas. Let her understand well that a blind father's sons are not always blind. In fact, they wish to see and can see things that even her sighted husbands can't see. Dushasanaa, strip her naked and make her sit on my lap.' Duryodhana pulled his dhoti aside and thumped his bare thigh. Bhimsena could not bear this indignity and shouted, 'Duryodhana, I will smash this thigh of yours that you have exposed so impudently in this arena full of people with a single strike of my mace. When time comes, I will rip off and toss skywards the dirty hand of scoundrel Dushasana that followed your commands like a puppet and touched my dear wife! I will tie my beloved wife's dishevelled hair only with his blood!' Bhimsena did not just roar these words but he brandished his mace and ran towards both of them. But he had to return and sit in his place, fuming with anger after hearing his elder brother's command 'Back off Bhima!'

"Dushasana scurried to Draupadidevi like a burning inferno moving towards verdure. He directly put his hand on the vesture that she was wearing. Draupadidevi turned around like an infuriated female serpent and bit his strong hand furiously. Dushasana withdrew both his hands in agony. Released from his hands Draupadidevi shot like a lightning bolt flashing in the sky. She scurried around in the arena. Dushasana chased her to try and get hold of her vesture. Beating her chest, her hands spread out, hair untied, the wailing lady implored all the major warriors in the gambling arena. Who wasn't among those? Everyone including Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Maharani Gandharidevi, grandsire Bhishma, guru Drona, Kripa, Vidura, Sanjaya and all the major warriors were there. The lady was imploring with wailing cries that would break one's heart. 'Maharaja..., Grandsire..., Maharani... save my honour. I will sweep the gambling arena of the Kurus as a maidservant. I will wash the royal family's vestures. I will do the royal ladies' hair. But don't humiliate me like this, by disrobing me.'



Devi implored Urnanabha, Chitrachapa, Dridhavarman, Nishangina, Mahabahu, Vishalaksha, Chitravarman, Somakirti, and Padmanabhan – all to save her honour. No one could respond to her. The next moment she was standing in front of the seat of Karna – the king of Anga. He also stood up at once at that time. But for some reason she did not make any request to him. Lamenting loudly, and cursing all in the arena and her husbands, Devi ran through the entire arena. She got exhausted, but got up like a rising serpent and ran again, to avoid Dushasana coming closer to her so that he could not touch her vesture. Running around with all her strength she began shouting loudly, ‘Tell me, is there a single gallant warrior in this ancient gambling arena of the Kurus, who has the courage of a lion and stands by Truth? Does anyone here today care about the lineage of Maharaja Yayati, Yadu, Puru, Hasti, Ajameedha, Samvarana, Janhu and Kuru at all? Isn’t any one of you aware that you are the descendants of Maharani Tapati, Nalini, Bhumini, Sudakshina, Viraja, Devayani, Ganga and Satyavati? An assembly without elders is no assembly, and elders without the sense of justice and injustice are no elders.

‘Do you think that a woman’s honour is merely a gambling piece that can be wrapped in the gambling board? Is it a piece of dice that can be held in one’s hand and thrown out as per one’s whimsy? Do you think that the society or the kingdom that humiliates a woman in such a horrendous way will not be destroyed? Are you even conscious of the fact that you are born from a woman’s affectionate womb? I beg you to tell me, is there at least a single son in this gambling arena today who still honours his mother’s milk?’

For a moment, dead silence prevailed. Even Dushasana’s hold on the royal lady’s vesture went loose.

“Only one valiant Kuru in the entire gambling arena stood up with resolve, and with desperate authoritativeness he told Dushasana who was his elder, ‘Dushasana, do not even touch Panchali. Members of the assembly, remember this is the assembly that has been honoured by royal ladies from Maharani Tapati to Satyavati. Abusing a royal lady in here is like trampling an idol of a goddess to be worshiped, in the temple itself.

““Though I am younger, I dare to ask all the elders here whether their swords that shine on the battlefield are corroded today. Why are the grandsire, Maharaja, Mahatma Vidura, Aacharya Drona, Kripa, all the ascetics, the wise and the hermits dead silent as if struck by lightning?

““I - Vikarna the son of Dhritarashtra tell you, the sobs and wails of a

devoted wife will carry the terrifying music of doom with them. The hot tears streaming down her eyes will assume the form of a thundering, tempestuous Ganga and run wild. None of the seats which you are sitting on now, will last then. Injustice to a devoted wife is like injustice to chastity itself! Her humiliation is the end of all chivalry.’

“His words set the assembly abuzz. Even demented Dushasana who was till now hysterically trying to grab the royal lady’s vesture, hesitated for a moment.

“Exactly at that moment Karna – the king of Anga stood up and said, ‘Vikarna, you are a fool. Even the elderly Grandsire, Maharaja, and Mahatma Vidura, who are present in the assembly, have not said a word. You are straining your vocal chords in vain portraying as if the mantle of *Dharma* is resting only on your shoulder.

“‘A devoted wife? What kind of devoted wife is this? The woman whose trumpet you are blowing as a ‘devoted wife’ is no devoted wife at all!

“‘She is a mere seeker of carnal enjoyment with five husbands! She is impure! An adulteress! A harlot! A whore!! This kind of woman always prefers hundred and five husbands rather than just five! A maid is at least modest enough to cover her body; she has at least humility. But an adulteress never has such modesty. What does it matter whether she comes dressed or undressed in the assembly!

“‘Vikarna, don’t meddle in to the matters that you know nothing about, sit down! Dushasanaa, unsheathe this dark, fragrant sword that has been dangling so far at the hips of impotent Pandavas, from the scabbard of her vestures. Strip this maid naked who has been lost in the bet!’

“Everyone in the arena was aghast to hear the appalling words from the valiant philanthropist. Hesitant Dushasana regained his composure and came forward. Grabbing the hem of Draupadidevi’s vesture he pulled it forcibly! Covering the bodice on her chest with her arms the wife of the Pandavas gave out agonizing cries that left all benumbed, ‘Oh Milinda, Madhava..., Madhusudana... hurry! Gopala, Ghananeela, Achyuta..., Keshava..., Srikrishna...help! Become the earth and split yourself open to swallow this ill-fated Draupadi! Come to be the fire in the *yajna*-pit and reduce this *yajna*-born Draupadi to ashes! Take the sizzling ashes of her remnants and smear them on the temples of these blind, despicable scoundrels! Dunk the drunken heads of these lascivious men in the tidal waves of my defenceless tears and drown them to suffocating death! Burn these venomous serpents lurking in

the thick forests of the Kuru dynasty with my scorching sighs! Blow out the giant lamp of the Sun today itself and bury this dark slave of the Kauravas in that pitch darkness. Or else, run, come from the expanse of the blue sky, from the void of the nether world, from the ten directions! Run, rush and save me...!!!’

“And... suddenly a cacophony of musical instruments and mantra incantations was heard from the roof of the gambling arena of the Kurus, like no one had ever heard before. An aura of unbearably brilliant light filled the arena. The next moment a rapidly revolving circle of a blinding light was seen there. I saw something like your shawl coming out of that light and touching the vesture that the royal lady was wearing. The next instant the unbearable brilliance made me dizzy and closing my eyes I collapsed unconscious. I don’t know anything about what happened next.” Even while narrating this, the chief minister covered his eyes as if he was trying to protect his eyes from the brilliant light. The Lord moved forward, patted his back, removed his hands from his face and said, “Chief Minister Vipruthu, calm down. No need to share further details now. I have understood everything!”

I realized one thing though – since that episode of gambling in the Kurus’ gambling arena of Hastinapura the Lord began thinking only about Hastinapura. He started looking gloomy like never before. Quite often he would take Uddhava Maharaja with him and go to the Aindra gate in the west. Sitting on the stone seats there he would keep listening to the continuous roar of the rising waves. He appeared lost in some distant thought. If at all he spoke, it would be just a sentence or two with Uddhava Maharaja. I was the only one who accompanied both of them all the time. Now in his company I had become so close to my Lord that I clearly understood that his mind was roaring just like the western ocean. I could automatically feel the countless thought waves rising on that western ocean even without speaking anything with the Lord.

In spite of being such a thinker the venerable Pandava Yudhishtira had not learned any lesson from the first gambling episode in Hastinapura. He had accepted even the second invitation from Duryodhana for gambling. Within eight days of the first gambling game he played the second gambling game with Duryodhana and Shakuni in Hastinapura itself.

He lost even this second game of gambling and according to the bet he lost the Indraprastha kingdom that the Pandavas and Yadavas had erected. The

last bet in this gambling game was that either Duryodhana with all his brothers would have to spend twelve years in a forest and one year incognito or the Pandavas would have to do the same. Yudhishtira lost even this last bet in the second game of gambling.

The news arrived in Dwaraka that Yudhishtira had left for Kamyakavana along with other Pandavas and Draupadidevi – to live in the forest! I felt very dejected after hearing the news.

The Pandavas who were the rulers of Indraprastha were leaving for the forest from Kauravas' Hastinapura itself. As many men and women of Hastinapura still respected Pandavas' father – world conqueror Pandu – they had gathered at the borders of Hastinapura to bid farewell to the Pandavas. All the five Pandavas had changed from the royal attire to plain white vestures. Draupadidevi was also dressed in plain simple attire. Her brother Dhrishtadyumna had also come to bid farewell to them. He was going to take all sons of Pandavas, to the Panchala kingdom for inculcating sanskaras and education. Our Subhadradevi's son Abhimanyu was to stay behind, because the Lord's *aatya* Kuntidevi was going to stay at Mahamantri Vidura's residence in Hastinapura as the Pandavas had lost the Indraprastha kingdom. She was not going to the forest.

The Lord felt hurt that Yudhishtira had gambled again even after all that had happened. But he was even more hurt due to the fact that Yudhishtira left directly for the Kamyaka vana, with all Pandavas and his dear sister Draupadidevi, without even meeting him. Yet he never deterred from his duty. He came to Indraprastha taking me and Uddhava Maharaja with him. He explained to Subhadradevi in a very loving and affectionate way how to face the current situation. He returned to Dwaraka along with sister Subhadradevi and his infant *bhacha* Abhimanyu. During our visit to Indraprastha this time I felt a drastic change. Earlier I had seen Pandavas' armed and uniformed soldiers patrolling the streets of Indraprastha. Now they were replaced by armed Kaurava soldiers in Kuru uniforms. It was obvious that Shakuni and Duryodhana had taken back the area of Khandavavana that Maharaja Dhritarashtra had so kindly offered to the Pandavas in the presence of my Lord. That too, in the form of a well-planned royal city of Indraprastha in place of the forest.

The puissant royal capital Indraprastha had completely lost its charm. The cultured royal family of the Pandavas had scattered in all directions. All Pandavas along with their wife Draupadidevi were in the Kamyakavana,

Pandavas' mother Kuntidevi was in Hastinapura, Subhadradevi-Abhimanyu in Dwaraka, Arjuna's wife Chitrangadadevi in Manipura along with son Babhruvahana, Uloopidevi on the banks of river Ganga at her parental home along with son Iravana, and Bhima's wife Hidimbadevi in the forest with son Ghatotkacha.

Many of the dreams that my Lord had seen about the Pandavas were wiped out. Now the foremost urgency was to visit the Kamyakavana; to rekindle the lost courage of the Pandavas; to console Draupadidevi. As per the Lord's instructions I took him to the Kamyakavana in the Garudadhwaaja chariot. Balaramadada and commander Satyaki accompanied us. As I was occupied in tending to the horses and the chariots I didn't come to know what discussions took place with the Pandavas during this visit. The Lord returned after spending two days in the forest.

Nowadays the Lord of Dwaraka had almost stopped going to the Sudharma royal assembly and the island of Queens' mansions. He would spend hours on end on the shores of the western ocean along with Uddhava Maharaja. Or he would visit the Shiva temple of Somanath, crossing the creek and then going in my chariot along with Uddhava Maharaja. It was only in the morning and evening that the Lord would meet Maharaja Vasudeva, Devakimata and Rohinimata, Balaramadada and Revatidevi to pay obeisance. If at all commander Satyaki, Anadhrishti and various troop leaders came to seek his guidance in regards to the growing Yadava army, he would only listen to them. Without saying anything he would point me to take them to Balaramadada.

If at all he spoke, it would be a lot with his own sons whom he would call in his chambers. There would be different groups of similar age, such as Pradyumna, Samba and Praghosha would be in one group. The visiting times also would be different for different age groups and they discussed a variety of subjects. Some of his sons were extremely brilliant. They would pose their questions to the Lord of Dwaraka to get their doubts cleared. Some were simply warriors. They would gather more information about warfare. A few were born humble and shy. They would only listen. The Lord would often be cheerful and laugh freely amongst his sons. Sometimes he would take his dearest daughter Charumati – Charu – in the Garudadhwaaja chariot and go to the Bhallata gate in the north. Even I wouldn't be there at that time. He would steer the chariot himself. At times Charumati also steered the chariot. The Lord himself had taught her.

It has been six months since the Pandavas had gone to live in the forest. Many people of Dwaraka had almost forgotten them. But my Lord, Balaramadada, Uddhava Maharaja, Maharaja Vasudeva and I could never forget them. Nowadays the Lord would meet Aacharya Sandipani more frequently and have discussions with him. I could strongly sense the change in the Lord's demeanour day by day. He was reluctant to perform any of his duties as the Lord of Dwaraka. The Lord who otherwise participated in any activity enthusiastically with pure love strongly preferred silence and seclusion of late. Nowadays words such as the holy place Prayaga, Ghor Angirasa, aashrama were frequently heard in his discussions with Aacharya Sandipani.

And finally, that day dawned. On that day, we went to the ocean shore from the western gate Aindra. All of us offered the evening oblations. But while coming back the Lord told me to take a seat in the back of the chariot with Uddhava Maharaja and took the reins of the chariot in his own hands. As it was evening a line of orange and pink clouds had spread across the skyline of the western ocean. The gentle ocean breeze would not let the Lord's shawl rest in its place. Gathering the fluttering shawl together, he called the horses by their names – Meghapushpa, Balahaka and such and spoke solemnly, "Brother Daruka and Uddhava, I want to talk to you urgently once we reach the palace. Remember, I want to talk only to you. Please don't bring anyone else along."

As soon as we reached the palace he let us know his firm decision. In a very calm but firm voice he said, "Dear brother Udho and Daruka, after much deliberation I have taken a firm decision. I had left Mathura before, now I am going to leave Dwaraka too, for good. I am going to an aashrama far away in the north to peacefully spend time in contemplation of the almighty God. It is up to you to decide whether you want to join me. Balaramadada and I have stayed together since Gokul. But this time I am not taking him with me. He left me once – in anger. Now I am going to leave him – but with respect and love for his seniority in my heart. I have no choice. As he is the formally installed prince, the kingdom of Dwaraka holds more authority over him than me. He will remain here, to serve and to protect Dwaraka. If you also decide to stay back, my love for you as my 'confidants' won't reduce even a bit.

Both of us simply kept staring at him. For a moment, it wasn't clear to us what he was talking about. We were stunned, perplexed and didn't know what to do. He realized that we were just mutely staring at him. Laughing

innocently like a child he said, “Dear friends, can’t you take such a simple decision? How must have I taken so many decisions in my life? I assure you that whatever decision you take, I will readily accept.”

“Dada, I can’t even imagine living without you. Can there be breath without the body? Is this what you judged me to be? Of course, I am coming with you, whether you consider me your friend or not.” Uddhava Maharaja responded promptly leaving no doubt at all.

“Oh Lord, I am your shadow after all. How can one separate it from the body? Wherever the Lord of Dwaraka will be, Daruka will be there.” I also conveyed my firm decision in clear words. Now it was going to be his choice, whether to take me with him or not.

He got a firm, clear response from both of us. Then he looked deep into our eyes once and coming closer he put his knee-length arms on our shoulders. Patting us gently he said, “Remember, that nobody should know where we are going. Uddhava will be fine as he is unmarried. But Daruka, your wife also should not know a single word of this! If that happens

I will leave both of you here and go someplace else all alone. Uddhava, maybe I will go towards the Himalaya which

bears with a smile many holy places like Amaranath that we visited!”

“Oh Lord, you have shown your faith in Uddhava Maharaja. I take a vow in the name of my wife, more than that I take a vow in your name that she will not know anything about this.”

“Then go, get ready.” The Lord dismissed both of us.

While leaving his chambers, I said to Uddhava Maharaja, “Now I understand why the Lord never accepted any royal throne ever!”

Uddhava Maharaja looked at me and smiling just like the Lord he said, “Daruka, its nothing special. Just now he told you to not tell anything to your wife, which means obviously, he is not going to tell anything to Rukminivahini along with his other seven wives. But I don’t know how to leave without telling Rukminivahini. Still, I will go; just as he has told me, without telling anything to anybody.”

The preparations for our departure from Dwaraka were all done. We were only going to take the usual Garudadhwaaja chariot with us. The back of the chariot was filled with minimum necessities like food grains for the journey, cooking vessels, and a few clothes. The Lord had given us strict instructions to not take any weapons with us.

A week before our departure the Lord got everybody mentally prepared

through Acharya Sandipani. Acharya said that ‘My dear disciple, the Lord of Dwaraka is going to a faraway region in the south to obtain a very rare Vidya, on my instructions. The Lord may take a Yadava or two with him if he wishes so. His new Guru himself has instructed him to not bring anybody else along. Therefore, even Prince Balarama will not go with him. With the assistance of Gargamuni, I am looking for an auspicious time for the Lord’s departure.’

After all such preparations, the Lord was ready to depart from Dwaraka; only with us, his two friends! With a signal of the hand he summoned only two of the men from among all who had gathered to see him off at the Shuddhaksha gate, on the Garudadhwaaja chariot that was already loaded on a boat. Those two fortunate men were chief minister Vipruthu and Acharya Sandipani.

We crossed the island creek and descended on the borders of Saurashtra. Then the Lord took the chief minister aside and bidding farewell to him he said, “Chief Minister, I may not come back from where I am going. I pulled you aside from amongst all and have brought you here only to tell you that you have to convey my message gradually and gently to all my wives, sons, Vasudevababa, both matas, the prince and Revativahini, their sons, sister Subhadra, her son Abhimanyu and all citizens in a manner that they can digest it. But not today, only after fifteen days. We will be going to an aashrama near the rivers Krishna, Kaveri in the southern region that we have not seen before. Don’t try to come there to find us ever. It will be in vain.” For the first time, today he embraced chief minister Vipruthu too, who got baffled by the action. The Lord put his head on the feet of Acharya Sandipani. Acharya pulled him up with genuine affection and took him in a deep embrace immediately. The Lord looked much taller than acharya now. Bringing both his palms together in front of his Guru the Lord humbly said, “I am going to see the same Guru whose name you had suggested in the Ankapada aashrama. Acharya, so far, I have tried to follow your teachings as much as I could. Please forgive me kindly if I have committed any mistakes.” He bade farewell to acharya too.

I took the charioteer’s seat on the Garudadhwaaja. In the back of the chariot were the two venerable Yadavas whom I highly esteemed throughout my life – the Lord of Dwaraka and Uddhava Maharaja. Today there wasn’t the usual grandeur of army with us. What was there, was only the three of us and the infinite, unrestricted cerulean sky atop and the holy land of Aaryabhoomi that



was being left behind under the wheels of the chariot!

Our very first halt was at Nageshwara, a holy place of Shiva's worship. During our journey, so far, we had strongly realized that because of the royal attire of the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja and my attire as a charioteer and also due to the embellished chariot, the men and women meeting us on the way were recognizing us very easily. They were running after the chariot, trying to halt it by spreading their hands. It was necessary to stop this. Nageshwara was one of the twelve holy places of Shiva in Aaryavarta. When we arrived in the Shiva temple here, the Lord shared his plan with me. He said, "Daruka, we all should get rid of the royal attire and put on simple clothes like aashrama residents. We should dispatch our royal attires to Balaramadada in Dwaraka along with our crowns through the temple priest here. Otherwise this journey will take very long. Besides, the course of our journey will be known back in Dwaraka."

In the temple of Nageshwara we changed from royal attire to the plain clothing of aashrama residents. We removed all royal insignia from the Garudadhawaja chariot, even the well-known pennant atop the chariot with the Garuda emblem, and replaced it with a plain saffron pennant. We also removed the fine caparison on the backs of all four horses, and changed their golden reins too. We handed over all this to the temple priest. The Lord gave him strict instructions about what to do. The appearance of the chariot was radically transformed now and so was ours.

In the temple, we came to know that if we continued our journey in the same way we would safely reach the expected destination of the holy place of Prayaga in the northern region without any obstacles. Before leaving we again devotedly offered a palm full of white flowers and *Bela* leaves on the grand *Shivapindi* in the shrine of the temple. All three of us brought our palms together in prayer and closed our eyes. The hymn of Lord Shiva automatically resonated in our minds. Now in our journey ahead, everything that was 'Shiva'—auspicious in the world, was going to be with us.

We passed Stavatirtha, crossed over river Mahi and entered Avanti through the Malava kingdom. This was the kingdom of Vinda and Anuvinda who were the Lord's *aatya*'s sons. But during this journey we didn't want to give anybody the slightest inkling of our arrival. Therefore, we decided to seek shelter in the charitable rest houses for travellers at Vishnu temples and Shiva temples located on the borders of various kingdoms on our way. Therefore, the citizens of Avanti didn't get even a wind of the Lord of Dwaraka

travelling through their kingdom along with his brother. During this journey the Lord and his brother would tuck their dhotis tight and groom the four white horses of the chariot with the thorny creepers that I fetched from the forests. Both of them used to be completely engrossed in the act. At this time, they would discuss various topics. I had already seen both of them picking up the soiled dishes of the invitees during the Rajasuya *yajna*. Now I was also witnessing them feeding all four horses, even occasionally picking up the horse dung without any reservation. Whenever we came across any forests or plateaus both the brothers would talk about various aspects of life from all angles. They would also include me in their discussions. But both of them would strictly keep silent whenever we approached a town and could see the people of that town. Then it would be my duty to speak and collect information for our journey ahead. I would also do this very cautiously.

After passing cities like Vidisha in the Nishadha kingdom, Padmavati in the Dasharna kingdom and Sagar in the Pulinda kingdom we crossed river Karnavati. This river was named after Karna – the king of Anga. One of our sojourns was at the bottom of Mount Chitrakuta where Srirama, Lakshmana and Sita had stayed once upon a time. Finally, we travelled through Pampapura and arrived at the holy place of Prayaga.

This place was a holy confluence of three big rivers in Aaryavarta – river Ganga flowing through the Hastinapura kingdom of the Kurus, river Yamuna that nurtured my Lord's delightful childhood with her waters, that came flowing from the Indraprastha kingdom of the Pandavas; and the third was the invisible river Saraswati.

We arrived at the famous Sangam ghat of Prayaga. I left the chariot on the ghat, in the shade of a sprawling mango tree and gave fodder to the horses. We began climbing down the steps of the Sangam ghat one at a time. At that time, I strongly remembered the Srisopana in Dwaraka. It had also become huge like this.

All three of us kept our dry vestures on a step near the edge and entered the waters of the confluence, dressed only in our loin cloths. Holding his sharp blue nose in his fist the bare-bodied Lord took a dip in the water saying 'Hail River Ganga ....' Uddhava Maharaja and I also followed suit. I feasted my eyes upon the Lord standing in front of me, drenched completely in the waters of Ganga and Yamuna, shining brightly in the sunrays. His radiant face showed no sign of fatigue even after such a long journey. It looked bright like the *Shivapindi* getting drenched under the trickle of the *Abhishek*

water in the shrine of the Shiva temple at Somanath.

The Lord took water from the confluence of the three rivers in his palms to offer oblations. We followed suit. The Lord chanted clearly – ‘Om bhoorbhuvaha Swaha .... Prachodayat ....’ We repeated after him. Suddenly, without giving us any idea, my Lord shouted ‘Hail Goddess Ida...!’ and plunged into the water in front of us. We just stood there, watching him in astonishment.

After swimming to his heart’s content in the confluence of the three rivers for a good half hour, the Lord came to the shore. I stood in front of him holding his dry vestures in my hand with utter respect. A thought made me smile. What if the Lord were in his usual attire with the crown on his head! What difference would it make if even in the aashrama he wore his regular attire, as a resident of the aashrama? To me he always seemed like an ascetic throughout his life.

I brought the Garudadhawaja chariot in front of the wooden east gate of the aashrama of Acharya Ghor Angirasa which was close to the Sangam ghat. While descending from the chariot Uddhava Maharaja instructed me, “Daruka, go in the aashrama and inform aacharya about our arrival.”

Saying ‘Yes Sire’ I walked towards the aashrama. I had had an opportunity to visit the Ankapada aashrama of Acharya Sandipani in the Avanti kingdom. The Angirasa aashrama had been designed exactly in the same way. The tall, capacious cottage of Acharya Angirasa stood in the centre of all the cottages. Only one thing was more eye-catching here than the Ankapada aashrama. That was the square *Yajna* pit in front of the Acharya’s cottage that was aflame throughout the day and night. Uninterrupted worship of Agni was the religious vow taken by the sage Angirasa clan that had continued for hundreds of years. Even in the rainy season the *Yajna* pit would be kept ablaze under a tall roof of grass by sheltering it on all four sides with shields made of grass.

Acharya Ghor Angirasa who was surrounded by his chosen disciples came out with me and approached the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja, spreading both his arms wide. I immediately noticed that all disciples were wearing saffron vestures but only the aacharya’s vestures were pure white. He had covered his mouth with a clean white strip of cloth. The strip was tied behind his ears with two strings. That strip easily covered most of the aacharya’s face and his thick beard. At the back of their heads, a tuft of long hair in the centre surrounded by four more tufts around it, was clearly visible. These five long

tufts of hair and the *Yajna* pit were the ancient distinctive features of the Angirasa aashrama. All Angirasas had the five tufts of long hair at the back of their heads to signify that the human body comes into existence with the enigmatic combination of the five basic elements. They were identified throughout the Aaryavarta due to the five tufts of long hair and their love of Agni the Fire. As they lived constantly in the company of the fire most of them had darkened and radiant fair complexions. Their eyes reflected a radiant streak of fearlessness just like the eyes of the Bhrigu disciples.

As soon as aacharya stood in front of them, both the brothers knelt down. My Lord on the right and Uddhava Maharaja on the left put their heads on aacharya's feet. Aacharya immediately pulled up both the brothers and held them in a deep embrace.

“How was your journey? You came without prior notice – I couldn't believe it!” Aacharya's voice was loud and clear.

I had offered respect and sought his blessing immediately after reaching there. He recognized me immediately. I had had the opportunity to offer him chariot service during his previous visit to Dwaraka. I informed him of the arrival of the Lord and his brother. He immediately left the cottage full of disciples, halting his discourse in the middle.

This aacharya was also a former Yadava of Mathura as per my knowledge. He was betrothed in Mathura. But before the wedding he became disinterested in worldly matters and directly went to the Himalayas. He had met the main Angirasa of the Angirasa rishi clan. In ancient times the founder of the Angirasa clan had spontaneously composed a few hymns of Rigveda. Atharvaveda that followed had five kalpas, of which one was known as ‘Angirasa Kalpa’ in his name. Since then the Angirasa clan was considered to be the ‘Vajrakula’ among the various clans of the rishis. Their main aashrama was in the Himalayas. Many branches of their aashrama like the one in Prayaga had spread throughout Aaryavarta. Renowned forefather Maharaja Yayati from the Lord's dynasty had been in the company of this Angirasa clan. He had also composed a few hymns in the Vedas.

This was a unique meeting of the Yadava dynasty and the ‘Vajrakula’ of the Angirasas.

This sage Angirasa, a former Yadava had obtained formal initiation. He had acquired his Guru's blessings by severe penance and meditation. As his Guru was pleased with his severe penance he gave him the name of Ghor Angirasa, and had appointed him as his successor, as the chief of the Angirasa clan after

him. He had realized that by living in the distant Himalayas it would not be possible to expand the 'Vajrakula' of the Angirasa clan. Therefore, he himself had started a branch of the aashrama near the confluence of three rivers at Prayaga. He still had a strong urge to start another branch, way bigger than the main aashrama in the Himalayas, near Mount Kailas.

In this Ghor Angirasa aashrama at Prayaga our new daily routine began. My Lord and Uddhava Maharaja were used to this kind of aashrama life since they had lived in the Ankapada aashrama of Acharya Sandipani, their former Guru. But I was new to this life. Still I wasn't afraid of it at all. Both the Yadava brothers stood behind me like rocks and were quite capable of handling the situation in case I made any mistakes.

On the first day, after our formal initiation ceremony the aacharya introduced us to the disciples from various kingdoms. In very few words he said, "This is Srikrishna – the son of Maharaja Vasudeva of Dwaraka – this is his brother Uddhava and this is his friend Daruka!"

As soon as he finished the introduction a big commotion arose among the disciples. Clear, rapid words were falling on our ears – "What? Srikrishna? The slayer of Kansa – Shrugala – Kalayavana – Narakasur – Shatadhanwa – Shishupala – Shalva – Paundrak Vaasudeva – Dantavakra and Viduratha? The possessor of the Sudarshan Chakra? The disciple of Acharya Sandipani, the Lord of golden Dwaraka? We hope it's not a dream!"

The commotion kept rising every moment. Acharya raised both his hands and ordered silence in clear, loud words – 'Silence – complete silence'. I sat down. The cottage was filled with quiet.

Acharya recognized the sentiments of his disciples and quieted them saying, "Dear disciples, he is no Srikrishna of Dwaraka now! From today he is your aashrama-brother. You have learned a variety of Yogas till today, but he has initiated a new Yoga in Aaryavarta – that is Premayoga! You will experience it more and more here onwards. Let us first get to know why he has come here. I am also curious to know the reason because he hasn't come here like you who are unmarried and the followers of Brahmacharyashrama. He is married, a family man, bound in relations such as father, son, husband, brother and a mentor to many. And still I have initiated him as my disciple. As it was his own wish I have also initiated both his friends also as my disciples. It is because I had promised him before that I will be his Guru at the right time. In my opinion that time has come now as he has arrived here. I ask him in front of all of you, 'Tell me Srikrishna, why did you feel like

coming so far away to me at this age in spite of having your dear Aacharya Sandipani with you? What exactly prompted you to do so? Why have you have become so disinterested in life? You would enjoy life to the fullest, played the flute in Gokul, consumed milk and curds after stealing it from the Gopas' and Gopis' houses, played the Gopas' *Rasa* dance to the heart's content with the Gopas and Gopis in the full moon of Purnima, and swam unrestrained in river Yamuna – why have you become like this?"

Quite impressed, I started looking at Aacharya Ghor Angirasa. He had directly asked the Lord of Dwaraka all the questions that arose many times in my mind till we came here. I got very curious to see how the Lord was now going to answer aacharya's questions.

My Lord started getting up from the grass mat. He was very modest as usual. Aacharya didn't feel it was necessary and so he immediately signalled and said, "Achyuta, you can speak while sitting." Hearing Aacharya's words the Lord looked at him with intense affection and smiled. A playful dimple blossomed on his bluish full cheek. Enchanted, I simply kept staring at him and attentively listened to his words that competed with the divine nectar. All disciples in the cottage were in the same state. Even aacharya who had asked the question forgot his seniority and listened attentively to him. The Lord's words flowed like the sweet gurgle of the swirling waves of Ganga-Yamuna flowing at some distance –

"Venerable Aacharya and all aashram brothers, all of you and Aacharya are wondering why I came here. Probably my dear brother Uddhava and close friend Daruka are also wondering the same. All the people of Dwaraka would also be wondering the same. Therefore, I am humbly stating this in front of the Aacharya who is the ultimate master of *Brahmavidya* in the entire Aaryavarta.

"It is not in my nature to stop in one place. Form Gokul I came to Mathura, from Mathura to Dwaraka. From Dwaraka I travelled throughout Aaryavarta. I did whatever and as much as I could do.

"I established the Pandavas of the Kuru dynasty of Hastinapura in Indraprastha. I met not one or two but literally thousands and lakhs of men and women. I loved each one of them as much as I could.

"I was involved with my heart and soul in Indraprastha, even more than the golden, puissant Dwaraka. I chose the five Pandava brothers from among the many men whom I came across, not because they were my aatebandhu, but because they possessed rare qualities.

“But – but I am deeply saddened by only one thing. A golden city can be erected on the roaring ocean; a grand royal city can be raised in the thick forests; evil powers obstructing the flow of all life can be destroyed determinedly. All this can be done, but for what purpose? We don’t understand what goes on in the mind of even our dear ones. I am extremely sad as to why it isn’t possible to shape it even with great efforts.

“The virtuous, truth-loving eldest Pandava Yudhishtira who has endured suffering due to the circumstances, goes astray! Even when he has a golden opportunity to show his prowess! Why? And how? One can create everything from nothing. How should one shape a mind, which is basically shapeless, with sanskaras? Rather how futile is the pride that ‘I am the creator’.

“I had envisioned a certain picture of the entire Aaryavarta based on the exceptional qualities of the Pandavas. I had much higher expectations from Indraprastha than from Dwaraka.

“A formally crowned king like Yudhishtira who is responsible for his subjects went astray due to the addiction of gambling; put the kingdom, his brothers along with his wife at stake. The descendants of the royal dynasty of Hastinapura dared to drag a lady in her menses into the gambling arena to fulfil their perverse desire for revenge. They dared to touch the vesture on her body in front of all venerable elders in the arena. *Maharathi* Karna, who is such an exceptional devotee of the Sun god, who at that time should have saved her honour by taking off his body armour and covering her with it, wished to disrobe her in front of all. All these are countless expressions of many human minds that are unfathomable to anyone.

“The eldest among my beloved cousins played the same kind of gambling game once again even after losing everything in the first game. He lost everything that he has achieved and is dear to him. He has accepted living in the forest and incognito. He left for the forest without meeting his close friend like me, that too with my dearest, best, most virtuous friend Arjuna! Even Arjuna left without meeting me as he couldn’t explain his brother’s idiocy to me. My dear *sakhi* Draupadi, who I consider as my dear sister and because of whom all these unimaginable, despicable events took place also left without meeting me.

“All such things happen due to the illusions of the mind. Unless a man’s mind is moulded he doesn’t become a man. These bitter experiences of life have brought me here. It is futile to dream about anything. It is impossible to mould human minds.

“I studied many Yogas like Dhyanayoga, Sankhyayoga and Jnanayoga devotedly in the aashrama of Acharya Sandipaie.

I considered Premayoga as the essence of my life. I am heartbroken that all this is just useless and therefore I have turned my back on all and come here at the feet of the acharya; to find total peace of mind. He should now expound to me what is right.”

The entire cottage filled with uneasy silence. All eyes were now on Acharya Ghor Angirasa who was sitting on the high seat with his eyes closed.

Acharya exclaimed without a moment’s delay, “This is what is called Vishadayoga - Melancholy! As beyond the sky there is the endless, dark space which one can never see, the Vishadayoga of the mind is endless. Srikrishnaa, I know very well that you are well aware of what Vishadayoga is. You yourself are way beyond it. I will explain exactly why you have come here.”

Stunned, we pricked our ears along with the disciples.

“You have come here to make all around you and the future generations understand what the Melancholy of a mind is, from your own example. The experience of the Night makes us realize the importance of the Day. The exposure to darkness helps us realize the value of Light. Madhusudana, you are well aware of what is Vishada (melancholy), valour, darkness and light. Grandsire Bhishma himself has addressed you as Vaasudeva. I say that Bhagvan Vaasudeva, you are the Light that every being is in quest of.” Acharya muttered something vaguely like – ‘Arpanam astu’ and went into a meditative trance. Our first day in the Angirasa aashrama was over.

On the very first day, my Lord had won over the hearts of everyone in the Ghor Angirasa aashrama of Prayaga.

Our days in the Prayaga aashrama were becoming increasingly memorable. All three of us missed Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Dwaraka every single day. But each one of us made sure not to mention it in our discussion. The aashrama was located on the banks of river Ganga but a bit far away from the confluence. From the other side, Yamuna had united with river Ganga in the confluence. Yamuna was a bit farther away. Yet both the brothers inadvertently turned to Yamuna for their baths. I also followed them to Yamuna. Once I gathered my courage and asked, “Oh Lord, what if you let even river Ganga have an opportunity of your visit?” The Lord looked at me with a smile and answered, “Daruka, I was taking Uddhava to bathe in the



Yamuna only because I wanted you to express your desire to bathe in the Ganga. Your forefathers were from the region on the banks of river Ganga. I knew that someday you would want to go and bathe in Ganga. Now from tomorrow we will go only to the confluence to bathe. Then there will be no question of Ganga or Yamuna at all. If you try you may be able to see the invisible river Saraswati also!”

The five tufts of hair on our heads had grown quite long now. At the back of our heads we had four tufts on four sides in a small circle, and one in the centre a little longer than others, all knotted tightly at the end, and rest of the head was shaved. On the first day, when we looked at each other’s heads we couldn’t stop laughing. When the aashrama chief came to our cottage hearing our commotion we stopped immediately. After all we were formally initiated disciples of Ghor Angirasa who were supposed to undergo arduous tests. Eventually we got used to these five tufts.

We were acquainted with all the disciples of the aashrama. Our stay here blossomed with varied colourful experiences like peacock feathers with beautiful eyes. I felt blessed hearing the invaluable discussions which I had never experienced before.

The discourse room of the main Acharya-cottage would overflow with disciples from various countries. Then Acharya would enter from the inner room with two aashrama chiefs on both his sides. The disciples chatting with each other in whispers would immediately become quiet and standing up quickly they would pay their respects to Acharya. Acharya would stand on a raised grass platform from where the entire discourse room could be seen. The aashrama chiefs would quickly stand on both his sides. The chief in charge of the conch would blow and produce an extended conch sound indicating the time of prayer. Then everyone including the Acharya would join their palms in prayer and close their eyes. The congregation would begin the common prayer. Everybody would wait for an exact gap of a few moments in the same rhythm and then begin the Guruvandana on a common note.

Once the acharya took his seat all the disciples would sit down on their grass mats. Here too acharya himself had instructed us to sit in the very first row of the disciples. Acharya would glance once at all the disciples with loving, affectionate eyes, giving all his blessings. He would close his eyes again for a few moments and would open them only after confirming the subject of the discourse in his mind. All the disciples would be eager to hear

the topic of the day. Acharya would again glance all over and with a smile declare the topic – ‘Sankhyayoga!’ A few disciples would then repeat the word to themselves, look at each other intentionally and be all ears, focusing their attention.

Beginning with ‘Dear Disciples’ the words from the sage would flow like the current of river Ganga. Then we would keep listening to him as if in a trance. ‘The joys and sorrows of life are created by the Body and Mind. The Atman – Soul is beyond that. The one who becomes aware of its existence would never be distressed about anything – would never feel melancholy. He also doesn’t get carried away by the pleasures of the body and mind. He only gets engrossed in the joy of his own Soul. He immerses himself in that joy.’

Now all the disciples listened attentively. The words of the Guru were opening the truths of life one after the other like smoothly unrolling a bolt of a fine fabric. Acharya described what ‘Asthira Buddhi’ – unsteady Mind is and elaborated on the requirement and significance of ‘Susthira Buddhi’ – a steady Mind. ‘The experience of Atman, the soul, is hard earned, and once it is earned it is equally difficult to comprehend it properly. For that a ‘Sthitaprajna’, one with a stable mind, is required who regards pleasure and pain as equal. Acharya didn’t just stop by mentioning the word ‘Sthitaprajna’; he continued to clarify every characteristic of such a person by giving examples from daily life.

This Sankhyayoga was very important. Acharya continued talking about the same topic many days after. The disciples asked him their doubts from time to time. Acharya’s discourse got really interesting when he started expounding Karmayoga. What is Karma? What are the manifestations of Karma? He explained everything very beautifully. He clarified well that a being is never free from Karma – even in the state of sleep.

I strongly noticed that during the discussions about Karmayoga the Lord asked acharya many confusing questions. Even Uddhava Maharaja participated in these discussions many times. The three of them thoroughly discussed words like Karma, Akarma, Vikarma and their definitions. One’s strong basic temperament makes one perform various Karmas. That basic temperament needs to be kept under control by disciplining one’s senses. Kama or desire is what forces one to commit sins against one’s own wish. If one keeps it under control by self-restraint, he achieves a godly quality. The essence of these ardent discussions about Karmayoga was that Karma without any expectations in return is the greatest kind of Karma. Above all, if

one passes away while doing Karma without expectations, for serving one's Swadharma, it is considered even better, as good as gold with fragrance.

The one who serves one's Swadharma without expecting anything in return automatically develops good relations with many people. He becomes a Vibhuti, a hero, during his lifetime itself. Like a lighthouse, he guides the generations to come, with his revolutionary thoughts! On the day of the conclusion of the discussion of Karmayoga, acharya asked my Lord with reference to the lighthouse, "What do you say Srikrishna, what is your opinion about this?"

The Lord simply answered "It is possible!"

Acharya's discourse was getting more profound now. We were now not missing Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Dwaraka as much as we used to. Acharya's discourse was the reason behind it. For us the aashrama itself had become Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Dwaraka. Once in a while a wise sage from the Himalayas visiting the holy place of Prayaga would come to the aashrama. Acharya would give his detailed introduction, mentioning his authority, his knowledge, and Gurukul. To honour the sage as a guest he would request him to give a discourse about many important topics such as Jnanavijnanayoga, Sanyasayoga, and Dhyanyoga. He would ask him many subtle questions, humbly stepping down to a subordinate position. He would ask, 'Which one is greater Sanyasayoga - asceticism or Karmayoga - duty?' Uddhava Maharaja would also enthusiastically participate in their discussions. He would firmly assert that Sanyasayoga is indeed great. The guest would also second his opinion. Then Acharya Angirasa would deliberately present the greatness of Karmayoga and make the debate interesting. But the disciples would get confused. They would be unable to decide whether Sanyasayoga is great or Karmayoga. My Lord would simply keep listening to the discussion smiling mischievously in between. In the end Acharya Ghor Angirasa would ask him, "Srikrishna, how come you are not saying anything? What is greater in your opinion?" The Lord would smile and answer, "A Karmayogi becomes a *Sanyasi* simply by practicing the detachment of a *Sanyasi* by his own volition, and Sanyasayoga doesn't prevail without Karma. Therefore, in principle they both are the same!"

Hearing this answer the disciples would feel satisfied that the half hour long discussion had concluded appropriately. Even Acharya Ghor would agree with them.

As a part of our daily chores, all three of us would go to the forest to collect

the wood, sacrificial sticks and wild fruits. My Lord who used to sit on the golden seat in the Sudharma royal assembly of Dwaraka would put the bundle of firewood from his shoulder onto the ground and sit on a boulder, his forehead full of perspiration. Instead of the yellow vesture he would be wearing a saffron dhoti. Sometimes I would strongly miss my beloved wife Hayamati, young Daruki and his brothers and the residence in Dwaraka. But I wouldn't say a thing, because

the Lord would never mention even a single one of his eight wives, a single one of his eighty sons and even Charu. Uddhava Maharaja was after all unmarried. But since his big brother

never mentioned anyone he would also not mention his father, mother or brother at all. I would keep quiet thinking how I could broach the subject that these two never even alluded to. When I was in Dwaraka I would cross the creek, and go to the forests of Aanarta, especially to collect the wild creepers for grooming the horses and the sturdy wood of the Kikar tree to be used in making the chariot wheels. Therefore, whenever I went to the forest here I would remember the chariot and the horses. Our Garudadhwhaja chariot and the four white horses – Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Shaibya and Sugriva – everything had been deposited in the aashrama repository as soon as we got our initiation.

Now acharya himself was enjoying while delivering the discourse. While speaking about the important topic of Dhyanayoga he expressed a very beautiful thought. He said, "A person should emancipate himself on his own. One should never lose courage, because in reality we are our own brothers or enemies." He was equally engrossed while explaining the topic of Vibhutyoga. In very simple words he said, "It is very important for one to know one's surroundings as much as to have a knowledge of 'self'. Life becomes easier once one knows who he is." He suddenly asked my Lord, "Tell me Srikrishna, have you understood who you are?"

Without a moment's delay the Lord answered with a smile, "Vaa...Su... De...Va! Because everybody calls me so and believes me to be!" My deft Lord eluded even the acharya's trap of words.

The days in the aashram got more engaging. All of us disciples would be agog to listen to acharya's discourse and couldn't wait to hear the signalling sound of the conch to go towards the Acharya-cottage to hear his ambrosial words. It had been one month since we came here. Day after day acharya's discourse about *Brahmavidya* was getting more elaborate and profound.

While talking about the important subject of Bhaktiyoga the aacharya got entranced. He said, “An ardent devotee of the Almighty wonders whether it is better to worship the Lord in the form beyond attributes or in a manifest form? The only answer to this is – both are equal. The worship of god beyond attributes takes one closer to the Almighty easily. The worship of a manifest form, without keeping any expectations also reaches same height as the worship beyond attributes. Even that takes one close to the Almighty.” While presenting such thoughts aacharya would forget even the lunch time. The disciples would feel full with the extraordinary thoughts they had just heard.

A month and a half had passed by since we came to the Angirasa aashrama. The five tufts on our heads had grown considerably long now. Our knowledge in the brains under those tuft roots had also enhanced quite a lot. We had completely become one with the aashrama now. It was as if it had become a family unit comprised of all the disciples, venerable aacharya who drenched us in the knowledge of *Brahmavidya*, aacharya’s aides offering us the knowledge of various subjects under the guidance of aacharya, all the chiefs of various aashrama stores, and animals such as cows, dogs, and horses.

While expounding the topic of Purushottamayoga, Aacharya Ghor Angirasa said, “Sansar doesn’t mean following your daily routine living with your wife and children. The word ‘Sansar’ means the entire world that is visible to one’s eyes or the tangible universe. Just as there is a Sansaravriksha – the tree of Life, there is also a Brahmavriksha – the tree of the knowledge of the Supreme Soul, Paramatma. But as its roots are visible at the top and branches at the bottom it is not easily recognizable. Inner vision is required for that. The one who recognizes it is called the ‘*Purushottama*’ – the Supreme Being. The one who goes beyond his own family life and works towards his life’s mission becomes a *Yogayogeshwara Purushottama!*” At this point aacharya questioned Uddhava Maharaja with a smile, “Uddhava, have you seen such a Supreme Being – *Purushottama?*” He also answered instantly, “Yes! But I cannot disclose his name. As you had told us, truth should be only recognized and experienced. It cannot be discussed.” He answered perfectly. He too didn’t get caught in the clasp of aacharya’s question.

While talking about Jnan and Vijnanayoga aacharya’s bearded face with a strip of cloth wrapped around his mouth became much more radiant. That radiance was getting expressed from his eyes only. He simply said, “Jnana, knowledge, means information about a particular subject. Ajnana is

unawareness in a particular subject. Vijnana is specialized knowledge in a particular subject. What is the kind of Jnana that you are learning in this aashrama about *Brahmavidya*?" Acharya questioned all the disciples. One after the other almost all disciples answered 'Gurudeva, it is Vijnana'. I also gave the same answer.

In the end aacharya looked at my Lord and asked, "Srikrishnaa, the knowledge that you gained in this aashrama – is it simple Jnana or Vijnana? What do you think?" My Lord who had enamoured everyone by this time and who had become the aashrama's favourite, replied smilingly, "Gurudeva, the correct answer to this question will be given by my dear friend – my brother Uddhava. Acharya should consider his answer as my own."

Honouring his dear dada's wish Uddhava Maharaja answered aacharya's question politely, "The Jnana that you have imparted to all of us disciples since the last two months is not mere Jnana. It is neither specially a Vijnana – the specialty in one subject. It is Prajnana!! It is the knowledge that enlightens one providing the reason of our four basic instincts i.e. hunger, sleep, fear and copulation; and beyond that, it is the knowledge of the weightless energy that pervades the entire universe; the knowledge of its continuous undulations! That is Prajnana Gurudev!"

Now the Lord himself spoke, elaborating his answer further, "Prajnana is the knowledge that is more exclusive than exclusivity itself; knowledge more profound than profundity itself. It is the incomparable pure knowledge that cannot be compared with anything at all! It is the knowledge that each being has to actually experience.

"We are truly blessed as you have given us this Prajnana of *Brahmavidya* in abundance. I had requested you once to initiate me as your disciple, and you did so. You have also given me this precious gift of *Brahmavidya*. Now I have only one wish, let me stay here at your feet along with my dear friends Uddhava and Daruka. I don't wish to go anywhere now!"

It was a touching experience for the entire aashrama. Even Acharya Ghor Angirasa was touched. He just said 'let's see what we can do' and kept looking fixedly at his beloved disciple. That day we all left the Guru's cottage in a very different mood. As the Lord had determinedly declared to live in the aashrama forever, we were lost in the same thought. It was quite evident now that some time or the other aacharya would hand over the responsibility of the aashrama to my Lord and go to the Himalayas. One Yadava had already become a master of *Brahmavidya* in the form of

aacharya. He had become an ascetic before getting married. The second Yadava – my Lord was going to renounce his eight wives, sons, daughters, lakhs of warriors and attendants and follow the path of an ascetic. One of his former relatives had achieved the status of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa. My Lord was certainly going to achieve the status of ‘Atighor Angirasa’ on the strength of his intelligence. We both were going to follow in his footsteps wherever he went.

It had been sixty-three days since we came to this aashrama. This was the sixty-fourth day. I had heard many times in the discussions of the Lord and Uddhava Maharaja that both these brothers had stayed exactly the same period of sixty-four days in the ‘Ankapada’ aashrama of Aacharya Sandipani in the forests of Avanti. It was not in his nature to get stuck in one place. He was indeed a Jalapurusha – always flowing like water.

I was lost in thinking how my Lord’s future life would be in this aashrama. A tranquil evening had descended on our aashrama at the holy place of Prayaga near the banks of river Ganga. I saw huge eagles producing shrill cries and returning to Mount Mainaka in the West. I had just returned to our cottage from river Ganga after offering evening oblations to the setting Sun. All three of us were getting ready for the evening prayers, spreading our mats on the floor. Suddenly we heard some commotion at the western gate of the aashrama. We could vaguely hear words like – ‘What – Srikrishnadeva’s brother? Mace fight expert Balaramadada? Sankarshana Balarama himself? And the Chief Minister of Dwaraka?’ After hearing those words, I arose at once from my mat and started running towards the western gate of the aashrama. At the wooden gate stood Brotherly Love in person! Hefty Balaramadada had descended from the chariot and stood at the western gate of the aashrama along with Chief Minister Vipruthu. The huge mace on his shoulder was shining in the rays of the setting sun. He shouted loudly as soon as he saw me, “Daruka, this Prince of Dwaraka would have found you even if you were hiding in the netherworld. Where is my young brother?” He laughed loudly throwing his head back. With that the mace on his shoulder shook. He couldn’t hide the euphoria of finally finding both his brothers. His appearance always inspired energy. Today I felt it even more. I moved forward and touched his feet. Mace warrior Balarama who had become impatient to see his dear brother embraced me tightly as if embracing his own brother. He said, “Come, take me to my brother. I have come to take him to Dwaraka with me. Come on Chief Minister.”

I came to our cottage along with dada and Chief Minister. The Lord and his brother were in the cottage. I offered the fruits which I had collected from the forest in the morning to Balaramadada and the chief minister who were tired due to the journey. Balaramadada felt refreshed and said to the Lord, “I have come to take you back to Dwaraka. Dhakatyā, how could you and Uddhava desert us like this? Poor Rukmini – she has been in so much distress after you left! Father and both the mothers are asking for you throughout the day and night. You should quietly come with me now along with Uddhava”. Dada clarified the purpose of his sudden visit while sitting down on the mat. The Chief Minister standing nearby with his hands joined in request said earnestly, “Oh Lord, please don’t try everybody’s patience now. Come to Dwaraka along with Uddhavadeva.”

The powerful prince of Dwaraka and Chief Minister kept looking at the Lord with a pleading look in their eyes. But he was completely peaceful. He resolutely said, “Dada, it is not possible now. I have taken the decision to come here after considerable thought. Now I will live here. You can take Uddhava and Daruka back if they are ready to go with you.”

A few stifled moments passed by. Uddhava Maharaja instantly said, “Balidada, I will go wherever my big brother goes. You can take Daruka with you. The three of us had stayed together in the Ankapada aashrama of Acharya Sandipani in Avanti. In fact, I would have requested even you to stay here. But as the formally initiated prince you have the responsibility of Dwaraka on your shoulders.”

Both brothers were trying to make me a scapegoat in front of Balaramadada’s powerful mace strike. How would I listen to that? I also said quickly, “Oh prince, I consider myself as the Lord’s shadow. I have never gone anywhere without him, and never will!”

Intellectual artfulness and politics was not Balaramadada’s forte. Still he was lost in thought. Within a moment, he decided something and said, “Let us do one thing; we will take Acharya Ghor Angirasa’s opinion in this matter. Do you agree Dhakatyā?” “Sure. Are you going to seek his opinion? We already know it. It is not that only we have fallen in love with him, he also loves us. I am quite confident of what he would say. We are his disciples. His command will be respectfully honoured by us.”

After having meals and taking some rest the prince left for acharya’s cottage along with the three of us. Acharya was sitting outside offering sacrificial sticks into the *Yajna* pit that blazed throughout the days and nights.



We approached him. All of us paid obeisance to him. First, he enquired with the prince about how Vasudevababa, both matas, Acharya Sandipani, his wife and son were doing in Dwaraka. Then he affectionately asked Balaramadada, “How come you arrived without any notice, Prince? Is it that the separation from your brothers became unbearable?” Gurudeva smiled.

“You are omniscient. Do I need to articulate the purpose of my visit?” I had sensed the difference in Balaramadada’s attitude since he had arrived here. He had come with a determined mind to take his brothers with him. He simply glanced at the Chief Minister.

“Gurudeva, the kingdom of Dwaraka without the Lord of Dwaraka is like the sky without sun. The prince is earnestly imploring him to return to Dwaraka since coming here. But saying ‘No’, he has declared his firm decision to stay here forever. And you already know how firm his decision can be.” The Chief Minister said plaintively.

“Oh, Chief Minister of Yadavas, it is indeed true. My beloved disciple Srikrishna is another name for Determination. He wouldn’t have come to my aashrama leaving puissant Dwaraka behind, had he not had that resolve of mind. His wish is the ultimate!” Gurudeva supported his disciple.

Again a few silent moments passed by. We all kept staring at the prince wondering what he was going to do now. We could never forget the mien of prince Balaramadada at this moment, throughout our lives.

He removed the golden royal crown from his head with his own hands and put it on the ground at the feet of the Guru! He leaned forward in front of aacharya and joining both his palms he said, “Gurudeva, it is my innate duty as an older brother to take care of both my younger brothers. If both of them are not ready to come to Dwaraka then you should initiate and accept me also as your disciple and offer me the aashrama attire. Send this royal crown of the prince that was put on my head in a formal ceremony, back to Dwaraka at the hands of the Chief Minister. I have full faith that the king of Dwaraka – Maharaja Vasudeva, both rajmatas – Devakimata and Rohinimata would accept your decision readily.”

Acharya Ghor Angirasa kept offering an increasing number of various sacrificial sticks into the *Yajna* pit that was the symbol of his Angirasa clan. The *Yajna* pit of his inner mind came ablaze while taking a firm decision. The *Yajna* fire flared. Again a few stifled moments passed by. Then he uttered each of his words like how the ancient sages must have extemporarily uttered each hymn of the Vedas – Prince Balabhadraa, I cannot accept you as

my disciple! You are a formally crowned prince of a kingdom, blessed by the sages and hermits. Only two things will happen unavoidably if you decide to live here for the sake of your brothers.”

“Which two things, Gurudeva?” Balaramadada asked politely with his palms joined. Everybody started looking at aacharya with tremendous curiosity.

Aacharya continued while offering sticks in increasing numbers, “Once the aged king of Dwaraka – Maharaja Vasudeva comes to know the whereabouts of you brothers he himself will come here with both his wives! The newly built kingdom will be left without a king. I will have to leave this aashrama as I will be the reason behind all this. Then this new aashrama also will be left without an aacharya. Therefore, in the given situation I can take only one decision – to tell Srikrishna to return to Dwaraka along with Daruka and Uddhava. I have fulfilled my ordained duty to teach him the *Brahmavidya* for which he had come here. It is his duty to take the *Aatmavidya* that I have taught him and make it his life’s mission. I have faith that he knows it thoroughly well and he does have the capacity to fulfil it. In front of this Fire of the *Yajna* pit that is the symbol of the Vajrakula of the Angirasas I command that Srikrishna – the Lord of Dwaraka should now return to Dwaraka along with his brother Uddhava and friend Daruka! I wish you a safe and happy journey.”

As soon as we heard the word ‘command’ all three of us bent down from our waist. While touching aacharya’s feet together we said in unison, “As you wish, Gurudeva!”

Extremely pleased with our words the Aacharya held the crown of the prince of Dwaraka in his hands. He stood up and going closer to Balabhadradada he put it back on his head. He blessed him also, saying, “May all be well!”

We took the blessings of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa and finally got the five tufts on our heads removed. We returned the aashrama clothes to the aashrama store. We bade farewell to all aashrama brothers and left from the Prayaga aashrama. We now wore the vestures and ornaments that dada had brought with him. But somehow dada had forgotten to bring the Lord’s usual crown adorned with a peacock feather from the treasury of Dwaraka. Probably because dada was never used to seeing the Lord without that crown and therefore didn’t realize it. Or maybe he forgot it in the impatient hurry to come here as per his nature. Because of that our return journey became

automatically easier. We decorated the entire Garudadhvaja chariot along with the horses. But on its flagpole, we hoisted a simple saffron flag instead of the pennant with the Garuda emblem. This was an instruction from the Lord himself. Due to that, in spite of his royal attire many devotees of the Lord who we passed on our way would pay obeisance from a distance, looking at the Lord's crownless head and the saffron flag on the chariot. We could see them arguing about something while gesturing wildly with their hands. This was happening just as the Lord had surmised about human nature. I would know what they were arguing about. I could hear their words vaguely, 'It is not the chariot of Dwaraka. It doesn't have the flag with the Garuda emblem.' Another person would say, 'There's no crown on his head. I bet he is not the Lord of Dwaraka!' Because of all this confusion our return journey was easier with the few select warriors that dada had brought along.

After three weeks, we came close to the creek of the island of Dwaraka. As dada had sent a messenger ahead with the news, I got to watch a scene that I had never seen before. Hearing the news that their dearest Lord of Dwaraka was coming back the men and women of Dwaraka had already started approaching us in whatever water vehicles they could, like boats and rafts. As they were impatient to see the Lord in person, they were just not ready to wait at the Shuddhaksha gate as usual. They were coming towards the Garudadhvaja chariot in flocks leaving the water of the creek behind and meeting the Jalapurusha who was the cause of their smooth flow of life. As soon as he saw the western ocean the Lord had told me to put up the pennant with the emblem of the golden eagle with his wings spread wide, on the chariot's flagpole.

Within no time the ecstatic, chattering men and women of Dwaraka gathered around the Garudadhvaja chariot like fresh flowers spread under the fully blossomed Prajakta tree. They began falling at the feet of the Lord of Dwaraka with moist eyes and heavy voices. 'Oh, Lord of Dwaraka, please never leave us like this again.' Their implorations blended in the roaring sound of the ocean.

The Lord started to bend down and pick up the citizens of Dwaraka one after the other. Patting them he said, "No – I will never go. Forgive me that I went without meeting you all."

Today, in spite of daylight, the Shuddhaksha gate was illuminated with lamps of *Karanjel* oil. The reflection of the golden fortification on the east of Dwaraka was constantly bobbing up and down with joy. The Lord,

Balaramadada, and Uddhava Maharaja – all started walking towards the Shuddhaksha gate. I followed behind them. The Yadava circle, comprising both commanders, and royal ministers was behind us. The Lord's entire extended family stood anxiously waiting at the Shuddhaksha gate adorned with festoons and flower garlands. Every single person was present there. Vasudevababa, both matas, Acharya Sandipani with his wife and son Dutta, Gargamuni, Revatidevi, the Lord's wife Rukminidevi along with her seven sisters, Subhadradevi along with young Abhimanyu, Pradyumna along with his seventy-nine brothers, Uddhava Maharaja's mother Kansadevi along with her sons, my wife Hayamati along with my son Daruki and his brother, all brothers of dada including Gada and Sarana, all his sons including Nishatha and Ulmuka – the entire family had become emotional and had gathered at Shuddhaksha to welcome my Lord.

As he saw his aged father – Vasudevababa, my virtuous Lord separated from us and walking briskly ahead he went forward alone with his heart full of love for his father. He knelt down in front of his aged father and put his smooth, blue, wide forehead at his feet. A few silent moments passed by. The gathered crowd simply kept watching the unprecedented father-son visit with teary eyes.

The old father effusively pulled up and held in a deep embrace his beloved son who was a *Chakravarti*, world conqueror, the possessor of the Sudarshan chakra and who had left him to become an ascetic. Some sentimental Yadava from amongst the gathered crowd hollered jubilantly, 'Hail the disciple of Ghor Angirasa, the son of Vasudeva, Bhagvan Vaasudeva Srikrishna...!' Everyone responded spontaneously in unison, 'Victory! Victory!!'

The Sudharma royal assembly that was convened the very next day became unforgettable. That day the conduct of both the brothers who were my co-disciples and were formally initiated by Ghor Angirasa, got engraved permanently on my mind.

Chief Minister Vipruthu raised the jewelled golden royal sceptre of the Yadavas and announced the purpose of the assembly in the overflowing council hall –

“He who erected our grand golden royal city Dwaraka with his intellect and hard work, himself forsook it in a moment without informing anybody and without meeting anyone. He went to the faraway aashrama in Prayaga at the feet of sage Ghor Angirasa. Brave warriors of our kingdom and expert spies tried their best to find him everywhere, but no one could find any clue of his

whereabouts. We all were feeling despondent. Nobody knew what to do.

“In the end, Prince Balarama found out his whereabouts unmistakably. Even today I don’t know how. I request him to share it with the assembly today.

“On behalf of men and women of Dwaraka I am delighted to welcome the disciple of Ghor Angirasa, the son of Vasudeva, Bhagvan Vaasudeva from the bottom of my heart.

“The Lord of Dwaraka is sitting with Rukminidevi, Uddhavadeva and royal charioteer Daruka, without his crown on his head, which is indeed rare.

“Since he was formally initiated in the aashrama, his crown was bereft of its master. It has been consecrated by mantras. I request prince Balarama that on behalf of Maharaja Vasudeva he should offer it to the Lord of Dwaraka with appropriate honour in front of the Sudharma royal assembly.” The Chief Minister pounded the royal sceptre as per the custom.

Well-built Prince Balarama arose from his seat. His chubby, round, fair face was reflecting the joy of his success in bringing his dear brother back to Dwaraka. He approached the Lord’s seat with an attendant holding the platter of the Lord’s peacock-feathered crown. With affection, he picked up the crown from the platter very delicately and placed it properly on my Lord’s head. At that moment, all the ecstatic Yadava members raised a thunderous applause. I remembered the day when Balaramadada had tucked the peacock feather in the Lord’s crown with his own hands. Even today that peacock feather was still there as it was. Only those who were touched by it realized that both the brothers were still the same – loving each other with their heart and soul.

Today Balabhadradada astounded the Sudharma assembly. He had never spoken more than a word or two just as a royal formality. But today he spoke even though nobody expected him to. It was indeed a splendid, unforgettable speech. He raised his hands and said, “All Yadava members of the Sudharma royal assembly, in front of Maharaja Vasudevababa I tell you that my dearest brother Srikrishna and I played and grew together since our childhood. We are like two eyes of our father and both the mothers. Any picture can be seen in its entirety only using both the eyes. I can’t imagine the kingdom of Dwaraka and this Sudharma assembly without dear brother Srikrishna in it. Vasudevababa is the ruler of this kingdom and I am the prince. But my brother Srikrishna is still the Lord of Dwaraka. He was the Lord of Dwaraka yesterday, he is so today and will remain so tomorrow. Many kings and

princes will come and go but there was, is and will be only one Lord of Dwaraka.

“I received the news from Acharya Sandipani that Srikrishna is in the Angirasa aashrama at Prayaga. I promptly left for the holy place of Prayaga without a moment’s delay. In my hurry, I even forgot to take the crown of the Lord of Dwaraka with me.

“Once I had forsaken him due to the misunderstanding over the Syamantaka jewel. Now he has returned after forsaking me. At that time, I had tucked the peacock feather in his crown in the presence of all. Today I have placed the royal crown with that same peacock feather on his head in the presence of you all.

“He is younger to me. I always call him ‘Dhakalya’. But today, in spite of being older than him, I request him to let go of his status of being the younger one and forgive this Yadava prince with a big heart. I love him as my brother as intensely as Vasudevababa and both mothers look at him as their son, and Uddhava, Daruka, grandsire Bhishma, Vidura, Sudama, Sanjaya, Arjuna, Radha and Draupadi regard him as their best friend. He knows it very well.

“He is not only the Lord of Dwaraka but he is the Lord of many more things. That is why I am imploring him.

“What if we had been unable to find his whereabouts? If he wouldn’t have returned to Dwaraka? Then I would have also abandoned Dwaraka. I would have worn saffron clothes like him and wandered from aashrama to aashrama in the entire Bharatavarsha. Sometime or the other he would have met me during this journey. The credit for the fact that he met me and all of you goes to Acharya Sandipani. I request him to come forward and explain the mystery behind all this to the assembly.”

Balabhadradada’s speech moved the entire Sudharma assembly.

As per the prince’s request Acharya Sandipani arose from his wood-backed simple seat. He had never before spoken anything much in the Sudharma assembly, but he spoke today. His pure white beard reaching down to his white upper vesture quivered momentarily. Utter silence prevailed in the assembly hall. Acharya said –

“Everybody is mistaken that my dear disciple Srikrishna went to the Angirasa aashrama in Prayaga without telling anybody. It is not so. I myself had advised him to go to Ghor Angirasa to master the knowledge of *Brahmavidya* which was essential for him. While leaving, he had genuinely requested me for a favour that until any important person comes asking for

his whereabouts I should not voluntarily disclose it to anybody!

“I regarded his request as a command, and so I didn’t tell anything to anybody. I could see the frantic rush of the Yadava commanders through the informers. I could feel the heart-rending anguish of Maharaja Vasudeva and both the rajmatas. That is why I went to their chambers from time to time and tried to console them with certitude saying, ‘Be patient. Do not worry’.

“I was worst affected by this quandary while listening to my wife’s words. She frequently said, ‘Where could he have gone? Will we ever see him again?’ At times, I felt that I should use the right of being his guru and disclose the secret. But I would control myself determinedly. His request seemed very simple to me when I heard it. But it tested even the Guru’s mettle. This was a completely new experience for me.

“It was Srikrishna’s wife Rukminidevi who rescued me from this predicament. She came once to my residential cottage out of the blue along with Jambavatidevi. She did not ask me any question at all. Instead she made a clear, certain statement. I was highly impressed to hear it. The regard that I had for her doubled. She had unmistakably surmised about her husband what no one else could even think of. She said, ‘My Sri would never leave anywhere without visiting his Guru and taking his permission and blessings. Please do me a favour and tell me where has he gone’.

“Keeping my word given to Srikrishna, finally, I told his whereabouts to her. She conveyed it to the prince and due to the prince’s prompt actions this golden day has dawned in the life of Dwaraka.

“I myself used to feel great agony wondering whether indeed he would not come back. When that pain became unbearable, I would intensely feel the urge to get up and go to the Prayaga aashrama directly. But I couldn’t do it, because then I would see the faces of Maharaja Vasudeva and both the rajmatas in front of my eyes.”

Now all eyes in the Sudharma royal assembly turned to Rukminidevi. She was calmly sitting next to her husband. I thought for a moment how tough it must be to be the Lord’s wife! For us Rukminidevi was indeed a Devi who was a dutiful wife and brilliant! She directly went to Aacharya Sandipani at the moment of intense agony, to inquire about the Lord. What if she wouldn’t have done that?

The entire Sudharma assembly was now completely charged only by my Lord’s name and his presence. So much so that Chief Minister Vipruthu completely forgot to request the Lord as per the custom, to say something for

the citizens of Dwaraka. He simply kept gazing at the Lord.

The Lord arose, without anyone requesting him, like a big bud of *Brahmakamala* blooming at the exact moment of the sunrise on the distant Manasa sarovar. He spoke very little this time, but it was indeed unforgettable. In his sweet, flute-like voice he said, “My dear brothers and sisters of Dwaraka!” The assembled members of the Sudharma assembly who were touched just by hearing the Lord address them showered a loud round of applause. For a long time, they kept clapping continuously. Every heart was overflowing like the rising tide of the western ocean, with ecstatic joy, due to two things.

One, joy was of the Lord’s return to Dwaraka. And the other because he had called each citizen of Dwaraka his ‘dear brother and sister’.

As the deluge of the applause subsided the Lord spoke only a few words. “I did not go secretly or stealthily to the holy place of Prayaga at the feet of venerable Guru Aacharya Ghor Angirasa. I did not go there in the gloom that the Pandavas left without meeting me. Sometimes deep melancholy engulfs the human mind. I went there to seek guidance from the Guru himself to find out in what does the root of melancholy lie, and how to eliminate it. In short I went there to revise the knowledge of *Aatmavidya -Brahmavidya* thoroughly.

“Who knows, maybe in future the entire Aaryavarta might need it! Whatever my intention and however grand it was, you all had to suffer for it. For that my brothers and sisters, I genuinely ask for your forgiveness.

“I promise that I will never ever leave my Dwaraka! And if at all such an occasion arises I will never ever come back! Therefore, at this moment all of you forgive me kind-heartedly and accept me as your own!” As the Lord bowed down, held his palms together and implored everyone earnestly, the entire Sudharma royal assembly was touched.

That evening I brought the Lord in the Garudadhawaja chariot to the shores of the western ocean near the Aindra gate to offer the evening oblations. Uddhava Maharaja also accompanied him. It was an exclusive and unique experience for me to see both of them standing in the ocean with their eyes closed and offering the oblations to the setting sun. A single thought kept revolving in my mind while staring at the sinking platter of the Sun. “No matter how hard I try I don’t understand who exactly the Lord is.”





**Draupadi**

I am Draupadi! The daughter of Panchala king Drupada. Everyone also used to call me Yajnasena; rightfully so. My brother Dhrishtadyumna and I were born out of the Putrakameshti *Yajna* performed by my father Drupada under the guidance of sage Yaaja and Upayaaja.

It was due to this *Yajna* that Sautramanimata was utterly neglected by all. Is the one who gives birth to you your only real mother? What about the one who nurtures and moulds your mind with Sanskaras? Is she not significant at all? If not, then in my opinion it should change. I became Draupadi as I was named after my father Drupada. But like the fire burning in the *Yajna* pit I became the dauntless, fiery and proud woman that I am because of my mother's sanskaras. At the mere mention of her name, the Panchala royal city – Kampilyanagar and our grand royal palace stands vividly in front of my eyes. It also reminds me of our brother Shikhandi born before Dhrishtadyumna's and my birth. Word was that he had become impotent due to some curse. That was the reason why my father Drupada had performed the Putrakameshti *yajna*. After our birth eight more sons were born to our parents. They were named Sumitra, Priyadarshana, Chitraketu, Suketu, Dhvajaketu, Veerketu, Suratha and Shatrunjaya. Meaning, I was the only sister to ten brothers. All my brothers always showered me with love as I was their only sister.

Though I had ten brothers how come Yadava Srikrishna of Dwaraka came to be my only brother? It is a never-ending story. Almost everyone including his close relatives called this exceptional and supreme leader of Yadavas 'Srikrishna'. Only a few of us called him 'Krishna' with loving affection. He also genuinely liked it. Those selected few people included my mother-in-law – Pandavas' mother Kuntidevi, Bhishma – the grandsire of the Kurus, Vidura, Sanjaya and a few more.

How do you exactly measure someone's worth? There are two ways to do that. Two questions need to be asked. First, what if that person was not born at all. And second, what if that person wouldn't have met you in your life's journey? Indeed, what if my Krishna was not born? What if he wouldn't have come into my life at all? I can't imagine what kind of twists and turns my life – the scorching life of a Yajnasena would have taken then?

Just as I was addressed as Draupadi and Yajnasena, I was also called Panchali, Krishnaa and Shyamaa, which was also appropriate. I was quite dark complexioned. That is why everyone called me Shyamaa. But Krishna

addressed me as ‘Krishnaa’ for the first time. I came to love my name ‘Krishnaa’ which meant dark, as it matched with the name of blue complexioned Krishna who first became my brother and later *Sakha*. Yes, Krishna was my most favourite brother. More than that, he was my best friend. Whenever I go back in time trying to figure out the time my friendship with him began, my Swayamwar ceremony in Kampilyanagar flashes in front of my eyes.

In my Swayamwar Dhrishtadyumnadada and father Drupada had put a condition of piercing the fish-eye, which was quite difficult to fulfil. Many renowned archers and kings had failed to do it. As dada had severely lambasted the warriors assembled in the Swayamwar pandal, it was bubbling with tremendous tension. So many questions arose in my mind at that moment! What if nobody really succeeds in fulfilling the Swayamwar condition? Am I going to remain a maiden in the royal palace of Panchalas? In spite of having ten brothers what kind of pitiful life would it be for the unfortunate unmarried sister? Oh, why have father and dada imposed such a difficult condition?

At exactly that moment my *Sakha* stood up. Whispers arose in the Swayamwar pandal – ‘the Lord of Dwaraka – the master of Sudarshan, owner of the Sharanga bow, executor of

Kansa ...’ oh, how many goose bumps arose on my body when I heard those words. So far, I had been looking at the ground with feminine modesty, holding the wedding garland in my hands. But now I raised my head to take a good look at the Lord of Dwaraka. He was indeed ‘Sudarshan’ – good-looking! Instantly, so many white royal swans of thoughts soared sky high from the lake of my mind. The first thought that came to my mind was – what if he indeed pushes aside the Shiva bow and pierces the fish-eye with his own Sharanga bow and fulfils the condition at this instant? How would my life in Dwaraka be, as his wife? I had heard a lot about his first wife Rukminidevi. Would she accept me? How would she treat me?

But whatever was supposed to happen, happened. Master archer Arjuna in the disguise of a Brahmin fulfilled the condition. I put the wedding garland around his neck amidst roaring applause, and glanced at ‘Sudarshan’ Srikrishna. There was no indication in his eyes whatsoever of the desire of winning my hand in marriage that was there a few moments before. His face shone with crystal clear brotherly love that was difficult to fathom. I tried my best to analyze it for quite some time, but was unsuccessful.

After the Swayamwar ceremony he came to meet me and Arjuna at the potter's place along with some Yadavas like his elder brother Balarama, Uddhava, and Satyaki. An enigmatic smile that I had never seen before blossomed on his blue face and he casually said to me, "Krishney! This is my dear cousin – master archer Arjuna. Have a happy married life with him." The moment I heard him call me 'Krishney' I realized that he was my *Sakha* – my best friend!

His beloved wife – my *vahini* – shared an invaluable secret with me in my very first meeting with her at the time of the Rajasuya *Yajna* in Indraprastha. Rukminivahini said to me, "Yajnasena, a woman's life is a potential core with tremendous power of creation. She never looks back in her life once she discovers her inner strength. She keeps marching forward." While thinking about her words I felt something very strongly. I had decided that I was going to share that with her as soon as we met next. 'It is not enough for a woman to just discover her own core of potential, but she also needs to find the core of potential of the other people entering her life.' In my case, it was about more than one husband who was entering my life. In case of Rukminivahini it was very difficult to discover the many cores of potential in her husband, my best friend Krishna. Indeed, extremely difficult!

Whenever I think about my five husbands, my best friend Krishna comes to my mind without fail. He had introduced all my five husbands to me completely, without holding anything back. Had he not done that, I could not have survived the quintuplet of these brothers even for a moment.

So, how were my five husbands? All five Pandavas – everybody's favourites, what kind of disposition did they have?

Yudhishtira – *Dharma* – the eldest of the five brothers. What kind of a person was my eldest husband Yudhishtira? I am going to address all my husbands by their first names only. If I address the Yadava leader, the Lord of Dwaraka, Srikrishna as only Krishna, there is nothing wrong in my calling my husbands by their first names as they all considered him as much more than an elder brother. In fact, if it might sound odd if I do otherwise.

So, what kind of a person was my eldest husband Yudhishtira? He was the formally crowned king of the Pandava reign in Indraprastha. As his conduct always abided by *Dharma* he was also known as *Dharma*. This first husband of mine was also the speaker of truth. Compared to his truthfulness my best friend Krishna would be deemed an outright liar. But the catch was, that was not the case. During the toughest times of my life I experienced that one

views truth according to one's own perception.

After my Swayamwar, at the potter's house in Kampilyanagar, without looking at me Rajmata Kuntidevi had said, 'If you have received big alms share it amongst all of you.' But when she saw me she felt extremely guilty, and repeatedly said, 'How can the lady of a family be called alms and be shared by many? Oh, how foolishly I uttered my words! I take my words back.'

At that time this truth-speaking, *Dharma* follower son of Pandu did not take a stand as the eldest brother of the Pandavas and say that, 'You are right, mother. A lady of a family should never be treated as alms. Only Arjuna had won her hand after successfully fulfilling the condition of the archery contest. The remaining brothers have no right over her.' At that time, I kept looking at him expectantly. But – but I didn't see any sign of maturity in his eyes. All I saw was absolute, bare lust! I could not forget that look in my eldest husband's eyes for the rest of my life. That is why I could never forgive him.

In our very first meeting he did the biggest injustice to me due to his own desire for me.

At that time the way my best friend Krishna advised me, helped me survive. That was the first time I experienced the friendship of Krishna. What if he wouldn't have met me then? As per my innate proud nature I would have strongly opposed the sharing of my life. But at that time Krishna gave me an extraordinarily friendly smile and said, "Shyamale, Krishney, you have such matchless beauty that your own pulchritude will bring the onslaught of lecherous men on you. Therefore, you are indeed in need of the combined protection of Bhima and Arjuna. It is best for you to regard my aunt Kunti's words and comply." That smile of his was befitting only him. It said so much more than his words.

This eldest brother of the Pandavas did not just stop at disrupting my life. But he literally disrobed me of the invaluable womanly honour that any Kshatriya should protect with his soul and life – that too in the crowded gambling hall of the Kurus. He put me at stake after losing himself. For him the allurements of gambling was greater than his own wife. At that time too, my best friend Krishna came to my rescue. Since the gambling incident I unmistakably realized that wherever he may be my best friend Krishna always resided in my heart. My faith in him strengthened.

Each one of my five husbands would address me by different names in privacy. Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira inadvertently called me 'Sugandhe'.

My entire body emanated a gentle fragrance like sandalwood paste or a fragrance dispersing from the pollen of blue lotus flowers. It was this fragrance that this formally crowned king loved very much. In that too I could detect the pride of a king. He never praised any other of my innate qualities openly. He always threw his weight around as the eldest of his brothers.

Yudhishtira had a turtle-like mind. Sometimes he would hide under the shell of being the eldest brother and at other times of his kingship. He was much less valiant than his younger brothers, and he overcame that deficiency with his fanciful philosophy.

It was because I became the Maharani of Indraprastha that I strongly noticed such prominent flaws of the eldest Pandava. Yet due to his reserved nature some of his qualities were unseen. Those qualities suited only him. The first ideal quality among these was that he never did anything without seeking advice from his venerable mother. Rajmata wouldn't have accepted anybody else as the eldest Pandava. Just as he tried to practise his authority as the eldest brother on his younger brothers he also politely respected the authority of his elders. I have no doubt that if rajmata would have been there at the time of the gambling, this eldest husband of mine would have simply tossed away the gambling dice for his mother's word. As the Maharani of Indraprastha he always treated me with due respect in front of the citizens. While building the Indraprastha kingdom in Khandavavana, in every meeting Krishna had enlightened me by unforgettable lessons on how I should behave as the Maharani.

From Kampilyanagar I came to Hastinapura, and then to Indraprastha. Since then I never visited my parental home. I got all the news about Sautramanimata, father Drupada, all the brothers and major Panchalas, in Indraprastha itself. Krishna's full support in raising the royal city of Indraprastha was the greatest. Even my brother Dhrishtadyumna had contributed, giving him a prompt response. He would visit Indraprastha occasionally with the Panchala troops; give personal attention to the construction of the royal city, and then return to the Panchala kingdom with the news of my welfare.

After we came to Khandavavana my five husbands decided upon a code of conduct with regard to me. No one usually disregarded it. They lived with me in privacy in the same sequence that they were born. According to that after coming to Khandavavana I begot the first son from Yudhishtira. Rajmata

named him Prativindhya. As he was the firstborn of the Pandavas' third generation he was going to be the future prince. Everybody looked after him vigilantly. His neck looked tall like his father's. He was named Prativindhya with the desire that he becomes strong like a cliff of Mount Vindhya. He was also called Yaudhishtiri. All his kakas showered this first son of mine with a lot of affection. He was going to be related to the other four Pandavas in two ways – they would be an *kaka* on the one hand and a stepfather on the other. Yet, as I had decided as soon as he was born, I particularly taught him to address everybody as father. As I was a wife to five husbands, I was also going to have to decide my own code of conduct accordingly. I was doing it under the guidance of Rajmata and best friend Krishna. The unprecedented facts of our lives were unknowingly bringing the three of us closer. Rajmata also considered Krishna as her best friend and treated and called him so.

My second husband was mighty Bhimsena. I was well aware that Bhimsena was the tough protective armour of the other four brothers. Bhimsena had an unmatched mighty powerful physique; exactly like friend Krishna's brother Balarama. In fact, he was Balarama's disciple in mace fighting and wrestling and just as open-minded as him. He would also hold the heavy mace on his shoulder, and throwing his head back, laugh loudly shaking his chest. What a vast difference there was between Yudhishtira and Bhimsena! One was like the North Pole and the other like the South Pole. Bhimsena couldn't control three things – hunger, sleep and anger. He looked healthy and husky due to his tremendous appetite and sleep. Like the mace on his shoulder his rage was also like another weapon for him. Whenever he challenged any of his rivals while brandishing his mace in circular motions with a fierce expression on his face, his rival would already lose half his courage. Bhimsena had a ruddy fair complexion. His thick moustache perfectly suited his round face shaped like a shield. Though he was such a great mace warrior and wrestler he politely obeyed the commands of three elders –his eldest brother Yudhishtira, Rajmata Kuntidevi, and my best friend Krishna. As he was a little older in age than Krishna, Krishna would try to bow respectfully. Bhimsena wouldn't allow him to do that. Bhimsena had expertise in handling mainly two weapons – the mace and the pestle. He wouldn't speak much in the royal council of Indraprastha. Speaking in public was not in his nature. But on the battlefield while defiantly provoking his enemy, his words would automatically get an exceptional edge of valour.

The unmatched physical might of my valiant husband Bhimsena was a

protective armour for many things. It was an armour for the valour of his four brothers, and for my attractive femininity. Besides it also protected the basic rights of the common man of Indraprastha. That is why Bhimsena was the favourite among the citizens of Indraprastha rather than the other four brothers.

It was my friend Krishna who had first addressed him as Bhimsena. Nobody else was so privileged. He did not address the others as Dharmasena, Arjunasena, Nakulasena or Sahadevasena. How perfect was the name Bhimsena given to him by Krishna! He never seemed like a single person. Whenever he came it felt as if an army of hundreds of elephants has come. The word 'fear' did not exist in his vocabulary. Therefore, whenever the citizens came across him, they would shout excitedly – 'Hail valiant Bhimsena victory to him, victory ....!'

All my husbands loved me dearly. But as a woman if anybody asked me to rank them, my first rank would go to Bhimsena, then it would be Arjun. And yes, the very last rank would be surely of Yudhishtira!

But if anyone asked me the same question as the Maharani of Indraprastha, my answer would be 'First rank is Yudhishtira' for sure. Why am I saying this in spite of his playing the shameless game of gambling? It is because after becoming the Maharani of Indraprastha I also changed drastically, that too, due to Krishna. I could never forget his advice about handling the responsibility of a Maharani. He was always a creator, and never a destroyer. Once he considered somebody as his own, that person would transform inside out in his company.

Bhimsena who could not be controlled by others would quietly listen to my friend Krishna. This is one of the main reasons why Bhimsena became my favourite.

There are many incidents in our life in the Kamyakavana which let me experience Bhimsena's invaluable love for me. A husband would fulfil any wish of his wife when he has a puissant kingdom at his disposal and many male and female attendants to obey his commands. I had experienced that many a times with the Pandavas. There was nothing extraordinary about it. But to fulfil her wishes while living in a forest certainly needs the deepest feeling of love. Once while travelling in the Kamyakavana along with all the brothers, I reached the shores of a lake full of water. Beautiful red ochre lotuses had blossomed at the centre of that lake. Oh, how marvellous they looked on the background of the blue water! The moment I saw them I



shouted, ‘Such beautiful lotuses!’ Hearing my words, the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira said, “Your abundant hair with a blue tinge, almost reaching your heels, look more beautiful than those flowers. Those flowers will look very beautiful in your hair. Once we reach our cottage we will send a forest dweller to fetch these flowers!”

I listened to him and looked at master archer *Dhananjaya*. My glance directly meant, ‘What are you going to do Arjuna?’ He gave me the expected answer, “I don’t have my Gandiva bow with me right now. Or else I would have shown you the magic of my archery, which could even pierce the fish-eye, right here. Shyamale, those lotus flowers in the centre of the lake, would have been lying at your feet the moment I grabbed my Gandiva bow in my hands.”

Nakula-Sahadeva also gave similar responses. I don’t even remember today what they said. In the end, I looked at Bhimsena. He did not say anything in response at all. He surmised my question with his eyes, and tucking his white dhoti he said, “Wait a moment. Let me go and get your favorite lotuses!” He leaped into the lake while all his brothers were watching him. Briskly moving his fair muscular arms through the waters, he reached the beautiful, red ochre lotuses and swam around them once. He spotted the best half blossomed and fully blossomed lotuses, and plucked them quickly. Holding the bunch under one arm and using the other to swim he came back. He removed the bunch of lotuses from under his arm, dropped it in front of all four brothers, and throwing his head back with his chest puffed, laughing loudly he said, “Arjuna, adorn her hair with them!” I could never forget the fair, muscular Bhimsena drenched in water, laughing innocently.

A woman comes to know the true nature of her husband in privacy during lovemaking, and I had five husbands. Each one had a different attitude in our privacy. I am saying all this because I want to unravel my entire life. That is why I have to speak about this without any reservation. To tell you the truth, after my first husband Yudhishtira’s turn when it was Bhimsena’s turn to spend time with me in privacy, I was quite scared on the first night. But that night itself I found out that my mighty husband Bhimsena who thunders like clouds and roars loudly with rage also possesses a sensitive, tender heart like the petals of a lotus. He was never rough with me in privacy. That is why as a woman I found him the most ideal husband. Yes – even more so than Arjuna who had won me in the Swayamwar!

I bore Bhimsena a son. Krishna himself named him – Sutasoma. He was

healthy like his father, and quite naughty too.

After Bhimsena it was the turn of Arjuna – my third-in-line husband, master archer *Dhananjaya*, valiant *Partha*. He had shot the very first arrow unerringly in the target and won me in the Swayamwar. The one thing I could never approve of him was the silence that he maintained, unfitting a valiant warrior, when a decision was made that I should be shared by all. Afterwards, in our privacy many a times he justified his actions saying that he complied with the command of his mother and the wish of his elder brother. But I was never convinced by that. I had no objection at all for respecting both of them as elders. Nobody could object to that. But at that moment itself I had realized that he might surrender his Gandiva bow at a crucial moment and throw it on the ground.

After the Swayamwar many a times I wondered what if Srikrishna was in Arjuna's place at the time when the decision of my sharing was made. What would he have done? He has also shown respect to elders throughout his life. Would he have remained silent? Certainly not. At that very instant he would have spoken out clearly and pointed out his elder brother's faults. He would have also kept his mother's promise and fulfilled her wishes. That is why I have always found Arjuna's silence at that time unforgivable. I had already surmised that he was unreliable. Only Krishna had the power of admonishing him at such times with stern words.

In our very first meeting it was he who had convinced me to accept my five husbands – that too, willingly. As a woman, I never felt any hesitation while talking to Krishna about my husbands. That was also a corroboration of my friendship with him.

All my relatives thought that Arjuna was my favourite husband. The citizens of Indraprastha also believed the same. And every time I saw *Partha* along with *Purushottama* Vaasudeva I also felt the same. Both of them were blue complexioned, almost equal in height. They looked like a figure and its shadow, reflections of each other. And the most important reason above all this was that my best friend Krishna had considered only Arjuna among all the Pandavas as his *Sakha* – confidant. None of the other Pandavas were fortunate enough in that respect.

The last two Pandavas were Nakula-Sahadeva. They were more like friends to me than husbands. I myself had to take the initiative to change their bashful nature during our privacy. There was one thing very special about them that nobody had felt, and it was that both of them had observed and felt

exactly the same things about the three elder Pandavas that I had noticed and felt about them. Just as they were younger in age to their brothers, so also, they were younger to me. But I never let them feel it. Just like Rajmata Kuntidevi never let them feel that they were her stepsons I also followed it particularly.

I bore five sons, one each year from my five husbands. The son I bore Arjuna was named Shrutakirti. This name was also given by Srikrishna. He came from Dwaraka specifically for that purpose. The meaning of his name was ‘the one whose renown is heard by all’. The sons of Nakula and Sahadeva were named as Shatanika and Shrutsena. Shatanika was just as exquisitely handsome as his father Nakula. His actual name was Shatanhika as he used to perform a hundredaanhikas -religious rituals daily. To make it convenient to pronounce his name was shortened as Shatanika.

Only I know how I managed to bring up all these five sons of the Pandavas’ third generation. I taught all my five sons to address all Pandavas as ‘Taata’. If they would have called my other husbands except their own father as ‘kaka’ due to anybody’s instruction even by mistake, it would have created major problems for all of them in future. The boys were also virtuous and mature. Also, I had the company of the experienced rajmata. As per my wish all my sons were known as the Pandava sons.

The Pandavas, Kurus or the Yadavas – all shared a major custom - polygamy. They justified it as ‘a necessity for the Kshatriyas’. Almost all of them had more than one wife. The only exception was Uddhavadeva. That is why he was respected by all. Because of this custom of polygamy, the first wife of each warrior had to desperately manage things on various fronts. Rukminivahini was my ideal in this respect. Whenever we met she always gave me tips on how to tie the valiant men in the bonds of love. In a way, I was fortunate that no one was as envious of my friendship with Rukminivahini as of Arjuna’s friendship with Krishna. But there was a vast difference between my friendship with Rukminivahini and my friendship with Krishna. As the Pandava Maharani I considered Rukminidevi as my ideal. But Krishna? I had considered him my *Sakha* as he was my ideal for the whole life.

I frequently had to face the polygamous relations of my five husbands. Yudhishtira later got married to a lady named Pauravi. Both of them had a son named Devaka.

Bhimsena already had a forest dweller wife named Hidimba even before

our marriage. She had a son named Ghatotkacha. He was the firstborn in the third generation of the Pandavas. Hidimba never came to live in Indraprastha or Hastinapura. She lived at her maternal home in the forest beyond river Ganga. I came to know about all this after the Swayamwar ceremony. Again, Krishna's guidance came to my assistance to digest that fact. In his first meeting at Indraprastha he affectionately asked me, "Krishney, are you happy in the company of your five husbands? Any discords with anyone?" I discussed the topic of Hidimba saying, "If Ghatotkacha appears tomorrow in front of all saying I am the first Pandava of the third generation. What then?" He smiled playfully as usual and said, "Shyamale, don't worry at all. In fact, it will be Ghatotkacha who will save all the Pandavas from any trouble. After all he is the firstborn son of Bhimsena. And, you see, my beloved wife Jambavati is also like Hidimba!" I was left nonplussed. It was his specialty that no one could tell what reference he will put forth and when. Amongst all the valiant men around me he was a genius. I also liked to pick an argument with him. At such times, he would finally say, "Panchali, you are indeed brilliant, even more than my beloved wife Rukmini. That is why I love you as a friend. Do me a favour. Never share this opinion of mine with her."

Bhimsena's third wife was Baladharaa. She was the daughter of the king of Kashi. Her son's name was Sharvatrata. Bhimsena's fourth wife was Kali. She was the daughter of Krishna's *aaty*a Shrutashrava and her husband Damaghosha. She was the sister of Shishupala, Krishna's *aate bandhu*, who detested him throughout his life. Krishna himself took the initiative to arrange this marriage.

Bhimsena addressed me as 'Subhage' in privacy. I also liked it.

My third husband Arjuna! Once he broke the code of conduct that we all had agreed upon. Therefore, he went on a pilgrimage for one year. Before returning to Indraprastha he married three times! The first marriage was with Uloopi – the Naga daughter. She was the daughter of a Naga named Kauravya who lived on the banks of river Ganga. In her childhood, she was married to the son of a Naga named Airavata. But as that son died Uloopi had become a child widow. This third husband of mine got married to her on the banks of Ganga in a 'Gandharva' Swayamwar. Later she gave birth to a son, who was named Iravana by the Naagas. Uloopi lived at her parental home of Kauravya Naga.

This husband of mine further travelled to Manipura during the pilgrimage, and got married to Chitrangada, the daughter of King Chitravahana of

Manipura. Her son was named Babhruvahana by the citizens of Manipura. Chitrangada had come to Indraprastha along with her son at the time of our Rajasuya *yajna*.

Arjuna was my favourite too as he was dearly loved by Krishna. The three of us had our own triangle of emotional bond that was incomprehensible to all others. Arjuna transformed it into a square bond – by abducting Subhadra! Subhadra was his fourth wife. I treated all my co-wives with affection. I especially treated Subhadra with more affection. It was because she was Krishna's sister. As my co-wife, I accepted her as a sister, just like Krishna. She also embraced me calling me *tai* in our first meeting, and whispered in my ears, "Krishnadada has advised me that it is Draupadi's friendship that will help you sustain among the Pandavas." I understood the underlying message. It was not just Krishna's advice to his sister, but also an indirect command to me. And how could Draupadi disobey Krishna's command? My dear sister Subhadra also bore a son. Krishna named him Abhimanyu. I also liked the name. I nicknamed Abhimanyu as 'Abhi' like I had nicknamed Arjuna's and my son 'Kirti'. He became the apple of everybody's eyes, not just because he was Krishna's *bhacha* but with his own behaviour, looks and valour. My love for Subhadra as Krishna's sister increased further as 'Abhi's' mother. Notably, all other Pandavas besides Arjuna also pampered Abhi genuinely. He was indeed so lovable that everybody felt attracted to him. I had quite noted a subtle difference in Arjuna's feelings about Abhi. Arjuna would unknowingly favour him a little bit more among all the sons of Pandavas. Was it for the sake of Abhi or for the sake of Krishna? I couldn't understand it no matter how hard I tried. Arjuna addressed me as 'Surekhaa...Shyama' in solitude. There was a tinge of darkness in the complexion of the three of us – Krishna, Arjuna, and I.

My fourth husband Nakula was exquisitely handsome. I had never seen Madana who was supposed to be the most handsome man that ever existed, and had no desire to see him also. But everybody called Nakula Madana incarnate. All Yadavas also called Pradyumna, the first son of Krishna the same. Only Uddhavadeva's complexion was very close to the complexion of these two. If Nakula, Pradyumna and Uddhavadeva stood chatting together a person looking at them from a distance could not figure out who was who. Nakula was an expert in tunnels and horses. After Shishupala's execution his daughter Karenumati was married to Nakula. Krishna had taken the initiative in forming all these diplomatic alliances. Karenumati was the daughter of the

Pandavas' *mavas* bandhu – meaning their bhachi. But as per Krishna's instruction she became the wife of Nakula. She had a son named Niramitra.

Nakula called me 'Yajnaseni' in private.

My fifth and last husband was Sahadeva. He had an obsession for fortune-telling. Sometimes he would take a look at my left palm and tell me my future. I would listen to him and then say smilingly, 'Why don't you see both palms of Krishna and tell him his future too?' At that he would frown and leave the chambers silently. He was an expert in cows and horses. He had three more wives. One of them was Vijaya – the daughter of Madra king Shalya, the mama of Pandavas. In spite of being his *mame* bhagini she also became Sahadeva's wife. Her son was named Suhotra.

One more daughter of the Yadava clan of Dwaraka came into the Pandava clan like Subhadra. She was Bhanumati – the daughter of the King Bhanu. This also took place with Krishna's initiative. She did not bear any sons.

Sahadeva's fourth wife was the daughter of Jarasandha – the Magadha emperor of Girivraja; the sister of Jarasandha's son Sahadeva. It meant that this Magadha lady had a husband and a brother with the same name – Sahadeva.

Sahadeva addressed me as 'Panchali' in private. Maybe because he was number five.

Yudhishtira – the eldest Pandava – my first husband. He was indeed a perfect elder brother. He had a keen sense of the qualities each of his brothers possessed. All Pandavas considered their eldest brother Yudhishtira's word as the last word, and Yudhishtira considered his mother's opinion as the final word in any subject.

It was during our privacy that I came to know this eldest Pandava in depth. He was more inclined towards the completeness of life, even more than his seniority among the brothers, the kingship of Indraprastha, war or his relation with me as a husband. He preferred the company of sages, hermits and Brahmins. He would have prolonged discussions with Mahatma Vidura, Uddhavadeva, and sages like Vyasa, and Yaaja-Upayaaja who would occasionally visit Indraprastha. After such discussions, this eldest Pandava who otherwise considered his mother's word as the ultimate would explicate a few fundamentals of life to his mother too. At such times his face resembled Uddhavadeva or Mahatma Vidura. Sometimes he looked like Krishna too. The speech of this eldest Pandava was extremely cultured and sweet. He never got angry as if he had given his share of anger to Bhimsena.

This is where there was a big difference in him and the mighty Kaurava Duryodhana of Hastinapura. Duryodhana had absorbed the anger of all his brothers within himself. With the exception of a couple of Kauravas like Dushasana and Vikarna it seemed that all other Kauravas were talking through Duryodhana's mouth. But it was different about all my five husbands. Each one had his own distinct personality.

The gift of compassion that this first husband of mine possessed was phenomenal. It was the compassion of an eldest son of a family that had endured many hardships and the compassion of a formally crowned, all-powerful and successful ruler of Indraprastha. As he had an innate inclination towards completeness, this compassion had sprung from the core of his life. Indeed, *Dharma* comprises such noble compassion that touches the hearts of many. It was because of this noble compassion of his that the citizens of Indraprastha called him 'Dharmaraja'. To me also he seemed the same.

My second husband Bhimsena. How did he appear to me and what was my impression about him? Just as he was incredibly powerful he was also modest. I got to see his modesty in front of his mother and elder brother, and two more people – my friend Krishna and his brother Balaramadada. Many people had the misconception that Bhimsena was mighty powerful and therefore not intelligent. I came to know later about the words that he uttered at the time of the gambling incident. I analysed them literally. He had said, 'Sahadevaa, bring me some fire. Let me burn his hands that gamble.' Isn't his intellect and presence of mind apparent from these words? He commanded only his youngest brother. And what he said was, 'Let me burn his hands that gamble.' and not 'Let me burn the gambling Yudhishtira himself', even in his rage.

Our daily routine was full of examples of Bhimsena's presence of mind. Who could say that Bhimsena who brought the red ochre lotus flowers for me from the lake, Bhimsena who told Bakasura, 'Let me eat first and take care of you later' had no restraint or brains? His unmatched strength was the impenetrable shield of our family. But he himself never made any claims about that. Oh, such humility! Every powerful man has some obsessions that leave others in a state of wonder. Bhimsena had that kind of sleep and hunger obsession. He did not simply gobble his food, he savoured it. He would make all his *putane* along with his son Sutasoma eat his favourite fruits. He would cheerfully exercise with them in the gymnasium. It was a pleasure to watch tall and hefty Bhimsena talking humbly with his comparatively short and lean

mother.

Bhimsena was the most ideal husband when I met him in privacy. I experienced the depth of his knowledge about music and beauty while conversing with him in our privacy. He would take every possible care to not hurt me as a wife. In his company, I always felt like I was taking shelter under a mighty pinnacle of Himalaya.

Bhimsena loved all his brothers dearly and without expectations whatsoever. I had never seen my father-in-law Maharaja Pandu. I had heard that he was a world conqueror. Bhimsena had silently filled his place in this family. ‘What if he did not exist?’ In my opinion that question itself accentuates the significance of his existence. He would prove that he was the son of Vayu by speedily brandishing his huge mace with swift ease. He made life blossom everywhere he went just like the wind.

My third husband Arjuna. He was also called *Partha* and *Dhananjaya*. Krishna also addressed him as *Gudakesha*. *Gudakesha* is a man who is alert and has total control over his sleep. He was versatile. He was the master of *Pratismrutividya* or *Indrajaala*. This husband of mine had two Gurus in weaponry – Drona and Kripa. But apart from them he had two genuine Gurus who taught him the real meaning of life – the first one was his eldest brother Yudhishtira and the second one was my best friend Krishna. In the company of these two, without losing awareness of being younger he silently learned a lot of things. He became the master of weaponry as he learned the art of weaponry from two expert Gurus, and he also mastered the art of understanding life due to Yudhishtira and Krishna. Krishna’s sister Subhadra was his last wife. Krishna used to tease me playfully as usual saying, ‘Krishney, Arjuna’s real love is only Subhadra. The hearts of warriors are like a stack of hay. No matter how tight one tries to bind it together with one string, when another string is tied to bind it the first string slackens.’ I would return his taunt with a smile saying, ‘Who told you that hearts of warriors are like a stack of hay? They are actually like the bed of Yamuna!’ He was no less in pulling legs. He would give me a naughty smile and tease me again, ‘I agree. The hearts of warriors are like the Yamuna, something that you cannot bind, unrestrained!’ Leaving him no chance to speak further I would dismiss his words saying, ‘Like the Yamuna that flows while flourishing both the shores equally!’

The assumption many people held that Arjuna would love me less due to Subhadra was proved wrong. Many a times Arjuna would come into my



chambers with my son Shrutakirti and Subhadra's son Abhimanyu. The same way he would go to her chamber too. He would teach difficult aspects of archery to both of them wholeheartedly at the same time.

Whenever Krishna came to Indraprastha the joy of Shrutakirti and Abhimanyu knew no bounds. Both of them would linger around him calling him 'Mama'. He would also talk to them for hours on end, forgetting himself. My other sons Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shatanika, and Shrutasena would also join them. The one who would badger Krishna with maximum questions was our Abhi.

Even for the populace of Indraprastha Abhimanyu had become the most favourite among all sons of Pandavas. It was not only because of his own virtues but also due to the people's love for Krishna and Arjuna.

Sometimes I would feel the urge to probe my husbands about their additional marriages. Maybe it was just my feminine tendency to guess what kind of women my co-wives were. Whenever I would ask the ruler of Indraprastha and the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira, it would always be with a little sarcasm. I would say, 'All of you Pandavas revere Krishna very much. You consider him as your mentor. He has rehabilitated not one or two but thousands of Kamarupa women. Why don't you follow in his footsteps and do the same?'

The ruler of Indraprastha would get perplexed with my puzzling question and say, "Maharani, I don't understand what you are implying. None of us can do everything that Krishna does. How can we bring thousands of such women into Indraprastha?" He would answer innocently. Bringing him to the point I would say, "Not thousands, only a few. Each one of you brothers has many wives in addition to me. I hear a rumour that they are not coming to Indraprastha because they are scared of me. What if you bring Pauravi to Indraprastha first?"

Hearing that direct question the Maharaja of the Pandavas would fall silent. As he was reserved by nature people wouldn't know whether that silence was for being unable to answer, but I would know it unmistakably. Maharaja Yudhishtira would answer all my questions about Pauravi with just a 'yes' or 'no'. Through this inquiry session I would tactfully gather all possible information about my co-wife who was never going to come to Indraprastha. Who knows, she may be useful to us in future sometime. I did all this inadvertently as per Krishna's advice.

Just like Yudhishtira I would also probe Bhimsena about his wives besides

me – Hidimba and Kali. I would say to him while chatting in privacy, “How about bringing Hidimba and Kali here, rather than occasionally going to the forest on the banks of Ganga to visit Hidimba, and going to Shuktimati of the Chedis to meet Kali?” Then laughing loudly, throwing his head back, pure-minded Bhimsena would say, “If we bring Hidimba here then we will have to transform Indraprastha back to Khandavavana which is not possible now, even for your friend Krishna. And Kali of the Chedis would never come to Indraprastha ever. You stop beating around the bush. Here in Indraprastha you will have only two co-wives – of the Yadava clan – Subhadra and Bhanumati. And since both of them are from Dwaraka they are more like sisters to you than co-wives. Isn’t it?” Bhimsena would demonstrate his outstanding intelligence.

I would also probe Arjuna about his other wives besides me. I would mention the names of Uloopi and Chitrangada from the distant eastern region while conversing and try to broach the subject of bringing them to Indraprastha. He was no less in teasing. He would say, “Both their kingdoms are far away in the eastern region. You can also go there and bring both of them to Indraprastha like Satyabhamadevi who went abroad with Vaasudeva as his charioteer. They will come for sure, but on one condition.” “What condition?” I asked the archer with curiosity.

He smiled. Looking at his smile, for a moment I felt as if Krishna was standing in front of me. He said sarcastically like his Guru – Krishna, “But there will be a condition of sending Subhadra back to Dwaraka!” Hearing that, I would feel dumbfounded. The very first thought that would strike me was what Krishna would feel if Subhadra was sent back to her parental home in such a way. I would keep silent. Then Arjuna would grab the opportunity to tease me more and say, “Before that they would impose one condition about you. Because you are the first wife, the Maharani. And most of all you are extremely brilliant like our venerable Rukminivahini. You must have by now reckoned what that condition would be!”

I would again be lost for an answer and keep quiet. Because I would have already reckoned that the condition must be to send me back to Kampilyanagar. Then and there I would take a firm decision to never probe Arjun about his other wives.

Thanks to my experience with Arjuna, I also decided to not probe the two younger brothers about this subject ever.

I had many co-wives adding all the wives of the five brothers. Only two of

them came to Indraprastha – Subhadra and Bhanumati. The people and my distant relatives knew only one thing – the half-truth that the Maharani of Indraprastha, Draupadi, has five husbands. Not many people knew that she also has not one or two but ten co-wives. The reasons behind that were for one, except two of them all other co-wives stayed out of Indraprastha and for another, the two co-wives who were in Indraprastha were related to Krishna and so had become more like sisters to me than my co-wives.

Sometimes I would think what if all my eight co-wives come to Indraprastha demanding their rights? What kinds of twists and turns would my life take then? Would the Yajnasena of the Panchalas get washed away while dealing with many husbands along with many co-wives? I would answer to myself – it will never happen. Because I am the sister of the Lord of Dwaraka – the best friend of Krishna!

During my life in Indraprastha the two women with whom I formed a close bond were – my mother-in-law – Rajmata Kuntidevi and sister Subhadra. Whenever I met Subhadra it felt like I was meeting Rukminidevi herself. In the beginning Rajmata Kuntidevi seemed to me like a mother-in-law, and she was so as the mother of five valiant sons. The citizens of Indraprastha would give her respect as the rajmata. Her speech sounded like the sweet resonating of the bells in the temple of Shiva. It indeed contained blessings but it also had the sweetness of maturity that comes from the bottom of one's heart after facing the hardships of life. She never spoke about the faults of her five sons in front of me. She ardently talked only about the virtues of her sons. She had deputed that duty to Krishna, to inform me about their faults. He also fulfilled this duty very tactfully. My mother-in-law was indeed perfect to be the rajmata. Just like Krishna had spread the acclaim of his Dwaraka kingdom throughout Aaryavarta, this rajmata also had a vision to spread the acclaim of her newly built kingdom of Indraprastha. As the one who would take her place in carrying forward her responsibilities, she had tested me thoroughly.

Whatever Sanskaras were inculcated in me during my childhood were all by Sautramanimata. Here in Indraprastha it was only the sanskaras of Rajmata Kuntidevi that were responsible for the moulding of my mind as a Maharani.

The most complex sanskara of these was the time of privacy with my five husbands. We all had unanimously outlined a code of conduct for that. All its subtleties were designed according to rajmata's instructions. When I accepted to be the wife of the five brothers, at that time before leaving Kampilyanagar

the rajmata had given a strict instruction to her sons. She summoned all of them together and said, “Just as this Draupadi of the Panchalas is a wife to all of you, it is also true that she has become a daughter to me. I have double responsibility towards her future life – first as her mother-in-law and secondly as her mother. You all followed my command of sharing the alms amongst all of you. Now that it is agreed upon that she will be shared, I am giving you the next command with full caution.

“I will be the one to decide how and when she will spend the time with each one of you as a wife. Of course, it will be done with her and your consent.”

My most favourite virtue of my five husbands was their evident devotion to their mother. Their commitment to her was unmatched. They were all equally devoted. Each one of them was ready to sacrifice his life for his mother’s word. Their temperaments, valour, love and hatred were different. But their love for their mother was equal. There was no difference in it such as Yudhishtira’s love was more as he was the eldest and Sahadeva’s was the least as he was the youngest. Not only that, even Nakula and Sahadeva who were the sons of Madridevi loved Kuntimata equally. Together these five brothers were like a mighty fist formed by five fingers of a hand. Their mother – Rajmata Kuntidevi – my mother-in-law had complete control over this fist.

In just a few days I came to realize the strong bond of their relationship. Since the moment rajmata took me under her wings as her daughter, she had filled in the vacuum in my life due to the absence of Sautramanimata.

It was at the time of our coronation that the code for my time with each husband was outlined. Till that time, I remained the daughter of Kuntidevi. It proved most beneficial to me as I could observe closely what a strong woman my mother-in-law was.

The code that the six of us designed for the private time with my husbands was kept extremely secret. Nobody else besides the six of us knew about it. In that the main role of the rajmata was to mentor me. She had developed a soft spot for me in her heart because I had agreed to accept five husbands on just her command. By considering me as her daughter she compensated for the absence of a daughter in her life. I addressed her as rajmata with respect.

After the coronation ceremony, I spent my first night in the company of Yudhishtira. At the entrance of my private chamber a pillar was erected to display the royal emblems. There was a stone nook on the pillar to hold an

emblem symbolizing each one of my husbands. When it was my private time with Yudhishtira a replica of the royal sceptre was kept in it. When it was Bhimsena's turn a replica of his favourite weapon, the mace was kept. During Arjuna's turn a replica of his favourite bow would be kept. For Nakula a sword and for Sahadeva it was the pestle.

The loving days that I spent in my private chamber in the company of my five husbands were heavenly. During this time, I noticed a very special thing about my five husbands which I will always remember. None of them ever asked me any questions about my privacy with the other brothers. Once they had accepted the code of conduct none of them failed to follow it. Here also I experienced the oneness of their hearts. Each one of them had complete faith that the others followed the code of conduct to the letter just like him. Only once the rule was broken.

After Yudhishtira's turn was over the attendant who changed the symbol in the pillar mistakenly put the bow instead of the mace. At that same time Arjuna needed his bow to protect the cows of a Brahmin that thieves were stealing. Therefore, breaking the code of conduct he entered the chamber during our privacy. He had brought Bhimsena's mace with him. He took his bow down from the pillar and put Bhimsena's mace there. While doing all this, his movements showed his politeness and extreme embarrassment, which I could feel. Because of that my love for Arjuna grew even more.

The kingdom of Indraprastha kept flourishing day by day. The kingdom of the Yadavas of Dwaraka and my maternal home, the Panchala kingdom, were the two main allies of Indraprastha. After Jarasandha the threat of the Magadha kingdom had reduced considerably. The acclaim of Dwaraka had spread throughout Aaryavarta. Its renown had reached the kingdoms beyond the ocean with the end of Kalayavana. Dwaraka was now being recognized as a well-planned harbour. Many mammoth ships of the kingdoms from the western ocean were docking in this harbour with their pennants fluttering atop. The name of Krishna had now gained the value of Srikrishna. That Srikrishna had now become well-known as Vaasudeva and Bhagvan. Yet I called him Krishna because of my deep attachment. I never felt there was anything wrong about it.

The layout of Indraprastha was quite similar to that of Dwaraka. The Pandavas had unanimously named the royal assembly here as 'Sriprasada' in honour of Krishna. The Sudharma royal assembly of Dwaraka and the Sriprasada royal assembly of Indraprastha were like two royal sisters,

connected with the bonds of love. The internal layout of our royal assembly was just like that of the royal assembly of Dwaraka. Krishna's favourite river Yamuna encircled Indraprastha. Expert architects had built the royal assembly of the Pandavas parallel to the semi-circular line of Yamuna, because of which the cool gusts of wind flowing from the Yamuna would directly reach the Sriprasada royal assembly.

As the Maharani of Indraprastha I had many responsibilities, such as looking after the needs of my five husbands with varied temperaments, to nurture their five sons, to attend the royal assembly, to bid farewell to my husbands at war time and welcome them on their return after winning the wars, and so on. I would get totally engrossed in those activities. Many a times my dear friend Krishna urged me to visit Dwaraka. I would say 'yes' to him. Though I wanted to go to Dwaraka very much it wasn't happening. I wanted to meet Rukminivahini and her seven sisters at least once. But no matter what I couldn't achieve it.

The only times we met were when Krishna came to visit during the construction of the royal city of Indraprastha in Khandavavana. It was at our coronation ceremony that I met Rukminivahini for the first time. I was smitten by her in the first meeting. She was indeed an exceptionally beautiful lady. She didn't have a dark complexion like me. She had a ruddy fair complexion. Even in our very first meeting she spoke volumes about her Uddhavabhauji. She zealously shared many stories of the brotherly love of Krishna and Uddhavabhauji with me. She also told me many amusing stories of Balaramadada. She didn't understand why I kept laughing while listening to the stories of Balaramadada. Finally, she couldn't suppress her curiosity and asked me about it, "Draupadi, do I sound like I'm mocking Balaramadada?" I promptly responded, "Not at all, vahinee. In our family, we too have one sample like your Balaramadada! He is Balaramadada's disciple!" Then both of us laughed heartily.

In the very first meeting, while chatting for hours together with Rukminivahini I strongly felt that I must visit Dwaraka at least once. At least once I should see Vasudevababa, Devakimata, Rohinimata, Revatitai, Krishna's other wives, Acharya Sandipani, his wife and son Dutta, both commanders of Yadavas, and Gargamuni. In our very first meeting Rukminivahini talked about one more woman – Krishna's best friend in Gokul – Radha – Radhika. While hearing from her how Krishna considers Radha his best friend, I realized that I had never seen Radhika of Gokul –

another best friend of my Krishna. What kind of a person would she be? What kind of a place would her Gokul be?

After the first meeting with Rukminivahini it became my hobby to probe Krishna about Radhika in many ways whenever we met. He was so clever! He would say to me smilingly, “Instead of listening from me what kind of a friend Radhika is, why don’t you yourself go to Gokul once and meet her in person? Draw all the information from her with your brilliant questions.” He would leave me nonplussed. He knew it very well that I would never go to Gokul. After he left I would myself try to create an imaginary figure of Radhika in my mind, but I was never able to complete it!

Three turning points in my life were very significant. First – my Swayamwar ceremony. Because of that I got five husbands, and also an experienced rajmata. But later I came to know from Arjuna that because of that same Swayamwar he was going to have to face his biggest enemy. It was Karna – the king of Anga, whom I had rejected in the Swayamwar. In the war that broke out after the Swayamwar his son Sudamana was killed in the pandal itself, that too by Arjuna’s arrow. Therefore, furious Karna had taken a vow to kill Arjuna. Arjuna knew the gravity of that vow, but he never seemed to be afraid of it. During the construction of Indraprastha in Khandavavana Krishna came often from Dwaraka to Indraprastha. During every visit, of all my five husbands, he chatted more with Arjuna alone. Both of them would go to the faraway banks of river Yamuna in Krishna’s Garudadhwaaja chariot. After each of these visits my husband Arjuna looked more determined and radiant than before.

The second significant turning point in my life was the coronation of Yudhishthira and me. Many kings and queens had come from distant kingdoms to attend the ceremony. Krishna had come with main Yadavas, Rukminivahini, Subhadra and both his brothers. Our coronation was celebrated with much grandeur. Innumerable kings and their queens, soldiers, male and female attendants dined in Indraprastha at that time. A month before and after the coronation, Indraprastha, located on the banks of Yamuna, was bustling. There were stacks of gifts given to the newly built kingdom of Pandavas. Those included various animals such as horses and camels from the Gandhara kingdom, elephants from Kamarupa, and healthy cows from the valley of Brahmavarta, well-nourished bulls, and agile dogs from Arbudagiri. There were also many herbal medicines from Himavana region, jars of old liquor from Panchanada region, honey from Magadha, fine vestures from

Ashmaka, gold and silver jewellery of various designs from various kingdoms, various kinds of weapons like swords, maces, bow-arrows, pestles, chakras, Agnikankana, Shataghni, and Bhrushundi. The Pandavas' auspicious abode was erected in the form of Indraprastha in the forest of Khandavavana. The entire credit for that goes to my dear friend Krishna with his lakhs of hardworking Yadavas, and my dear brother Dhrishtadyumna with his thousands of Panchalas. Both of them stood behind Pandavas' Indraprastha kingdom like rocks.

Now there were three mighty kingdoms in Aaryavarta – first Dwaraka, second Hastinapura and third Indraprastha.

The third turning point in my life was the *Rajasuya yajna*. Many things had happened during the time since the coronation ceremony till the *Rajasuya yajna*. At the time of the coronation ceremony Maharishi Vyasa had prudently advised me, 'Never forget that you are also the daughter-in-law of Hastinapura.' But I forgot his advice! There is no convincing explanation as to why someone forgets something. To forget something is simply not remembering it. An error is an error even if it takes place unknowingly. I made such an unforgivable mistake during the *Rajasuya Yajna* in the Mayasabha chamber raised by Mayasura. First of all, it was the thought that came to my mind which I myself disapproved later and secondly, the words that I uttered.

Prince Duryodhan who had come from Hastinapura, entered the chamber of Mayasabha. It was for the first time after the Swayamwar that I saw Karna – the king of Anga. The moment I saw him a wild thought erupted in my mind and I whispered in the ears of my maid Hiranmayi, "Oh Hiranmayi, had it been in my destiny to be the wife of this possessor of Kavacha-kundala, so many fountains would have blossomed in the garden of my life!" In the meantime, Duryodhana stepped onto the optical illusion of a carpet which was actually a Rangoli design drawn on the surface of the water and fell into the pond making a loud splash. I was standing in the balcony along with my maids. I couldn't resist laughing, seeing the Kuru prince bobbing up and down in the water. While laughing, I said to my maids, "Are the sons of a blind father also blind?" My maids also laughed at the scene and at my words. Hearing the sound of their loud laughs the fully drenched Kuru prince became red with fury. Leaving his crown and mace in the water pond itself he stared at me with his fiery red eyes and muttering something to himself, stomped out of the Mayasabha chamber.



I kept staring at his back. I immediately realized that I had made a mistake. But it was of no use now. If it had been somebody else, it would have been possible to apologize and console the person. But never with Prince Duryodhana. Such an unforgivable mistake committed in a fleeting moment keeps continuously pricking at a cultured heart afterwards. That is what happened to me. Duryodhana never forgave me, but even I did not forgive myself for that thoughtless, idiotic moment and words.

In the Rajasuya *Yajna* I actually saw Krishna using the Sudarshan chakra on Shishupala. I could never forget that radiant form of his, which was blinding. The world always told me, ‘You are the daughter of fire, born out of a *Yajna* pit.’ The fire that I had seen throughout my life in the *Yajna* pit and the fire of thoughts that I experienced as the daughter of fire, were nothing compared to that radiant form of Krishna. At that moment, I realized that he is not merely a brother or a friend as I consider him. He is so much more that could not be expressed in words; he is inconceivable and one who cannot be weighed on any scale. It is only possible to experience him rather than trying to understand him.

Due to the mourning for Shishupala the Rajasuya *Yajna* was cancelled. Another *Muhurta* was drawn soon after that and the *Yajna* took place in the same pandal. Krishna on that day, offering the sacrificial sticks in the *Yajna* pit looked so different. He was paying obeisance to the invited sages and hermits with an innocent smile. Another thing happened while I was engrossed in his thoughts. Guru Drona of the Kurus came along with his son Ashwatthama to meet Maharaja Yudhishtira sitting beside me and bid farewell to him. Maharaja Yudhishtira touched Guru Drona’s feet to offer respect. He offered his heartiest blessings to the Maharaja of Pandavas. I also bent down to touch his feet. But while getting up my triangular diadem got stuck in his dress and fell at his feet. I was utterly shaken. Guru Drona immediately picked it up, wiped it gently with his shawl and handed it over to me.

The Rajasuya *Yajna* that was of great significance for us Pandavas was accomplished without any problems. Indeed, it was, because Shishupala had a secret purpose in humiliating Krishna in the *yajna*. He wanted to start a war in the *Yajna* pandal just like the war that had erupted after my Swayamwar. One way or the other he didn’t want the Rajasuya *Yajna* of the Pandavas to be accomplished. If the Rajasuya *Yajna* would have been disrupted it would have brought tremendous shame to the name of the Pandavas. It would have

been a big setback to the friendship of the Dwaraka kingdom of Krishna with the Indraprastha kingdom of the Pandavas. Shishupala would have gotten the satisfaction of avenging his best friend Jarasandha who had made him the commander. The biggest satisfaction he would have gotten was that of punishing the Black one who had abducted his soon to be wife Rukminidevi from right under his nose. Indeed, what would have happened, had Shishupala succeeded? If our Rajasuya *Yajna* would have been disrupted? I can't even imagine what kind of turn the life of the Pandavas and therefore my life too would have taken?

That is why I was quite gratified that the Rajasuya *Yajna* had got conducted smoothly. In fact, the pennant of Krishna and Pandavas' acclaim was magnified due to the execution of Shishupala. Its inspirational fluttering had spread throughout the Aaryavarta.

It was quite a ritual to make my thick, long hair in front of the mirror in my chamber in the royal palace of Indraprastha. I had selected four-five skilled maids for that purpose who would be engaged in that activity for a good half an hour. While looking at my reflection in the mirror and chatting with the maids alongside I would get engrossed in my own thoughts. In that reverie, I would compare the memories of my five husbands with each other.

Sometimes this reverie would catch an interesting rhythm. I would wonder which of the men and women of Dwaraka, Indraprastha and Hastinapura had different kinds of divine qualities. Among those the prominent ones were Krishna and Arjuna. Both of them had blue complexion. They looked like a figure and its shadow. If they both stood chatting together people could figure out who was who only because of the peacock-feathered crown and the fresh Vaijayanti garland resting on Krishna's chest. People who knew Arjuna could recognize him due to the Gandiva bow that he carried on his shoulder.

Only commander Satyaki in Dwaraka had the divine gift of knee-length arms just like Krishna. He was extremely brave and intelligent. Notably, his love for Krishna was also unparalleled. His temperament was more like Balaramadada.

In Hastinapura there were two other prominent men who were blessed with divine gifts. One was the devotee of Sun, Karna – the king of Anga who was born with impenetrable Kavacha-kundala, and the other was the Guru's son Ashwatthama who was born with a fleshy bead on the crown of his head.

I had never seen Bhimsena's first wife Hidimba – a daughter of the wilderness. But I had heard that her son Ghatotkacha was born with some

extraordinary powers. Among the women in all three places I was the only one who was *yajna*-born, fragrant and long-haired.

I had heard it from many people that my mother-in-law Rajmata Kuntidevi had obtained a divine mantra called Devahuti from sage Durvasa many years before. These five brothers carried the effect of that mantra's power in their personality. Yudhishtira carried the effect of the earth or Prithvi principle, Bhimsena carried the effect of the wind or Vayu principle, for Arjuna it was the water or Jala principle and for Nakula-Sahadeva it was the light or Prakash principle. These two brothers were like Usha – the dawn and Nisha – the night, connected to each other with a thin line of light. I never tried to probe into the deeper meaning of this Devahuti mantra. I did not find it necessary. Nobody ever tried to probe deeper in Dhrishtadyumnada and my birth from the *yajna*. Nobody ever found it necessary.

Among the three centres of power – Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Dwaraka, my friend Krishna was the only one who possessed the authority over the radiant chakra Sudarshan. His brilliant intelligence was unmatched in not only the three kingdoms but in the entire Aaryavarta.

One question about Krishna would often arise in the minds of many others and that was, 'why he does he not employ the Sudarshan chakra frequently?'. In the pandal of the Rajasuya *Yajna* I had actually seen him using the Sudarshan chakra to kill Shishupala. Since then the same question often arose in my mind also. I could not sit quiet without finding the answer to it. So, once I asked him directly, "KrishNa, when you have such a powerful Sudarshan chakra with you, why don't you use it everywhere? Do you have any restrictions about its use?"

He smiled then and said, "I knew you were going to ask me this question some time or the other. The Sudarshan Chakra has been bestowed upon me by Bhagvan Parashurama. As per his instruction I am not free to use it arbitrarily!"

After hearing his reply, I got even more curious. I asked him, "Doesn't this mean that when you project the chakra you get that intuition directly from your inner self?"

"You are indeed extremely brilliant, Draupadi. You have accurately guessed the secret of the chakra. Uddhava also knows it. If I try to use the Sudarshan chakra adamantly, I get a very strange experience. The mantras of the Sudarshan chakra which otherwise I feel close to me, desirable and like the pure white swans in Manasa sarovar, disappear from my memory within

moments! They fly away like the royal swans scattering due to the thunderous sound of the lightning during the Mriga constellation. Then my body experiences extreme fatigue that is so exhausting that it feels like the Kisan of the gopas in Gokul, the Krishna of the Yadavas and yours, the Srikrishna of Gargamuni, Dhaumya rishi and Maharishi Vyasa would drain away with it. Then I just let go of the thought of projecting the Sudarshan chakra like the gopis of Gokul let the lamps of *Kojagiri* afloat on the waters of the Yamuna.”

If Krishna himself couldn't use the divine power of Sudarshan chakra at his will, what about the others? From the centres of power like Indraprastha, Dwaraka or Hastinapura, none of the men or women having divine powers was free to use them to their own advantage. Even I wasn't free. I was well aware that I had developed an ego due to my matchless beauty. Krishna had tactfully and clearly made me aware of it from time to time without hurting my feelings. While doing so he always used to smile and say, 'Krishney, humility befits beauty. If an extremely beautiful lady is also humble, it is as good as gold with the fragrance of a Prajakta flower!'

As a mama, he got along very well with all the Pandava sons in Indraprastha. His most favourite among them was Subhadra's son Abhimanyu. Among my sons, he chatted more with Shrutakirti. That silly boy also badgered Krishna with such questions that no one would otherwise ask. He would say, "Krishnamama, everybody says you have eighty sons. Tell me, how do you recognize each one of them?"

Krishna was Krishna after all. While giving a satisfactory answer to his *bhacha* he would purposefully increase his curiosity. He would say, "You are talking about my eighty sons Kirti? Go to Hastinapura once. The Kuru family there has hundred Kauravas. You should go and see once how their mother and father unmistakably recognize their sons in spite of being blind. You will be amazed. They don't just recognize their sons but they also know them very well inside out!"

Thus, my days were passing delightfully as the Maharani of Indraprastha. I was engrossed in nurturing my six sons and cultivating their characters. Yes, I considered Subhadra's Abhimanyu as my own. All my husbands were extremely valiant. They had made conquests in all four directions of Aaryavarta, which had brought innumerable wealth of food grains, garments, animals, maids and servants to Indraprastha. It had increased beyond imagination due to our coronation. I was the venerable Maharani of the

puissant Indraprastha, and the honourable citizens here; the beloved wife of five valiant Pandavas. I was the wealthy mother of six obedient sons; the most favourite daughter-in-law of Rajmata Kuntidevi. More than all this I was the beloved friend of Krishna – the Lord of Dwaraka! Indeed, I couldn't ask for more in my life. Wasn't this the treasure of life that anybody would desire for?

But a human being, a mere puppet in the hands of destiny should never consider or say things such as – I am satisfied, I possess everything that I desired for or I have achieved everything. My mentor and best friend Krishna had always advised me as such. But the innate Kshatriya lady within me, full of self-pride, would sometimes take over and unknowingly I would forget Krishna's advice.

Prince Duryodhana of Hastinapura was never going to take lightly the unmatched prosperity of the Pandavas that was reaching sky high, their incomparable acclaim spread throughout Aaryavarta and their friendship with Krishna of Dwaraka that was renowned everywhere. Actually, he was not the prince of the Kurus of Hastinapura. But he had declared himself the prince even before the separation of Hastinapura and Indraprastha. As soon as the Pandavas left Hastinapura he had assumed the position of the prince over there. He would make his blind father Dhritarashtra dance to his tune. In fact, he had almost usurped the position of the ruler by his own actions, even without sitting on the royal throne of his blind father.

Indraprastha became a thorn in the flesh for Duryodhana. He had not come to his senses even after returning from the Rajasuya *Yajna* and witnessing the chilling execution of Shishupala with his own eyes. The Kuru prince who was still full of hatred for Krishna would mention my dear friend Krishna among the people as 'a cowherd whose feet are soiled by cow dung and urine'.

A man always behaves according to his inborn nature. An arrogant man never lets go of his arrogance. If such a person comes to power his ego inflates. And Prince Duryodhana was actually using two kinds of powers – one was that of the royal throne, another was that of emotional blackmail. Since childhood he was used to keeping his ninety-nine brothers under his thumb. Once we came to Indraprastha he began considering himself as the undeclared king of his blind father's Hastinapura. Hastinapura was a mighty kingdom due to the wealth, military power and old alliances with other kingdoms. Duryodhana who was the heir to its throne was now getting

extremely jealous of the prosperity of Indraprastha. He had begun arranging meetings with his political advisers and planning incredible schemes of bringing Indraprastha down. He still didn't have a complete idea of how much support the kingdom of Indraprastha had in the form of Krishna. His cunning inner clique included Shakuni mama and his brother, the self-proclaimed political advisor Kanaka, Dushasana and his prominent brothers, and Kuru's Chief Minister Vrishavarma who obeyed all his commands.

According to the news that I received from the informers, Duryodhana and Shakuni were trying their best to get Karna into their inner clique, but they had been unsuccessful in doing so. We received clues about that too in Indraprastha. I got a bit worried while listening to the details about it. Karna, the king of Anga, was strongly against any kind of political machinations. He had only one yearning – directly challenge the Pandavas to war, and fight a conclusive battle with them upfront. This persistence of his had got me worried. It is true that I had once felt an unknown attraction for him, but it was not physical lust. He was an ardent devotee of the sun and I was a fire-born daughter. After giving it thorough thought I feel today that it was an attraction due to the connection with the effulgence. I was afraid of the impenetrable Kavacha-kundala of Karna. To top that, in the presence of grandsire Bhishma he had taken a vow of conquering the four directions of Aaryavarta and had just recently returned after fulfilling it successfully.

Duryodhana's seizure of Hastinapura which was the kingdom of my father-in-law Maharaja Pandu, was sheer injustice. Yet my husbands had accepted the region of Khandavavana and had worked hard to erect Indraprastha there, which would put Hastinapura to shame. Obviously, I was very proud of them. After all I was the Maharani of this newly built kingdom.

Any calamity befalling Indraprastha was unacceptable to me. Duryodhana was astutely going to take advantage of world conqueror Karna who was wounded by my words during the Swayamwar ceremony. But now I had firmly decided not to be afraid of anyone when I had my best friend Krishna supporting me. I had strong faith in his friendship.

One day Vrishavarma, the Chief Minister of the Kurus of Hastinapura arrived in Indraprastha with a royal invitation. He stood in the Sriprasada royal assembly and presenting the royal invitation to me and Maharaja he bowed and humbly said, "Grandsire Bhishma and Maharaja Dhritarashtra of Hastinapura have invited all Pandavas of Indraprastha – for Vishnu yaga! An invitation for the Yadavas has also been sent to Dwaraka. Maharaja

Srikrishna will certainly come for the *Yajna* to Hastinapura along with Prince Balaramadada. You all should come too. Please don't miss the opportunity to attend the religious ritual in the original abode of your clan."

While listening to Chief Minister Vrishavarma's invitation in extremely modest language, I don't know why, my right eyelash fluttered. A suspicion arose in my mind. I instantly said, "The invitation is for a *yajna*. There is no need for us to come there as a couple. If there is such need then Subhadra and Bhanumati would come with their husband. The rajmata will be there for sure."

At that the experienced senior Chief Minister said, "No, the Pandava Maharaja and Maharani are especially invited. This invitation is not only from the Maharaja and Maharani of Hastinapura, but also from grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura and the citizens of Hastinapura."

Now Indraprasth got engaged in preparations for the travel to Hastinapura. I sent a message to Dwaraka for Krishna with a special messenger. It said, 'It is okay if nobody else comes, but you must come to Hastinapura. We have to go to Hastinapura for Vishnuyaga.'

Indeed, he came to Hastinapura at the right time as per my message, but in such a different way and form! He came in the form of apparel that a noble lady like me would never be able to forget!

I don't even want to remember the incident that happened in Hastinapura at that time. Narrating it myself is highly impossible for me.

I had great respect for my five husbands in my heart. But only the eldest Pandava – Yudhishtira, the king of Indraprastha was responsible for whatever happened in Hastinapura during this visit. He otherwise possessed many rare qualities. He was suitable to be the leader of his four brothers and to take care of the Indraprastha kingdom. But I don't understand what happened to him after coming to Hastinapura. Some events are indeed so difficult to explain in any way no matter how hard you try. My virtuous, righteous eldest husband who wouldn't even think of committing a sin, lost his mind. He became delusional and a slave to addiction beyond any kind of justification. His gambling addiction threw the Indraprastha kingdom that had reached the apex of glory within a short time, in to a deep chasm of destruction in an instant.

This wise eldest Pandava played the game of dice with the Kauravas even before the Vishnuyaga. He put the kingdom of Indraprastha at stake along with the military, maids and servants, wealth and animals, and lost it. Then he

put his four brothers at stake one after the other and lost them too. He forgot that he was a formally crowned king of an established kingdom and therefore responsible for the woes and comforts of his subjects. He put himself at stake and lost that bet too. In the gambling hall, he was disgraced by the vituperations of the Kauravas who were giggling hysterically in the frenzy of victory. He became so insane and irrational that he put me – his wife – the Maharani of Indraprastha – the daughter of Maharaja Drupada – the sister of Dhrishtadyumna – Yajnasena – also at stake in the gambling *Yajna* of the vile Kauravas. And... and he lost even that very last bet.

Fortunately for the Pandavas none of the Kauravas romping in victory and bursting with joy came up with the idea of challenging Yudhishtira to put his widowed mother, who had suffered a lot in her life, at stake. Had it happened, then I am quite sure that he would have put his mother at stake too!

I am not saying this just because I am overly emotional. On that day, due to the encouragement of the shouting Kauravas who had lost their minds, shameless and mean Dushasana ultimately touched the saree I was wearing. Dushasana who was eager to disrobe me had lost his senses even more than Yudhishtira who was playing the dice game.

In that ancient gambling hall of the Kurus I spread my hands in front of each warrior and implored them desperately to protect my honour, beating my chest and crying out loudly. None of them except Vikarna got up; no one said anything. Karna, the king of Anga intimidated him and made him sit down. Karna's intellect had also gone corrupt! Dushasana who had gone crazy determinedly put his hand on the saree that I was wearing!

I got furious. I completely lost my mind and had no clue what I was saying or where I was. Only an iridescent peacock feather with bluish, purplish, greenish, golden shades kept revolving in front of my tearful eyes!

When I regained my consciousness the only thing I heard was an unfamiliar tune of the flute fading away somewhere far. Grandsire Bhishma was giving me support and taking me out of the gambling hall, covered in a heap of sarees. At that time that indistinct tune of the flute had stopped completely.

My honour was saved. I understood very clearly who had done it.

When I entered my chambers. and saw Rajmata Kuntidevi in front of me, I couldn't control my tears. I ran to her and putting my arms around her neck I started crying uncontrollably. She did not say anything else except, 'be quiet, my daughter' and simply kept patting on my back with deep affection. I



could never forget that touch throughout my life. Her words ‘my daughter’ were engraved on my heart forever. That touch of hers was exactly like the touch of the peacock feather, and her words were like the tune of the flute that I had just heard. Today I realized very strongly that Rajmata Kuntidevi was not my mother-in-law – not the mother of Pandavas – but my own mother! I was away from Sautramanimata of Panchalas. This strong-hearted, extremely tolerant woman had taken her place. From that moment, itself I had again found my mother!

Did my eldest husband Yudhishtira learn a lesson and control himself even after unprecedented heinous events in the gambling game? Did he act like a human being? No! When Shakuni and Duryodhana provoked him, he played another game of dice – Anudyuta – again, and lost that too. In the previous game of dice, he had lost material wealth like the army, animals, money, and kingdom. In the sequel, he lost the most valuable wealth of all – Time. He was the owner of all the material things that he had lost in the first game of dice. But did he have any right over Time which he lost during the second game of dice? Can anybody ever claim any right over Time?

The bet that my eldest husband had lost in the second game of dice was that all five Pandavas would have to go to live in the forest for twelve years along with their wife, followed by one year of living incognito.

The news that we were leaving for the forest spread everywhere. It was obvious that we couldn’t go back to Indraprastha. So, without visiting Indraprastha and saying farewell to our subjects we were directly going to the forest. Valiant Arjuna implored his eldest brother for quite some time, to go to Dwaraka at least once. Bhimsena also seconded him. I was already feeling that I should meet Krishna who had saved my honour, at least once. If we were going to any forest, we should go to a forest in the direction of Dwaraka. But no – I couldn’t say anything. Because the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira kept reiterating only one thing – ‘I won’t go there. You all can go if you want, only if Duryodhana permits you to do so.’ I couldn’t even understand what had gone wrong with my eldest husband. Not only did he play the first and second game of dice losing his senses, but in spite of being a king of a sovereign kingdom he did not play the second game of dice with a condition that ‘we will decide which forest to go to’.

Duryodhana and Shakuni’s intention in giving the Khandava vana to the Pandavas was that they should fall prey to the attacks of the wild tribes; they should be devoured by wild animals. Now we had to face wildlife for not a

day or two but for complete twelve years.

We removed our royal attires as they were of no use in the forest and put on plain, white dresses. We began fasting to get used to starving as we might have to go without food occasionally. That is why within only two days everybody's faces started looking drawn. Especially while bidding farewell to Rajmata Kuntidevi they became miserable and dark. She was now going to live with Mahatma Vidura in Hastinapura until our return. She kept saying only one thing again and again, "I am used to living in the forest. Let me come with you."

This request of hers was presented in front of gambling expert Shakuni. That so-called great man who wouldn't let go of any opportunity to cause pain to the Pandavas gave an insolent reply with false helplessness, hiding his sly smile. She was not put at stake! She cannot go to the forest even if she wants to! She is a rajmata indeed – only without a kingdom! All the citizens of Hastinapura have tremendous respect for her. She is indeed a rajmata – the one who rules the hearts of the citizens of Hastinapura. She should happily live with Mahamantri Vidura!

My husband Bhimsena was the one who seethed the most at this answer given by Shakuni. But he just couldn't do anything. Sometimes even mosquitoes get miraculously powerful!

The men and women of Hastinapura who had tremendous respect for Maharaja Pandu and were very grateful for the services that he had rendered came to the borders of Hastinapura to bid farewell to us. Among them were grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura, minister Sanjaya, guru Drona, Kripa, and the royal priest of the Kurus. The six of us whose lives were tied to each other's joys and sorrows, determinedly turned around to leave. We got ready to face any kinds of odds that were coming our way and complete the *Yajna* of our life of twelve years of forest life and one year of living incognito.

Now we were facing the thick and green darkness of the forests! We started walking from the western side of Hastinapura. The first river we reached was Bhagirathi. We took our first break under a sprawling banyan tree on her banks. All travellers called this tree 'Pramaana Vataavrikasha'. The life mission of this tree was to provide a cool shade to the traveller while bearing the heat of the scorching sun above. Were we going to be successful in our future life with the blessings of this tree? As we did not have a single grain of food with us we drank the crystal-clear water of Bhagirathi for our dinner.

We woke up early in the morning, even before sunrise, and after bathing in

the river Bhagirathi we continued our journey. All six of us were bare feet. Fearless, mighty Bhimsena was leading us. The only thing he had in his hands was a sharp hatchet to cut the branches of the trees and the thorny bushes coming in our way. By evening we reached Kurukshetra which was surrounded by lakes. Now Arjuna took Bhima's place. We went wherever he took us. While walking, he said to Yudhishtira, "We are going towards Sanneth sarovar. During my world-conquering mission, I lived here at Kurukshetra for one whole month. Every day I used come to this Suryakunda for bathing. As Kurukshetra is surrounded by many lakes, lots of devotees come here. Throughout the year, they perform many religious rituals. Therefore, this place is also called Dharmakshetra."

"Looks like you have forgotten one thing master archer *Partha*. On the day of the solar eclipse..."

"It was here that we met Srikrishna – my best friend – for the first time."

"Let's stay here for a few days. Draupadi can wash her thick, long hair properly in the waters of the lake," Bhimsena said looking at me and smiling.

Meanwhile though no one had told them to, Nakula and Sahadeva had collected firewood. Bhimsena tucked his dhoti, found three good stones and made a neat stove. Arjuna and Yudhishtira collected food grains like Sattoo, Godhoom, and rice from the devotees in Dharmakshetra. It was collected in alms. They also got copper vessels with them. Bhimsena washed the rice grains in the lake and put a copper vessel on the stove. On the auspicious land of Kurukshetra, the rice started boiling for satiating the hunger of the world-conquering sons of Maharaja Pandu!

We felt refreshed after drinking the waters of rivers like Drishadwati, Saraswati and lakes like Brahmakunda and Jyotikunda and crossed the forests in the west one after the other, finally reaching the Kamyakavana. Here Nakula, the land expert, chose an open space on which we wanted to build a cottage, near a crystal-clear stream of water. All five brothers fastened their dhotis tight and raised a neat and beautiful east-facing cottage by the evening. It had a separate chamber for me, a bathroom, and a kitchen. As a child Bhimsena used to make sticky clay balls and throwing them far away would be a part of his exercise. He chose some fine sticky clay and kneaded it with his feet. With that he made two-three beautiful jars of different sizes, and seven-eight earthen pots. Sitting on a grass mat Yudhishtira kept staring for a long time at the different-sized platters that he had created. The pots, jars and platters that Bhimsena had created were indeed beautiful. Unwittingly I

put the biggest platter in front of him. Then throwing his head back he laughed loudly and said, “You did exactly the same thing that Kuntimata would have done. Keeping my voracious appetite in mind I have created this big platter! The platters for the others have also been made according to their appetite.

Meanwhile, in the front yard of the cottage Arjuna had created five beautiful bows from supple wooden sticks. Far away in the distance horse expert Sahadeva had tamed a wild horse that he had captured. He had mounted it and was making it run in circles at a constant pace. Nakula had created neat arrows from bamboo sticks and copper. Yudhishtira had walked through the forest and collected multi-coloured flowers and *Bela* leaves and had kept them in an earthen platter near his mat. I had daubed the entire cottage floor and made a small shrine using wood and clay in a corner. I had kept it in the direction facing Dwaraka. A *Shivapindi* made of sand was clearly visible in the shrine. It was affixed to a plattersized image of the Moon. In front of the pinidi was a tiny statue of *Nandi* in a sitting posture. I had also kept a colourful flute made of bamboo resting against the platter-shaped moon behind the *Shivapindi*. A fresh peacock feather was also kept on the *Shivapindi* along with *Bela* leaves and white flowers.

As two thick layers of thin-bladed soft wild grass covered the roof of the cottage the temperature inside the cottage was maintained. It didn't get too cold during the rainy season and winter and during the summer it remained pleasantly cool.

The blue sky above, a crystal-clear spring in front of the cottage, with a continuous flow of gurgling water, thick forests beyond a circular area around the cottage with various creepers climbing up the tall trees and tangled in each other, various birds on those trees making distinct chirping sounds since sunrise – such was our charming ‘Pandava abode’ in the Kamyakavana. These five brothers started living with me in this abode just as happily as in the palace of Indraprasth.

Every morning Yudhishtira would worship the *Shivapindi* in the cottage. He would decorate it with *Bela* leaves. In the end, he would offer Shiva's favourite white flowers. After that Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva and I would offer *Bela* leaves and white wild flowers. Then with a calm and peaceful mind we all would repeat the hymn of Shiva after Yudhishtira. Closing his longish eyes, he would sing it in a peaceful rhythm

On the very first day while my eyes were closed, the hymn of Krishna

spontaneously burst from my lips. I sang with inner inspiration. My five husbands also automatically and unanimously reiterated the hymn of Krishna. Thus, during our stay in the Kamyakavana unwritten tradition was followed – that of the hymn of Shiva in the clear voice of Yudhishtira at the crack of dawn followed by the hymn of Krishna in my feminine sweet voice.

Our days in the Kamyakavana started becoming more and more interesting due to the daily chores that we shared. Every day one of my five valiant husbands would keep me company in the cottage. The other four would go to the forest to hunt for food, to collect materials for daily worship, firewood and fodder for the wild cows that we had recently domesticated.

Dhaumyarishi with whom we had ageless close bonds, came to the forest along with his disciples, of his own accord. They also raised their huts near our cottage. Just as columns of smoke from the *Yajna* pit used to rise through the roofs of the huts in our Pandava colony every day, the ambrosial Vedic mantras incanted in the clear voice of Dhaumya rishi and his disciples too began reaching the sky. Giving a new dimension to the Kamyakavana our Pandava colony became fearless and puissant with emotions.

In the cottage, cooking was my job. I would be full of perspiration trying to ignite the fire in the clay stove by blowing repetitively. Though my original complexion was dusky I was probably getting a ruddy tone. Yudhishtira himself used to tell me so. That former Maharaja of Indraprastha would get engrossed in thoughts and become silent watching me blow in the clay stove to make fire. He would then leave the cottage and sit alone for a long time on the stone platform under the Pipal tree. Then he would do some kind of worship while meditating.

While performing the daily chores in the cottage, I would invariably remember Krishna. So many forms of him! So many memories related to me, my five husbands and Rajmata Kuntidevi!

I should clearly mention one thing though – I did not remember anybody else as much as I remembered him during our stay in the forest. For the first few days after coming here I missed Drupadababa, Sautramanimata, Dhristadada, Kampilyanagar and my sons – Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shrutakirti, Shatanika and Shrutasena, who went to Kampilyanagar with dada, a lot. My only consolation was that they were under the care of their loving grandfather, grandmother, and dutiful mama. All my sons were virtuous. Each one had inherited their own father's qualities by birth, and had also acquired the qualities of the four step-fathers by observation and

imitation. I had no doubt in my heart that they were all going to exceed these five Pandavas in valour. For days, I would get lost in thoughts such as how big they would have grown and how would they look when we would meet them after thirteen long years.

I had not seen much of the other sons of my husbands. But as Subhadra and Arjuna's son Abhimanyu was in Indraprastha, he had become my most favourite. The main reason for that was that while speaking in his sweet tongue he would unwittingly remind me of his mama – Krishna. I also remembered Rajmata Kuntidevi a lot.

But in the later period Krishna and only Krishna occupied my heart inside out. My heart ached due to one bitter truth. We had not even been able to fulfil our duty of meeting him at least once before coming to the forest. What would he be thinking of me? He must have labelled me as the most selfish person! Such a thought would leave me disturbed. Sometimes in that depressing thought I would sit alone at the front door of the cottage. My eyes would be moist with the profound memories of Krishna. At such times Bhimsena who would have returned from the forest would drop the bunch of wooden logs from his hefty shoulder near the cottage wall and sit by my side. He would wipe my eyes with his shawl and say to me, “Panchali, be patient, have faith. Krishna himself will come to this forest to meet you. My heart is intuitively telling me.” Just his sitting by my side would console me a lot.

I did not have to wait for long. One day Bhimsena entered the fence of the cottage shouting loudly, raising his hands high. He was continuously shouting so loudly that he could be heard throughout Kamyakavana, “He has come! He has come! The Lord of Dwaraka – Krishna has come!” He came in front of me panting and said, “Krishney, Krishna has come! I recognized the saffron-coloured golden-bordered pennant of his chariot. There are two more chariots.”

There were four stone platforms around the cottage in four directions that were built by Bhimsena himself. It was a convenience that he had created for himself. Whenever it was needed he would stand on those stone platforms and shout loudly, to convey a message to his brothers who would be somewhere in the forest. Then within a short time his four brothers would arrive in the cottage one after the other. Today he shouted so loudly in the excitement of Krishna's arrival that even the wild animals like tigers and hyenas waiting for a chance to pounce on the cows in the colony got scared and ran away frantically. One after the other the four Pandavas arrived from

the eastern gate of the fence around the cottage. Immediately after them three-four chariots stood in front of our colony. Standing at the cottage door I eagerly started looking. My beloved friend, dusky complexioned Krishna descended from his Garudadhvaja chariot harnessed with four white horses. Charioteer Daruka and Uddhavadeva followed him. From the chariot behind, my brother Dhrishtadyumnadada descended. Behind him were the commander and the Chief Minister of the Panchalas. From the last chariot, only the charioteer got down. That chariot was overflowing with household goods required for a family.

Leaving all his brothers behind only Arjuna walked briskly towards Krishna. He leaned forward and was about to touch his feet when Krishna pulled him in a deep embrace. Such a master archer but he was moved by this affection. He started sobbing dejectedly on Krishna's strong and bare shoulder. Krishna patted and comforted him. The remaining four brothers followed and touched Krishna's feet. I was still watching from the door. His long fish-shaped eyes kept frequently turning towards the door. It became unbearable for me to stand there. I actually went to the inner chamber of the cottage. I just didn't know what to say to him and how.

He came in the cottage with his brothers. Still I did not come out of the inner chamber. My heart was overflowing with mixed emotions. All sages and hermits, venerable kings, citizens of many kingdoms – all considered him omniscient. Then how come he did not understand my humiliation? Instantly my heart was filled with rage for him. The next moment it was filled with joy that he had come to meet me. I didn't know what to say.

I had thought that he will immediately come in, but he didn't. This was his specialty that left me and many others disconcerted. He was the one who understood the sentiments but he himself was not at all sentimental. He could get one with everyone's emotions but would never get carried away with them. I remembered his thoughts that he shared with me from time to time and finally was able to compose myself with determination.

Lunch was over. Everybody took rest along with him. At dusk our meeting in the forest commenced in the front yard of the cottage on the grass mats. A seat was reserved for me in that meeting. Nobody was speaking anything as Krishna stood in person along with Uddhavadeva in front of us. The searing rage due to the events that had taken place since we left Indraprastha for the Vishnuyaga *yajna* of the Kauravas and my mortifying humiliation, that I had kept suppressed in my mind with efforts so far, burst out. Looking sternly at

Krishna I said, “The sages, hermits and yogis consider you as the manifestation of forgiveness and Truth. They say that you existed even before the world that is perceptible to the eyes, that you are the creator of all animate and inanimate beings. Everybody says that you are the universe that consists of the three worlds, all the Nakshatras, the ten directions, the sky, the Sun, and the Moon. Then doesn’t this universe of yours include my hair that I have kept open? Each one of these strands of hair carries a trauma at its root. Don’t you see that?”

“Tell me oh *Purushottama*, who am I? Am I really the beloved wife of these five so-called valiant husbands? Tell me, what if a similar calamity had befallen Rukminivahini who is dear to your heart!”

All my husbands dropped their heads and just kept listening. I looked at Krishna. He still kept smiling gently as usual. It enraged me further and I said, “Was it appropriate that the perverted Kauravas dragged me, who is the wife of these five brothers, your best friend, the sister of this Dhrishtadyumnadada, by pulling my hair in a hall full of people as a maid? Krishna, I was dressed in a single saree, in my menses! Was it proper that during such a condition the Kauravas romping with joy put me to shame in front of all? Was I the daughter-in-law of grandsire Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi or a maid? Guru Drona, Kripa, grandsire Bhishma, Vidura and Sanjaya kept mum as if their lips were sealed, since they are the slaves of wealth. Is money so destructive? Is wealth so powerful?” I realized that even he didn’t have an answer to a single question of mine, yet I could not stop before pouring out my heart’s discontent. The anger that I had suppressed so far erupted like a volcano. “The person who tolerates injustice without resistance is as guilty as the person who inflicts it. Why blame the Kauravas? These five husbands of mine – in spite of being very powerful and great warriors silently kept watching the gross insult, shameless ignominy and injustice to their wife. These five husbands of mine never disappoint the one who surrenders to them. Then how come they kept quiet when I sought refuge? I have borne each one of these husbands one radiant son. How are they going to stand up to the next generation and confess that they were unable to protect the honour of their mother?”

“The Kauravas played a deceptive game of dice by making the dice fraudulently. They swindled the kingdom out of the Pandavas and made all of them their slaves. While I was dressed in a single saree and in my menses, they humiliated me in front of all the elders in the ancient gambling hall.



What use is the valour of my five husbands if it cannot help me in such a shameful time? Of what use is Arjuna's Gandiva and Bhimsena's mace? Shame, shame to the power of Bhimsena and the valour of Arjuna. How can despicable people like Duryodhana and Dushasana remain alive even for a moment when Arjuna and Bhimsena exist? Arjuna had won me in the Swayamwar but I became the wife of five as per my mother-in-law's instruction and the wish of the elders. Pointing to that fact the Kauravas giggled loudly and shamelessly asking me in a hall full of people, 'What does it matter if you belong to five husbands or a hundred and five?'

"As if it was any less demeaning, this so-called glory of the family, the eldest Pandava, played another game of dice. Why? With the greedy expectation that he will win back all that he had lost. Krishna, didn't you ever sense that foolish, destructive greed of him that has been present throughout his life?"

That omniscient Krishna, who was called the Lord of Dwaraka was not answering a single question. He was sitting silent in that forest meeting. His silence became totally unbearable to me. In a fit of anger, I said, "These five are not fit to be my husbands. I have no husbands. I am neither a wife nor a daughter-in-law, nor a daughter to anybody. And yes, oh Krishna of Dwaraka, you are neither a brother to me, nor a friend. You are nothing to me. I am all alone – lonely!" With overwhelming grief, I buried my face in my palms and began sobbing uncontrollably. I couldn't see anything; couldn't lift my face up.

I could barely speak between my sobs, "Neither these husbands are mine; nor the sons are mine; and nor are the brothers mine. My father the king of Panchala and this brother Dhrishtadyumna are not mine. My heart-wrenching pain of all is that Krishna, you... you are also not mine, which is why the shameless Kauravas could humiliate me. I have to live in a forest in spite of being the Maharani of Indraprastha. In spite of being so heroic, you all are not having any regret and are utterly ignoring me. Karna called me a prostitute in front of all the elders and laughed disdainfully at me. Oh Krishna, the fire that his actions have flared in my heart never calms down even for a moment.

"You consider me a *Sakhi* and call me so. I also worship you ardently. You possess indomitable and mighty power. When I was being disgraced in the gambling hall I surrendered only to you from the bottom of my heart. I desperately invoked only you. Even today I do so and tomorrow also I will.

Oh Krishna... tell me very clearly, are you going to punish these sinners who have disgraced my honour, or not?"

Everyone in the meeting was thoroughly shaken by my fiery words. Everybody fell silent. Only Krishna spoke then, very little but quite reassuring, "Krishney, my beloved friend, all those who are the target of your anger, all those who disgraced you in front of the elders will be killed by Arjuna's arrows and Bhimsena's mace! And I will be a witness to that. I will do everything possible for the Pandavas and you. Just as you move about grief-stricken, leaving your hair open, the wives of Kauravas would also lament for their husbands, leaving their hair open. I did not take any vows in my life, but today I am taking one. Only for your sake. Krishney, stop crying. Have faith Draupadi, that these words of your Krishna will never prove to be false. The Pandavas will become kings again, and you will be their Maharani."

Arjuna who felt revitalized by hearing Krishna's words couldn't keep quiet and said, "Draupadi, everything will happen just as Krishna said."

Now my brother Dhrishtadada also said with courage, "Oh Bhamini, I will kill Drona, who has insulted our father and who helplessly and silently watched your humiliation being a slave of wealth in spite of being a guru. Our Shikhandi will destroy Bhishma at the right time. And mighty Bhima will break Duryodhana's thigh as per his vow. Master archer *Dhananjaya* will decapitate Karna – the son of a charioteer who called you a prostitute. With the backing of Bhagvan Vaasudeva Srikrishna we will always be invincible. The imprudent sons of Dhritarashtra will be nowhere!"

The forest meeting became peaceful after hearing the words of Dhrishtadada and my husband Arjuna. Krishna said, "Krishney, had I been in Dwaraka I would have come to the Vishnuyaga *yajna* just as I came to Indraprastha for the Rajasuya *yajna*. I would have never let that destructive game of dice take place. I would have compelled Maharaja Dhritarashtra to open the eyes of his mind by describing Dushasana's actions to him in my elucidating language. I would have forced him to speak. If that would have been unsuccessful I would have appealed to the femininity in Maharani Gandharidevi and compelled her to pull down the cloth strip on her eyes for the first time in her life. Had that also been unsuccessful, I would have certainly invoked the divine mantras of Sudarshan just as you invoked me. I am certain that I would have clearly recalled the mantras and I would have annihilated those who touched the saree on your body, and called you a

prostitute.

“But Yajnaseni, I was engaged in a war with Shalva at that time, on the coast of the western ocean. Chief Minister Vipruthu told me everything after returning to Dwaraka. I immediately came here after hearing what had happened. Yudhishtira, I do not hold any resentment in my mind that all of you came to the forest without meeting me. I never gave any importance to any social formalities with regards to you Pandavas and Krishnaa. I have been disciplining the evil-minded as much as possible all my life. Henceforth my life’s mission will be to seek justice for you.”

Now I, along with my husbands, were quite composed. Suddenly Yudhishtira remembered something and excusing himself, went from the front yard into the cottage. He brought something with him and sat on his mat again. He held a platter of copper in his hands. Giving it to Krishna he said, “I did extreme penance to worship the Sun god as Draupadi has to take a lot of efforts while igniting the fire in the stove. A radiant *Yogi* appeared in front of me and presented this platter to me. He simply said, ‘Whenever your wife needs to cook food this will be useful. But this platter should be put under the rays of the sun and you will have to do your usual worship at that time.’ I bowed down to him to pay obeisance and closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, he had already turned back and gone far away. I kept asking myself, ‘Who could he be?’ and kept looking in the direction that he went. I could clearly see that the grass under his footsteps was burnt and scorched.” Yudhishtira reported what had happened.

Krishna took the copper platter in his hands and observed it once. He smiled to himself, and closing his eyes he muttered something. Handing the platter back to Yudhishtira he smilingly said, “This is a very special platter. It will never let you fall short of food!”

Krishna and the others stayed with us in Kamyakavana for a few days. Once Uddhavadeva said to me, “Draupadi, you and your five husbands are indeed fortunate. Don’t feel sad about your living in the forest. I have complete faith that things will happen just as dada said. He himself will make it happen. You know him even better than me!”

I became cautious and immediately said to him, “It is true that I know him quite well, but not as much as you, Deva!” Hearing that, Uddhavadeva gave a pious smile. His smile reminded me of Krishna’s smile which gave me a different experience every time. Looking at him was like having a pleasant experience of looking at Krishna’s reflection in a mirror.

With the help of attendants, we properly arranged all the weapons such as Arjuna's Gandiva bow, Bhimsena's mace, Nakula's sword, and Sahadeva's pestle and other useful things that Dhrishtadada had carried in his chariot, in the cottage. Among them when I saw a comb for making my hair and *Kajal* for the eyes that Sautramanimata had sent I strongly remembered her.

They bade farewell to us and were ready to go back. One has to walk on the path that life lays before one. Yet my heart became heavy with the thought that Krishna was leaving. I said to him, "Next time bring Rukminivahini and Bhamavahini along with all other vahinis. Tell Subhadra that I am taking good care of her master archer. Do come to meet me with Abhimanyu once."

My friend Krishna left the Kamyakavana along with Uddhavadeva, Daruka, and Dhrishtadada. Before leaving he had clearly stated what he was going to do, which had given me great peace of mind. Indeed, it is a best friend's job – to cherish the familial relations formed by birth and the friendship formed by bonding of the souls. Because of his promise even our life in the forest became carefree and delightful. We had to live in the forest not for a short time, but for a good twelve years.

During this time of twelve years which tested our mettle, we lived in three different forests– Kamyakavana, Dvaitavana and Gandhamadana. For the first six months, we lived in Kamyakavana. In this forest, we survived on the fruits and roots that my husbands gathered and the animals they hunted. They took turns even for hunting. Sometimes Bhimsena alone would bring two boars and three-four deer to the cottage with the help of the tribesmen. There were also other aashramas in this forest. Due to the commotion during hunting the daily routine of the hermits from other aashramas was getting disturbed. They complained to Yudhishtira about the disturbance caused in the daily rituals.

We decided to leave Kamyakavana and came to Dvaitavana. Here one day Maharishi Vyasa came to visit us unexpectedly. He stayed for two days. For two days, my five husbands and I were occupied in serving him. None of the Pandavas went out to the forest during this time. The Maharishi gave us detailed guidance as to how we should face the arduous life in the forest. In this forest too we stayed for six months, that is, till the month of Margashirsha.

In the second phase of our stay in the forests, we returned to the Kamyakavana from the Dvaitavana. The incident that took place in the gambling hall of the Kurus was indicative of the royal vengeance of

Duryodhana, Dushasana, Shakuni and Karna. They were not going to molest me physically in front of the elders. They had an intense urge to avenge the insults that they suffered at my hands knowingly or unknowingly. None of them had even an iota of carnal desire towards me. But here in the Kamyakavana one such incident happened when my chastity was threatened.

Jayadratha, the leader of Sindhu-Sauvira caused me to suffer this. He was travelling from his Sindhu kingdom to the city of Martikavati of Shalva. Kotika, the son of King Suratha of the Shibis accompanied him. Their combined army camped near our aashrama. Yes, our Pandava colony was now being recognized as an aashrama due to the presence of Dhaumya rishi.

In the aashrama while I was alone in my cottage, and Dhaumya rishi with a few of his disciples and servants was in the guru-cottage, Kotika of the Shibis came to my cottage. Those were the days of summer.

While wiping the drops of sweat on his forehead with his shawl he requested me for some water. I filled a clay pot with water and went to give it to him. He drank the water staring at my long open hair reaching my heels and my dark curvaceous figure with unblinking eyes. While handing over the clay pot to me he looked deep into my eyes and asked, “Are there any Neelkamal flowers in the cottage? I can smell their fragrance!”

“No. There are no such flowers in the cottage. That fragrance is coming from me!” I answered with an innocent smile. He also smiled and thanking me, went away.

I got busy with cooking. Usually it didn't happen but today Nakula who was on duty to guard the cottage also went to the forest to bring something. I was all alone in the cottage. Within a few minutes some commotion of the soldiers was heard around my cottage. Following that a hefty, armed man entered the cottage saying, “Where is that Draupadi of the Pandavas – the fragrant Kaurava maid living in the forest?” His eyes were full of the fire of lust. They looked so different from Duryodhana and Dushasana's eyes.

He recklessly put his arms around my waist! He was forcefully abducting me – a married woman – a wife of five husbands, in broad daylight. Again, I screamed loudly gathering all my courage – ‘Oh sage, run... save me...’ Dhaumya rishi hurried out with a few male and female attendants. But Jayadratha put me in his chariot and ordered his charioteer to speed up. The chariot left, and my femininity got dragged along with it. How many more lecherous, lusty glances this body named Draupadi was going to have to bear?

Jayadratha had tightly held my wrist in his firm grasp. His charioteer was speeding the chariot as if it was being followed by a herd of tigers. Utterly helpless I was whimpering, “Help Achyuta... Madhava... Milinda...help.” Jayadratha was laughing wickedly with contempt and saying, “That low life cowherd is in Dwaraka. Let your five husbands stay here in the Kamyakavana collecting wood! Come, I will make you Maharani of the Sindhu-Sauviras. A diamond like you only befits the crown of the Sindhu leader. Your life is not for collecting wood in the forest. I have come all the way here looking for you after hearing the fame of your fragrance.” The chariot kept moving fast. It was unbearable to hear his words.

Here in our aashrama my mighty husband Bhimsena was the first one to return. As soon as he heard the news of my abduction from Dhaumya rishi he did not waste a moment. He climbed onto the stone platform on the west of the aashrama and shouted, sending a signal for Arjuna to hurry. The next moment Bhimsena mounted a sturdy horse that Sahadeva had tied and started galloping in the direction pointed by Dhaumya rishi. He was taking one precaution while going. He was stripping off the branches of the trees that were coming his way, like an elephant stripping off the branches in his way. It was a signal for Arjuna who was going to follow him soon.

As he had left immediately due to his extreme love for me, he had even forgotten to carry his mace. Halfway down the road he realized it. It was not possible to go back from there. He took out his ultimate weapon. The son of Vayu had such a loud and harsh voice that it would scare the hell out of the person who was at the receiving end. In a battle, he would scare his enemy dead simply by his loud screaming. He started roaring at the top of his lungs – “Jayadratha you rotten creature, wait. How dare you think that you would be able to pluck the fragrant lotus flower of the Pandavas while I am alive? Wait! You, sinful soul.”

Jayadratha’s chariot carrying me had to come to a halt as there was a river ahead of us. While his charioteer was looking for a boatman who could put his boat in the water, I heard the loud cries of Bhimsena which gave me courage. I relaxed. Jayadratha had also heard the roaring cries. He grabbed my wrist firmly and started dragging me towards a boat visible far away. His armed charioteer went to stop Bhima. Bhimsena was unarmed; he began throwing stones at the charioteer and kept shouting, “Jayadratha, you wretched man... Wait! I dare you to fight a wrestling bout with me if you are the true leader of the Sindhus.”

Even Arjuna who was following with his Gandiva bow could hear the screams. By this time Bhimsena had already killed the charioteer only by throwing stones at him. He had grabbed the sword from the charioteer's hand and now he was holding it.

Now swift arrows started swishing our way. Just from their sound I recognized that my husband Arjuna – the master archer had come. Within a few moments Arjuna came into sight standing next to Bhimsena. Meanwhile I was feeling half dead due to all the dragging and screaming.

Jayadratha got nervous seeing both the sons of Kunti chasing him together. His grip on my wrist slackened. Leaving me on the spot the mighty Kshatriya, so-called leader of the Sindhus disappeared in the thick Kamyakavana. He simply ran away.

Due to the prompt actions of my husbands, Bhima and Arjuna, my honour was protected. I had resentment in my heart against my valiant husbands because they did not utter a word of protest and sat meekly in the gambling hall while I was put through a gruesome experience. Yudhishtira was the one towards whom I had the most ire. My anger towards Bhima and Arjuna reduced considerably after this attack of Jayadratha. More than feeling happy about my honour being saved I felt much more satisfied to see that the valour of Bhima and Arjuna that had as good as vanished was reawakened and got a new edge again. But I was still not ready to forgive Yudhishtira! He was the reason that I was shared by five husbands. He was the one who shamelessly played the game of dice putting me at stake. It was because of his doing that Dushasana had dared to touch my saree in front of venerable elders.

After giving it considerable thought I decided that the valour of two of my five husbands had been awakened. Now the same should happen with the others. Otherwise their valour would get extinguished like sparks of fire on a boulder in the forest. A decision was taken in our forest meeting that we should have at least one Astra – a divine weapon at our disposal. For that purpose, Arjuna who had the potential to earn the Pashupatastra should go to Mount Himavana. He should perform the necessary penance and obtain the Astra from Shiva.

As per the unanimous decision Arjuna bade farewell to us and left in the direction of the North. The more I remembered Krishna whenever I was alone in the aashrama, the more I discovered the latent 'Draupadi' within myself. I realized fully that I won't be able to survive being just a wife to my five husbands during this long period of living in the forest. I will have to be

their mother – who would pull their ears when needed and who will love them affectionately as well.

The Kauravas had now usurped our Indraprastha kingdom. They had imposed the administrative system of Hastinapura on Indraprastha. They had dismissed all the commanders and chiefs of our fourfold army, and replaced them with arrogant leaders from Hastinapura. It was not only the Pandavas and I who suffered due to being condemned to the forest. The citizens of Indraprastha who had lived happily under our rule also suffered. We were getting all the information about it from the news that we got from Mahatma Vidura, and minister Sanjaya.

It was now six years since we came to the Kamyakavana. In the meantime, Arjuna had also returned from Mount Himavana after obtaining the Pashupatastra from Shiva who was disguised as a tribal man. During this time, from Dwaraka, occasionally Chief Minister Vipruthu, sometimes commander Satyaki or Anadhrishti, at times Krishna's most handsome son Pradyumna visited us on Krishna's behalf. Whenever Pradyumna came he occasionally went to the forest with Nakula to collect sacrificial sticks for Dhaumya rishi's *yajna*. It was amusing to see both of them together. Nakula, in the white vestures of a forest dweller and Pradyumna, in the royal costume looked alike.

Balaramadada also came to visit us occasionally along with Revativahini and his brothers Gada and Sarana. Once he and Bhimsena came together they would stay together till the time of their departure. Notably, even here sometimes both the guru and the disciple would turn our front yard in the Kamyakavana into a mace pit and practice a mace fight till both of them got sweaty. As both of them used to snore loudly at night their grass beds would be arranged in the front yard. One thing was notable that both of them would get up very early before sunrise and be back from the stream after taking a dip. Sometimes, at dusk after the evening prayers Bhimsena would massage his guru's feet with oil.

Every time Balaramadada came, inadvertently I compared him and Krishna in my mind. Then I realized that Balaramadada could be compared only with Bhimsena.

My five husbands had regarded Dhaumya rishi as their guru in the Kamyakavana. Living in the forest had brought them closer to Dhaumya rishi. As his disciples spread throughout Aaryavarta came to know that he had come here, they would come to the Kamyakavana in groups. Sometimes



they would be even more than fifty in number. Then it would get really difficult for the sage to make arrangements for their food. Yudhishtira who observed it would say to me, “Draupadi, send your copper platter which has been charged by Srikrishna with the power of mantras to the rishi’s cottage”.

Then for quite some time that copper platter would stand in the front yard of the rishi’s cottage, shining in the rays of the sun. The food cooked in that platter would never fall short for the guests. When I saw, Yudhishtira serving food to the disciples, my anger towards him began waning gradually.

The rainy season that thrashed the Kamyakavana was over. The overflowing rivers in the forest returned to their normal flow. Fog, announcing the severe cold of winter, began covering the forest. Now it was necessary to leave the Kamyakavana as soon as possible. Bhima and Arjuna built two neat and beautiful boats with their brothers’ assistance. All five brothers were going to take turns carrying those on their shoulders. Without taking any household goods from here we were going to leave this forest only with the clothes that we were wearing. Wherever we were going we were going to build a new cottage and begin a new life there. On the chosen day, all of us met Dhaumya rishi and sought his blessings. He was also going to follow us to the new forest along with his disciples.

We reached the Dvaitavana after crossing many rivers. Here also Bhima and Arjuna raised a spacious cottage to our liking. It was even bigger in size than the previous one. My five husbands built a circular, sturdy, protective wooden fence around it, and also raised a small colony of big and small huts nearby for the rishi and his disciples. Dhaumya rishi was going to bring our cows and cattle with him later. Within a couple of months our Pandava colony in the Dvaitavana was inhabited and running smoothly. Then Yudhishtira invited Dhaumya rishi through Nakula. First, the sage’s disciples arrived in groups along with the cattle. Dhaumya rishi arrived with the last group.

Now our Pandava colony in the Dvaitavana was well established. Early in the morning mantra chanting blended with the clouds of smoke rising from the huts and the rishi’s tall cottage in the centre. In front of Dhaumya rishi’s cottage a spacious *yajna* pit started blazing day and night. The comforting, pure hymn of the Almighty sung by his disciples began echoing in the ambience –

This entire universe is an abode of the Almighty. Hearing such words at the beginning of the prayer I would inadvertently remember Krishna. It did not

feel as if he was somewhere far away near the western ocean. It felt like he was always here in the Dvaitavana with our Pandava family. I would have an uncontrollable urge to test all my husbands and check if they also felt the same about Krishna. If I would have asked them all at the same time, they would have just reiterated what the first one answered. Their true feelings wouldn't have been revealed. Then my test would not be successful.

Therefore, in the Dvaitavana I tested each one of them separately, one by one. On the very first day when the sage began the hymn, as soon as I heard the commencing words I asked Arjuna, "*Dhananjaya*, what do you feel when you hear this hymn?"

He answered precisely, "I sing this hymn in my heart day and night. I feel that the almighty in this hymn also resides in my heart!" I would feel ecstatic hearing his reply.

Still, to get confirmation of his love for Krishna I would probe him further, "Would you feel like singing this hymn if Krishna stands here, in front of you?"

Just as he was a master archer with perfect aim, he was also a brilliant friend of Krishna. He would immediately understand my intention in asking the question. He would say, "If he were in front of me why would I even need to sing a hymn? Does one ever hear one's own praise? Krishney, has Arjuna ever remained Arjuna in his presence?" His perfect and precise answer would leave me speechless.

After a few days, I asked the same question to my eldest husband Yudhishtira, "Do you remember Krishna while hearing this hymn?"

He answered according to his temperament and befitting his seniority, "Draupadi, what did Arjuna answer to this probing question of yours? Consider that as my answer too!" His reply would indicate his lost kingship, his seniority and his love for Krishna too. He would have unmistakably surmised that I had asked this question to Arjuna before him, which would clearly indicate his seniority and kingship. He would agree completely with Arjuna's answer even without knowing it, which would express his love for Krishna and Arjuna too.

I asked the same question to Bhimsena after a few days. He replied, "Everybody considers me as Hunger and Power incarnate. It is true that the world cannot run without these two. For me Krishna is Hunger and Power!" Even his reply would be apt and correct.

I asked this question to Nakula. He said, "Krishna resides everywhere.

Anything that is beautiful is proof of his being there.” His answer would be suitable to his temperament.

In the end, I asked this question to Sahadeva, “Oh Sahadeva, tell me what exactly do you feel listening to this hymn?” The answer he gave was in keeping with his nature.

Sahadeva replied, “Shyamale, I see Krishna who resides everywhere in the world, in the form of a horse. He is cautious, fast and has control over sleep like a horse!” I felt satisfied after hearing his answer too. His answer also suited his character.

Each Pandava’s reply showed his own perception of Krishna. No doubt they all loved Krishna from the bottom of their heart.

The answer that Sahadeva gave made me go deeper in my own soul. Now wasn’t it the most important question as to how my love for Krishna is? I asked myself, “What do you find Krishna like?” The reply came, “A lot like Arjuna. No – no – like Yudhishtira. No – like Bhima? No – then who else? Like Nakula or Sahadeva? No – No–.” I couldn’t find any answer to the question that I had asked myself. I became restless and agitated. Deep down in my heart I thought, ‘Instead of having to find out what I feel about him by using my intellect, how about getting to see it with my own eyes? Right now, here in this Dvaitavana!!’

Even as I was looking restlessly at Sahadeva’s after hearing his reply he rushed out of the cottage towards the entrance outside saying ‘Oh the Ashwapurusha – the Horse-man’.

Yes! My best friend, the Lord of Dwaraka – Krishna himself had come to the Dvaitavana to meet me. Daruka had brought his embellished grand chariot Garudadhwaya with four pure white horses in front of our ashrama entrance. Krishna descended from the chariot first. As I saw him help Bhamavahini gently get down I too ran forward. So, as soon as I remembered him intensely my best friend stood in front of me in the Dvaita vana along with Bhamavahini and Uddhavadeva.

This was the second-time Krishna was coming to visit us in the forest. In this second visit I strongly realized that though he was the Lord of opulent Dwaraka, when he came to visit us he came in a very simple manner with a few selected people, leaving his army, chariots and elephant troops behind. He had never done anything in his life without any purpose. Even in his alert sleep he would be thinking about the welfare of the world that was awake. He had one intention in coming to visit us in a simple manner – of respecting our

way of living in the forest and our Kshatriya pride! What if he would have visited us with the same grandeur that he visited other places in Aaryavarta? My husbands would have intensely felt their poverty. Their hearts which were already full of guilt due to the insults they had suffered in their lives would have been completely shattered. The most significant quality of Krishna that I had felt was that he always kept the life around him blooming.

With Krishna's arrival, our aashrama in the Dvaitavana was filled with joy. As soon as he came, first he went to visit Dhaumya rishi, even before eating or drinking anything. Usually, Dhaumya rishi would also forget himself once he started his meditation. As Krishna went in front of the rishi, he automatically opened his eyes with a smile though nobody had informed him. As he saw Krishna in front of him he stood up at once. Krishna moved forward with agility and kneeling down, put his smooth forehead on his feet with respect. The rishi smiled again and offered his blessings, 'May all be well. Arise, oh, Lord of Dwaraka.' Bhamavahini and Uddhavadeva also put their heads on the feet of Dhaumya rishi.

Dhaumya rishi who was smiling pleasantly, took his seat. Krishna sat in front of him on a grass mat, along with Uddhavadeva and Bhamavahini on either side. Around them Bhima and Arjuna sat on the right, Nakula-Sahadeva on the left hand and Yudhishtira directly behind him. Daruka stood near the door of the cottage. As Krishna saw him he said, "Daruka, why are you standing so far? Come closer. Come and sit near Yudhishtira." Awkwardly fidgeting he stood in his place. Then Krishna invited him again saying 'Come' and smiled.

Daruka said, 'As you wish Sire' and sat in our Yadava-Pandava circle. First of all, Dhaumya rishi inquired about the welfare of the royal circle of Dwaraka including Vasudevababa, Devakimata and Rohinimata, Balaramadada and Revativahini.

Then for quite some time all of us chatted about various subjects. The subject of Pashupatastra came up during the discussion. At that time, Krishna asked Arjuna a question, "Dear friend, I am very happy that you have obtained the Pashupatastra. I am also proud of you for the reason that you succeeded in pleasing Lord Shiva who is quite difficult to please. Tell me, what difference do you find in the Arjuna before obtaining the Pashupatastra and after obtaining it?"

Arjuna was flustered. He had never thought about it in this way. Yet he cleverly said, "You are omniscient. You know everything. Then why are you

testing me in front of all?”

Krishna didn't allow him to digress from the topic, and asked him, “Are the mantras of Shiva's hymn more valuable or the mantras of the actual projection of Pashupatastra?”

Arjuna answered like a proficient warrior, “Both.”

Krishna smiled at that and said, “Brother Udho, tell this master archer, what is most important in Pashupatastra.”

Uddhavadeva said ‘Yes dada’ and answered with a smile, “Shm karoti iti Shankaraha – Shankar with such powers himself is most important! It is essential to remember Pashupati himself before the projection mantras of Pashupatastra!”

Now everybody started looking at Uddhavadeva reverently. Master archer *Dhananjaya* realized how inexperienced he was compared to both these brothers. He felt ashamed. That was also not right. So, Krishna immediately said, “Brother Arjuna, Udho and you – both are my friends – one is the master of Pashupatastra and another is a devotee of Shiva.”

One day, after performing the morning rituals, Bhamavahini and I came to the shores of a lake in the forest. I wanted to collect my share of the sacrificial sticks that were offered daily in the *yajna* of Dhaumya rishi in the name of Krishna. I never delegated this task to anybody else. On my way back, I would also collect red lotus flowers from another lake for my daily worship. Today I had the company of a lady from the Yadava clan. After collecting the sacrificial sticks, we both came to the lake and sat on the shore. We casually put our feet in the blue waters of the lake. For the first time, today, I strongly felt how dark my complexion was! Bhamavahini's feet looked so ruddy and beautiful! The dark colour of my feet had blended in the blue waters. Her ruddy feet had surpassed even the blue waters. Bhamavahini asked me unexpectedly, “*Sakhi* Draupadi, a doubt has been lingering in my mind for quite a few days. Since a long time, I have wanted to get it cleared from you when we met.”

“What is it?” My curiosity was aroused.

She said, “I want to ask you a question – but how? I feel shy.”

“First you are my friend and then my *vahini*. My beloved Krishna's wife. On top of that you are my elder too. You have the right to ask me anything freely.”

“Dear friend Draupadi, I have been observing subtly, since I came here in the Dvaitavana that all your five husbands behave as per your wish. None of

them even thinks of going against your word. You yourself have told me while chatting that Bhimsena once had courageously brought some lotus flowers from another lake like this one in the Kamyakavana. So, dear Krishney, please tell me also what do you do to keep your five husbands under your spell!”

I was stunned for a moment hearing her thought which was completely unexpected for me. For the first time in my life I realized that not just men but even a woman can think in such a way about me with reference to the Pandavas. Today such a thought had occurred in Krishna’s wife Bhamavahini’s mind.

I got confused as to what answer I should give her. I said to her, “What are you asking me *vahini*? Is there ever any kind of mantra to keep your husband in your control?”

She was Bhamavahini – not Rukmini. She said, “Let me explain to you clearly what my question is. How come these five husbands of yours who are so god-like and as valiant as the Lord of Dwaraka, submit to your word day and night? Do you follow any religious rituals for that? Or do you use any specialized tactics from the Kamashastra? Have you gotten any potent medicine concocted for that purpose?”

I was utterly surprised now. I asked her as per my nature, “Dear *vahini*, what prompted you today to ask such a weird question?” She felt a bit embarrassed. She kept silent for a few moments. As if she had remembered a lot of things she said, “Draupadi, friend, how should I begin! It has been so many years since my father Satrajita offered my hand to the Lord of Dwaraka in the crowded assembly of the Yadavas. My husband treats me extremely affectionately and lovingly sometimes. That time it feels like he loves nobody else more than me in the whole world. But only he knows where he gets lost the next moment. That time it feels like he doesn’t belong to me. Therefore, I am wondering whether I can always keep the Lord of Dwaraka under my influence, even if by learning some mantras for endearment from you – by making you my Guru.”

Hearing her wish I was quite angry. I said to her, “You are asking me the ways of women who are not virtuous! You are asking me the strategies used by women who are not loyal to their husband. How am I supposed to know that?” She was nonplussed by my answer. Still she persisted, “Don’t you follow a single one of these ways?”

“No!” I replied calmly.

“Yet you have kept your husbands in your control! What kind of magic is this?”

“To be one with your husband in mind and bonded with him doesn’t mean keeping him in your control. I am fortunate enough to have such a bond – not with one but with five husbands. This is the only truth!”

Now the pride of a lady belonging to the Yadava clan was shattered. Satyabhamavahini who was otherwise so proud joined both her palms together in front of me and said, “Krishney, I want to be your disciple from today. Give me your blessings and tell me of a woman’s *Dharma* that you follow with regard to your husbands.”

I held her hands affectionately in mine and said, “Dear friend, I serve my husbands without any pride and anger. Your question just now made me wonder what if you had gone through the same fate in the Yadava council that I suffered in the Kuru council! You would have totally abandoned your husbands with the pride and anger inherent in you.”

Due to my words, she became engrossed in introspection. She fell silent. I went near her, and forgetting that I was younger to her I held her close like a sister and patting her I said, “Bhame, pride sneaks into one’s mind like a thief. The lady of the house should always be cautious to chase it away not only from her own mind but also from the minds of other family members. Or else it devours and destroys everything. Anger is the next stage of pride!”

She kept listening attentively, forgetting her seniority. I kept talking, forgetting I was her junior. “Every morning when I get up the first thing I do is cast a glance at my palms and remember the family deity of the Panchalas and Pandavas. Then I concentrate my mind and remember my friend Krishna. I never argue with my husbands, never look at them suggestively in front of others. I never treat them disrespectfully to insult their honour. I don’t touch my meal – not only before my husbands but also before the servants have eaten their meal. I always keep everything in the house neat and tidy. That is why I have survived even this stay in the forest.” My Yadava friend who was till now constantly fidgeting her fair legs in the lake now started to listen to me with steady mind and legs. I intently looked into her big, black, radiant eyes and said, “Oh dear Bhama, to keep my husbands contented all the time I cook delicious, gourmet dishes for them to the liking of each one of them. When one of them goes to another city for any reason I follow religious rituals for his wellbeing. Whatever traditions of the family my mother-in-law has taught me, I follow them to the letter. I have never disobeyed my mother-

in-law – the rajmata. I consider her more like my own mother than the rajmata.

“I keep track of all the valuable ornaments in our family treasury. I have always kept a keen watch on those. I always make sure that the servants are doing their chores on time and neatly. I don’t know any other mantra for controlling my husbands than this.”

Now the queen of Dwaraka felt genuinely ashamed. A new shade manifested in her original nature. Very softly she said, “Forgive me, my friend. You are the Lord of Yadava’s most favourite among all women, just like Radhika from Gokul. I have heard it from him many a times, and so I asked you many questions. Forgive me, if as the lady of the Pandava family you found them offensive.”

I also felt the change in her. It didn’t feel good to me that my dear Krishna’s wife was seeking forgiveness from me. I gently lifted her tapering, fair chin up with a lot of affection and looking deep in her eyes I said, “Oh Queen of Yadavas, if you want to keep Krishna under your spell you must practice humility all the time. Treat everyone with pure love.

“You had an egotistical attitude that only you are his favourite wife. That kind of pride generated the question in your mind today.

“Dear friend, just drown that pride in the western ocean that surrounds Dwaraka and roars continuously. Be one with only Krishna. Submit your life at his feet with utter devotion and no expectation. Merge your personality into that great personality. And then you will never feel that he has gone away from you. He serves those who submit themselves to him. Remember, his favourite yoga is only one yoga – Premayoga!”

My heart was filled with gloom that Krishna was going back to Dwaraka. Now the period of six years of staying in the Dvaitavana was coming to an end. After that we had to go incognito for one year. I was feeling dejected thinking about whether we would be able to meet Krishna again or not. If we do meet, in what condition would we be? An urgent meeting was convened in the meeting room of our cottage. Krishna sat on an elevated seat covered with a grass mat, which Bhima had placed facing the east.

All of us sat in front of Krishna. The eldest Pandava Yudhishtira sat on his right with Bhima and Arjuna on his right and Nakula-Sahadeva on his left. Bhamavahini and I sat on Krishna’s left. Uddhavadeva sat in the centre, facing Krishna. Daruka stood at the door of the cottage, holding a whip in his hand. He was not going to let into the cottage any of Dhaumya rishi’s



disciples or servants. This was a very important Yadava-Pandava meeting in the Dvaitavana, arranged secretly with a lot of precautions. The organizer of the meeting and the speaker – everything was Krishna. The upcoming mission was of me and my five husbands living strictly incognito for one year. A smallest mistake from any one of us during this period would banish us to another round of residing in the forest and living incognito as punishment. For that, Krishna had called this meeting, to give us all the instructions of caution and forewarn us.

As Krishna seated himself on the elevated seat his face changed. It started looking much more radiant at once.

He began muttering something in the sitting position with his eyes closed. His face gradually got more and more luminous with each word that he muttered. After quite some time he gradually opened his fish-shaped eyes.

Dear friend Krishna began speaking in his divine sweet language, “Oh valiant Pandava brothers, a very critical testing period in your life is about to begin – the period of living incognito! This period is going to last for one whole year. During this time, each one of you will particularly have to forget that you are five brothers – the Pandavas – the sons of Kunti and the sons of Madri. Though you have been living in the forest Draupadi is still your queen. Henceforth you and she will have to forget your past life. She will have to play the role of a maid. Each one of you will have to play the roles of different kinds of attendants. I have thoroughly and deeply pondered over what kind of roles all five of you will have to play efficiently. Each role has been decided keeping in mind your nature and temperaments.

If you are thinking that you may go to any distant forests and quietly spend your time of living incognito there, it is simply not going to be possible. Even before your period of living incognito begins, Duryodhana’s skilled informers from his secret service will be infiltrating all forests of Aaryavarta. They will form an alliance with the tribal kings of each of the forests and thoroughly search them. Considering this strategy of his I have decided that your stay in the Dvaitavana will be your last stay in a forest. We will have to plan some gimmicks so that Duryodhana and his secret agents from Hastinapura will keep searching for all of you particularly in the forests. For that purpose, five Yadavas and a woman will live in some of the forests in your disguise. Their body structures will resemble yours. The woman will disguise as Draupadi.”

We all kept looking at him mesmerized. He continued, “Even this strategy

will not work for long. Once the duplicate Pandavas in the forests are exposed we will have to immediately withdraw them from there. In the beginning, we will have to deceive them into believing that you brothers have dispersed and are living separately.

“I am expecting that the first three months will pass away in all this. After that we will have to plan something else. The entire Aaryavarta clearly recognizes two of you. Bhimsena as the mace warrior and Arjuna as the master archer. People know the remaining three more by their nature than by the weapons they use.

“The second phase in my planning will be to deceive them by making them believe that each one of you is appearing in a different forest. First, the mighty mace warrior Bhimsena will emerge in one forest. It will be his duplicate. The acclaim of his mace expertise will automatically reach Duryodhana-Shakuni in Hastinapura. A joint troop of mace warriors and wrestlers will leave from Hastinapura to wipe out that Bhimsena. They will try to find out that Bhima as soon as possible. Kauravas are well acquainted with all the habits of Bhima. The duplicate Bhimsena will have to vanish before they can find him.

“After that in another forest in the opposite direction an invincible archer will emerge. His whereabouts will also reach Hastinapura. Wary Duryodhana-Shakuni will try to trace him. He too will have to disappear in time. By this time the first half of the year would pass by.

“For the remaining six months, loyal Yadavas disguised as Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva will surface in different forests in service of the respective tribal kings. They will keep bragging excessively and openly about themselves among the wild tribes. One will display pride about his expertise in horoscopes. One will keep claiming that he is a renowned horse-expert. Another will keep beating his own drums as the land expert. But these three Yadava warriors dispersed in three different forests in three directions will not get caught by the tribal kings. They will vanish just as they surfaced, like mushrooms. One after the other they will return to Dwaraka. But the warriors of Hastinapura will keep searching for them in the forests believing they are still there. By this time the second half of the year of living incognito will be over.

“During this entire year, the secret agents of Hastinapura should think that you are hiding in one of the forests only. The success of this mission majorly depends upon this deception. My expert spy team of Dwaraka will

successfully carry out the difficult task of convincing the Kauravas that you are hiding in a forest for living incognito – that too in the eastern region. You should rest assured about that.

“You are not going to live in a forest during this year. Instead you will be living in one of the renowned royal cities! That too, in the western region. You are not going to live in hiding during this time but openly. I am well aware that this involves great risks. But sometimes in human life such situations arise when one has to play a game of hide and seek with everything that one has, putting one’s life on the line. I have full faith in the courage that each one of you possesses. I believe as much in your indomitable self-control and obedience. Listen very carefully to what I am going to say now and follow my instructions to the letter cautiously throughout the year.”

All of us were preparing ourselves to spend the year of living incognito in some unknown, dense forest. We had thought that at the most my husbands would have to disperse in the forest and live separately. We had prepared ourselves for such a situation. But this friend of mine was telling us something totally different and completely bewildering for us, ‘live openly during the period of living incognito – that too in a royal city –among hundreds and thousands of people.

He kept talking and we kept listening to each and every word cautiously and attentively.

“During this year of living incognito you are going to live in the western region of Aaryavarta; in the royal city of King Virata in the Matsya kingdom as the attendants of the royal family of King Virata! It is most necessary that under any circumstances all five of you stay in touch with each other with caution. Even Draupadi should not stay away from you. You have already experienced that any calamity can befall especially her any time. One gets matured by experiencing hard knocks in life.”

Now he fixed his clear gaze on my eldest husband, the first Pandava, Yudhishtira and said, “Oh *Jyeshtha*, you have the biggest responsibility during this period of living incognito. You will have to play your own role to perfection and also keep a keen eye on the other five. First of all, you will enter Viratanagar of the Matsyas from the eastern gate two months before the period of living incognito begins, as a Brahmin named Kanka who possesses expertise in Vedashastras, Puranas, *Upanishadas*, Aranyakas, Brahmanas and all religious rituals. You will have a code name ‘Jaya’, for the convenience of keeping in touch with your brothers. All you brothers will have to give your

best to achieve ‘Jaya’ i.e. victory in this mission. You will have to astutely pretend that you have thorough knowledge of astrology. First, you will have to win over the Matsya King Virata’s heart. So, let me tell you about the members of the royal family of King Virata. Listen carefully. Sudeshna is the Maharani of Virata – she is a very loving, religious and virtuous lady who keenly observes religious rituals. The royal couple has two sons and a daughter. The eldest son is named Bhuminjaya alias Uttara. In spite of being born in the Kshatriya clan he is extremely timid. The second son is Shweta who is still young. Their sister is Uttaraa. She is exceptionally beautiful, loving, intelligent and a virtuous lady who possesses rare qualities and is very sociable. The commander of the Viratas is Kichaka, giant in size and very powerful. As Maharaja Virata is old and his son Uttara is incompetent, commander Kichaka holds the reins of the people of Virata.

“Once you win over Maharaja Virata with your knowledge of astrology, you will have to skilfully make him aware of the inadequacies in his kingdom, one at a time. The first shortcoming you will bring to his notice will be the lack of a master chef with skills of preparing delicious food suitable for each season.”

Now the Lord of Dwaraka fixed his eyes on Bhimsena’s round, plump face and said to him, “Bhimsena, you will be master chef of the Viratas! Your name will be ‘Ballava’. You, who usually carry a huge mace on your shoulders, will have to enter Viratanagar from the western gate carrying a perforated ladle instead. Looking at your bare and weird appearance the children on the streets may ridicule you occasionally. If it continues for the rest of the year it will be safer for your stay here. You should look comical and not gallant due to your huge physique. As you will be the royal chef on Yudhishtira’s recommendation, your voracious appetite will be automatically taken care of. Your physical strength, which is the only major support for your family will not diminish during this time. In fact, it may increase further. You should take only one precaution. Unless there is an emergency never show yourself in front of commander Kichaka even by mistake! That expert commander of the Viratas will instantly recognize you for sure. Your code name will be ‘Jayesha’.”

Now we got extremely curious. Each and every word of his left us spellbound. It was taking our minds into a completely new territory. The genius commander of the Yadavas, my best friend Krishna, moved his gaze from Bhimsena to Arjuna’s sharp nose and then fixing it on his eyes he said,

“Dear Arjuna, you have to play the most difficult role during this period. You will enter Viratanagar from the main gate and that too, disguised as a woman. The entire Aaryavarta knows you as an indomitable, master archer, and regards you as the best among men. You will have to completely transform your manly handsome appearance that immediately stands out, only then can you remain anonymous. You will have to play the role of ‘Brihannadaa’ – the dance and music teacher of Virata’s daughter Uttaraa. Your code name will be ‘Jayendra’. Instead of bearing the Gandiva bow you will have to dress up like a woman. You will have to put a vermillion dot on your forehead in the name of your husband who is in a faraway country. You will have to adapt a feminine gait and speak like a woman. This is going to be very difficult for you. For that you will have to make Panchali your guru. So far you have been her husband – now you will have to be her disciple. You are already the best of a man, now to be a cultured lady, properly learn what womanhood is, from Panchali!”

He was not just surprising us, but also leaving us shocked. How was my husband Arjuna ever going to agree to disguise himself in a woman’s attire? Instead of that he would prefer to come out of hiding and appear in front of Duryodhana. Krishna surmised the hesitation in his mind unmistakably and said to him, “You are not going to do this only for your own sake. You will have to do it for the sake of all your brothers along with your wife and for the men and women of Indraprastha as your duty towards the kingdom.” Krishna did not give him a chance to waver even a bit and reminded him about the Kshatriya quality in him.

He arose from the grass mat and approached Arjuna. Putting his hand on Arjuna’s shoulder he said very affectionately, “*Dhananjaya*, this disguise of yours as a woman will be remembered forever. The chapter of your manly achievements is going to begin from this chapter of feminine disguise. Play your role with such perfection that even your wife Draupadi won’t be able to recognize you.”

Arjuna felt blessed hearing his words; and touching his feet he said, “Achyuta, everything will be done exactly as you say!”

By this time, Krishna had completely mesmerized our meeting. He went back and took his seat on the grass mat. Fixing his keen, visionary glance on Nakula he said, “Nakula, you will enter Viratanagar from the southern gate as ‘Granthika’. Your code name will be ‘Jayatsena’. As you are an expert in horses, you will skilfully bring the stable of Viratas under your command

within a month. Remember, bringing the horse troops of a kingdom under your control is almost like bringing half the kingdom itself under your control!”

“As you wish Madhusudana. I will successfully complete the task assigned to me.” Handsome Nakula replied with a smile that suited him.

Fixing his bright eyes on the last brother Sahadeva, Krishna said, “Sahadevaa, you will enter Viratanagar from the northern gate as ‘Tantipala’. Your code name will be ‘Jayadbala’. You have acquired deep knowledge of Tanta – the tethers for cows. As an expert cowherd, you will bring the cattle of Viratas under your control. You will have to teach them minute details of how to nurture and protect the cattle. Remember that your knowledge is going to prove significantly beneficial to the Viratas in the near future.”

“As you wish Gopala. Everything will happen as per your wish.” Sahadeva also responded in the affirmative.

Uddhavadeva who was silently listening so far, smiled and expressed a doubt, “Dada your plan is to disguise Arjuna as a woman. Now only Draupadi is left. Are you going to tell her to dress up like a man? Even I don’t understand anything that you are saying now, hence the question.”

“Brother Udho, wait a bit. Listen to what I am saying completely. The role that I have chosen for Draupadi is an appropriate one. She will stay in the chamber of Maharani Sudeshna and Princess Uttaraa as ‘Sairandhri’. Sairandhri is a maid especially assigned for helping the royal ladies in adorning themselves. For the convenience of all her code name will be ‘Malini’.” My prudent friend moved his glance from his dear brothers towards me and gave me instructions, “Draupadi, as Sairandhri you will be the maid to Sudeshnadevi and Uttaraa. You will always stay in the inner chambers of the royal ladies.

“Dear Pandava brothers, you all can meet twice a day in the kitchen of the Viratas at the time of lunch and dinner. Draupadi can go to the kitchen any time under any pretext. *Sakhi* Draupadi can always keep the five of you united by skilfully using your code names.

“Draupadi..., sorry, Sairandhri, no Malini – remember one thing always. You too should particularly avoid going in front of commander Kichaka. If that happens any kind of disaster may befall you. In that case, only Bhimsena will be able to protect you! I won’t be there!”

While talking to me he had intentionally pretended to make a mistake. By making that mistake he wanted to warn me about Kichaka. He wanted to

inscribe the name Malini on my mind. Malini means a flower girl. He had given me this name suggestively. Any woman's chastity is like a flower. I was to protect it and not let it wither. His intention was that I should thoroughly remember my name Malini during this period of living incognito.

He did not ask anybody else but me, "Any doubts Draupadi?" Realizing the intention behind his question I asked, "What should I do about the fragrance emitting from my body?" My five husbands along with Uddhavadeva kept staring with their eyes wide.

My best friend Krishna was different from anybody else. He imagined himself in my place living as Sairandhri for an entire year and said, "The fragrance of your body can be taken care of by using a new Ketaka leaf in your thick, curly hair, daily. But during this period of living incognito you will have to tie your thick, long hair that you have left open so far. For that you will have to use a strip of cloth. There will be no one to serve you as you yourself will be a maid, you will have to do it by yourself."

Thus, the entire mission of our living incognito was planned with minute details under Krishna's guidance. Entering the Matsya kingdom along with our weapons wouldn't be proper. Everybody handed over their weapons to Bhimsena. He was going to keep them in a safe secret place on the border of the Matsya kingdom and only then was going to enter Viratanagar. The forest meeting concluded by remembering Goddess Ida and chanting her prayer.

Krishna bade farewell to us and left for Dwaraka along with Bhamavahini and Uddhavadeva. Within a few days our period of staying in the forest was over. As per Krishna's plan we began our journey to go into living incognito. Before leaving a meeting was held under Yudhishtira's guidance to revise how each one should behave during that period. Now all six of us had no doubts left in our mind.

As decided, from the Dvaitavana first Yudhishtira entered alone into Viratanagar and presented himself in the service of King Virata. Following him Bhimsena, Arjuna and all of us entered the city one after the other. All of us assumed our roles and began our work cautiously. Yudhishtira barely managed to send a messenger to Dwaraka to let Krishna know that we had safely reached Viratanagar. It was the last contact with Krishna and Dwaraka. Now, not even by mistake was any messenger or message from Dwaraka going to come to Viratanagar. We were going to hear any news of Dwaraka only from the Chief Minister of the Viratas, that also very rarely. Thus, our struggle in life which one may call incognito or one may not, began.

While I was serving as a maid even if just for adornment of the royal ladies, initially I made some prominent mistakes that anyone could have noticed. Somehow, I managed to cover them up by giving some lame excuses at that time. But I realized afterwards that before giving convincing excuses for my mistakes and correcting them, every single time I would remember Krishna unwittingly. Sometimes when I thought about it at leisure I strongly felt that it was only by his wish that all this – our living in the forest and then incognito was happening. He was so unified with our Pandava family that he was making us experience everything that he had experienced in his life. He had chosen an incognito life for himself since his birth. Later he had gone to the forest of Avanti in the aashrama of Acharya Sandipani to obtain all-round knowledge of life by submitting himself at the feet of his guru. Though that was not actually living in the forest he had experienced it thoroughly by living in that aashrama and by grazing the cattle in the meadows on Mount Govardhana. Nowadays such thoughts would strongly take hold of my mind and take me closer to Krishna. I don't know if any of my five husbands experienced it or not, but what I felt was that Krishna himself was living with us as one of the servants of Viratas! That is why I felt fearless while spending the days of living incognito in Viratanagar.

Six months of our incognito life passed by uneventfully. Then the first news of Dwaraka which arrived in Viratanagar was that of the wedding of Samba – the son of our Jambavativahini – to Lakshmana, the daughter of Duryodhana who was the reason of our misery! Word was that Balaramadada had taken all the initiative in this marriage alliance. We all got the news in the kitchen of the Viratas by word of mouth. I was completely shocked by that news. Various thoughts crossed my mind. Samba was the son of my friend Krishna and Jambavativahini, meaning my *bhacha*. How come Krishna who had been the best friend to us Pandavas accepted Lakshmana, the daughter of Duryodhana who humiliated me, as his own daughter-in-law? And due to this marriage has Krishna befriended Duryodhana just like he befriended us? If he has indeed become Duryodhana's friend, then what was going to happen to us? Then who is going to be our patron in this incognito life that was planned by him?

Not only me but my five husbands also became restless by the news; completely shocked. We couldn't meet each other openly. We couldn't even talk in detail about this major news during the short meeting that we could have in the kitchen. We were going through a big emotional turmoil.



Krishna himself released us soon from this tension. For the first time his messenger came to Viratanagar and met with Kanka the expert astrologer of the Viratas. The message he delivered instantly released our mental tension. Indeed, it was Krishna's specialty that he would think of an event from all angles, took into consideration its effect everywhere, and found a perfect solution for it.

In short, the story of the Samba-Lakshmana marriage went like this – Samba had abducted Duryodhana's daughter Lakshmana from Hastinapura. The only reason for that was he had liked her with all his heart. Actually, Duryodhana should have prudently accepted the relation with Krishna through this bond; like Rukminivahini's brother Rukmi had tried to patch up by giving his daughter Rukmavati's hand in marriage to Pradyumna. But, in spite of everything that had happened Duryodhana still considered Krishna as a lowlife cowherd. Was he a good diplomat? Not at all. If he were then he would have accepted Samba as his son-in-law. But the exact opposite thing happened. Duryodhana chased Samba and Lakshmana and put Samba in the prison of Hastinapura, and sent Lakshmana back to the royal palace. Due to all these happenings, there was agitation in Dwaraka. Balaramadada brandished the Samvartaka plough on his shoulders and attacked Hastinapura with the army. He ferociously fought with Duryodhana's army and left Hastinapura shaken. Defeating his disciple, he freed his *putanya* Samba from the prison. He brought Samba to Dwaraka along with Lakshmana and got them married with grandeur. Krishna watched everything silently. Why? I was wondering about that. But after giving it thorough thought I realized that the reason he kept quiet throughout this episode was only because of us Pandavas. He probably did not find it right to hurt his big brother while we were living incognito. He had sent a special message only for me with his messenger. It said, "Krishney, I have no relation with Duryodhana whatsoever. You should harbour no doubt in your heart. Once the incognito life ends and your five husbands come out in the open I have plans to get much bigger things done by them. It's up to you to convince them to remain calm."

While listening to this message a very different quality of his that I had not realized so far touched my heart. He was a true diplomat; something much more than that. He always had a vision to look at any big event happening around him in a prudent manner. Nowadays I was clearly becoming aware that my love for him as a friend was transforming into a devotion that could

not be defined. It was his doing after all. He was a true king of the *Chandravansha*. His legacy was that of the moon which stays far away in the sky and makes the lotus flowers bloom in a lake. It was indeed a blessing to feel Krishna's closeness with such intensity while he was far away, than to experience him closely in his person.

I had unmistakably noticed a subtle thing about Krishna right from our very first meeting in Kampilyanagar. He always forewarned me of future happenings in a subtle way while talking to me. It was he who had convinced the rajmata prudently that it would be better that I accept five husbands in marriage. That too, in front of me, while looking at me. During this period of living incognito, while making the long black hair of Virata princess Uttaraa I would automatically go into a trance. At such times, occasionally the princess would reprimand me saying, "Sairandhri, you are being so careless – where are you looking and what are you doing? Do you even know how to make hair? If you cannot handle my thick, black hair I will choose another maid. You can just leave!" I would have to take her upbraiding in my stride.

Then to alleviate her anger I would tell her stories of Krishna of Dwaraka, Arjuna-Draupadi of Indraprastha and Subhadra and her son Abhimanyu as if I was a third person and had just heard all those from someone else. She would listen to those tales attentively. As I had a watchful disposition, I had already noted a subtle thing about her. She paid extra attention to the tales of Arjuna more than anybody else. Sometimes she would also ask questions about Arjuna.

I would frequently visit the dance school and the kitchen of the Viratas under some pretext or the other. I would see Brihannadaa in the dance school wearing the special Matsya style costume with the *Padar* tucked in. The sound of the jingling anklets on her feet at the rhythm of the dance beat 'Ta Thai Tak Thai' would leave me heartbroken. Arjuna was the best man among my five husbands. He possessed many rare qualities. Probably that is why, more than the others he was the one who had to go through this difficult test of living as an insignificant maid.

While making Uttaraa practice, Brihannadaa would be perspiring due to the heat of Viratanagar. While wiping the drops of sweat on her forehead with the edge of her *Padar* she would glance at me for a glass of water. I could never forget that look in his eyes. At that moment, even though being the best of the men, to me he seemed like a child, like our Shrutakirti.

When Ballava would meet me in the kitchen he would first convey the

wellbeing of his four brothers to me in a whisper. He would put some special dish that he had prepared that day in my hand and say, “Sairandhri, take care of your health!” Actually, I should have been the one doing those things for him. I would feel sad seeing him bare and sweaty, cutting the vegetables and prepping the food for the Viratas.

I had the least contact with Kanka. He would always be accompanying Maharaja Virata. How could a maid in the inner chambers of Princess Uttaraa appear before them directly? I had to devise many ideas to meet Yudhishthira, and convey his further instructions to his brothers safely. For that, I would create some fictitious problems for Princess Uttaraa and go to Maharaja Virata along with her to get them resolved. While the princess talked with her father I would inquire about Kanka’s wellbeing and seek further instructions from him. It was comparatively easy to meet my husbands Nakula-Sahadeva, known as Granthika and Tantipala, in the stable and the cow pen.

The second half of our incognito life was also coming to an end. Now just the last week remained. After that we were going to be free like the wild birds. Especially of late I remembered Krishna continuously as the arduous period of incognito life had passed by uneventfully. But ... but .... we Pandavas were not so fortunate to have our lives going on so smoothly. As usual, to meet Kanka, I went to Maharaja Virata along with Uttaraa. Virata’s commander Kichaka was in a very confidential meeting with his king in the royal chamber. After seeing us Maharaja Virata smiled and said to his daughter, “Come Uttaraa, have you heard what our commander is saying? He has received news that the Pandavas of Indraprastha who lost the gambling game are living secretly in our Matsya kingdom. Prince Duryodhana of Hastinapura has requested to search for them thoroughly. The message is that as soon as they are found they should be imprisoned. The commander is working on the same plan.” I was horrified on hearing those words. Our plan that had worked successfully throughout the year was about to be exposed in the last phase! If somebody recognized us we would be immediately imprisoned! Again, living in the forest – again, living incognito. I felt dizzy. I kept staring at Maharaja Virata with my mouth agape. I didn’t even realize that commander Kichaka had been staring at me with unblinking eyes. He asked Uttaraa, “Is this your maid, Princess? What is her name?”

“Malini” replied Uttaraa.

It was impossible for me to wait there even for a moment. Even the citizens

along with the royal circle were fed up of arrogant Kichaka. It was absolutely necessary to warn my husbands of the impending grave danger without wasting a moment.

First, I met Kanka in his room. “Duryodhana has come to know that we are living in the Matsya kingdom! He is searching for us!” As soon as he heard my words his face turned white with fear instantly. He stood silent for a long time. Then he uttered only one sentence – “Go and meet Bhima and Arjuna immediately. We will have to do what they say.”

As per his instruction, first I met Bhima and Arjuna and informed them of the impending calamity. I also warned Nakula and Sahadeva. I did this very astutely and at the end of the day I returned to my room. While wiping the sweat on my forehead with the edge of my *Padar* I sat on a mat in front of a big mirror. I freed my tied hair. Looking in the mirror I started running my lean fingers through my hair. It was my hobby and pleasure to look in the mirror daily and run my fingers through my thick, long hair. But at this moment I wasn't enjoying that as usual. Is there any defender for my bluish, thick hair or not? Dushasana had grabbed the same hair tightly in his fist and dragged me in the council of the Kurus. Is the same thing going to happen here in the royal city of the Viratas if we get exposed? What if another Dushasana is hiding here too? The thought itself made me horripilate. Just that idea itself made my heart wail, ‘Achyuta... Madhava... Milinda... help...!’

Just then Madhulika, another maid, entered my chamber hurriedly. “Malinitai, the commander is coming to visit you!” she said with frightened eyes while panting.

It didn't occur to me that now I must gather and tie my open hair which is usually tied. Only the warning from Krishna kept ringing in my ears and mind – ‘Draupadi, don't ever go in front of the Viratas' commander Kichaka, even by mistake!’ Just the memory of these words left me trembling. Whether to vanish in the sky or to hide my face in the ground, where should I hide? I couldn't think of anything.

While I stood bewildered like a statue in front of the mirror the tall Virata commander Kichaka came in stomping his feet, bearing his huge mace on the shoulder and stood right in front of me. For a moment, I felt as if the entire world was spinning around me. His eyes wide, he kept staring strangely at my eye-catching heel-long hair. Then laughing sarcastically, he said, “Indeed you are Malini – a garland of beautiful flowers – but you are also Sukesha –

the one with beautiful, long hair – just like Draupadi of Indraprastha!”

I couldn't speak anything. I stood stupefied in front of him, as if struck by lightning. He kept muttering further, “Such ravishingly beautiful maid should exercise the power of her beauty on the commander instead of serving the princess. I am going to make such arrangements by telling the king, so that even I will be able to adorn your thick hair with flowers.”

Not a single word of his entered my ears. Only the flute-like words resonated – ‘Only Bhimsena will be able to protect you.’ Suddenly my fear vanished in thin air, and my mind got determined. I delicately brought my long hair over my shoulder with my left hand. While making playful gestures with a strand of my hair in a shameless way that surprised even my own self I invitingly said, “Oh how fortunate this lowlife maid Sairandhri would be to serve the commander! Whenever you want Malini will be at your service!”

As soon as he heard my encouraging, inviting response, that huge commander of Viratas holding the mace, directly came close to me. He put my hair back again and in a whisper, that only I could hear he said, “Sairandhri – Malini, get all dressed up and ready. I will spend tonight in your fragrant company!”

I blurted out the words of response as if pushed by someone, “As the commander wishes. This maid is at your service.” Hearing that the commander of Viratas was pleased with himself and laughed aloud shaking his chest. He left just as he came in, like a storm. I was scared to death looking at the back of his huge figure. First of all, I remembered Krishna. It was as if he was telling me from every direction, ‘Go to Bhimsena without wasting a moment’. As if pulled by an unknown force I rushed towards the kitchen of the Viratas. The moment he saw me, just by looking at my face Bhimsena surmised that I was in some kind of big trouble. I immediately told him in a soft voice what had happened. For a moment, he was also lost in thought. Then he said, “He seems like the Jayadratha of the Viratas. Don't worry. I am here. I will take good care of him. What did he say to you – that he wanted to plant flowers in your hair, didn't he? Let me sever that rugged tree of his body itself. And that too, in front of you. Do not worry at all. Just as you have promised him, get all decked up and sit on your bed.”

The night descended on Viratanagar. During the evening Bhimsena met all his brothers and instructed them to wait near my bedroom throughout the night. I had never seen Bhimsena plan anything so strategically. But that night I became especially aware of a subtle quality in him. He did anything

that was related to me very thoughtfully. In such things, his heart would be full of silent love for me. He had assigned the duty to all his brothers to keep a keen watch outside my bedroom. It was a perfect arrangement to make sure that not a single warrior of the Viratas would be able to enter my bedroom even if it was on fire.

As per Bhimsena's instruction I sat on my bed with my hair left open and all decked up. The night progressed. Kichaka had not yet arrived. Many suspicions stirred up in my mind. Had the commander come to know something about our incognito life? Was he planning to capture us? What if his armed warriors came in instead of him? Just when I was getting restless with each passing moment, the inebriated commander of the Viratas, Kichaka, entered my bedroom. There was no crown on his head, no mace on his shoulder. With hair dishevelled the eyes in his melon-like round face were overflowing with lust.

I was sitting on my bed with a thudding heart and my face turned down. To appear inviting to him I portrayed shyness. I had purposefully let my thick, long hair hanging down the bed like a serpent, their tips directly touching the carpet on the floor.

Kichaka – the lecherous commander of the Viratas – came and sat by my side while stammering something like 'M – Malini – Sa – Sairandhri – dear'. In the gambling hall when Dushasana had grabbed my saree I had seen his eyes burning with revenge. I raised my head and looked at Kichaka's eyes too. They looked so different. There was no trace of revenge in them, but the uncontrollable, flared up inferno of bare lust. At that moment, I strongly felt deep in my heart that one's eyes give away one's character. So far, I had not seen a single person with eyes like my dear friend Krishna!

Impatient Kichaka muttered 'Sa-Sa-Sairandhri, Ma-Ma-Malini why are you so shy', and moved closer to me to take me into his embrace. I got terrified. Exactly at that moment my hair reaching from the bed to the rug got tugged. A pain shot in my head. I became cautious and also fearless. I dropped my jade-studded, serpent hood-shaped ring that I was holding in my hands on the floor. It made a clunking sound. I bent down saying, 'Where did my ring go?', and as decided earlier, went under my bed along with my thick, long hair, like a serpent goes into its hole.

Lascivious Kichaka got restless on the bed. Wondering where the sweet-spoken Sairandhri who was right in front of him had disappeared, he began looking below the bed stammering 'Sa-Sa-Sairandhri-Ma-Ma-Malini'. He put

his muscular, hairy hand under the bed and grabbing the hair that came into his hand pulled, saying, ‘Come on dear – come outside’.

The one whom he pulled out was my mighty husband Bhimsena! His exhilaration vanished as if a huge python that can swallow its prey whole had appeared in front of him instead of a female cobra. Still he stammered, “You... Ba...Ba...Ballava...how come you are here?” Bhimsena was any way not in a state of mind to listen to anything. He shouted so loudly that it would have left a listener trembling in fear. “You scoundrel, she is not Sairandhri!” Shouting so, he put the first powerful strike on Kichaka’s neck. Kichaka lurched to one side. I ran out from under the bed. Leaning against the wall I kept staring with my eyes popping. I had only heard of Bhimsena’s unmatched wrestling power. I had never seen it in person.

“You, sinful soul... She is not Malini either!”

Bhimsena leapt on the tall commander like a soaring falcon.

“She is Draupadi – the wife of us Pandavas of Indraprasth, you foul creature...!” He struck Kichaka’s neck from the other side. Kichaka lurched to the other side.

I had never seen this side of Bhimsena. At that moment, his eyes were shining bright like the sun and the moon in the sky. Like the thunderous clouds of Mriga roaring loudly Bhimsena challenged Kichaka, thumping his muscular arms with a deafening sound, “Commander of Viratas, get ready to fight a deadly duel with the Pandava wrestler Bhimsena!”

By this time Kichaka had also regained his composure. He also thumped his arms loudly. Like two massive wild elephants colliding against each other, both of them began fighting right in front of me. Within a short time, they began perspiring profusely. Bhimsena had become uncontrollable like never before. He was throwing Kichaka down on the ground, using various wrestling maneuvers one after the other, like a washer man striking wet twisted clothes on the stone steps of Yamuna’s ghat. Half an hour passed by. Kichaka looked half dead now. Bhimsena was getting more aggressive each moment like the wild wind in a storm. For a moment, I wondered, ‘Would he be controlled even by Krishna if he comes here at this moment? I also felt for an instant that it was not Bhimsena at all, Krishna himself was wrestling, getting all wet with perspiration’. I simply kept staring at him in amazement.

“Malini, see how your Ballava is beating the crap out of him!” Bhimsena sat on Kichaka’s belly and began landing strikes one after the other with his iron fist on Kichaka’s big, hairy chest, shouting wildly. With every strike

Kichaka would shut his eyes in agonizing pain and writhe.

Finally, the invincible wrestler of the Pandavas who had reached the climax of the bout, put his arms around Kichaka's neck and held it tightly in the Bahukantaka hold. My wide-eyed valiant husband Bhimsena began tightening his grip every moment, gnashing his teeth in anger. As Kichaka felt suffocated he started to flounder like a fish out of water and tried to break free. But no – it was the Bahukantaka hold! Bhimsena ultimately killed him.

As Maharaja Virata came to know about the execution of commander Kichaka, initially he got scared. Then when he came to know that Pandava wrestler Bhimsena had done it, he gained his composure. He came to the kitchen in person to meet us along with gift salvers of royal costumes. Maharani Sudeshnadevi, his sons Uttara and Shweta, daughter Uttaraa and the Chief Minister accompanied him. His speech indicated regret that the world conqueror Pandavas had to work as lowly servants in his kingdom.

As per Maharaja Virata's wish we all put on the royal costumes again. That day I strongly realized a special quality of Yudhishtira. During the last thirteen years, twelve years of forest life and one year of incognito life, he had spoken in a dismal, pathetic, piteous manner. But when we wore the royal costume, the kingship and the spirit of a Kshatriya within him resurfaced with a flourish. He took the place of the eldest Pandava and assumed the leadership of the Pandavas for further action. My mind was concerned about one thing though. Will he again create a problematic situation with gambling as per his nature? Where was he going to lead us after all? But he had completely transformed. The very first instruction that he gave to Maharaja Virata was the indication of his transformation. He said to Maharaja Virata, "Maharaja, first of all, send a special messenger to Dwaraka. Send an urgent message to Srikrishna – the Lord of Dwaraka that we Pandavas are coming out of our incognito life. Please give us your blessings."

I was happy that first he had remembered Krishna. It was obvious now that the Viratas were going to be in trouble due to us. It was necessary for us to leave the city as soon as possible. We held a council at night. It was unanimously decided that we should go to one of the towns on the borders of Virata and Indraprastha, choosing such a place with the permission of Maharaja Virata. According to the condition put in the second game of gambling, the Kauravas were supposed to return the Indraprastha kingdom to us after the completion of incognito life.



But the very next day we received a message from a special messenger of Krishna that left me and all my husbands wary again. The message was, “The army of Hastinapura with all prominent warriors has left to attack the Viratas to capture their cattle! Duryodhana has unerringly surmised that you are located in Viratanagar due to the execution of Kichaka. He has presumed that you will show up for the protection of the cattle. Grandsire Bhishma, guru Drona, Kripa, Karna – the king of Anga, his brother Shona, Ashwatthama, Duryodhana himself with a few chosen brothers and Shakuni are coming with the army. You should fight against them along with the Virata army, showing yourself up on the day of *Vijayadashami*. Arjuna should lead your army.”

*Vijayadashami*, the tenth day of the month of Ashwin dawned. The Matsya kingdom, located near Marusthali, used to get only a few intermittent rain showers throughout the year. That also was over now. The veil of whitish fog that had spread over Viratanagar lifted as the day progressed. The citizens began their daily routine. Herds of pure white, brown, blackish, grayish cows were taken out of their corrals and to the incline of Mount Arbuda nearby for grazing. Only the old cows and young calves were left behind in the corrals of the city. As the day advanced, a big commotion was heard from the inclines of Mount Arbuda. Following that Maharaja Virata who was gasping for breath entered the kitchen along with the newly assigned commander. My five husbands dressed as warriors and I had gathered there under the leadership of Bhimsena. My husbands had already prepared their minds as per Krishna’s timely instruction. But none of them had a single weapon with them. Maharaja Virata brought his palms together in prayer and implored them earnestly, “You are mighty warriors. Please protect the cattle of my subjects. You should immediately get into the chariots, chase and protect our cattle that the Kaurava army is capturing and save our honour.”

After hearing his appeal the five valiant Pandavas started looking at each other. Bhimsena said, “We do not have our weapons. How are we going to protect the cows?”

Maharaja Virata responded promptly, “You can take whatever weapons you want from our armoury and leave immediately.”

I realized the problem was that my valiant husbands did not have their weapons charged with mantras and said, “They have kept their weapons in the hollow of a Shami tree on the border of your kingdom. They will have to use those weapons only.”

“Tell Prince Uttara to get the chariot ready. We are all set. Maharaja should

command him to steer the chariot as per my instruction. We will take care of the rest.” Arjuna’s face brightened with the thought of seeing his favourite Gandiva bow after a year.

We came to the palace of the Viratas. I performed *Aukshan* for my five husbands, all ready to go to war, in front of Maharani Sudeshnadevi, Princess Uttaraa and other royal ladies. Bidding farewell to us, under the leadership of Arjuna, the brigade of the chariots of the Viratas marched forward to protect the cows. The mammoth Virata army followed them. Throughout that day of *Vijayadashami* I kept moving about restlessly while remembering only Krishna! I was imploring to him in my heart, “You have protected the honour of the Pandavas till today. Protect it today also. Let my invincible archer Arjuna be successful in the mission.”

I did not eat anything throughout the day, nor did I drink any water. The woodpecker of my mind constantly kept pecking at the huge tree of the circumstances saying, ‘Today my husbands are exposing themselves from the incognito life. Fortunately, they have got a chance to show themselves on the battlefield. Let them be successful in the mission of protecting the cows of the Viratas. Krishna, if you give them anything other than that, I will never see your face and accept incognito life one more time – for the rest of my life!’

The dusk of *Vijayadashami* descended over Viratanagar. Flocks of birds that had gone to Mount Arbuda to feed themselves were returning to the city. Then at first the indistinct mooing of hundreds of cows was heard from a faraway distance. I became alert. Followed by that, I heard the acclaim of Maharaja Virata. My face brightened. I pricked my ears. Now I could clearly hear only one victorious slogan – ‘Hail invincible archer Arjuna. Well done *Partha* – protector of the cows. Master of the Gandiva bow, *Dhananjaya* – victory to him! Victory!’ My face brightened with the brilliance of millions of lights.

My triumphant husbands had returned after a sweeping victory over the Kauravas. They had freed the cows of the Viratas with valour suitable to the Kshatriyas. It was a small compensation to the Viratas who gave us invaluable support by offering us shelter for one year. My five husbands came to visit me with radiant, victorious faces. The account they gave was thrilling. It was hopeful for the future.

The Kaurava army comprising thousands of horse riders had reached the inclines of Mount Arbuda and chased the cattle of the Viratas. They had

come to surround the cattle and abduct it, steal it. Who all were there? Grandsire Bhishma, the son of Ganga, a lifetime celibate, who had acquired the Prasvapa astra from Bhagvan Parashurama, aacharya Drona and Kripa who had taught archery to the Kauravas and Pandavas, Ashwatthama who had acquired the Brahmastra from his father, world conqueror Karna – the king of Anga, his brother Shona, many Kaurava brothers and brothers of Shakuni. And who was leading them? It was Duryodhana who had showed his bare thigh to me in an assembly full of people and Shakuni who played the deceptive gambling game by making dice fraudulently!

My husbands had reached the Shami tree where the weapons were kept, in the chariots of the Viratas. Bhimsena bowed down to the tree first, then climbed onto the tree and brought down all the weapons one after the other. All weapons were charged again with mantras. Then everyone offered flowers and paid obeisance to the weapons, and took hold of their own weapon. Now the change on their faces was noticeable. Their faces displayed complete fearlessness. Their eyes became radiant like the sun. Physically they were five armed warriors, but their hearts were united in a powerful fist in which Goddess Ida resided. Unanimously they hailed the name of goddess Ida.

They approached the Kauravas who were fleeing with the cattle of the Viratas. They blew their conches, brandished their bows and arrows, and held weapons like the mace and the pestle. In front of Mount Arbuda, amidst the cacophony of war drums, a fierce battle broke out between the Kauravas and Pandavas along with the Viratas to obtain the cattle. Arjuna was possessed by the spirit of war today. His grit that had been suppressed for thirteen years erupted uncontrollably today. By evening he had undeniably defeated grandsire Bhishma, guru Drona, Kripa, Karna – the king of Anga, and all. One of his sharp arrows hit Karna's brother Shona in the chest and he fell in the battle. Karna collapsed, and crying on his lifeless body, took a vow to kill Arjuna!

In the evening Arjuna projected the Sammohanastra – weapon of hypnosis – on all the Kaurava warriors whom he had disarmed. He had obtained this Astra in the Himalayas at the time of obtaining the Pashupatastra. Due to the effect of the Astra the Kaurava warriors who were exhausted by fighting got hypnotized first, then delusional and finally fainted one by one.

Then hailing sky-piercing acclaims of his best friend Krishna, Arjun ordered Uttara- the prince of Viratas, 'Oh prince of Virata, go and snatch any

article of clothing that you can, from the bodies of all who have fallen unconscious. Those will declare the outcome of today's battle to your father." He obediently followed the command and climbing down from the chariot he snatched the shawls from the bodies of major Kaurava warriors who lay scattered.

Arjuna gave me a detailed account of the battle and said, "I have brought some of the collected shawls for you as a gift" and glanced at Bhimsena. He came forward smiling. Handing a blue shawl to me he said, "This shawl belongs to Duryodhana's friend Karna, the charioteer's son, the so-called king of Anga, and the one who laughed at you and called you a whore."

I looked at the shawl. Indeed, it was blue just like Krishna's shawl. But it was now that I realized the considerable difference between the two. Krishna's shawl had a gentle softness like a peacock feather. This shawl had a roughness that one could feel, may be due to the brocade design on it. The words he had uttered in the gambling hall full of people echoed in my ears and my heart, 'A whore – what does it matter if she belongs to five or one hundred and five men?' I thought of Krishna dressed in a yellow vesture and said, "Will even one of those who fell unconscious in the battlefield today ever understand the gentle warmth that your shawl has?"

While I was lost in my thought Arjuna put a blood-red shawl in my hand. With radiant eyes, his chest puffed up with pride, he said, "This shawl belongs to Ashwatthama – son of guru Drona!" I kept staring at the shawl. I thought a lot about it but did not understand why the father and son got involved in stealing cows, which was such an abominable act for a Brahmin! Why did Ashwatthama – the son of the guru who usually spoke in a philosophical manner choose to wear this blood-red shawl? If at all I would have gotten any answer for this, it would be only from Krishna!

Maharaja Virata was very pleased with Arjuna and my other husbands for defeating the Kauravas to protect the cows. Even Princess Uttaraa's opinion had changed when she came to know that her dance teacher Brihannadaa was not a woman but valiant Arjuna himself. She had openly expressed her desire to have Arjuna as her husband, to her father. Oh, she was so young! If I had had a daughter she would have been of the same age. She was attracted to my husband – master archer Arjuna with romantic ideas suitable to a teenage girl who worshiped valour.

Her strange wish which was inappropriate for her age, reached my ears. I was completely baffled. She was a princess. Her father loved her very much.

He might have even granted her wish. And I knew Arjuna very well. He went on a pilgrimage and returned after two marriages! This needed to stop somewhere. Whenever I faced any emotional problem I did not remember anybody else but Krishna.

I met the royal messenger who was carrying the following message of Yudhishtira to Dwaraka in person, 'We have come out in the open. The Kauravas who attacked the Viratas have been defeated. Please come immediately to give us further guidance. We are waiting for you.' I sent all the attendants in the chamber outside and gave him a secret message in private, 'Tell Krishna to leave immediately. Or else Arjuna will get married to Uttaraa who is suitable to be his daughter.'

Now as the news that my husbands, the Pandavas, had come out of incognito life was known, the kings of various kingdoms neighbouring the Matsya kingdom began visiting Viratanagar with their commanders and chief ministers. The first one to visit us was my brother Dhrishtadyumna who came along with the army. Shalya of Madra kingdom who was the mama of Nakul-Sahadeva also came to visit. One messenger of the Viratas was also sent to Hastinapura to Kuntidevi and Vidura.

We had strictly fulfilled the condition of 'twelve years of forest life and one year of incognito life' as agreed with the Kauravas. Now there shouldn't have been any obstacle in the way of my husbands getting the Indraprastha kingdom back, just as they had previously obtained the Khandavavana by Krishna's mediation. I was dreaming about re-entering Indraprastha in a grand manner and honourably along with all my husbands.

The entire Viratanagar was bedecked with flower garlands, festoons and arches decorated with flowers. The four gates in the four directions of the city were embellished with rows of tiny lamps. The entire Matsya kingdom had gathered in Viratanagar with great enthusiasm. Everyone was eager to see Krishna in person. All these preparations had been done for that. Within a few days, his triumphant, embellished Garudadhvaja chariot driven by Daruka stood in front of the gate on the southern border of Viratanagar. My beloved friend Krishna descended from the tall, embellished chariot steered by four pure white horses along with Uddhavadeva and Balaramadada. I was standing at the southern gate to welcome him along with my five husbands, Maharaja Virata, Maharani Sudeshnadevi, Uttaraa, Uttara and Shweta, Chief Minister of the Viratas and the new commander. As soon as his feet touched the land of the Matsya kingdom the citizens of Virata happily shouted the

acclaim of his divine name that reached sky high, ‘Hail Bhagvan Srikrishna Maharaja....’

With a smile on his face and palms joined together, he politely offered respect to the men and women who had gathered there. I simply kept staring at his radiant face. A single glance at his face and it gave me such an unforgettable experience of my life! All my tension due to the twelve years of forest life and one year of incognito life simply vanished into thin air. I was seeing him in person after a long time, but to me it felt like only yesterday. The iridescent peacock feather in the golden crown on his head shone brightly. I could smell the overpowering sweet fragrance of the fresh Vaijayanti garland resting on his chest. He walked briskly and stood right in front of me. While all Pandavas along with Maharaja Virata were greeting him, he whispered in a soft voice which only I could hear, “Krishney, I have received your message! Don’t worry about anything at all! How are you doing?” Within a moment, he bowed down to Maharaja Virata and Sudeshnadevi and disappeared among the Pandavas.

A meeting of the royal circle of the Viratas, Yadavas and Pandavas took place at night. Before that meeting, Krishna met only Arjuna in private and discussed something important with him. Balaramadada, Uddhavadeva, Dhaumya rishi who had come from the Himalayas and the chief ministers of the Yadavas and Pandavas attended this meeting with Krishna. I was the only woman from the Pandavas’ side. Maharaja Virata, Sudeshnadevi, the family priest of the Viratas, their new commander, chief minister, Prince Uttara and Shweta were also present. Maharaja Virata inquired about the wellbeing of all and then presented his heart’s desire. He said, “The Pandavas, especially master archer Arjuna, have fought courageously and protected our cattle as well as our honour. Therefore, I have taken a decision with Maharani’s consent, to offer our one and only beautiful daughter Uttaraa who is an expert in dance and music, in marriage to valiant Arjuna! Arjuna should accept her hand in front of all present in this meeting.”

All eyes turned to Arjuna now. Without wasting any time, he immediately said, “Maharaja’s daughter Uttaraa is my disciple in dance and music. I am her guru. A marriage between these two great relations will be against *Dharma*. Any guru can look at his disciple only as his child, and not from any other perspective. We Pandavas cannot forget the affectionate treatment that we got from the Viratas during our incognito life. Therefore, with respect I am accepting Maharaja’s offer. His daughter Uttaraadevi will become a part

of the Pandava royal family, not as my wife but as my daughter-in-law. My son Abhimanyu is young and handsome. He is well suited to be a son-in-law to the Maharaja and all the citizens of Virata. I propose the Virata princess' marriage to him in front of all."

Arjuna had cautiously and skilfully diverted the arrow coming towards him. He was a master archer after all. He had spoken everything that Krishna had told him silently with his eyes.

The Abhimanyu-Uttaraa wedding was fixed and it was also decided that it will take place in Viratanagar itself.

The already decorated Viratanagar was now beautified even more. The priests from both sides found an auspicious *Muhurta* for the wedding. First the groom's party arrived from Dwaraka. All the queens including Bhama, Jambavati, Bhadra, Kalindi, and Lakshmanaadevi came along with Rukminidevi. Subhadra came with Abhimanyu and Revativahini. The Sudharma royal ministry of Dwaraka, both commanders and all troop leaders also arrived. Acharya Sandipani came along with his wife, son Dutta and Gargamuni. This was the first wedding ceremony of the third generation of the Pandavas. Aged Maharaja Vasudeva and both his queens wished to attend this wedding but were going to be unable due to the long journey. They had already given their blessings to Abhimanyu before he left Dwaraka.

Rajmata Kuntidevi arrived from Hastinapura along with the armed guards that Mahatma Vidura had sent with her. Nobody else was coming. Even the Viratas had not invited anybody else.

In the presence of Krishna, Balaramadada and Uddhavadeva the wedding of their *bhacha* Abhimanyu and Uttaraa took place with pomp. Krishna affectionately embraced young and handsome Abhimanyu who looked like him except for the blue complexion and gave him an appropriate blessing, 'May your glory reach the corners of the world'. While blessing Uttaraa he said, 'May you live long!'

My five sons, Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shrutakirti, Shatanika and Shrutasena who had come from Kampilyanagar embraced their brother Abhimanyu. The faces of newly married Abhimanyu and Uttaraa beamed with a unique radiance. I looked at Krishna in the wedding pandal. He was telling something to Arjuna. I couldn't hear it due to the commotion around.

On the day after the wedding a council of the Viratas was held. I sat in this meeting next to Maharani Sudeshnadevi along with the eight queens of Krishna. Whatever Krishna spoke in front of the Viratas, Yadavas, Panchalas

and Pandavas who had gathered together for the wedding was indeed unforgettable – it exhibited the concern for justice that he had demonstrated throughout his life. It was full of his pure love for Pandavas. More than that, it contained a prudent vision as if he could vividly see the events in the future. He said in his clear, spellbinding speech, “Maharaja Virata, dear Pandavas and senior warriors of Yadavas, Panchalas, and the citizens of Virata! The five valiant and virtuous Pandava brothers have completed the time of twelve years of forest life and one year of incognito life and have come out in the open now.

“First of all, I commend them and offer my heartiest blessings for their life’s journey ahead.

The quality of being a Kshatriya isn’t limited only to demonstrating spirited valour on the battlefield! Human life itself is a battlefield in its entirety. These five warrior cousins of mine have successfully lived it by leading their forest life and incognito life without evading their duties.

“A potent, invincible Kshatriya resides within each one of you. I appeal to that Kshatriya within you. Imagine for a moment that you are in a similar situation like the Pandavas and you will find your own answers undoubtedly whether you would have sustained in these testing conditions. That is why each one of you should listen to me very carefully now and take the right decision for yourself. I have complete faith in the pure spirit that resides within you.

“From this royal altar of the Viratas I am directly questioning the Kurus of Hastinapura, are you at least now, going to do justice to the Pandavas or not?”

In his divine speech like the blue sky he made everyone see the ultimate truth, like the shining sun –

“Right since their childhood Duryodhana and his brothers, Shakuni and his brothers, and all their allies have been tormenting the Pandavas. Why? Did they seem defenceless to them? From the royal city of the Viratas I proclaim openly that I regard the Pandavas to be my most virtuous *aate bandhus*. They are the undoubted leaders of future Aaryavarta.

“I am going to try everything possible. But as much as I have understood Duryodhana and Shakuni, I am quite sure that they will never readily do justice to the Pandavas. The Pandavas will have to go to war with all the support that they can gather to obtain their rightful share of power. They will have to elicit justice on the battlefield itself. If at all such an occasion arises I



appeal today itself that the Matsya kingdom of the Viratas should firmly stand behind the Pandavas along with their army. Maharaja Virata should dispatch a mature, wise and experienced envoy today, towards Hastinapura to meet Maharaja Dhritarashtra of the Kurus. Also, send a clear message to the Kauravas that they should honourably return the Indraprastha kingdom to the Pandavas.

“My Dwaraka kingdom and I myself belong to the Pandavas right since our very first meeting. We will always give them our support. I would say only one thing with the experience that life has offered me, that life’s problems never get resolved by fighting destructive wars on the battlefield. In fact, they multiply and get more complicated. The only way to make human life happier and more bearable is – Love! For that undoubted Love, I appeal to Hastinapura openly on behalf of the Pandavas and the kingdoms of the Viratas, Panchalas and Yadavas who are present in this council, that they should resolve the matter of Indraprastha with conciliatory means and love.

“If I have done anything at all in the journey of my life to resolve such disputes between justice and injustice then based on whatever little virtue I have acquired due to that, I appeal to the Kurus from here itself – give justice to the Pandavas!” His face covered with perspiration looked like a sunflower covered with dew drops in autumn. He did not seem to me like the *mame* bandhu of the Pandavas, the little brother of Balaramadada, the big brother of Uddhavadeva, the gopa who belonged to the gopas once, the disciple of Acharya Sandipani and Ghor Angirasa, the son of Vasudevababa, Devakimata and Rohinimata or not even the best friend Krishna who was always close and well known to me. He seemed like somebody very different from all of these.

He decided to send the newly married Uttaraa-Abhimanyu back to Dwaraka along with a few chosen relatives. They left along with the army accordingly. We bade farewell to them and came back to the royal palace of the Viratas. Then I asked Krishna a question that had been lingering in my mind for quite a few days, “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, I have heard that you have raised a staircase in your royal capital with golden steps in memory of the memorable people that you met in your life. I have heard the acclaim of this grand Srisopana from many people. Word is that there has been addition of many steps to it. Krishna, you never said anything about it, so I have to ask you myself now – is there at least a single step among the golden steps of this Srisopana of yours for this disgraced *Sakhi* of yours living in the forest?” My

question was completely unexpected to him. He kept looking at me with a weird expression. Then he gave me a charming smile and said, “Krishney, who told you that there is only one Sopana! You are my *Sakhi*. Think about it. Is there another Srisopana? If there is then at what number will there be a jewel-studded step in your name?”

His answer left me confused. I kept thinking – a second Sopana? Where could it be?

“Can’t find it? Shyamale, silly girl, the other Sopana is right here in the heart of this dear friend of yours! You yourself have to decide which step will be yours in that sopana! Nobody else, not even I!” He smiled and casually walked away from me – like the fragrant autumnal breeze coming from Yamuna!

Now it was certain that we were going to Indraprastha. For that Krishna presented a proposal to Maharaja Virata; to raise an encampment for the Pandavas in a town called Upaplavya on the border of the Matsya kingdom which was close to Indraprastha. The royal envoy of the Viratas had already left for Hastinapura. It was time to say goodbye to the city where we had spent the hardest and testing year of incognito life in disguise. I went and personally met each one of the maids who worked as sairandhris. By this time, I had prepared my mind as the incognito life was over. But when I went to say goodbyes to them they were overwhelmed with emotions, some of them even started sobbing. Their pure love brought tears to my eyes too.

Bhimsena’s kitchen mates cooked his favourite dishes and fed him in the kitchen of the Viratas while bidding farewell to him. Yudhishtira and Nakula-Sahadeva had similar experiences from their mates who worked with them throughout the year. This rightly taught me and my five husbands one truth of life – that no one comes in anybody’s life without any reason ever. Once that person goes away from us, then we understand their significance in our lives.

We bade farewell to everybody in the royal palace of the Viratas and came to Upaplavya, a small town, along with Krishna. As per Maharaja Virata’s order a luxurious encampment with all sorts of amenities was raised here for us. Prompt servants were at our disposal. Satyaki and few chosen warriors of Dwaraka accompanied Krishna. Balaramadada, Uddhavadeva, and the Yadava royal ladies had reached Dwaraka along with the newly married couple – Abhimanyu and Uttaraa. Once we settled in this camp Krishna organized an important meeting with me and my husbands. He would usually

be smiling even in such meetings. But in this meeting, he looked quite serious. I had never seen him like this before. He spoke very little in this meeting. He said, “The Kurus of Hastinapura have not given any response at all to the royal envoy of the Viratas! They have conveniently kept silent. Now I will have to coerce them to speak. Dear brothers, I will do whatever I can for you. For a final attempt to reconcile the relations between you and the Kurus I will even go to Hastinapura – the royal capital of the Kurus as a mediator. I will put my intelligence and eloquence to test. I have stood up for justice throughout my life. I will try my best to get you justice by means of reconciliation.” Hearing that Yudhishtira, on whom our future depended, said, “Vaasudevaa, I also want to put an end to this by means of reconciliation. War will bring permanent enmity between us cousins. We have followed all the conditions of the gambling game to the letter, now they should return our Indraprastha kingdom to us just as they had taken it from us. That is what we want to insist upon. To go to war for that and sacrifice many more lives who have nothing to do with it won’t be right. You try to reconcile as much as possible. You may ask for the opinion of my brothers if you wish.”

Grabbing the unsolicited permission Bhima spoke, leaving me appalled, “Just tell them to give our Indraprastha kingdom back without any retaliation. That’s all we are asking for.”

Unexpected to me, Arjuna seconded him and said, “Our own people will be killed in war – instead, in my opinion mending the fences is better!”

I got upset seeing the delusional behaviour of those on whom I was relying the most and said, “Krishna, looks like these valiant husbands of mine have forgotten my humiliation in front of all the seniors in the overcrowded gambling hall of the Kurus, that was so shameful for all of us. They have also forgotten about my open hair and their vows. Even they don’t consider me as their own and hence don’t realize the intensity of my sorrow. Even if they have forgotten it I will never forget the humiliation of my honour. I will not allow even you to forget it. If you forget it then my father Drupada and brother Dhrishtadyumna will seek revenge for my humiliation. If they also don’t, then remember that all my valiant sons including Abhimanyu will seek it.”

Even after listening to my words he calmly said, “Krishney, I understand how you feel, but first calmly listen to what I say. It is not necessary that I will succeed in my good intentions of reconciliation. One should always keep

trying. One should not be adamant to expect any particular outcome of one's attempts. One should be prepared silently for failure too! If I succeed in my efforts of reconciliation – then you will regain the kingship of Indraprastha. If not then your husbands will have to be ready with their weapons charged with mantras, taken down from the Shami tree, for a grand battle. Yudhishtira played the gambling game openly. What I am playing is also a gamble which is not evident – the gambling game of war that is acceptable throughout the world!" It was now becoming clear why he had become so serious.

From his manner of speaking and grave attitude that was suggestive, I reckoned that he was thinking about something more than the negotiations. He sent his loyal Yadava messenger to Kuru Maharaja Dhritarashtra with a message, 'I am coming to Hastinapura'. We were waiting for his return. He returned within a few days. But he returned with Kuru minister Sanjaya, not any message. Sanjaya was not just a minister. He was the chief of the Kurus' chariot troop. He was an ardent devotee of Krishna. It was a political ploy of the Kurus to send a message through him. Instead of directly saying that the Pandavas will not get the Indraprastha kingdom back, Duryodhana and Shakuni had sent a hypocritical message in the name of Maharaja Dhritarashtra.

It was – "If the Pandavas want to go to war they should consider that war is never beneficial to anybody. Innumerable gallant warriors and soldiers will be killed in a war. Kingdoms get destroyed. A philosophical and stable-minded person like Yudhishtira should think about it. Instead of participating in such a war where his own relatives will be destroyed wouldn't it be better to spend life in a holy place like Kurukshetra, on the alms given by the religious pilgrims? He should remember that his name is Dharmaraja, hence he and his brothers should act according to *Dharma*. They should give up the idea of going to war!"

In the capacity of a minister Sanjaya delivered the exact message that he carried as a loyal servant, to all of us. I was benumbed to hear that message. The Kauravas were directly telling the Pandavas to seek alms. A murmuring disquiet buzzed among the Pandavas. Krishna was the only one who was calm. He got up from his seat and went close to Sanjaya and put his right hand on his shoulder. Patting him for a moment Krishna said to him in a serene voice, "Sanjaya – friend, my brother Yudhishtira is indeed Dharmaraja. He will definitely follow *Dharma* as his name connotes, and his

brothers will also do as he tells them to do. They will never be divided.

“Just convey to Kuru Maharaja Dhritarashtra and grandsire Bhishma that Krishna is coming to visit them; to meet them and to seek their blessings!” As his friend Sanjaya understood the hidden meaning in his response, he simply kept staring at Krishna’s dark black, fish-shaped eyes while holding Krishna’s hands in his for a moment. The next moment he muttered, “Oh, what a situation am I caught in?” That minister of the Kurus prostrated in front of Krishna, directly putting his head, on Krishna’s feet.

“Sanjaya, brother, get up, what are you doing?” said Krishna and gently pulling him up, took him in an embrace.

Kuru minister Sanjaya stayed for a day in our camp and left for Hastinapura.

Now in Upaplavya, preparations for Krishna’s departure for Hastinapura for the mediation began with the assistance of Maharaja Virata. Satyaki and select Yadava warriors were going to accompany him. As usual Daruka was going to steer the chariot. Maharaja Virata paid personal attention and got his grand Garudadhwaja chariot decorated. On the flagpole of the chariot the golden pennant Garudadhwaja fluttered in the air with the image of the golden eagle ready to soar with its wings spread.

Ten well-equipped and embellished chariots stood in a queue behind the Garudadhwaja chariot. Behind them were rows of cavalry and infantry. Krishna left our grand pavilion along with Maharaja Virata and my five husbands. I was also with them. A maid held a salver in front of me. I picked up a fistful of cooked rice from it and waving my hand around the four horses and dear friend Krishna I threw it away as a gesture to ward off the evil eye. In my mind, I spoke to the horses about my dear friend who was going on an important mission relevant to the future of us Pandavas, “Oh dear horses, our saviour, the Lord of Dwaraka is in your care now, carry him safely and all of you come back only with good news.” I performed *Aukshan* for Krishna and Satyaki. While touching Krishna’s long fish-shaped eyes with the back of my wet fingers I peeped deep down in the dark black eyes. Those ocean-like eyes were utterly calm. I could not comprehend them at all. First, Satyaki climbed into the chariot. Daruka was all set holding the golden-bordered orange whip in his hand. The other warriors had already climbed in their own chariots and were ready to move. The horse riders were set on their horses, balancing their javelins in their hands. The foot soldiers were holding their sharp shining swords in their hands.

As soon as Maharaja Virata moved forward and signalled Krishna with his hand, he briskly got into his chariot. He threw a glance with an eagle eye on the line of chariots, cavalry and infantry troops behind him. He looked at Maharaja Virata and my five husbands in the same sequence as they were standing in a queue. I was standing near his chariot. He looked deep into my eyes as if saying – ‘Krishney, don’t worry. Everything will be alright. You will again ascend the throne of Indraprastha as the Maharani.’ He untied the Panchjanya conch from his shawl and blew it with all his might. Raising his right hand, he signalled Daruka to depart in the direction of Hastinapura.

Krishna left for Hastinapura from Upaplavya. It was the month of Kartika. After that there was only the news which we kept receiving from the informers that the Viratas had planted on his way to Hastinapura.

Krishna did not succeed in the mediations! Let alone the Indraprastha kingdom, Duryodhana flatly refused to give even the five towns of Avisthala, Vrikasthala, Makanda, Varanavati and Shalibhavana which Krishna asked for the Pandavas. Not only that, he replied insolently again in front of the same elders that, “Without war the Pandavas will not get even a small particle of the dust that rests on the tip of a needle if it is pushed into the ground!”

More than all this I felt deeply hurt by one of his thoughtless utterance. In the crowded Kuru assembly, he dismissed Krishna degradingly and said, “I would have ordered my servants to get back even the dust particles of the holy land of Kurus stuck to your soles, you cowherd, who is going back donning the tatters of my denial of your proposal. But, for that purpose also I do not wish even my servants to touch your feet which are always soiled with cow dung and urine! Get out of this assembly hall quietly. Or else, you, insolent bull of Gokul, I will get you all tied up with ropes and put you in prison!”

Yadava commander Satyaki could not control himself after hearing those words and brandishing his sword he ran towards Duryodhana. Krishna himself controlled him with a gesture of the hand.

I was enraged even while listening to that disgraceful news.

Krishna, when he returned from Hastinapura was not the same person at all. The mischievous, playful, charming smile with the dimple that easily blossomed in his cheek, had disappeared beyond the banks of Yamuna. He spoke as less as possible now. He was thinking more and more. For me this was the most trying period, the period of his unbearable silence, even more than my Swayamwar and the battle afterwards, my despicable humiliation in

the assembly hall of the Kurus, the period of twelve years of forest life after that and the arduous incognito life, and the attacks of Jayadratha and Kichaka violating my chastity.

After the unsuccessful attempt at negotiations Krishna himself took the decision on behalf of all of us – that of a conclusive war! But this war was no longer limited to only the Kauravas and Pandavas. It became the war of the entire Aaryavarta! Of Justice against Injustice! Of Forgiveness against Oppression! The war of Human Spirit against Demonic Powers! Of Truth against Untruth!

Krishna came from Hastinapura and immediately left for Dwaraka after telling us Pandavas resolutely to begin ‘preparations for war’. He himself began getting the Yadava army ready for the war. The moment he crossed the borders of Hastinapura a whirling storm began travelling with him wherever he went. The storm of the Great War! He ordered the four-fold army of Dwaraka to begin preparations for war. In Hastinapura the Kurus had also braced themselves for war.

During this time, living in Upaplavya, I kept thinking about the downfall of the Pandavas as a family. I was in Upaplavya along with my husbands. Rajmata was in Hastinapura. Subhadra was in Dwaraka along with her newly married son and daughter-in-law, and my sons were in Kampilyanagar with their mama, Dhrishtadyumna. This was the situation. Even if we would have thought of sending a message to each other, it would have been at least a month before we got them. Once Krishna decided that war was inevitable, my five husbands spread in all directions to seek military support from other kingdoms just as they had done before conquering the world. The only thing I could do was to wait to hear any news from them. In Upaplavya, Maharaja Virata did everything possible to comfort me. For the first time in my entire life I was experiencing this kind of heart-wrenching loneliness.

Right beyond the Matsya kingdom was the border of Indraprastha. But Indraprastha was now under the rule of the Kauravas. The news that the Pandavas were staying in the Upaplavya city of the Matsya kingdom had already reached Hastinapura. Because of that armed troops of the Kauravas began hovering around Upaplavya. Even during such a terrible and lonely situation I never felt afraid, and that was only by thinking of Krishna.

After about a month, my husbands who were scattered in various directions started returning. The one who came first was Yudhishtira. He had returned after meeting many kings in the central region of Aaryavarta. Then came

Arjuna. He had met the rulers of Magadha, Kalinga, Vanga, Tripura, and Kirata kingdoms in the eastern region. Then Bhimsena returned to Upaplavya. He had visited the kingdoms in the western region right from Panchanada, Sindhu-Sauvira to Kamboja, Gandhara and Balhika. Nakula-Sahadeva came back after travelling from the Chedi, Avanti and Bhojapura kingdoms of the central region to the entire southern region from Ashmaka, Padmavata, Kraunchapura, Andhra, Chola, and Pandya to Mount Malaya.

Now the bustle of various kings, chief ministers, commanders and royal envoys visiting Upaplavya increased considerably.

Just as my husbands and Krishna tried to seek military support, Duryodhana-Shakuni did the same from Hastinapura. In fact, groups of ten brothers of Duryodhana accompanied by one of Shakuni's ten brothers had already dispersed in different directions of Aaryavarta. Duryodhana himself went with his mama, Shakuni to meet the rulers of kingdoms such as Panchanada, Gandhara, Vahika, and Kamboja with salvers full of lavish gifts.

As all kingdoms of Aaryavarta showed interest in this war its significance increased manifold. It was not just a war any more, unintentionally it turned into a Great War. That set the wheels in motion in various kingdoms in all directions of Aaryavarta. News started arriving that armies of some kingdoms were on their way to Hastinapura. A shocking news arrived for us in Upaplavya: 'Duryodhana has left for Dwaraka from Hastinapura along with Shakunimama and few chosen Kuru warriors. He is going to meet his guru, Prince Balaramadada to seek the support of the Yadavas in the war. Then he is going to meet Krishna and after reminding him about their relationship due to the marriage alliance between his son and Duryodhana's daughter he is going to request Krishna to support him.'

We were shaken to hear all the details of the news. We had been taking it for granted that the entire Dwaraka kingdom along with Balaramadada and Krishna was going to support us. We arranged an urgent council to take a decision in this matter. In that council, Yudhishtira insisted on only one thing –Arjuna should immediately go to Dwaraka on behalf of the Pandavas. He should remind Krishna about their personal friendship, and take every precautionary measure to make sure that in any case the mammoth Yadav army should not offer its support to Duryodhana, but only to us.

Arjuna was already benumbed by the news that Duryodhana was going to visit Krishna. He was just nodding his head in affirmation or negation for the sake of it. He was not speaking much in the council. By the end of the



council his inactiveness became unbearable to me. After the decision was made I shared my firm opinion with him as the Pandava Maharani, before concluding the council. I stared hard at him and said, “Oh master archer *Dhananjaya*, it is okay even if you don’t gain the entire world and its support, but never miss to seek the support of Krishna no matter what! Don’t let him go away from Pandavas for any reason. Don’t come back from Dwaraka unless and until you seek his complete blessings!”

Arjuna’s face that had looked so confused and clueless till now, lit up. He spoke exactly in Krishna’s style, “Krishney, don’t worry. I will do as you say.”

I had experienced one truth of life so far – I planned something for the future, and in reality, something else totally unexpected happened, testing me and my husbands.

Arjuna returned from Dwaraka with a very bizarre fact.

Arjuna and Duryodhana visited Krishna in his resting chamber on the same morning. Krishna was in a blissful slumber on a rosewood bed. Duryodhana who had arrived first in the chamber sat on a seat near his head so as to not disturb his sleep. Arjuna who arrived later in the chamber was startled to see Duryodhana there. He was about to turn back when he remembered my words, ‘Don’t come back without Krishna’s blessings’. Then he decided something and entered the chamber. He gently sat on the bed near Krishna’s feet. Looking at his friend Krishna in deep sleep he even forgot the purpose of his visit to Dwaraka. He kept looking at the sleeping face of Krishna, forgetting himself. Taking enough caution not to disturb his sleep he took the opportunity of gently pressing his legs. The moment he touched his leg *Gudakesha* Arjuna immediately realized that Krishna was not asleep. He was just lying down with his eyes closed. As Arjuna’s doubt about Krishna being asleep for such a long time was cleared from his mind, a subtle smile flickered on his face.

After some time, Krishna ‘woke up’! His big fish-shaped eyes opened. He smiled gently to see Arjuna sitting at his feet and said, “*Partha*, when did you come?” Immediately Duryodhana smiled and attracted his attention by saying, “Pranama, Lord of Dwaraka, I have also come to visit you. Is everything fine?”

Krishna stretched and twisted his body as if he was just waking up from his sleep and sat on his bed. Duryodhana did not give Arjuna a chance to speak and said, “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, I arrived in your chamber first. I came to ask

for your forgiveness for having ignorantly called you a lowlife cowherd in the Kuru council. Please kindly forgive me and listen to what I have to say first.”

Each word of Duryodhana was full of deceitful diplomatic strategy. Krishna recognized it and winking to Arjuna he smilingly said to Duryodhana, “Oh Prince of Kurus, I had forgiven you even as I was leaving the assembly hall of Hastinapura. But still, today morning I saw this *Dhananjaya* of Pandavas first. Besides, he is younger to you. Therefore, I should listen to him first. Tell me Arjuna, why have you come?” Krishna did not give Duryodhana a chance to complain about it.

By this time Arjuna had got up from the bed and standing in front of Krishna he kneeled down politely with his palms brought together in prayer and said, “Your *Sakhi* Draupadi has conveyed her affectionate Pranama to you. Pranama from all of us Pandavas is always at your feet. Your Kunti *aanya* has conveyed her blessings to you. Oh Hrishiksha, as per your wish the war between Kauravas and Pandavas is now inevitable. It is with your blessings that we raised our kingdom of Indraprastha. In this war the Pandavas want your blessings along with the blessings of Balaramadada, Uddhavadeva, Maharaja Vasudeva and Rajmata. I have come here to obtain those blessings.”

Krishna smiled. In his special style, he said, “Oh Arjuna, I can offer only my blessings to you and the Pandavas. Yesterday itself in our Sudharma royal assembly dada and I had a serious difference of opinion over the problem of the Pandavas and Kauravas. He said that all senior Yadava warriors including him and myself should support Kaurava Maharaja Dhritarashtra along with the entire four-fold army. Or else stay aloof from the war! Prince Duryodhana had already visited him promptly and convinced him so. I told the Sudharma assembly, “Let the senior warriors decide for themselves whose side they want to choose in this war of the Kauravas and Pandavas. The Yadava army will go to the side that Prince Balaramadada decides to join. But I am not at all going to participate in this war as an armed warrior! If need be all I will be able to do in this war is to supply the weapons to the warriors, look after the injured or may be steer someone’s chariot.

“Dear friend Arjuna, you have come as a representative of the Pandavas and as you are the first in line, first you tell me undoubtedly and clearly, what do you want? Do you want me, who will be unarmed and will share his experience and wisdom with you or the fourfold Yadava army which is huge

in number and equipped with weapons? Whom do you want – me or the Yadava army? If you want the Yadava army, then you will have to go right away and visit Balaramadada. Dada is of the clear opinion that we should not take any sides in this war at all!”

Arjuna did not think about anything else and without an iota of doubt in his mind he bent down. He put his head on Krishna’s feet and politely said, “In any case it is your and only your blessing that I want Achyuta!”

Krishna put his hand on the crown Arjuna was wearing and said smilingly, “As you wish.” He immediately looked at Duryodhana and spoke in Yudhishtira’s style, “Oh Suyodhana, you have no other alternative but to accept the Yadava army! What is your decision?”

Duryodhana bent a little, brought his palms together and hiding his joy he said with sly courtesy, “As the Yadava Lord wishes. The Kauravas are ready to accept the Yadava army. I have already obtained such permission from Balaramadada yesterday. I know it fully well that a word from the Lord of Dwaraka has the power to change it. That is why I came here to seek permission from you too. I am contented that you granted it to me. I have only one polite request.”

Hearing praise for his words from Duryodhana Krishna smiled suggestively. He surmised what Duryodhana was going to request and said, “Kauravaa, don’t be afraid. I am not going to hold any weapon in my hands. I have taken such a vow. The only thing I will hold in my hands is the whip for the horses. Taking that into account it does not make any difference whether I am there or not in this war between the Kauravas and Pandavas!”

He was Duryodhana after all. He knew Krishna of Dwaraka very well. He said, “It is not about the weapons, it is about your silence!”

At that point Krishna got up and patting Duryodhana on his shoulders he said, “Your expectation for even a charioteer to keep silent is really strange Suyodhana. You will shout as you please to encourage your soldiers. Then isn’t it unfair that a charioteer should keep silent and not utter anything at all to encourage his horses? I never asked you for justice. I ask it today. Let me speak freely to encourage innocent beings! Don’t insist on the silence, Suyodhana.”

“Alright. As you wish.” Remembering the fact that he was older than Krishna Duryodhana raised his right hand as if in blessing.

Krishna smiled! Arjuna had never before seen him smile like that. As Duryodhana had turned his back he never got to see it.

But a strange thing happened in this period due to the events that took place. When Balaramadada who had insisted that the Yadavas should side with the Kauravas in the war heard Krishna's final decision, he disagreed with it and leaving everybody behind he actually went to the Himalayas! After that Uddhavadeva who was completely against war, also left and went to some place in the same region. Uddhavadeva visited his dear brother Krishna before leaving. But Balaramadada did not meet him! This was of course in accordance with his nature.

Krishna had sent Gargamuni, Maya, Vishwakarma, Twashtta, Kamalaksha and Vidyunmali for our assistance. With their support Bhimsena raised an encampment of the Pandava army on Kurukshetra near the banks of river Drishadwati. It included separate pavilions for the royal ladies of Pandavas. Separate pavilions were also raised for the wives of leading warriors. There were separate enclosed storage rooms for weapons like tridents, iron clubs, bow-arrows, chakras and so on. Maharaja Virata sent special messengers to places like Chedi, Madra, Manipura, and Girivraja and invited all Pandava ladies scattered in various cities to Upaplavya. All Pandava ladies except for the forest-dwelling Hidimba who was Bhimsena's wife, gathered in Upaplavya. The small town of Upaplavya was now transformed into a royal city. Maharaja Virata made sure that the men-women guests of Pandavas coming to the city were comfortable. He possessed a big body as his name denoted. Now he had also become large-hearted for us Pandavas.

News came that the Yadava army of Dwaraka was on its way to Kurukshetra. The fourfold army of Hastinapura had already reached Kurukshetra. The Kaurava army was inflating like the inundated river Ganga, that bloated by the moment in a great flood. And we received the final instruction from Dwaraka, "All warriors and ladies should now leave Upaplavya and go to Kurukshetra towards the encampment of the Pandava army on the banks of river Drishadwati."

As per Krishna's instruction I arrived at the Pandava base on the banks of river Drishadwati along with Subhadra and pregnant Uttaraa. The wives of major Pandava warriors also accompanied us. Automatically, the responsibility of the care of these ladies came on my shoulders.

Dhrishtadada arrived from Kampilyanagar along with Shikhandi, other brothers and the armed Panchala army. Kurukshetra bustled with action with his arrival. Then every day the number of warriors in our encampment kept growing. Kekeya king Brihatkshatra came along with his army. Subahu, the

king of Kashi, arrived with Shaibya. His army consisted of thirty thousand chariots. From Shuktimati, the city of the Chedis, Shishupala's son Dhrishtaketu arrived with his son Veetahotra along with one *akshauhini* army. My friend Krishna himself had appointed him as the ruler of the Chedis after Shishupala. The Vatsas came along with their army. Notably, commander Satyaki joined the Pandava base along with his troops. He had declined the appeal and orders of Balaramadada, Anadhrishti, and Krutavarman to join the Kauravas' camp. He said, 'I will go wherever Krishna goes' and came to our camp. But Krutavarman, the other valiant Yadava warrior, was going to join the Kauravas. Of course, the entire Yadava army was not with these two. Some troop leaders of the Yadava army had decided not to participate in the war as per Balaramadada's wish. They had stayed back in Dwaraka. Now our Pandava army was estimated to be seven *akshauhinis*. Every day Dhrishtadada came to the royal ladies' pavilion and gave the report of the day's happenings and the progress of the army, to me and rajmata.

Now me, my four husbands, Dhrishtadada, Maharaja Virata, Satyaki, and Dhrishtaketu – all of us were waiting for only Krishna! After all he was the charioteer of all of us. Arjuna had gone to Dwaraka to meet him.

The bright fortnight of the month of Margashirsha was coming to an end. The thick autumnal fog surrounding the holy place of Kurukshetra began to thin out. Meanwhile, at the Kaurava base located opposite our base, a colossal eleven *akshauhini* army had united. It was one and a half times larger than the Pandava army. It included Yavanas, Shakas, Gabalas, Barbaras, Kiratas, Kekeyas, Vatadhanas and such. From the Gandhara kingdom of Shakuni their proficient army had arrived. There was a big group of the Yavana and Shaka clans from the western region comprising the Kapisha, Kamboja, Vahika and Gandhara kingdoms. All of them had gathered at Kurukshetra in support of the Kauravas. This was all Shakuni's skill. Shalya, the mama of Pandavas, had left from Shakalnagar along with son Hritayana to join our camp. But Duryodhana visited him on the way and convinced him to join the Kaurava camp by giving him grand gifts. Ashmakeshwara of the Ashmaka kingdom had arrived in the Kaurava camp. Krishna's Garudadhwaaja chariot steered by Daruka was the last to arrive on the holy land of Kurukshetra where about forty million soldiers had gathered to showcase their gallantry! He had made sure to visit the Shiva temple of Nageshwar while coming from Dwaraka. He had performed *Abhishek* on the

*Shivapindi* with Arjuna and Daruka, offered *Bela* leaves and white flowers, and closing his fish-shaped eyes he had sung the hymn of Shiva from the bottom of his heart.

He had become one with Shiva – the lord of destruction – before commencing the catastrophic war of a great human sacrifice, powered by his sheer intellect.

It was the first day of the dark fortnight of the month of Margashirsha. On that day, many dark-complexioned, meagrely dressed woodcutters from both sides carried wide-bladed sharp hatchets and began cutting various towering trees, standing on the thirty-two-mile radius of the field that was going to be the setting for the battle tomorrow – the first day of the Great War; and began piling them up on the side of the battlefield. Ashoka, Anjana, *Aamra*, Almali, *Audumbara*, *Ashwattha*, Taala, Tamala, Kinjala, *Kadamba*, Kinshuka, Saaga, Punnaga, *Khaira* and many more such trees started collapsing with a loud crashing sound. Many armed, gallant warriors were going to fall in the same manner in the Great War that was going to begin tomorrow.

Krishna's Garudadhwaya chariot entered Kurukshetra from the side of the Kaurava base. As soon as it entered many people recognized it immediately. By now everybody knew that he was backing the Pandavas. Still to get a glimpse of him at least from a distance the soldiers eagerly gathered at the entrance of their pavilions.

The news of his arrival in Kurukshetra spread rapidly like wildfire and reached my camp. When I heard it, I got so restless that I didn't know what to do. I was very angry with him. First of all, he had let Balaramadada and Uddhavadeva leave Dwaraka. We expected that he would support us with the entire Yadava army. But he had proved that nobody could take anything about him for granted. The Yadava army was divided. Therefore, though everybody went to visit him I did not go. After meeting everyone, he himself came to my pavilion. He had already reckoned the reason of my anger. He saw me with my back turned to him, and tried to convince me, "Krishney, I know why you are angry. But have some patience. Just keep watching what happens next. Success in war never depends on the number of soldiers. All my vows and your wishes will be fulfilled. Arjuna told me in Dwaraka what you had instructed him to do. I am very much contented that the Pandavas accepted me in spite of my being unarmed. I will never let your faith get shattered. Trust me. Victory will be only yours. May I take your leave now?"

His last words were a direct blow to my heart. Though I was younger than

him in every sense, he was asking for my permission! Oh, how foolish was I to get angry with him! I quickly turned my face towards him, and briskly moving forward I touched his feet. I got up and looked at him. He was smiling. His face looked resplendent to me like never before. Before commencing the Great War that would be remembered for years to come, he said to me, “Krishney, I know very well how to defuse your anger. I take your bow as your permission granted to me and take your leave!” He turned and left. I kept wondering, ‘Indeed who is my best friend Krishna after all?’

Finally, the second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha dawned. Since before dawn, on the *Brahma Muhurta* itself commanders on both sides had already arranged their armies in particular formations. The commander of the Pandava army was my brother Dhrishtadyumna who was formally appointed so with rituals at the hands of Krishna. The seven *akshauhini* Pandava army ready to fight, stood behind him. Grandsire Bhishma was the Kaurava commander. The eleven *akshauhini* Kuru army stood behind him. I was in my pavilion far away. Arjuna’s wives Uloopi, Chitrangada, Nakula’s wife Karenumati, Sahadeva’s wife Vijaya and many maids were with me. Bhanumati and Subhadra were in a separate pavilion. Abhimanyu’s pregnant wife Uttaraa was in their pavilion. We couldn’t see any proceedings on the battlefield at all. The only sound audible was the clamour of the elephant cries at a distance, the neighing of the horses and the faint hubbub of the warriors blending with it.

The resplendent disc of the Sun – the Lord of the Sky – gradually ascended in the sky on the eastern horizon of the holy land of Kurukshetra. In our pavilion, we eagerly pricked our ears in anticipation of hearing a loud commotion. There were so many of us ladies but none of us uttered a word. Everyone’s mind had already reached the battlefield. I first heard the familiar sound of the Panchjanya conch of Krishna. It was followed by the sound of Dhrishtadada’s conch. Probably, grandsire Bhishma responded to it by blowing his own conch. Then there were the familiar sounds of the conches of my five husbands. After that a loud, thrilling cacophony of conch sounds was heard, which gave goose bumps. The trumpeting of elephants and the neighing of horses was heard from both sides. Then suddenly nobody knew what happened, but all the sounds gradually reduced and stopped completely. Utter silence prevailed, leaving all of us bewildered. I just couldn’t control myself and getting up from the circle of the ladies I went to the entrance of the pavilion. I kept staring madly in the direction of the battlefield that was

not in sight. What happened? I didn't understand anything. Did the war stop or what? In that case, what about my vows? What about my long hair that I had left open? I became restless and without talking to any of the ladies from the royal circle I started pacing around restlessly in the pavilion, muttering to myself. The Pandava Maharani within me was in agony as if pricked by hundreds of arrows. I wasn't in so much pain even when I was being humiliated in the gambling hall, but just thinking about it left me feeling ashamed and upset. For whatever reason if the war doesn't take place, if the scoundrels who dared to touch the saree on my body and the shameless people who watched it helplessly do not get punished, then the Pandava Maharani Draupadi's honour would be reduced to nothing! It will be stained! There were so many close friends with me, but none of them was going to understand my agony. I didn't feel like saying anything to anybody.

About half an hour passed by in that miserable and tormenting silence. And nobody understood what happened suddenly, but again the entire holy land of Kurukshetra reverberated with the commotion of various sounds of hundreds of conches, elephants, horses, and camels, clinking sounds of various weapons and the encouraging loud shouts of 'Get set... rise... attack!'.

The unprecedented, thrilling Great War between Kauravas and Pandavas had begun!

I exhaled a sigh of relief. The Himalayan tension on my mind abated immediately. Again, I began talking normally with my friends.

We Kshatriya ladies never felt anxious about the thrilling events on the battlefield throughout our lives. It is ingrained in us that life itself is a battle.

Every day all of us calmly heard about the exciting events of the war one after the other. Sometimes someone from us would be miserable on hearing about the loss of her relative in the war. I would then hold her close and console her by patting her. Now all of them had begun calling me tai instead of Maharani. Subhadra had emotionally come closer to me like never before. She also began consoling many by inner inspiration.

The evening of the thirteenth day of the war descended on our camp. All the news that the war messenger had brought so far was hopeful with respect to the outcome of war. So far none of the major Pandava warriors had fallen in the war.

But today at the centre of the 'Chakravyuha' formation arranged by Guru Drona, a fierce battle took place between Duryodhana's son Lakshmana and our Abhimanyu. Lakshmana had struck a blow of the mace on unconscious



Abhi and killed him.

Jayadratha had asked ‘Where is your mace?’ and insolently kicked the lifeless body of dead Abhi. Abhi’s head remained stuck in the ground, only his torso turned around.

My entire body flushed with rage hearing that news. Holding back my grief I tried to console Subhadra who was beating her chest while lamenting loudly, ‘Abhi – my Abhi’. Just then friend Krishna himself and Arjuna came into our pavilion only to console Subhadra. I was also moved to see Arjuna for the first time with his head hung low, that was usually held high. I composed myself again and moving forward I held both his arms tightly and shaking him frantically I shouted, “I want to see Jayadratha’s head. That scoundrel has kicked the lifeless body of my Abhi. Tell me oh archer, are you going to do it or not?”

Composing himself, grief-stricken Arjuna said, “Krishney, I have already taken a vow in the Chakravyuha formation itself that I will kill Jayadratha before tomorrow’s sun sets or else I myself will enter into fire. Be calm.”

Krishna and Arjuna consoled Subhadra and me and went to their camp. Subhadra still sobbed in the grief of losing her son. I kept patting her trying to console her, saying, “Calm down. Compose yourself Subhadra”. She had lost her only son. I couldn’t even imagine what she was feeling. I remembered what Krishna had once said, ‘Yajnasena, war is like a great *yajna*! No one can tell what kind of sacrifice one will have to offer in it.’ I wondered from whom and how many more sacrifices was this great *yajna* going to claim!



**Arjuna**

I am Arjuna! One of the famous five Pandava brothers. Very rarely, Kuntimata called me ‘Shendephal’ – the youngest child. As I grew older I came to know a fact about the ‘Shendephal’, that by law of nature many rare qualities are collectively found in the ‘Shendephal’. I considered only two relations in my life as supreme. First was that I was the ‘Shendephal’ of Kuntimata and more than that I was the first best friend of Srikrishna. These two relations offered me a lot in my life.

In my life, I regarded only Srikrishna as Supreme. Everyone has a pride of his ‘self’. I took pride in the fact that I had surrendered my ‘self’ at Srikrishna’s feet.

Initially I used to address him as ‘Srikrishna’ like the others. Later, Yadava priest Gargamuni explained to me from time to time that the epithet ‘Sri’ in his name has various shades. I experienced this strongly during many events in my life. Whenever I called him ‘Srikrishna’ I always felt that he was much taller than me, directly touching the sky! Just as vast and boundless as the sky!

But when Draupadi came into my life after the Swayamwar, I gradually realized how appropriate it is to call him ‘Krishna’. Her calling him Krishna was supported many a times by Kuntimata, with which even I agreed. While calling him ‘Krishna’ sometimes I would feel that he was dwelling in my fist-sized heart and at other times I experienced that I myself was accommodated like a tiny particle in his heart that was as big as the sky. And it was he who taught me that Life means actual experience! Nothing else...!

Possibly because of that I got into the habit of inadvertently calling him ‘Srikrishna’, whenever I wanted him to realize that he was much greater than me, and whenever I realized that I had made a mistake and I wanted to indicate that I was a being much smaller than him, unwittingly I would call him ‘Krishna’. Such was Krishna and Srikrishna who was so great that he occupied the whole of my life and yet remained much more beyond it!

It was Krishna who clearly explained the meaning of my name ‘Arjuna’ to me. During our very first meeting at Kurukshetra near the Suryakunda he looked deep into my eyes and said, “The name ‘Arjuna’ befits only you. No one else can go even close to it! Try to understand the meaning of your name clearly and always remember it. Arjana means to acquire – to obtain. Your life’s fruitfulness lies in acquiring all selective knowledge in the world that takes one to the zenith of honour.” Since then he called me ‘Arjuna’.

Sometimes he would call me '*Sakha*' with affection. It was my experience that whenever he called me '*Sakha*' my entire day would be filled with extreme joy. On such a day, some or the other virtuous deed was certainly carried out by me. That is why deep down in my heart I always felt that all the time he should call me only '*Sakha*'. Whenever he called me '*Sakha*' with affection my face lit up. I came to know that only later, after I was told so by Udhodada and Draupadi.

I had noted subtly that he addressed and considered only a few more chosen people as '*Sakha*'. The list included his charioteer Daruka, his best friend Sudama of Sudampuri, Mahatma Vidura and minister Sanjaya of Hastinapura. And the most important person was Uddhavadada.

I had heard him address only Draupadi as '*Sakhi*'. Sometimes from Kuntimata or Balaramadada I had heard that in his childhood, in Gokul he called Radhika as '*Sakhi*'. He himself had told me that in remembrance of Radhika, every day he used to wear a fresh, white Vajjayanti garland on his chest. That is why sometimes even Radhika's imaginary character would float in front of my eyes. As I reflected over Draupadi and Radhika being his '*Sakhis*' I would inadvertently remember Rukminivahini. She was Krishna's most favourite wife. After Kuntimata I revered her the most. I called Krishna's seven other wives *vahini* too. All of them had different temperaments and were respectable.

Whenever I thought of the thousands of women of Kamarupa whom he had rehabilitated in Dwaraka I felt – indeed, the meaning of womanhood that he had understood was not understood by a single warrior from any of the Kshatriya clans like us Pandavas, Yadavas, Kauravas, Viratas, Panchalas, Chedis and Magadhas. This was one of the main reasons why I regarded him as '*Sri*'. Kuntimata herself had brought this facet of his to my attention saying, "Arjuna, observe minutely how my Krishna treats every woman that he meets. Cultured behaviour is nothing else but this. You should also never forget it."

It was because of these teachings that I got married to the Naga daughter Uloopi, during my pilgrimage after my vow was broken. Srikrishna's marriage to Jambativahini was an exemplar for me. Even Bhimsena had it as an exemplar when he got married to Hidimba. I had accepted Naga daughter Uloopi – a child widow – as my bride remembering these two who were close to my heart.

When I look back at my life in this way I vaguely remember Mount

Gandhamadana. As Kuntimata had told us, all of us Pandavas were born on Mount Gandhamadana. While offering us the region of Khandavavana as our share of the kingdom Shakuni had meanly said in front of Krishna, ‘Pandavas are used to a life in the forest.’ What he said as political sarcasm was in fact the truth of life that we had actually experienced. Today I feel very proud of that life in the forest. It was the truth of life for us because we were born on the Shatashringa summit of Mount Gandhamadana. Later, during the stay in the forest I had to spend nine years on Mount Gandhamadana. As kings, we ruled the Khandavavana. We spent our years in the forest in the Kamyaka and Dvaita vanas. After the unprecedented Great War of Kurukshetra we ruled Indraprastha for a few years and then for our final journey we went to the forest of Himavana – the snow-forest. The Pandavas and forests were an inseparable couple right from our birth till the end. It must be because we were constantly in touch with the forests that our hearts remained simple, artless and pure even in all adverse conditions. Kuntimata and I always considered this as the blessing by our friend Krishna for us Pandavas. It was Srikrishna who taught us that if you are pure and positive in mind, the result will be positive no matter what the situation.

As the five of us looked different, we appeared different to the world. It is also true that our temperaments were basically different. Yet, the five of us were a united, unbreakable entity like a mighty fist. Kuntimata played a crucial role in keeping it that way. Her daughter-in-law Draupadi also played an equally important role in that. But we knew very well that an invaluable large share of this credit went to Srikrishna – our beloved friend.

Some events in our lives were unforgettable and proved to be the turning points in our lives. The very first event was that of the house of lac. The second was that of the Swayamwar of Draupadi. Then many more events like the burning of Khandava vana, creation of Indraprastha, killing of Jarasandha, the Rajasuya *yajna*, killing of Shishupala, Yudhishtira’s mindless gambling game and the calamity, Draupadi’s humiliation and so on. Any of these events could have caused a rift in our unity. But it did not happen. What was the reason behind that? It was the life-giving guidance of Kuntimata that we received in the first phase of our lives, and the gift of Srikrishna’s invaluable blessings that we obtained in the second phase of our lives. Sometimes even the thought, ‘What if Srikrishna had never met us in our lives?’ leaves me numb and at a loss for words. I feel terrified and restless.

Personally, I was indeed his best friend. That is why later he counselled me during the Great War to help me wise up to my duty when I felt despondent and was veering away from it.

Why did he choose only me for that eternal advice? In fact, Dhrishtadyumna of the Panchalas was the commander of Pandavas in that war. When he noticed that I was despondent and was not ready to do my duty, he should have actually approached commander Dhrishtadyumna, leaving me alone in my Nandighosha chariot. He could have just transferred the leadership of my army to him and continued with the war. He did not do so at that time. The reason behind that was his pure love for me.

In his mind, he surely must have assessed the suitability of my elder brothers Yudhishtira and Bhimsena, before imparting the timeless and indispensable philosophy of the Gita. Why must Yudhishtira have not passed this acid test of his? As per my intellect, it was because Yudhishtira had proved that he could get completely obsessed with an addiction like gambling – an addiction that makes one forget one’s humanity. Krishna had not forgotten that in spite of being the eldest, instead of sacrificing his right he had expressed his wish to get married to Draupadi after the Swayamwar. So to speak Yudhishtira has always been speaking in the philosophical way that Krishna preached in the Gita to me. But those words never made any impression on the minds of the four of us who were younger to him, especially on Bhimsena’s mind. Why was it so? It was because whatever Yudhishtira preached throughout his life, he never practised it himself, whenever faced with a trying situation. In fact, as the eldest brother it was his responsibility to showcase his gallantry. He had become the Maharaja of Indraprastha because he was the eldest. But he never expressed any desire to visit the Dwaraka of Srikrishna with whose invaluable assistance Indraprastha was erected. He never actually went there. That is why I occasionally addressed Srikrishna as ‘dada’ also, but I always called Yudhishtira as Yudhishtira or Maharaja.

Sometimes I wondered what if either Bhimsena I or were born as the eldest. If either one of us had become the Maharaja of Indraprastha, then how would things have been? But I never expressed this thought of mine openly. Was this behaviour of mine hypocritical? Not at all. I always respected the word of Kuntimata and Srikrishna as final– from the bottom of my heart. My utmost devotion to them was the strength of my life. It was in fact the essence of my life.

Yudhishtira had a bit of an inconspicuous royal pride about the fact that his brothers would never disobey his word. Krishna was completely aware of that. If he would have preached the timeless philosophy of life in Gita to Yudhishtira, then Yudhishtira who played the gambling game insanely would have moved about from temple to temple giving shallow discourses about it.

Then why didn't he choose mighty and powerful Bhimsena? Everybody knew that Bhimsena was mighty. But when he was overpowered by valour, at times he would become uncontrollable. It was easy to puff up his pride about his strength but difficult to control him. Srikrishna himself was a mighty wrestler. Everybody thought he made Bhimsena take on Jarasandha himself. I never had that misconception. What would have happened if Bhimsena would have lost his control during the wrestling bout in Girivraja that lasted for so many days? Invincible Jarasandha would have definitely taken advantage of that. Bhimsena put the Bahukantaka hold around Jarasandha's neck in the end. What if the exact opposite had happened and Jarasandha would have tightened the Bahukantaka hold around Bhimsena's neck? Srikrishna would have come forward exactly at that moment. He would have openly indicated Bhimsena to seek pardon by raising his thumb. And in the same wrestling pit he would have challenged Jarasandha to fight with him. It was with this Bahukantaka hold that Krishna had killed Kansa who was much younger and more powerful than Jarasandha. Although everybody had forgotten it I remembered it well.

Whether he was in a duel, on a battlefield or in his daily life, Srikrishna was like an iceberg, with only its tip visible and actually being eight times bigger under the water!

Another weak point of Bhimsena was his hunger and sleep. That is why he had not chosen Bhimsena for the Gita.

Then why did he choose only me as his best friend to preach the Gita? To tell you the truth this question never came to my mind. I was never 'myself'. I was the breath of Srikrishna! Therefore, my life cannot be complete if he is omitted. In another sense, talking about him is like revealing myself. It is like a shadow trying to describe the actual figure in its entirety.

In the beginning, I used to ask him, why should we do a particular thing? How should it be done? What will happen if we do it and what will happen if we don't? But every time he convinced me with a smile in such a way that later I realized that the flow of his thoughts was very powerful, like a strong

current of water that cannot be contained with two feeble hands. On some occasions, I clearly realized that though grandsire Bhishma and he both were Jalapurushas there was a big difference between them.

Whenever I start thinking about Srikrishna like this, many events keep springing up in my mind like a jumping herd of deer running speedily. Flocks of colourful peacocks big and small, begin to alight gently on the shore of my mind, giving out their peculiar cries. I cannot keep my eyes focused on anyone in particular. I am narrating this story of Krishna and Arjuna as I recall it. I am fully aware that his life is like the everlasting quiver that I got along with the Gandiva bow; overflowing with events!

Nowadays, as I try to find the meaning of his presence in our lives, I feel like a child who has lost his way in a thick forest. No criterion is enough to evaluate his character in its entirety. No matter what angle I look at him from, what I essentially feel is that he is vast and limitless – just like the clear blue skies! The piece of sky that one can see from the roof of a cottage and the vastness of sky that one sees when one comes out of the cottage – it is the same experience with him.

Of late I frequently remember his first visit with us on the land of Kurukshetra near the Suryakunda and that too on the day of the solar eclipse. Today I realize that though it was the day of the solar eclipse the sunrise in my life had begun since that day itself.

In this very first meeting with Srikrishna at Kurukshetra I just felt like paying obeisance to him by sitting in the Virasana pose. Why did I feel like that and what else did I feel during this first meeting itself – I tried to discover and understand it throughout my life. I never found any satisfactory reason for that. I found it later, only when he preached before the beginning of the Great War at Kurukshetra. Whatever I understood was so concise that it contained the essence of my life. It was that he is a visionary, with the vision of the betterment of the entire human race in Aaryavarta. I am only a means to achieve that end.

What I am telling you is how I saw him later, after many more years. It was before the beginning of the Great War – the great *yajna* of the lives of forty lakh warriors. The second time that he met me and the other Pandavas was at the time of Draupadi's Swayamwar in Kampilyanagar. Many people think that it was here that he met us for the first time. In our childhood, we first appeared in Hastinapura from Mount Gandhamadana along with Kuntimata. He received the news about us in Dwaraka within a few days. After that he



used to gather detailed information about us, on Vasudevababa's instruction. On the occasion of the solar eclipse he met us at Kurukshetra along with Uddhavadeva. Since that day not a single day of us Pandavas and Kuntimata passed without remembering him and Uddhavadeva.

The second time he met us was at the time of Draupadi's Swayamwar. I didn't know at all that he too had come to participate in the Swayamwar. Only three major happenings during the Swayamwar were deeply etched on my heart. The first was that Karna, the charioteer's son, stepped forward with pride and picked up the bow of Shiva that was kept for the Swayamwar. At that moment while looking at his movements I intensely felt that Karna was also a Jalapurusha like Srikrishna and grandsire Bhishma. But the next moment I discarded that thought promptly. No way could a charioteer's son be on an equal footing with grandsire and Srikrishna. After quite a while I came to know that Karna's son Sudamana was killed by an arrow of mine. Word was that Karna had therefore taken a vow to execute me! The second happening was that of Draupadi's words. It was not possible that any Kshatriya lady would ever speak of her own accord, during the Swayamwar. It wasn't according to the norms of etiquettes. But Draupadi said with clear determination, 'I will never become the wife or the daughter-in-law of a charioteer!' And the third event was the visit of Srikrishna, Balaramadada and Udhodeva at the potter's house in Kampilyanagar where we were residing. Really, what if Srikrishna wouldn't have met us Pandavas on that day? The way Draupadi had looked at me on that day might have perhaps prompted me to vehemently oppose sharing her with all. I had strongly thought of doing it. That day, a unique facet of Srikrishna and Kuntimata got imprinted permanently on my mind. It taught me never to disobey the word of these two.

Srikrishna convinced us how it was appropriate that Draupadi should become the wife of all five of us. He also explained to her who she was. Kuntimata seconded his word. That day I realized one truth – only Srikrishna stood like the Himalayas behind my widowed mother who had faced many calamities courageously!

It was only after that event during Draupadi's Swayamwar that the firm bond between Krishna and me was initiated. Had there been any other gallant Kshatriya in my place, he would have mistakenly harboured a grudge against Srikrishna for supporting the sharing of his wife whom he had won in the Swayamwar. I never harboured such grudge. Later Draupadi became

Krishna's beloved *Sakhi*. Even that didn't bother me at all. In fact, as time passed, I came to understand my wife Draupadi more through Krishna. Not only Draupadi but I also came to understand Kuntimata more as a 'mother' than my brothers. Not only did I understand my mother but I also came to understand life in its entirety.

Srikrishna and Kuntimata were the two people who prepared the code of conduct for the time to be spent privately by us five brothers with our wife. Krishna instructed us about how to treat Draupadi in privacy. Our experienced Kuntimata advised Draupadi how she should behave as a woman.

The code of conduct that was drawn made all of us realize how thoroughly Krishna thinks about others rather than himself.

Kuntimata guided Draupadi about parenting. When our sons began talking Draupadi would teach each one of them to address all of us as 'Taata' meaning father. But there was a subtle difference in it. They would add 'Taata' at the end of the name for all of us except for the biological father and address us as – Arjuna taata, Bhima taata and so on. All of us brothers considered Draupadi's five sons – Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Shrutakirti, Shatanika, and Shrutasena – as our own. Our sons were a tight-knit third generation of Pandavas.

It was at the time of the burning of Khandavavana that I grew closer to Srikrishna. Duryodhana and Shakuni, the leaders of the Kurus, pretended to be generous, and offered us the region of Khandavavana, full of thick forests, as our share of the kingdom. Here I must tell you clearly what I understood of Duryodhana. He was very difficult to win over in a war just as his name suggested. Even in normal life, he was difficult to comprehend. In front of the citizens of Hastinapura he made a great show of his deep love for his ninety-nine brothers, but in his heart, he had no love and affection for any of them except for five-six of his favourite brothers. He considered the other brothers only as his obedient servants. He was well aware of the fact that he did not hold any right over the Kuru throne either by law or by age. He knew it quite well that our eldest brother Yudhishtira was the rightful heir. Except for his subtle pride and addiction for gambling, Yudhishtira was a loving person who treated the Pandavas and Kauravas with affection. He was loved by the citizens of Hastinapura. They also considered him as their prince. Grand sire Bhishma also very thoughtfully supported him to be the prince.

Shakuni, the son of the Gandhara king Subala was the one who had crept

between the Kauravas and Pandavas like a thorn of Kikar. Shakuni made the blind king Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi who had blindfolded herself for the sake of her husband, dance to his tune, along with Duryodhana and his ninety-nine brothers. He had eleven more brothers. They moved about freely in Hastinapura as his loyal spies. All of them were supported by a shrewd politician called Kanaka. Duryodhana treated his beloved brother Dushasana who was born after him like his own shadow. The four of them always tried to drag world conqueror Karna into their crafty plans. Duryodhana had obliged Karna by making him the king of the Anga kingdom. But for some reason Karna insisted on only one thing, ‘Challenge the Pandavas directly. Let us fight them on the battlefield.’

The house of lacquer was the first ordeal for us Pandavas. We escaped that because of the timely warning from Mahatma Vidura. Only one good thing came out of that calamity. Our Bhimsena got associated with the Rakshasa clan due to his marriage with Hidimba. Her son Ghatotkacha was growing up in the forests. The second ordeal in our lives was the burning the Khandavavana. But today it is becoming clear why Srikrishna accepted the Khandavavana region on behalf of us in the royal assembly of Hastinapura. What if he hadn't accepted it? There would have been no strong friendship between him and us at all. It is true that we were his *aate bandhus*. He had many more *aate bandhus* like us. But he had already proved it by executing his unjust, cruel mama Kansa that he was never going to get tangled in such false blood relations. He did not hesitate to punish his paternal cousin Shishupala who assisted Jarasandha. He had also severely punished Viduratha and Dantawakra, two more of his *aate bandhus*.

Krishna had given as much importance to the construction of the well-planned royal city of Indraprastha by clearing Khandavavana, as he had given for the construction of Dwaraka. During the construction of Indraprastha many a times he had come to visit us and had guided us. His guidance was so insightful that in our future life we never had to turn to anybody else for such guidance. The only reason for all this was that he loved us from the bottom of his heart. He reverently loved Kuntimata much more than his other *aatyas*. He was never seen regarding his other *aatyas* as highly, during the journey of his life.

Srikrishna was a family man and sociable, always surrounded by relatives and friends. Each one around him felt that he or she was the only one whom Srikrishna loved the most. That was his specialty indeed. His close brothers

Balaramadada and Udhodeva thought him to be closest to them. But his feelings of love for both of them were quite different. Just as those two brothers thought that he was closest to them, all of us, his aatebandhus, chulatbandhus and mavasbandhus too thought the same. Not only that, the young and old Yadavas of the eighteen clans of Dwaraka also thought of him as their own brother. Considering the energetic way in which the Kurus always welcomed him, how can one deny that the distant Kurus also considered him as their own brother? In each and every visit of ours Uddhavadeva and I talked about him. These talks were a delightful experience in my life. Both of us could never forget the invaluable truth that we discovered about Srikrishna through these discussions of ours. Everything has two ends; one at the top and one at the bottom; one at the beginning and one at the end. Even this multifaceted earth has the southern and northern pole. The truth that touched both of us was that our Srikrishna has been easily connecting these two ends; at every stage of life.

He had two fathers – his biological father Vasudevababa and his foster father Nandababa from Gokul who nurtured him. He also had two mothers, his biological mother Devakimata and his foster mother Yashodamata, the gopa woman who took care of him diligently and inculcated sansakaras in him.

Just as he had two mothers and two fathers, he also had two gurus. The first one was Acharya Sandipani from the Ankapada aashrama of Avanti and the other was Ghor Angirasa from Prayaga aashrama. Acharya Sandipani had given him the fundamental knowledge of Brahmacharyashrama, comprising the Shastras and Astras, fourteen Vidyas and sixty-four fine arts. Ghor Angirasa had imparted the complete knowledge of Brahman to him.

As I happened to come into his company, no one else but I realized that though Guru Drona and Acharya Kripa imparted the knowledge of the Shastras and Astras to us, we never got a guru who imparted *Brahmavidya* to us. We never went to any aashrama at all. We never experienced that aashrama life is a powerful centre of imparting values. Lately I had started to strongly feel that the reason for the enmity that grew between the Kauravas and us was probably because we were deprived of the aashrama life.

I don't know if my brothers felt it but while talking to him I always felt that Krishna was my greatest guru.

At the time of burning the Khandavavana and erecting Indraprastha in its place I developed a more affectionate and close relationship with Srikrishna. I

will always remember what he said to me while setting the forest on fire, “Oh Arjuna, my heart breaks while destroying such a beautiful treasure of Mother Nature created after years of penance. I have experienced it once before on Mount Gomanta how agonizing it is for a heart that longs for creation. I will never forget these two events in my life. That is why I could never forgive Jarasandha who left me no choice but to destroy the forests of Mount Gomanta. We had to set the Khandavavana aflame to erect the royal city of Indraprastha for you Pandavas; I will never forgive Duryodhana and Shakuni for that. Remember that just as sometimes one is required to set ablaze thick forests clearly visible to the eyes, one also has to destroy the forests of insolence, injustice, and arrogance in human life. Without that the flow of life does not proceed. Even in the new royal city one has to raise well-planned, beautiful forests.

It was in this Khandavavana that I obtained the Nandighosha chariot of four pure white horses with the pennant of Kapi, and a very auspicious bow named Gandiva along with two inexhaustible quivers. I could never forget the extreme joy that he felt when I received it, which was even more than what I felt. How did his joyous face look at that time? Now after so many years today I realize that it was like his face at the time of the Rajasuya *yajna* when he projected the Sudarshan chakra towards Shishupala in front of all of us. He always emphasized the significance of the Gandiva bow that I had obtained. One time he told me very firmly, ‘You should guard this difficult to obtain Gandiva bow just as vigilantly as you would protect Draupadi during your privacy!’ After that, many a times the thought of the divine Sudarshana chakra that he had obtained, kept revolving in my mind. Sometimes, I would get lost in myself, wondering what could be the association between his twelve spoked, Vajra centered Sudarshana and the bow string of my Gandiva bow, the hair-raising sound of which can be vividly heard at a far away distance? Why was my complexion blue just like his – like the multi-coloured shades congealed on a hot iron rod after splashing water on it? Whenever such a basic question arose in my mind I would simply keep looking at him for a long time. At that time, it felt as if I was looking into the mirror. Ultimately, I would ask him only one question, “Oh Hrishikeshaa, who exactly are you? Tell me at least once, who exactly am I to you?”

Then he would give me a charming smile and say, “You are my beloved friend! There is one more like you” – I would look deep into his eyes and say promptly, “Udhodeva!” Then he would give me a very different kind of smile

and say, ‘Right! You correctly guess what is on my mind. That is why you are my beloved friend!’

It was only as per his direction that I went to the Shiva temple of Somanath near Dwaraka at the time of Subhadra’s abduction. I was disguised in a saffron robe of an ascetic. My beard had grown long. During the mission of Subhadra’s abduction, I obeyed all his instructions to the letter. There was only one thing I did spontaneously. Leaving the Shiva temple of Somanath I crossed the creek in a boat and reached Dwaraka. That was to visit his Srisopana to my heart’s content before abducting Subhadra. No citizen of Dwaraka could recognize me due to my saffron attire. Passing by the check posts one after the other I reached the Srisopana. Oh, how sparkling and grand it looked! It was so tall with so many steps. I went close to the lowest step in front of me. My heart got filled with mixed emotions. I bowed down to the Srisopana from the bottom of my heart and touched my head to the step. For a few moments, I kept my head rested on the step.

I had no idea or expectation whatsoever. I raised my head while thinking only about Krishna and simply kept looking. On the highest step of the Srisopana he stood – so tall. Srikrishna himself! Climbing down the steps one by one he came closer. No one else had recognized me yet, but he recognized me in the very first glance. Generally, he never put his hand on the shoulder of any ascetic. But looking deep in my eyes he did it. He spoke to me that which only I would understand and not any of the attendants who were around, “Yogiraja, I know you. Of late the Raivatakas are in strong need of an ascetic like you. You should immediately go there. Tomorrow itself my sister Subhadra will leave here to visit the temple of the family deity before her wedding to the great Kuru Duryodhana. I have instructed her to visit you also. I am sure you will give her appropriate blessings. You should!” I received my clue from the person I wanted it from. For me it was like his blessing. From that moment, the Srisopana occupied a precious spot in my heart – just as Subhadra did later!

There are so many such incidents which are engraved on my heart, as Krishna’s beloved friend. For the naming ceremonies of our sons he came from Dwaraka to Indraprastha without fail. Kuntimata named Yudhishtira’s son Prativindhya. Prativindhya means resembling Mount Vindhya. Balaramadada who had accompanied Krishna at that time also liked it. All of us liked it. The right to name the first child of the third generation of the Pandavas went of course to Kuntimata. For the naming ceremony of Bhima’s

son, he came to Indraprastha along with Balaramadada, his son Pradyumna, two more of his brothers and two step-brothers. This big and healthy child of Bhimsena was named 'Sutasoma'. Balaramadada himself gave him this name saying, "Bhima is my disciple. I will name his son". He also gave a funny and convincing explanation as to why the name 'Sutasoma'. Dada said, "We Yadavas always love Soma! He is the son of this Soma – hence Sutasoma." Hearing that, Srikrishna smilingly said, "Dada, Soma means the Moon. So, you mean to say that he is the son of Pandavas who belong to the *Chandravansha*. Right?"

For my son's naming ceremony, he came along with Uddhavadeva, Rukminivahini and Balaramadada. Srikrishna himself named my son 'Shrutakirti'. He explained the name in the following way, "His father – our Arjuna has struggled through days and nights to obtain great acclaim. He had to travel throughout Aaryavarta for conquering. This son of his will get acclaim right from his birth. He cannot be anybody else but 'Shrutakirti'! Born with acclaim!"

He also came for the naming ceremonies of the sons of my two younger brothers, Nakula and Sahadeva. Our Udhodeva named both of them. That was also as per Srikrishna's wish. Uddhavadeva himself named Nakula's son 'Shatanika' and Sahadeva's son as 'Shrutasena'. Those two names were also meaningful.

All the five brothers wholeheartedly loved all the five sons of Draupadi. Our love for Draupadi and the good qualities in all the sons were the reasons for that, but one more reason was that we had been bereft of our father's love since childhood. We never experienced our father's affection. All of us strongly felt that our sons should not miss what we had missed. Whenever the subject of 'fatherly love' was discussed my heart would fill up with deep respect for two people. The first person was Kuntimata. Whether it was in the forest or the royal palace of Indraprastha she never let us feel the lack of anything. The second person was Srikrishna. He was our mentor and guru; our exemplary elder *mame* bandhu. My brothers may not have felt it but I strongly felt that he was also our loving father!

His love for me had so many facets. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't comprehend them all.

The way he protected me with vigilance gave me the feel of his fatherly love. It had happened many times. But it was impressed on my mind the most during the mission of Jarasandha in Girivraja. In the royal palace of the

Magadhas he put forth Bhimsena and himself, and not me!

If I had to fight a duel with Jarasandha... then? With his genius, he had astutely avoided the possibility of what...if.

He could have easily fulfilled the condition of Draupadi's Swayamwar but he refrained from it. He recognized me correctly, just by the Virasana pose that I took and assumed the position of a silent spectator. This act of his befitted only a father. He had silently loved me like a son. Many times, he behaved in a way that only I could understand. I also reciprocated his fatherly love with equally appropriate respect.

His elder brother Balaramadada was like an elder brother to us too. I used to call him dada. I had subtly noticed that Krishna called him dada in many different ways. Whenever he wanted to point out a mistake to his Balaramadada he would act more humbly. Occasionally, he stood in complete opposition to him. But even while opposing him he never spoke with disrespect.

Srikrishna's favourite, beloved wife Rukminidevi was my favourite *vahini*. Many a times I felt that it was as a result of Rukminivahini's influence that Srikrishna's speech became so charming to the audience. When I would ask him so, he would simply smile. If I tried to get an answer from Rukminivahini, her round face would glow with a smile that seemed like a reflection of his divine smile, and say, "Oh Arjuna, is it ever possible for anybody to do that? How can anyone bring high tide to the ocean by pouring one's bowl of water in it?"

Whenever Rukminivahini and Draupadi talked to each other for whatever reason, I would unwittingly assume the position of a silent spectator. Draupadi was loquacious and talked in an insistent manner. Rukminivahini would occasionally utter a sentence or two resembling a question, while taking precaution not to reduce Draupadi's fervour. Draupadi's bullock cart of chatter would then sprint forward. The funny part was, both of them would forget that I was listening. At such times if Krishna arrived there, it would have a magical impact. Both of them would stop talking at once and simply keep looking at him. Then he would also skilfully remind them that they had ignored me so far. Talking to me solemnly he would say, "Our Abhimanyu has complete knowledge of breaking into the Chakravyuha formation. He has learned it from me. But he doesn't know how to break out from the centre, towards the first ring of the formation! Why don't you bring him to Dwaraka sometime? I will give him the demonstration in person."



Abhimanyu was unique among all the Pandava sons. He was passionate about learning to use new Shastras and Astras. He was also very humble. He was Srikrishna's favourite *bhacha*. Abhimanyu also loved his mama equally deeply. He never disobeyed his mama's word.

Since my first meeting with Srikrishna at Kurukshetra I had experienced a truth about him – his life was like a lotus flower with a thousand petals that blossomed gradually day by day and looked different every day.

I often wondered why he took so much interest in Subhadra's marriage with me even in the face of Balaramadada's wrath. The reason for that was not only his absolute love for me but also his boundless love for his sister. It was a big surprise for me as to how he had discovered the love between Subhadra and me, without asking me anything at all. I tried to dig it out of Subhadra later. The answers she gave were completely unexpected. She told me, "Before the abduction every time Krishnadada kept complaining about you. He used to say, "That Arjuna of the Pandavas is very reserved. Karna, the king of Anga who possesses the Kavacha-kundala, and Ekalavya, the son of Hiranyadhanu are better archers than him. That master archer is a womanizer more than the other brothers. Wherever he goes he gets married and brings a new wife!" While hearing Subhadra's words I would keep smiling. Once she finished I would say, "Silly Subhadra, it was a unique trick of your Krishnadada to find out how strong and firm your love for me was. The world doesn't consider each and every action and every word of your dada as Krishnalila for no reason."

I could never forget the facet of his nature that I saw at the time of the abduction of Subhadra. He himself had planned all the minute details of how I should abduct Subhadra. Not a single part of his speculation had gone wrong. He was playing a specific role while meeting Subhadra and me, like a skilled actor. While meeting Balaramadada and Revativahini he was playing a different role. In short, he was a master in acting. The title of his drama was 'Premayoga'. Whether it was for the gopa-gopis of Gokul, for Yadavas in Mathura, for the disciples in the aashrama of Aacharya Sandipani, or for Yadavas and Pandavas while creating Dwaraka and Indraprastha, or while travelling continuously throughout Aaryavarta to eliminate the unjust kings of various kingdoms – every time and in every event, he practised and worshiped only Premayoga.

Due to his prudent vision, he made me abduct Subhadra and strengthen the relations between the Pandavas and the Yadavas of Dwaraka. After getting

married to Subhadra the frequency of my visits to Dwaraka increased.

Once a funny incident took place during one of my visits to Dwaraka. Our guru's son Ashwatthama also came to Dwaraka from Hastinapura while I was in Dwaraka. He visited Krishna, dada, and *vahini* as soon as he came. In the evening Ashwatthama and Srikrishna went to the ocean shore in Srikrishna's Garudadhwaya chariot, for offering the evening oblations to the Sun god. Daruka was obviously there with them. He was busy guarding the chariot and the horses. After offering oblations Srikrishna and Ashwatthama sat in the sand, chatting. The platter-sized disc of the sun was about to set. While looking at it intently god knows what came over Ashwatthama and suddenly he said to Srikrishna, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, I always keep thinking about the Sudarshan that you have— the radiant chakra that looks like the sun disc. I have travelled so far to meet you just for that. Oh Yadava, right here sitting on this sand of the ocean, will you please appear in front of me in your form carrying that Sudarshan chakra? Is it possible for you to do it right at this moment?"

Krishna looked at him and smiled gently in spite of his strange request. While he continued sitting, he looked at the platter-sized sun disc for a few moments, closed his eyes and chanted the divine mantras of the chakra of brilliance. His face started looking much brighter. Within a moment or half both of them could hear a cacophony of various instruments blended with the sound of the ocean, as if coming from a faraway distance.

Ashwatthama kept staring with his eyes wide. He could see the radiant chakra revolving rapidly on Krishna's right index finger that he had raised. It had twelve spokes and a centre of Vajra. Krishna's face glowed with the same brilliance as that of the Sudarshan. Ashwatthama shut his eyes automatically as his eyes couldn't bear that light. Now the cacophony of instruments reduced gradually and ceased. From his index finger Srikrishna put the chakra on his right in the sand. The Sudarshan chakra was lying in the sand. Now Ashwatthama had also gained his composure. He just kept staring at the Sudarshan chakra with astonishment. He himself was the master of powerful Astras such as Brahmastra and Narayanastra. Without moving his eyes away from the Sudarshan he asked Srikrishna, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, if you find me worthy of it, then give your divine Sudarshan chakra along with its mantras to me! If you possess a heart as big as the western ocean spread in front of us, then give away this Sudarshan to this Ashwatthama today!"

The son of the guru had put Srikrishna in such a tight spot as nobody had

ever done. Yet Srikrishna was calm. As he got up gently and walked towards the ocean, his rosy soles with many auspicious symbols produced footprints in a line on the wet sand of the western ocean. Not a single footprint was out of line or awkward.

Krishna bent forward and picked some ocean water in his palms. The Vaijayanti garland and pearl necklaces with the Kaustubh diamond around his neck dangled. The peacock feather in the golden crown on his head fluttered on the ocean wind. He walked back and offered the water in his palm on the Sudarshan yantra lying in the sand chanting the mantras with his eyes closed. He gave away his cherished Sudarshan chakra to Ashwatthama, in the presence of the Sun god and the Ocean god. Now his face came back to normal with much satisfaction. He smiled as usual and said to the guru's son, "Oh Ashwatthama, son of the guru, you can take the Sudarshan with you if it's possible for you to carry it and take care of it. From today it belongs to you!"

Ashwatthama who was already standing by this time, moved forward with a lot of enthusiasm and with his eyes still fixed on the Sudarshan chakra. He bent down and tried to pick up the Sudarshan chakra of Srikrishna. He could not even move it slightly in spite of applying all his might. His face twisted into weird expressions. He stopped for a moment, got up, moved back a bit in the sand and tucked his dhoti tightly. Thus, doing Kakshabandhan he got ready with determination. Again, he tried to move the Sudarshan, intently concentrating his mind and with all his might. But to no avail. That *maharathi* warrior made many efforts in different ways to pick up the Sudarshan and got all soaked in sweat in the process. Exhausted, he dropped on his knees in the sand itself. He was at his wit's end and embarrassed. The sun had sunk in the west. Srikrishna came forward and affectionately placed his rosy palm on Ashwatthama's moist back. He patted on his back gently for a few moments and said, "Come, let's go!"

Without a word Ashwatthama got up obediently. He moved forward and fell at Srikrishna's feet saying, "Oh Hrishikeshaa, you are the only one worthy of this Sudarshan. Nobody else can possess it but you. Be kind to me and take it back."

Krishna pulled him up lovingly, patted his shoulders and smiled. He closed his eyes, chanted some mantras and said, "Done". Both of them started walking towards Garudadhwaaj. Krishna stopped and turned back. He saw that the Sudarshan lying on the sand had disappeared in the dim light of dusk!

Maybe it went to visit the sun that had set!

When Sikrishna himself told me this incident I got to see a petal of his incredible personality that was like a lotus flower with a thousand petals. He did not share this incident with anybody else. When I heard it from him, I discovered one hidden Arjuna within myself. Srikrishna was so close to me. I had actually seen him project the Sudarshan chakra in the Rajasuya *yajna*. I possessed the auspicious Gandiva bow along with the inexhaustible quiver. I was the master of Narayanastra and Pashupatastra. Yet I never felt greedy for Srikrishna's Sudarshan. Such a thought never occurred to me and would never occur in future, even unknowingly. In fact, I would have happily surrendered my bow and the Astras at his feet if required. Whenever I saw Ashwatthama and talked to him I always remembered his father Guru Drona. Guru Drona was indeed *Dhanurveda* incarnate! His knowledge about weaponry was as vast as the ocean. His love for the Kauravas and Pandavas was befitting that of a guru. The only two weaknesses in him were the love for his son and the desire for revenge. Ashwatthama was his only son. Maybe because of that, he was as dear to him as his own life. Amongst all his pupils he taught the great Brahmastra only to the two of us. Ashwatthama and me. He deemed nobody else worthy.

Guru Drona's urge for revenge was so strong that he had vowed to avenge the refusal by King Drupada to acknowledge him as a friend in spite of their former friendship, the reason being the poverty of Drona. We, the Kauravas and Pandavas completed our training in weaponry under his guidance. As his *Gurudakshina* he had asked us to capture King Drupada and present him as a prisoner in front of him. Drona had not forgotten the insult of being rejected as a friend. Now it was I who had to take the initiative to fulfil his demand. I captured Drupada and presented him in front of my guru as *Gurudakshina*. Later, the same Panchala King Drupada, Draupadi's father, became my father-in-law. I had thought that he might be holding a grudge against me as I had taken him captive. But there was no trace of that at all. The exact reason for that was not known to me for quite a long time though. Sometime later I came to know it from Draupadi. Panchala King Drupada had an intense hatred for me due to some past events. How did his hatred transform into love, not only for me but for all of us brothers? It was all due to Krishna's magic.

Draupadi becoming the wife of all five of us was also not agreeable to Drupada. Dhrishtadyumna had clearly stated his father's disagreement. But

subsequently the marriage of the five of us with Draupadi took place in Kampilyanagar, one a day, at the hands of Drupada himself. The credit for this also goes only to Krishna's magic.

Both the times Krishna had used Dhrishtadyumna for making it happen. Srikrishna had visited the Panchala kingdom many times in person along with Uddhava and Balaramadada. He had invited Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna to Dwaraka for various reasons. He had felicitated Dhrishtadyumna many a times by offering him fine vestures and selective weapons in the Sudharma royal assembly of the Yadavas. More than that Srikrishna constantly kept iterating to him "Panchala Prince Dhrishtadyumna, your valour has not been acclaimed appropriately yet. In spite of being a young leader of lakhs of Panchalas you haven't been bestowed with the honour that you deserve. I will give you that honour which will make you eternal and immortal!" He kept saying such things mysteriously. I came to know about all these things sometimes from Draupadi and at other times from Dhrishtadyumna. Thus, through each event I myself came to know the Krishna's devotee Arjuna within me.

One such sentimental incident related to Draupadi took place in Indraprastha. Krishna himself told me about that too. That time he was visiting Indraprastha with Rukminivahini. He loved our Abhi very much. One day he took Abhi with him and toured the entire royal city of Indraprastha in his Garudadhwaaja chariot. Our Indraprastha had just been inhabited then. Our Chief Minister would show each room in our royal palace to any visiting guests while explaining the architectural intricacies to them. He was doing the same for Krishna. Rukminivahini was also with them. Since she was there Draupadi and Subhadra were also present. He came into our Srikripa assembly along with them. The Chief Minister explained why we have named the assembly so. He heard that and smilingly said, "I can understand the Pandavas' love for me. They are the descendants of the Kuru dynasty. The Kuru dynasty is Chandravanshi. It would have been better if this royal assembly would have been named Kurukripa. This assembly of yours is called Srikripa. Chandra, the Moon, is also one of the meanings of the word Sri. I consider your Srikripa royal assembly as Chandrakripa.

After the royal palace, our Chief Minister began showing them the costume store, granary, treasury and so on. Abhimanyu who was with Srikrishna was asking him a lot of questions and getting his curiosity satisfied by Krishna's convincing answers. In the end, they all arrived in the armoury where many

of Pandavas' favourite weapons were lined up. In my section of the armoury many bows were placed in a line. A quiver filled with arrows was placed near each bow. Srikrishna was very enthusiastically giving information about various arrows to his *bhacha*, like Suchi is the arrow used to pierce a target as small as an eye. The Jidma arrow goes zigzag because of its zigzag shaft. The Gajasthi arrow is made from the bones of an elephant. The Chandramukha arrow looks like the crescent-shaped moon. Finally, he came near the quiver filled with Bastika arrows. The special feature of this arrow was that its sharp tip would stay embedded deep into the target. As its shaft was fitted by a screw to the end of its tail, it would come loose by unscrewing. During wartime, poisonous substances would be smeared on the tip of the arrowhead. The wooden tube in which these were stored would be kept next to the quiver in the chariot. After providing all this information to Abhimanyu, Krishna picked up a Bastika arrow from the quiver to demonstrate how the tip of the arrow gets embedded in its target.

The screw of that arrow was tight and was not turning easily as it had not been handled for a long time. He handed that arrow to Abhimanyu and told him to unscrew the nut. Abhi also tried his best, but to no avail. The screw was tight as it had rusted. The Chief Minister took it from Abhi to give it a try. He also did not succeed! Now Srikrishna took that arrow back in his hand while smiling. Biting his lower lip under his teeth Krishna tried to unscrew the rusted Bastika arrow.

The nut came loose but the tip of the sharp blade pierced Krishna's rosy, lean index finger. Blood started trickling from his index finger. All three ladies – Draupadi, Rukminivahini and Subhadra ran forward at once while exclaiming 'tch tch'. The Chief Minister also got flustered. Abhimanyu moaned looking at his mama. Everyone panicked. Subhadra said to Rukmini, "Hold the finger tight to stop the bleeding. I will be back with a bandage." She ran towards her chamber. Rukminivahini stopped the trickle of blood with her thumb.

But Draupadi tore a strip of her rich saree without any hesitation at all. Coming forward she removed Rukminivahini's thumb from her dear friend's index finger. She immediately tied the strip of the rich cloth tightly over the wound and stopped the bleeding.

Srikrishna who used to hold the twelve-spoked Sudarshan chakra on the same index finger started looking at the bandage with a smile. Meanwhile Subhadra returned with a dressing. Srikrishna calmly looked at the three of

them while smiling. Looking at Draupadi he said, “You realized that blood is more valuable than garments. At the right time, you will also realize that sometimes blood needs to flow for the sake of garments!”

The moment that I remember when Srikrishna occupied the whole of my mind was the moment when he executed Shishupala.

At that time, I saw him in his resplendent form holding the Sudarshan.

The condemnations Shishupala hurled at him, which I or no one else had ever heard before were just unpardonable. At that time, only I experienced a major rare quality in Srikrishna. It was his forbearance. He warned Shishupala from time to time and tolerated his ninety-nine offences. Throughout his life, he had been enduring the vilifying name-calling as ‘lowlife cowherd’ by his mama - Kansa, Jarasandha, Narakasura and many more kings. Still he tolerated it calmly and with a smile.

At the time of Shishupala’s execution I actually experienced that once he is determined about something, his face dazzles with the brightness of hundreds of suns. That was the moment when his intensely brilliant form holding the Sudarshan chakra and his fish-shaped eyes closed, was imprinted on my mind forever, never to be erased. At that very moment I earnestly and resolutely surrendered the Neelkamal of my life at his feet. I myself feel the difference between the Arjuna before the execution of Shishupala and after it.

The second incident that brought me even closer to Srikrishna was the abduction of Subhadra and my marriage to her. At that time, I was on a pilgrimage as I had violated a rule in the code of conduct decided by us brothers. During the journey of that pilgrimage I had got married to Uloopi and Chitrangada. Before each marriage, I had not forgotten to seek his clear permission through his messengers who met me every now and then. It was probably due to this reason that he invited me to Dwaraka when he got wind of Subhadra’s proposed marriage with Duryodhana. It all happened according to his plan as to how I should disguise myself as an ascetic, camp in Aanarta and live an austere life in the Shiva temple of Somanath, on the ocean shore near the holy place of Bhalaka.

After Subhadra’s abduction, I returned to Indraprastha. I was most worried about proud and dignified Draupadi’s reaction, with respect to Subhadra. It was obvious that as per her outspoken nature she was going to rebuke me. She would have probably reprimanded Srikrishna too. I had prepared myself to face her wrath. I had planned in my heart what and how to answer her. But all those preparations were wasted. She welcomed Subhadra wholeheartedly

as Srikrishna's sister. At that time, I realized how difficult it is to predict what goes on in a woman's mind. Subhadra became Draupadi's sister as much as she became my wife.

After getting married to Subhadra I had come to Dwaraka along with her to celebrate the first Diwali festival as the son-in-law of Dwaraka. Oh, how the Yadava men and women showered me with affection! This visit to Dwaraka was as memorable as the execution of Shishupala.

It was the day of *Kojagiri Pournima*. In the evening Srikrishna invited me to his chamber as the son-in-law through minister Vipruthu. After having milk and fruits he explained a special tradition of the Yadavas to me. He said, "Do not get carried away by the love that the Yadavas have showered on you. Just as one learns to swim when one is pushed into the water you should be able to play the *Rasa* as the son-in-law of the Yadavas. Tonight, you will have to play *Rasa* with me, Balaramadada and Udho near the lake in the great garden of Dwaraka. Get as much training of the *Rasa* dance as possible by the dance teacher of the Yadavas. Don't forget that just as skill is required to use the Gandiva bow on the battlefield so it is required for this dance called *Rasa*."

The enchanting platter-sized full moon of *Kojagiri* arose on the horizon of Dwaraka. Today all men and women of Dwaraka assembled on the shore of the lake in the great garden in the heart of the city. Some expert Yadava musicians had dug deep ditches in the ground. Those were plastered with clay and limestone from inside. Tanned leather covers were stretched and fitted on those holes. It created huge kettle drums in the ground like the war drums. Around it sat eight bare, muscular Yadava drum players. They were flanked by other instrument players who held instruments like the horn, trumpet and cymbals. The entire garden was lit with tiny lamps. Many cauldrons sitting on huge stoves contained boiled milk. Men, women and children were leaving the chambers of the royal palace located near the Sudharma royal assembly of Dwaraka wearing fancy and colourful costumes. In the evening, all my seven vahinis had arrived from the island of Queens' mansions and gathered in Maharani Rukminivahini's chamber along with their sons. With Rukminivahini's permission they left in separate chariots along with their sons towards the great garden. Chief Minister Vipruthu stood sincerely at the big gate on the east of the garden to receive all the men and women of the Yadava royalty. He held the jewel-studded, decorated golden royal sceptre of the Yadavas in his right hand.



As midnight approached the great garden got fully crowded and was abuzz with the chatter of Yadava men, women and children to such an extent that the sound of the ocean became inaudible. The ebullient Yadava crowd assembled enthusiastically for the *Rasa* was waiting for only two chariots now. Even the moon that was dispersing dense, white light was eager to see the faces of Krishnachandra and Rukminivahini of the *Chandravansha*. The chariot of Maharaja Vasudeva who was the honourable chief guest of the *Rasa* was in front of us. He was sitting with both Maharanis and our Udhodeva in the embellished chariot. The aged Maharaja's pure white, thick beard was fluttering with the ocean wind.

In the Garudadhvaja chariot behind them were Srikrishna, Rukminivahini, Subhadra and I. With a whip in his hand Daruka was steering the chariot carried by the four moon-white horses Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Shaibya and Sugriva at a slow pace.

We arrived at the garden where the *Rasa* was going to take place. Chief Minister Vipruthu welcomed us. Subhadra and I were the special guests of tonight's *Rasa*. We walked together as a couple behind Maharaja Vasudeva, both the Maharanis, Srikrishna, Rukminivahini and Udhodeva. We came near the cauldron full of milk. Srikrishna picked up a wooden ladle and a wide bowl. Gargamuni chanted a mantra. As soon as he finished it, saying "Hail Goddess Ida" Srikrishna dipped the ladle in the cauldron. He scooped a layer of cream as thick as the teak leaf in the bowl, and poured a pot full of milk on it. He offered a bowl of that Prasada to me as the honourable guest and son-in-law. Following that Rukminivahini also handed a similar bowl to Subhadra.

We savoured the incredibly delicious thick cream and drank the milk to our heart's content. After us the Prasada was distributed among all the royal men and women. Once the distribution among the royal circle was over, groups of Yadavas attacked the many cauldrons placed on the stoves kept in various locations shouting "Hail Goddess Ida". White-bearded Vasudevababa entered the *Rasa* arena decorated with flower garlands. As a senior honorary he flung a fistful of vermilion in the sky hailing Goddess Ida. At that moment, a cacophony of many *Rasa* instruments arose. Today, in the beginning, only selected men and women were in the *Rasa* arena. They were all from the royal circle. Vasudevababa and Devakimata and Rohinimata who had grown old now but were still enthusiastic, played among them for some time. Srikrishna was surrounded by Rukminivahini along with other vahinees –

Bhama, Jambavati, Satya, Mitravinda, Lakshmana, Kalindi and Bhadra. Notably, Kasheru who was a representative of the Kamarupa women, was also there. It was the very first time I was participating in the *Rasa*. I went with Udhodeva and Subhadra to Srikrishna asking for his blessing in order to not make any mistakes. In the pure white light of the full moon that Krishnachandra among the men seemed so very different to me. I had never seen him like that before.

As I touched his feet he gently pulled me up. His golden crown was not on his head today. Instead a crown made of wild creepers was fastened tightly around his head. His dear peacock feather tucked in it was glowing in the moonlight. I stared in his fish-shaped eyes. His eyes that otherwise emitted the brilliance of the sun rays were serenely dispersing tranquil moonlight at this moment.

He smiled on seeing me quiet. Even today he asked me a puzzling question. He said, “Dear friend Arjuna, do you know what I would have done if Draupadi were here at this moment?” I was baffled that he was remembering Draupadi when his own sister Subhadra was standing on my left in the *Rasa* arena!

“I don’t understand what you would have done at this moment! Sometimes I don’t even understand what you say. Then how would I understand what you would actually do?”

He gave me a charming smile in the pleasant moonlight of *Kojagiri*. The twin tooth behind his rosy lips shone. Without a word, he removed the fresh Vaijayanti garland resting on his chest and putting it around my neck he softly said, “As a representative of my dear *Sakhi* Draupadi I am putting this Vaijayanti garland around your neck as the honourable guest of the day. Do you know who had given this to me?”

“No” I was stunned again.

“Radhika of Gokul, my beloved *Sakhi!*” He smiled again. He signalled to the musicians to begin the music for the *Rasa* dance. I, the third Pandava and the son-in-law of the Yadavas began playing *Rasa* with Subhadra as best as I could. He began dancing like an expert with all the men and women! One moment he was here, the next he was there and I could see him and only him in the entire *Rasa* arena. The moon kept rising in the sky. The *Rasa* dance kept getting increasingly interesting in a way that I could never forget.

I met Kuntimata as soon as I returned to Indraprastha after the Diwali celebrations. While sharing the account of Dwaraka with her I told her that I

played the *Rasa*. I particularly shared the news with her that Krishna put the Vaijayanti garland around my neck which he had never done before with anybody else. She smiled slightly while hearing it. Today, for the first time I felt that her smile reflected a tinge of Krishna's smile. She inquired about the wellbeing of Maharaja Vasudeva, Devakimata and Rohinimata and then said, "That he put his Vaijayanti garland around your neck has a lot of significance. Arjuna, never make the mistake of thinking that he plays *Rasa* only in the *Rasa* arena. He has been playing *Rasa* throughout his life and he will do it in future too. Do you clearly understand the meaning of him putting the Vaijayanti garland around your neck in front of all Yadavas?"

"What does it mean?" I asked her.

"Arjuna, he is going to conduct some kind of grand *Rasa* in the future. You will have the responsibility of playing the main role in that. Remember, while conferring commandership on a Kshatriya, a garland is put around his neck. He has quietly announced you as his future commander without performing any formal rituals – that too, in the *Rasa* arena!"

Since childhood I have been hearing such words of Kuntimata. Her words got me thinking. Whatever I was today was the result of her sanskaras.

In our childhood while we were living on Mount Gandhamadana, one night the wind blew out the lamp of *Ingudi oil* in our hut. We were having our dinner. The wild banana leaves lay in front of us. Mother had served incredibly tasty dishes on those. My four brothers waited till she re-lit the lamp with the fire from the stove. I kept eating even in the dark. By the time she placed the lighted lamp in front of us, my dinner was more than half way done. Seeing that, Bhimsena who couldn't control his hunger said, "Dhana, how could you eat in the dark?" I was so engrossed in thought that I kept staring at the leaf. I had no clue what to tell him.

Kuntimata explained, "Sons, you can achieve everything with practice. Arjuna has automatically achieved it. Whether there is light or not while eating, the hand will reach only the mouth and he is accustomed to it. He will never forget anything that he learns once. You should also try it." Saying so, she blew out the re-lit lamp and said, "Now eat your dinner like you usually do". We finished our dinner without any problem in the dark. After some time, she lit the lamp again. The banana leaves in front of us were completely clean. Her face had a tinge of brightness that we had never seen before.

Just like Kuntimata, Acharya Drona had also inculcated deep sanskaras in us which were useful in actual life. Once he told all of us to shoot the eye of a

stuffed bird hanging on a tree, only with a single arrow.

Just when each disciple took the stance the guru would ask him, “What do you see at the tip of your arrow?” As no one realized the intent of the question everybody answered something like, I see the leaves of the tree, the branches, many other birds, I see the sky and such.

I told him, “I can clearly see the tip of my arrow touching the bird’s eye” Hearing that Gurudeva was very pleased with me. He had taken efforts to teach me how to pierce a target just by hearing its sound. I knew only two other master archers who were experts in sound targeting. One was Ekalavya and the other was the charioteer’s son Karna!

The impressionable days of adolescence in Hastinapura never got erased from our hearts. It is the rule of nature that every being gets curious about his surroundings, which raises many questions in the mind. The path of seeking answers to these questions leads to perfection. A man’s body develops virility. A woman’s body achieves femininity. This impressionable period in everyone’s life till achieving maturity is very crucial. It is during this period that one’s character gets shaped. We spent our adolescent days in the royal city of the Kurus. The citizens of Hastinapura revered our world-conquering father – Emperor Pandu. We received the same affection in abundance from the men and women of Hastinapura during this period.

All of us, the members of the Kuru family lived in the royal palace that was erected by Maharaja Kuru a long time back. The Kuru dynasty had a great lineage of rulers such as Hasti, Kuru, and Ajamidha who were valiant, virtuous and concerned about their citizens’ welfare. Grandsire Bhishma had protected this dynasty with his own life whenever it was on the verge of extinction for whatever reason.

Grandsire Bhishma was *Dhanurveda* incarnate. He was a celibate for his life as per his promise to his father Maharaja Shantanu. In prowess, he had achieved the Himalayan zenith of Purushartha by defeating his own guru Bhagvan Parashurama. He had attained the eminence of a staunch Rajayogi in spite of living in the puissant royal palace of the Kurus. Even in Hastinapura his daily routine was just like the sages in the Himalayas. Even at this age he used to get up at the *Brahma Muhurta*, and would always perform his morning rituals after bathing in the Ganga. He would pray and recite various mantras. Then he would stand on the charity altar and offer clothing, jewellery, cows, and so on to the guests coming from various kingdoms to Hastinapura. After that he would visit the armoury of the

Kauravas and Pandavas. Sometimes Mahatma Vidura or the royal charioteer Sanjaya would accompany him, sometimes rulers visiting from various kingdoms would be with him and at other times there would be sages, who had a white beard like him and glowed with the brilliance of their meditative powers. When he entered the armoury Acharya Drona and Kripa would welcome him with a smile. The armoury would get filled with his presence! He would thoroughly check the progress of all hundred and five of us by addressing each one of us by our names. Along with us he would also inquire about the radiant Karna, son of a charioteer, who was one of the disciples of Acharya Kripa. Drona's son Ashwatthama was his favourite.

In that age of adolescence our ideal was the son of Ganga, grandsire Bhishma. The moment I saw his chariot entering the premises of the armoury, I would run towards it like a bird. I was the one who would pay obeisance to him before anybody else by touching his feet. He would immediately pick me up and putting his lean-fingered right hand on my head he would say, 'May you be victorious, oh son of Pandu'. Generally, he smiled very rarely. But when he did, it was a pleasant experience – of watching a tall summit of the Himalayas shining in the radiant sun rays because of his thick white beard and pure white teeth. I would listen to every word of his very attentively. He talked about Kuntimata with utter respect and honour. It was due to his awe that all of us, the disciples of Drona, received flawless and thorough education of weaponry. I had noted a specialty of grandsire. He was free from jealousy and therefore had no enemies. Indeed, grandsire Bhishma was the fruit of all the virtuous deeds of generations of the Kuru dynasty. His physical presence was as reassuring as the rising sun on the eastern horizon dispersing millions of rays every morning, after its absence in the sky at night. He was renowned as 'Grandsire' not only in Hastinapura but throughout the entire Aaryavarta as well as the distant kingdom of Gandhara. My subconscious mind was greatly influenced by grandsire.

Perhaps because of that, I could never forget that it was he who had first addressed Srikrishna, who was my perfect ideal, as 'Vaasudeva'. So, grandsire Bhishma was the one who influenced my mind the most with the deep impression of Srikrishna.

Maharaja Dhritarashtra of the Kurus was a grandmystery that no one could fathom. Among all the members of the royal circle that I had seen, the lives of grandsire Bhishma and Srikrishna were eventful with respect to thoughts

and actions. Their lives were like prodigious volumes of literature. Still, I could read and understand every single page of those. Maharaja Dhritarashtra was the only piece of literature, in the first chapter of which I was stuck for my entire life – the chapter of the greed for power and blind love for a son. It was Srikrishna who safely pulled me out of it many years later.

Was Maharaja Dhritarashtra blind? Now, after a great deal of experience I clearly feel that he was not blind at all. The million eyes of his mind saw one and only dream in various manifestations, that of seeing his eldest son Duryodhana formally enthroned as the ruler of Hastinapura. I am quite sure that if that had happened he would have left Hastinapura the very next day for *Vanaprasthashrama*. Maharaja Dhritarashtra was the one and only person in my life who I felt was constantly telling me with his lamenting, wet and blinking eyes, ‘Oh Arjuna, son, you are the master of sound targeting. How can’t you hear this lamentation of my heart! It is my only wish that my son Duryodhana inherits the throne of Hastinapura after me. You Pandavas who unexpectedly showed up here and are becoming an obstacle in achieving that goal should return to the forest just as you came.’ People become blind in their greed, but this king of the Kurus always remained sighted with his mind’s eye on the royal throne due to his selfish desire. He kept dreaming of only one thing – the coronation of his son.

Initially, I was surprised to see that he recognized any man or woman who entered his chamber even when they didn’t announce their names. How could he possibly do that? Human beings generally have five senses. This Maharaja of Hastinapura who outwardly spoke amiably, possessed a sixth sense that no one could ever see. It was his greed for the royal throne.

Though I never addressed Maharaja Dhritarashtra as ‘*kaka*’ even by mistake, I often addressed his Maharani – Gandharidevi as ‘*kakee*’. Just as we Pandavas felt love and respect for Kuntimata, we felt the same for this *kakee*. She also reciprocated with the same pure love. Just as Srikrishna’s most beloved Yoga was Premayoga, Gandharimata’s most spontaneous feeling was the same, Premayoga. Sometimes I used to think, what if this mother of ours had been born in Srikrishna’s Yadava family of Dwaraka! She would have reached such zenith of greatness that no one can even imagine. Just like every woman she also saw a dream throughout her life – that her eldest son Duryodhana had become a righteous person. That dream of hers was never fulfilled – nor was it going to be.

Recently, while thinking about Duryodhana a strange thought was

bothering me. I strongly felt that even thinking about him was torture. Nowadays I have been thinking, what if he had been born as the hundredth Kaurava? Sometimes I wondered what if he had been born as the sixth Pandava amongst us. But in his vocabulary what-ifs had no meaning at all. His mind and life was like a lone insolent wild boar. Whenever a thought came to his mind, or rather it was fed in his mind by Shakuni mama, he knew only one thing – to hit the Pandavas head-on! He didn't bother about the consequences of attacking us in this manner.

The glory of our Kuru dynasty was totally eclipsed by only one person – Shakunimama of Gandhara. He was sly inside out. Maharaja Dhritarashtra had a sixth sense – that of the greed for the royal throne. This Shakuni also had a sixth sense – that of innate subterfuge. Only one example can correctly describe his deceitfulness – a scorpion's deadly poison is hidden in its crooked pincers. Each and every atom of this Gandhara scorpion had pincers full of subterfuge. He was so full of poison that even if Shivashankara who got a blue throat due to swallowing the poison that came out of the ocean-churning for the sake of world's wellbeing had met him some time, he would have winked at him and said, "Oh Lord, you are so wonderfully fair except for your throat! This blue throat looks like an ugly patch on your face. My Gandhara guru in the science of medicine has given me a divine remedy. If you apply it, in an instant your blue throat will become fair like Parvatidevi's complexion. But this paste is dark black in colour. Bholenath should not look at its colour!"

That paste given by this Gandhara physician would have been as lethal as the stored poison of a black snake. Only Shiva knows if he would have been able to endure it.

Shakuni was the master of slander. I could never figure out, how a virtuous sister like Gandharimata got a wicked, crafty brother like him? Seeing them together on a few occasions I would strongly feel that a person never has any control over his birth.

The only place of respite in Hastinapura for me, my brothers and Srikrishna was Mahatma Vidura and his simple but neat residence on the border of Hastinapura. His heart was as simple and pure as his home was. His wife Parasavidevi was a perfect match for him. Mahamantri Vidura was extremely learned, pure at heart by penance and also very pragmatic. His face reflected the brilliance of his wisdom. It always reminded me of Uddhavadeva in Dwaraka. All of us Pandava brothers called him Vidurkaka with respect.

What if Vidurkaka had not become the Mahamantri of the Kurus? Then he would have certainly acquired a great position like Srikrishna's gurus, Acharya Sandipani or Ghor Angirasa. Grandsire Bhishma had recognized this potential of his and had stopped him from going to the Himalayas. Srikrishna's name always came up in their talk. Grandsire Bhishma and Mahatma Vidura were two among the few in Hastinapura who knew what kind of Truth Srikrishna was and were touched by it.

As a Kshatriya warrior and a disciple, whenever I think of Guru Drona I am always reminded of the vast Yamuna under the sprawling *Kadamba tree*, the waters of which glisten in the rays of the sun and the depth of which is immeasurable. I could never comprehend three things in his life. The first one was the discrimination that he made between Ashwatthama and me as his son and his disciple. I was his best disciple hence like his son. Merit-wise I was a bit better than his son. I could never forget that he silently observed these qualities and secretly offered the Brahmastra to his son.

The second thing was the incident of the disgusting game of dice. At that time Draupadi had implored him, wailing and spreading both her hands in front of him. Even today it is chilling to remember her words. At that time, she had said to him, "Acharya Drona, you are their guru. Practise your right as the guru and control Duryodhana and Dushasana. Bring my husband to his senses, who was foolish enough to play the game of dice. This daughter-in-law of the Kurus – your daughter – spreads both her hands in front of you and begs you to save her honour." But Guru Drona simply kept staring at Grandsire Bhishma. She gave out a heart-wrenching cry that I could never forget when she saw the helplessness in his eyes, of the realization that 'the men in this hall are slaves of wealth'.

The third thing that I couldn't comprehend was his refusal to accept Karna and Ekalavya as his disciples based on their caste by birth. Both of them were dynamic youths who were seekers of knowledge and hard workers. Eventually, they proved their incredible mettle though they didn't receive any guidance from him as a guru. Ekalavya had erected an earthen statue of the guru and in front of it he rigorously practised archery. Just like me he had also achieved mastery over the skill of hitting a target only by hearing the sound it made. One day during a hunting expedition Guru Drona got to witness this feat of his archery in front of all of us. Ekalavya had consecutively shot five arrows with different pressures in the mouth of a continuously barking dog with such skill that it had stopped the barking



without causing the slightest injury to the dog's tongue. This was indeed an ultimate matchless feat of archery. While witnessing it at least I felt like removing my bow from my shoulders and surrendering it at Ekalavya's feet.

But Guru Drona demanded *Gurudakshina* at that very instant from that phenomenal disciple of his, whom he had never given any kind of training. At that time, I had found it bizarre, and I continued feeling so for the rest of my life. Guru Drona asked his tribal disciple to give his right thumb as the *Gurudakshina*. Even Ekalavya cut it immediately in front of us with his left hand and offered it at the guru's feet. Nothing like this had happened ever before in the Aaryavarta region and one could never tell if it would happen in future. I could never forget the brilliance with which his eyes shone while offering that unique *Gurudakshina* at the feet of his guru.

Later I came to know from Guru Drona himself that the unprecedented event had taken place because of me and for my sake. He demanded that strange *Gurudakshina* as a precaution to avoid anyone else getting better than me as the master in archery.

That day itself two weird thoughts passed through my mind. I was getting news that Karna was also becoming an expert at hitting a target by its sound. He was the disciple of Kripacharya and not Drona. What if, coerced by Drona, Kripacharya had demanded Karna's impenetrable Kavacha-kundala as *Gurudakshina*! I couldn't tell the reason behind my faith, but I certainly believed that he would have removed it from his body and offered it at his guru's feet. The second thought was about Srikrishna. Had Acharya Drona been his guru instead of Acharya Sandipani then would he have demanded something like this from Srikrishna? What would have Krishna answered as a staunch, obedient disciple? I am quite sure that at such a time he would have just given a naughty smile as usual and said, "As far as my knowledge goes a guru would never accept a blood-soaked *Gurudakshina*! I wish to offer my thumb at my guru's feet, but it wouldn't be possible for me to cut it with the left hand. Besides I wouldn't like to spill my blood on the guru's feet. Therefore, the guru should be so kind as to cut my thumb himself! Emancipate me from the 'sanskar' of *Gurudakshina* and give me blessings for a successful life!"

Two of Guru Drona's relatives made two distinct impressions on my mind. One was his brother-in-law Kripacharya. Not just a guru he was also the family priest of the Kurus. Possibly because of that he had a greater inclination towards the religious rituals of the royal family. The other person

was his son Ashwatthama. From birth, he possessed a very precious gift that no one else had. A fleshy red gem was located on the crown of his head. He used to cover his head with a strip of cloth in order to prevent anyone from seeing it. He spent most of his time in Karna's company. Sometimes Krishna's brother Uddhavadeva would visit Hastinapura. Then he would spend all his time in Uddhavadeva's company. I always found Ashwatthama to be different from others. But how he was different, that I couldn't figure out no matter how hard I tried. Therefore, later, in Indraprastha I even asked Srikrishna once – "Madhava, how do you find the guru's son Ashwatthama? What do you think of him?" At that time, he didn't respond with his usual playful irony. His face became solemn as it rarely became and he said, "To tell you the truth he is not the guru's son and not even Ashwatthama. He is like that permanent blemish on the moon!" I didn't understand a single word that he had said then. So, with my innate perseverance of an archer I pushed him further and asked one more time, "I didn't understand a single word that you said." Then he smiled playfully as usual and said, "*Dhananjaya*, is it really necessary to understand everything? Arjuna, sometimes ignorance is bliss!" Even this statement got me thinking.

After the coronation of our elder brother Yudhishtira in Indraprastha, some years passed by blissfully. Under Srikrishna's guidance our newly built kingdom thrived progressively and judiciously. Within the first six years Draupadi had borne us five brilliant sons. The royal palace of Indraprastha bustled with their lively presence. During this time, we had decided to follow certain rules with regards to spending private time with our wife. Once I broke one of those rules. Therefore, I had to leave Indraprastha and go on a pilgrimage for one year. At that time, I travelled in the eastern region of Aaryavarta. During that journey, I performed formal rituals at the holy places of Akshayavata, Vashishthaparva and Tunganatha, to wash away my sins. I visited the holy places of the eastern region one by one and reached Naimisharanya. There I took holy dips in rivers like Utpalini, Nanda, Aparananda, Kaushiki, Mahanadi and Gayatri. Finally, I entered river Ganga which was considered the holiest of all throughout Bharatavarsha.

I remembered the days in Hastinapura while taking a dip in her warm waters. There, in her expanse, the five of us used to swim to our hearts' content in our childhood. While I was lost in these thoughts I had no idea that I would have to shoulder the responsibility of one more wife. Seeing me bathing the Naga daughter, Uloopi who had come there to fetch water

approached me with her water pot. In a very sweet voice she requested, “I have recognized who you are. Please do me a favour and come to the Naga kingdom with me. Accept the hospitality of the Nagas and then continue your pilgrimage.” She was indeed incredibly good-looking. I couldn’t refuse her offer.

Her father, Kauravya Naga, put forth a marriage proposal as soon as he saw me. Meanwhile all the Nagas who had gathered there had realized that I was Kunti’s son *Dhananjaya*. They made a din and pleaded me to accept the proposal. I couldn’t refuse them too. Finally, I agreed to get married to Naga daughter Uloopi. I became the son-in-law of the Nagas. Uloopi was married to the son of a Naga called Airavata in childhood itself. As her husband passed away when she was still a child she became a ‘child widow’. Now she became my lawful wife. After some time, I left the Naga kingdom.

In the end, I came to Mount Mahendra which was blessed by the stay of Bhagvan Parashurama, who had bestowed the Sudarshan upon Srikrishna. I visited the summit there and the Bhrgu ashrama on it and descended into the Manipura kingdom. The ruler of this kingdom was Chitravahana. His daughter, Chitrangada of Manipura, became my third wife after Draupadi. She loved dancing. She would make me sit in the dance hall and present her splendid dancing skills for hours. She had copper-white complexion. After some time while wiping the beads of perspiration on her forehead and neck she would come and sit next to me. Like an innocent, naive young girl she would ask, “Did you like my dance? Am I making any mistakes? Among the citizens of Manipura even men dance along with women. It is our tradition. Will you dance freely with me?”

Hearing that, I would smile and say, “I like watching dance. Another thing I like is to make my enemy dance to the beat of my arrows!” Hearing my reply, she would get disheartened.

One day she zealously approached me along with an informer from Dwaraka. Since the beginning of my pilgrimage my best friend Srikrishna had been sending his expert informers one after the other and was always in touch with me. No matter how high a kite flies; she keeps an eye on her young ones. Srikrishna’s love for me was even more than the affection for his own sons. I knew it very well.

Chitrangada presented the informer of Dwaraka in front of me and said, “Oh master archer, listen to what he says. It looks like the right person has taken upon himself to make you understand what is good for you. He has

brought a message from the Lord of Dwaraka that as long as you are in Manipura you should take dance lessons from Chitrangada every day. Dance is an art form that keeps one fit. Learning any form of art never goes waste.”

Srikrishna’s message was a command for me. So now the scenario was exactly opposite. As soon as we entered the dance hall I would say to Chitrangada, “Oh Gurudeva, you have won, and I have lost! I can guess well that it must be you who conveyed my opinion about dance to Dwaraka. Otherwise such an order would never be issued from there. Now teach me how to dance in rhythm and to a beat.”

This training in dance that I took in the Manipura kingdom came in handy later during the year of living incognito in Viratanagar while teaching dance to Princess Uttaraa, in the disguise of Brihannada. It was proof of Krishna’s words that ‘Learning any art form never goes waste’. Later, when Chitrangada gave birth to a son I named him Babhruvahana only after discussing it with Krishna. Babhru’s hair was brown. In his youth, instead of a horse he used to ride an animal which was also brown in colour. The citizens of Manipura called it Yak.

There was not a single event in my life that was not connected with Madhusudana of Dwaraka. Dwaraka! I am going to tell you in the end about my beloved friend Srikrishna who was the whole and soul of Dwaraka. In the beginning let me say only this much as a glimpse, that I always addressed him with different names, suitable to the occasion. Every time I found him to be extremely composed and showing a great deal of self-control, I always called him ‘Hrishikesha’ – the one who has control over his organs. Whenever he talked to me about his life in Gokul I addressed him by names such as ‘Gopala, Muralidhara, Damodara, Nandanandana, Mohana, and Govinda’. Whenever he talked about the lakhs of Yadavas of Dwaraka to me, I called him ‘Lord of Dwaraka, Vaasudeva, and Yadava’. From whatever angle, I looked at my life, I saw only Srikrishna there.

With his memory, another face that lingered in front of my eyes was that of his biological father – Maharaja Vasudeva. He had become very aged now. In Hastinapura Grandsire Bhishma and Maharaja Dhritarashtra were also aged. Maharishi Vyasa who visited us occasionally was also aged. But there was a very basic difference between all these seniors. Vasudevababa did not get an opportunity to inculcate sanskaras in Balarama and Srikrishna like Grandsire Bhishma and Maharaja Dhritarashtra who got an opportunity to keep an eye on us since childhood and inculcate sanskaras in us. Nandababa and

Yashodamata of the Gopas got that opportunity. That is why Maharaja Vasudeva always tried to send his emissary from the island of Dwaraka to Gokul located near Mathura to invite Nandababa and Yashodamata to Dwaraka. But that aged couple would not leave their beloved Gokul. Srikrishna had often told me, “Going to Gokul now will be wrong on my part. Even I do not have the right to wipe out the image of innocent Gopalakrishna holding his flute, from the hearts of Nandababa and Yashodamata.” The striking quality that I felt about Srikrishna was, he never forgot that his birth parents had to spend their life in prison during his childhood. Therefore, he cautiously made it a point not to hurt them in any way during their old age. Vasudevababa, Devaki and Rohinimata were also aware of Srikrishna’s feelings. In fact, Rohinimata understood Srikrishna even more than Balaramadada.

Among the royal circle of Dwaraka Balaramadada’s personality was a bit difficult to understand. I should have in fact felt resentment towards him because of the stand he took during Subhadra’s wedding. But I didn’t feel that way. That was also due to Srikrishna’s ingenuity. Whenever Balaramadada’s name was mentioned in front of me he would always say almost casually, “Our Balaramadada is hot-tempered but also calms down quickly. Just as quickly as he gets emotional he also forgets his own actions very quickly. The Yadavas don’t mind it. Others also shouldn’t.”

Balaramadada was also a prodigious book, but like the mountain ranges of Aravali, opened by Mother Nature with her own hands. I always had the same respect for him as Srikrishna did. Even after getting married to Subhadra!

The Yadavas had two commanders – Anadhrishti and Satyaki. Anadhrishti had become old now. A true pillar and guide of the Yadava army was *maharathi* Satyaki who was experienced and had travelled throughout Aaryavarta with Srikrishna. Satyaki’s disposition was a bit like Balaramadada’s. As long as he was in Srikrishna’s company he seemed very energetic and radiant. Away from him he looked lustreless and dull. Just like him I was also Srikrishna’s *Sakha*. Then what was the exact difference between the both of us? He was a *Sakha*, dependent on Srikrishna, I was a *Sakha* completely surrendered to Srikrishna.

This submission of mine knew no boundaries. On various occasions Srikrishna had assessed the extent of my submission to him through many tests. He had chosen only me as his ‘Paramsakha’ among us Pandava

brothers. He never addressed any of my brothers as *Sakha*.

There was a huge difference between the Yadava ladies and the Kaurava-Pandava ladies. All the Kaurava ladies except for Gandharidevi unknowingly carried the pride of their riches. Such women included Duryodhana's wife Bhanumati and his sister Dushala. As our Pandava women had to struggle constantly with difficult circumstances they had automatically developed a kind of forbearing maturity. Kuntimata was their esteemed ideal. Draupadi also perfectly suited her as a daughter-in-law. Sometimes I would get this strange thought – what if Duryodhana's wife Bhanumati had to face a humiliating experience like the one in the gambling hall of the Kauravas? What if Karna's wife Vrishali had to face it? Whoever was present in that gambling hall, what if their wives had to face it?' That is why after that disgraceful incident of the gambling hall, Draupadi's place in my heart was elevated to a much higher position. Bhima had openly taken some vows. My way of doing things was different. Therefore, at that moment, in the gambling hall itself I had taken a vow in my heart to avenge the dishonour of her chastity. Draupadi was Srikrishna's beloved *Sakhi*. Other than Draupadi, he had not regarded any other woman as his *Sakhi* except for Radhika in Gokul. She was Krishna's dear *Sakhi*. I was his best *Sakha*. Draupadi was closer to me than my other wives.

And so, I frequently thought of the Yadava ladies of Srikrishna's Dwaraka. I also used to think about how Draupadi feels for each of them. The leading ladies of the Yadavas of Dwaraka were Devaki and Rohinimata. Srikrishna had very thoughtfully refrained from accepting the royal throne of Dwaraka and had conferred that honour on Vasudevababa instead. He was also aware that this would cast aside Rukminivahini's right to be the Maharani of Dwaraka. He had discussed matters with Rukminivahini and only then planned the administrative system of the Dwaraka kingdom. Notably, Rukminivahini had not at all opposed the system that he had in mind. It was this sacrifice of hers that had given her the strength to effortlessly practise the right of love over her seven co-wives. In fact, Gandhari and Kuntimata, Draupadi and Rukminidevi were different manifestations of the same kind of disposition.

Srikrishna's seven wives in Dwaraka apart from Rukminivahini had completely different dispositions. Like seven different kinds of flowers with different fragrances. It was Rukminivahini who had successfully carried out the tough and unmatched task of being the thread that strung them together in

one Vaijayanti garland. That is why Draupadi and I had boundless respect for her.

Rukminivahini had the biggest influence on the women of Dwaraka such as Revativahini, the aacharya's wife, Gargamuni's wife, wives of both the commanders, wives of all the ministers including Chief Minister Vipruthu, and those of the troop leaders, the sixteen thousand Kamarupa women whom Krishna had rehabilitated, and their leader Kasheru. Everyone had utmost respect for Devaki and Rohinimata. Indraprastha, Dwaraka and Hastinapura were connected with my life through strong emotional ties. I could never forget Karna's vow of killing me during Draupadi's Swayamwar. I had heard that he had impenetrable Kavacha-kundala on his body. My brothers and I had already witnessed his expertise in archery, in shooting a target by hearing its sound during the contests organized on Vasant Purnima. Yudhishtira had clearly expressed concern about Karna in our meeting in the same evening after the contest. I had consoled him saying, "You don't have to worry about that son of a charioteer." But the throbbing pain of his terrible vow was always there at the back of my mind. I would particularly discuss this subject in my meetings with Srikrishna. He wouldn't usually get solemn. But whenever we discussed the topic of Karna he would initially fall silent for a few moments. After some time, he would smile as charmingly as usual and say, "You just maintain your unbreakable unity. Then you have no reason to worry about his Kavacha-kundala!"

After Indraprastha, Hastinapura and Dwaraka the most important places in my life were the Panchala kingdom as my father-in-law's place and Viratanagar as Abhimanyu's father-in-law's place. Dhrishtadyumna who was born out of the *Yajna* fire had a great influence over Kampilyanagar of the Panchalas. He was valiant, had a complexion like hot gold, and spoke passionately. The Panchalas were abundant in number. As their Maharaja Drupada – my father-in-law – belonged to the same generation of grandsire and Maharaja Dhritarashtra, he was now aged and weary. The enormous kingdom of Panchala was under the rule of Dhrishtadyumna. He had divided the kingdom in two parts, Northern Panchala and Southern Panchala, for the sake of administrative convenience. Dhrishtadyumna always had the last word in the Panchala kingdom. This brother-in-law of mine regarded me very highly, not only because I was his sister's husband but also because in his eyes I was a master archer.

I had never dreamt that I would have to stay in Viratanagar of the Matsyas

for an entire year. But I had realized and agreed with what Srikrishna always said – one can never tell who will enter one’s life and where one will have to go. His entire life was the mirror of this truth. He was born in the prison of his mama, Kansa. Immediately after birth he went to Gokul and lived there. Then he came to Mathura and then to Dwaraka. After that he travelled through the entire Aaryavarta which was befitting a valiant universal ruler. Even he wouldn’t be able to list all the places he had visited. In the same way, I also had to travel to many places during the twelve years of living in the forest.

The five of us along with Draupadi had to spend the first few days of our stay in the forest in the Kamyakavana. It was in this Kamyakavana that we met Srikrishna for the first time during our forest stay. We had directly come to the Kamyaka vana from Hastinapura without meeting him after the gambling incident, and without going to Indraprastha, as per the conditions of the game. None of us mentioned anything about gambling to Krishna in this first visit. But Draupadi said it all. As usual he heard it silently. He guided us with minute details of how to spend the twelve years of living in a forest and one year of living incognito with unity and self-control. He stayed in our hut in the Kamyakavana for two days and returned to Dwaraka. We also moved to the Dvaitavana from the Kamyakavana. After six months in the forest, one day, Maharishi Vyasa unexpectedly came to the Kamyakavana to visit us. The aashramas of other sages were also located in this forest. Our daily hunting was probably creating some trouble for them. Especially Bhimsena would create a racket, shouting very loudly during hunting. It was creating a hindrance in the daily religious rituals of the people of the aashramas. They put forth their complaint to the Maharishi. As per his suggestion and instruction we moved from the Dvaitavana to the Kamyakavana again.

It was in this forest that an unforgettable truth of my life came to be. In the council of us brothers along with Draupadi it was decided that I should go to the Himalayas. As Srikrishna had told us, henceforth we were not going to be able to sustain ourselves unless we obtained a powerful Astra. In his opinion only I was suitable for that purpose. Therefore, I had to leave the company of all my brothers and Draupadi to obtain the Pashupatastra. For that I had consciously prepared my mind. I paid obeisance to Yudhishtira and Bhima before leaving as they were elder to me. I held Nakula and Sahadeva in a deep embrace. I stood in front of Draupadi to bid farewell to her. It felt as if the entire hut was full of emotions like never before. But she was very strong.



She said, “Oh master archer, don’t come back without obtaining the Astra. Whenever you miss me, remember only Srikrishna. He will never desert you under any circumstances.” I gave her the response that she expected, “It is because of him that I exist. Don’t worry about me Shyamale, goodbye.”

From that moment, my forest life was on the go like a wheel. After bidding farewell to all I started travelling towards the North on a pilgrimage. Alone!

I reached Mount Gandhamadana in the Himalayas. It was filled with such appealing and fresh natural beauty! As Kuntimata had told us, we were born on the Shatashringa summit here. I was the only one who got the first opportunity to see this birthplace again today. First, I went to the Shatashringa summit and found our birthplace by identifying the landmarks told to us by Kuntimata many a times in our childhood.

For two days. I stayed in the hut where we were born. According to Krishna, a pilgrim should not live in one place for more than two days. I experienced so much in those two days! My childhood, which I vaguely remembered, revolved around me rapidly during this time. Many aged native women expressed their love in their native way by waving their fingers around my face and then cracking their knuckles on the sides of their temples to ward off the evil, saying ‘Kuntimaiyya – Arjuna – Bhimbhaiyya...’ During those two days, I ate the delicious wild fruits and drank the milk of cows and sheep that they lovingly offered to me. With their leader, I went and saw the boulder that had broken in two when Bhimsena had jumped on it from above. After two days, I bade farewell to those pure of heart, affectionate natives and arrived on the plateau on Mount Gandhamadana. I had carried my Gandiva bow with me along with the two inexhaustible quivers. I also had other weapons like the sword which could be easily handled. On this airy plateau of Gandhamadana I built a neat hut.

My daily routine in Hastinapura in Guru Drona’s school of weaponry training was different. It was also different while living in Indraprastha as Arjuna, the son of Pandu. Now here on Mount Gandhamadana it changed completely while living alone. Here I lived alone not for a few days but for five years.

Krishna who had the experience of crossing the Dandakaranya many times had given me training for safe forest life. There were two major things in that. The first was to protect myself from ferocious wild animals like tigers, wolves, and hyenas. For that I had dug quite a deep and wide trench around the hut. For fuel, I had collected dry wooden logs in a room that would last

me for a year. Every night I ignited a fire in that trench with those logs making the hut secure for the night. The second thing was to collect food grains and dried fruits for the rainy season. I had also hung two-three big earthen pots in slings to store honey.

During the rainy season and autumn, the hut would stay warm due to the fire burning in the trench. By the time the first summer arrived I had built a sturdy, tall wooden fence around the trench. Then there was no need to ignite a fire during summer.

I had come here to obtain the Pashupatastra. But it was with Lord Shiva! It was very difficult to please him and make him manifest himself. Obtaining the Astra from him was indeed an extremely difficult task.

Every morning I used to get up on the *Brahma Muhurta*, bathe in the river and return. I would take a light fruit snack and then sit for meditation and recitation. Without fail first I would remember dear friend Krishna. His face with the peacock-feathered golden crown on his head would appear in front of my closed but alert eyes. Blue complexioned Krishna wearing a yellow silk dhoti, with the fresh Vaijayanti garland and pearl necklaces with the Kaustubh jewel resting on his chest, and holding the mace and chakra in his knee-long arms would manifest in front of my closed eyes.

I would get entranced, and begin singing the hymn of Sri in my mind. In the meditation, I would put my head on his feet. My soul, my consciousness would completely surrender to him and earnestly implore – ‘Oh Lord Vaasudeva, save me!’

Whenever I would start such a prayer full of emotion by losing myself and becoming one with him, I would hear the clear words coming from his divine lips. Unknowingly, I would imitate him.

I would automatically start singing Shiva’s hymn. Now Srikrishna, who was earlier wearing the peacock-feathered crown, would appear in the form of Shivashankara, in front of my closed eyes. He looked like Shiva sitting in the meditative pose on the Kailasa summit of Mount Himavana, bearing Ganga and the crescent-shaped moon in his matted hair, wearing necklaces of serpents around his blue throat, and holding the *Damaru* in his hand. I would plead to him from the bottom of my heart, ‘Oh Lord Shivashankara, save me!’

This life on Mount Gandhamadana during which I did penance, lasted for four years. Autumn was now over on Mount Gandhamadana and summer had begun.

It was the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight in the month of Magha. As usual, with the Gandiva bow on my shoulders I left for hunting, balancing the two inexhaustible quivers of arrows on my back. For a long time, I didn't see any deer. In search of deer I entered the thick forests of Mount Gandhamadana. There was a grassy meadow here. Many deer were grazing. Without letting them get even a wind of my presence I aimed at a tall male deer with wide antlers and shot an arrow at him. It was not going to miss its target. The deer leaped, ran desperately for a few feet and collapsed. Meanwhile all other deer had disappeared from the meadow. I felt proud of my aim and moved forward. I went near the deer. When I was about to touch it, I heard intimidating words from behind a thick bush, "I have shot that deer. That arrow stuck in his chest is mine. It is my kill. Do not touch it!" I glanced in the direction of the intimidating voice. I was not at all used to hearing something like this. He was a Kirata – a tribal man. Probably a leader. He was tall, muscular, bearded, had covered his matted hair by tucking wild bird feathers in it and had fully covered his chest with a tiger skin. I was such a courageous person, but even I was taken aback by his appearance at first. Of course, I still had complete faith in my perfect aim. I said, "The arrow that has pierced the chest of the deer, is mine. The kill is mine."

We had an argument about whether it was mine or his. Then he challenged me, saying, "I am the Kirata king. I have complete authority over this Mount Gandhamadana – and also the Himalayas! You, a worthless human being who carries a trivial bow on his shoulders – get ready to fight with me."

I was agitated on hearing his challenge. I said, "I am Kunti's son, master archer Arjuna of Indraprastha. I am *Dhananjaya*, the best *Sakha* of Srikrishna. I may tolerate my own insult but not that of my Gandiva bow. Kirataa, get ready, I have accepted your challenge."

We brandished our bows. A fierce battle began in the forest. For a long time, we vehemently showered each other with various arrows. But our battle remained inconclusive. His expertise of archery was unique among all the archers I had met so far. I did not fail to remember Srikrishna while counter-attacking each of his arrows. Hours passed by. The evening was approaching. We were surrounded by heaps of arrows. Wild flies began hovering over the kill that lay in the middle. Suddenly the arrows coming from the opposite side stopped. The Kirata had hung his bow on his shoulder and was approaching me. I also stopped. He stood right in front of me. He was much

taller than me, darkish and radiant. He reminded me of Srikrishna. In a voice melodious like a *Damaru* he said, “Oh Krishna-devotee, Kunti’s son *Partha*, you have recognized yourself. You have also recognized your best *Sakha* Krishna. How come you didn’t recognize me?”

Stunned, I kept looking at him. His words fell on my ears as if echoing from the valleys of Shatashringa, “I am the Lord of Kailasa - Shan...Ka...Ra!”

The lord of Kailasa – Shivashankara – whose name itself has tremendous power was actually standing in front of me! Promptly, I prostrated at his feet. I couldn’t speak a word. My whole body was covered with goose bumps.

Shiva picked me up just as gently as Srikrishna would. Just like Krishna, Shiva held me in a deep embrace close to his big heart. There are no words to describe that touch of Lord Shiva. It was simply unforgettable. After some time, he held me in front of him by my arms, looked deep into my eyes and said, “I am pleased by your expertise in archery with the Gandiva bow. I am going to bestow on you the Pashupatastra along with its mantras, for which you came here with such determination. Remember that you have to fulfil a mission that will benefit the entire human race. You are born as ‘Narashreshtha’, the best of men, and you have Srikrishna – Narayana himself by your side. Wherever he will be, there will be *Dharma*, and wherever there is *Dharma*, there will be victory. You will be victorious. You have my blessings. Listen to the divine mantras of Pashupatastra –”

Shiva closed his eyes. The flow of mantras in his voice started cascading like a torrent of Ganga gushing down the Himalayas. My eyes also closed. I automatically began repeating the mantras. In the end, radiant Shiva vaguely said... ‘Tathastu’ – May your wish be fulfilled!

I opened my eyes. The Kirata king had disappeared.

That night I slept peacefully like never before. From the very next day I could feel a tremendous change within me. I was free from the thoughts of being separated from my family and the thoughts that ‘I am alone, I am away from my beloved wife Draupadi and my brothers, and my best friend Srikrishna is far away in the Dwaraka kingdom’. I began seeing Shiva everywhere on Mount Gandhamadana.

Very soon I experienced Shiva’s blessings in that forest. My four brothers along with Draupadi came on Mount Gandhamadana to meet me. Meeting them after five years gave me inexpressible joy. My dear brother Bhimsena embraced me so tightly that I felt as if he was going to crush my body. Their

faces blossomed like a sunflower when they heard the news of my obtaining the Pashupatastra. Almost for an entire week we kept chatting with each other continuously. The topic of our talks was only Srikrishna.

The hut that I had built earlier for myself was now brought down. The trench around the hut was filled up, and the protective fence around it was also removed. We selected the distant summit Kubera for our next stay. There, on a sizeable circular area, we built a small colony of huts having separate chambers for each one of us like in the royal palace of Indraprastha. Next to our colony, a colony of ashramas for Dhaumya rishi and his disciples was also built. It had been six years since we had left to live in the forest. It was unanimously decided to stay together on the Kubera summit of Mount Gandhamadana for at least the next three-four years. Draupadi and my four brothers had stayed in the Kamyakavana for the last five years. This Kamyakavana was close to Hastinapura. Mount Gandhamadana, on which we were going to live now, was quite far away from Hastinapura. Therefore, Duryodhana and Shakuni who were responsible for pushing us into this situation, were not going to know about our further movements. All this planning was obviously Srikrishna's.

We stayed on the Kubera summit of Mount Gandhamadana for four years. Now it was ten years since we had left Hastinapura. At the beginning of the eleventh year we had a meeting. It was unanimously decided to leave Mount Gandhamadana. We were leaving this mountain for the second time. First time we had left it with Kuntimata in the tender age of childhood. This time we were leaving with the contentment of having fulfilled a duty. Kuntimata was living alone at Vidurakaka's house in Hastinapura. All of us were desperately longing to see her. We knelt down and touching our heads to the ground we prayed to the mountain-god. We didn't know when we were going to see these mountains of the Himalayas again.

During our return journey, we were going to take a halt at Badri-Kedara. We arrived at this holy place on the Ganga and stayed in the veranda of a charitable rest house of a Shiva temple. Here Nakula-Sahadeva got busy building a stone stove. Bhimsena went to collect firewood. Draupadi began preparations for cooking. Elder brother Yudhishtira began supervising all of them and giving necessary instructions, sitting on a mat and resting his back to a stone wall. I went to the banks of the Ganga with an earthen pot to fetch water. I filled the pot with water and put it aside on a stone step. I entered the clean, crystal waters of the Ganga. I finished my bath and came out. Holding

the earthen pot on my shoulders I began climbing the steps of the ghat. I was lost in thoughts such as where and how to spend the next year of living incognito. Just when a few steps of the ghat remained I heard a voice calling me, ‘*Dhananjaya, you?*’ That voice was as sweet as coming from a pot of honey. I knew that voice quite well. A radiant-looking man was standing on the step in front of me. He was wearing simple white clothes. His thick, curly, open hair rested on his shoulders. His face and voice seemed very familiar and close to me. I looked at the man closely.

He was our Uddhavadeva!

Exclaiming, “Uddhavadeva, you?” I put the earthen pot down and touched his feet. He pulled me up and held me in a deep embrace. I promptly questioned him, “How come you are here? And that too dressed likethis?” He smiled and said, “Are you surprised Arjuna? I will tell you. Where are your brothers? Where is Draupadi? How are you all?”

I was overwhelmed by every word, with the realization that I had met someone so dear after so many years.

“Deva, please come with me. They are all staying at the charitable rest house of the Shiva temple.” I picked up the earthen pot again and began walking. He followed me. We came to the charitable rest house. As I had assumed, no one recognized him at first. Then within a few moments Draupadi got up from near the stove. Narrowing her eyes, she stared at Uddhavadeva and almost screamed, “Oh, this is our Uddhavadeva! How come he is here?” She came forward. She paid obeisance to him by touching his feet three times. The next moment she asked, “How is Krishna? Where is he? When is he coming to meet us?” As she asked the questions one after the other, my brothers also realized who had come. They also paid obeisance by touching Deva’s feet. Yudhishtira held his hand with utter respect and seated him on his own mat. He also asked, “How come you are here, Deva?”

Uddhavadeva smiled and said, “Okay, okay, I will tell you everything at leisure. But I see that all of you have not been keeping good health during this period of living in the forest. Look after your health first. I am here in Badri-Kedara as per my dada’s instructions. I relinquished the royal attire of Dwaraka’s Yadavas in the Ganga when I first saw her on my way here. For many years – since the time we spent at the aashrama of Acharya Sandipani – only one thought has been lingering in my mind, to find the meaning of human life. I took this decision as I thought that I would never be able to do it while living in puissant Dwaraka and carrying weapons.

Dada probably has plans to construct something here in Badri-Kedara. Therefore, he had sent me here to survey this area thoroughly. He has counted the years of your forest stay precisely. He knows that you were on Mount Gandhamandana. I think from here you should directly go to the Kamyakavana. Dada will meet you there, and tell you the further plan.”

Uddhavadeva’s visit left us feeling much gratified. He stayed with us for two days. Then we bade farewell to him and left for the Kamyakavana. This was the third time we were going to that forest. As soon as we reached the Kamyakavana Bhimsena surveyed the forest and selected a beautiful area near Trinabindu sarovar for our stay. This was our last halt of our forest stay. This was the twelfth year of forest living. Here too we erected a capacious colony of huts.

Our daily routine in the forest began. During this last year of our forest stay some significant events took place.

One such event was when Durvasa rishi came to the Kamyaka vana along with a large number of disciples to test Draupadi’s mettle. How was Draupadi going to feed so many guests? She was going to fail as a dutiful hostess. Short-tempered Durvasa was then going to curse her for insulting a guest.

But this cunning plan of Duryodhana and Shakuni did not succeed. Draupadi’s acclaim as a dutiful hostess remained intact due to the copper platter that Yudhishtira had obtained from the Sun god by performing penance.

Around the same time a messenger that Srikrishna had sent brought some very significant news. It was with reference to Karna who had begun a charity session in Hastinapura. He had offered his impenetrable Kavachakundala to a Brahmin mendicant, who had asked for it. The mendicant was not a Brahmin. He was Indra, the king of Gods. I had tremendous respect in my heart for the gods and their king Indra. The gods always fought for justice like our Srikrishna. The respect for them was due to their ideology of life. For some reason, I did not like Indra’s act of disguising as a Brahmin mendicant and rob Karna of his Kavachakundala by deception. In spite of the fact that Karna who had disgraced Draupadi in the crowded gambling hall was my prime enemy!

The second event was that of Kauravas’ Ghoshayatra. During the Ghoshayatra Bhimsena and I fought valiantly to rescue Duryodhana, Dushasana and Karna who were captured by Chitrasena Gandharva. We spared their lives and sent them back to Hastinapura.

The most significant event that took place here was our last meeting with Srikrishna in the Kamyakavana. When he met us with select Yadava leaders on the banks of Trinabindu sarovar, the weariness which had come upon us due to living in the forest vanished into thin air. The unbearable tension in our minds was released instantly.

After welcoming him heartily, the meeting of the six of us headed by him on the banks of Trinabindu sarovar, was crucial. He presented to us a detailed picture of his meticulous plan of how and where we should spend the entire year of living incognito. After all he was an ingenious executor who had raised Dwaraka from nothing. It was highly impossible for him to miss even a tiniest place that was unsafe.

Srikrishna left for Dwaraka after repeating the details with all the subtleties of how we should behave during the period of living incognito. Now for an entire year we were not going to see him at all. As per Srikrishna's instructions we had to go to Viratanagar for the incognito life. The whole year of living incognito in Viratanagar was one which I could never forget out of all the events in my life.

As per the condition of living incognito I had to get out of my warrior's attire. I had to wear the dress of a female dance teacher. I had to wear a bodice on my chest in place of an iron armour which I always used to put on. It was most painful when I had to hand over my cherished Gandiva bow to Bhima for hiding it on the Shami tree. Even more painful was the realization that for the sake of safety my beloved best friend Srikrishna was not going to meet us even once.

I felt the same agonizing pain while putting on a woman's dress that Draupadi must have felt when her saree was being pulled. None of my brothers ever had to face the harrowing situation of dressing up like a woman that I had to, in spite of being a warrior and the master of Pashupatastra. It always came to my mind that Srikrishna also never had to face it. We came to know about the nature of the Matsya people because Srikrishna had maintained friendly relations with them since a long time while travelling back and forth to Indraprastha and as he used to discuss them with us from time to time. For one year, we lived in Viratanagar safely.

The ruler of this city, King Virata, Maharani Sudeshna, Uttaraa who later became my daughter-in-law and her brother Uttara also entered my emotional circle. Uttaraa became dear to me like a daughter, just as Srikrishna's daughter Charumati.



I felt that I had changed considerably since obtaining the mantras of the Pashupatastra. Whenever the mantras echoed in my mind I strongly remembered Shiva whom I had seen in the form of a Kirata. But this Shiva would be dressed like Srikrishna and be in Srikrishna's form which we usually saw. Only that, in this form I could feel his already blue throat to be even darker.

After our period of living incognito was over things moved with much speed. Like that of Srikrishna's Sudarshan chakra which rarely manifested.

It was confirmed that many of the problems between the Kauravas and us were not going to be resolved without a war on the battlefield. I had been to Dwaraka and met Srikrishna. To his seemingly difficult question, 'Do you want the armed Yadava army or unarmed me?' I had instantly and clearly answered, "It is You that we want, as is! Kuntimata, all my brothers and I along with Draupadi want Srikrishna and his invaluable blessings."

He had given detailed information to Duryodhana about the exact numbers of the rathis - maharathis, chariot warriors, infantry and horse riders of the Yadava army. He had completely convinced him and sent him back to Hastinapura with a smiling face. He took only Yadava commander Satyaki and select warriors with him and left Dwaraka along with me. We came to Upaplavya.

As soon as we came to Upaplavya he turned the wheels with his ingenious intellect. He tried his best to avoid the catastrophic war between the Kauravas and us. As the first attempt, he told my father-in-law Drupada to send the family priest of the Panchalas to Hastinapura for negotiations of compromise with Maharaja Dhritarashtra and grandsire Bhishma. He came back unsuccessful.

Knowing that Kaurava minister Sanjaya is one of the Sakhas of Srikrishna, Duryodhana, Shakuni and Kanaka sent him for negotiations on behalf of the Kauravas to our encampment in Upaplavya. Minister Sanjaya presented the message of the Kauravas which he personally disapproved, to Srikrishna in my presence. It was not a message of compromise at all. It was a crooked denial in a hypocritical message. Sanjaya said to Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka, "Maharaja Dhritarashtra sends you a message that instead of putting the lives of lakhs of valiant warriors at stake in a great war, Yudhishtira and his brothers should go and live in another forest like Khandavavana that they have loved since their childhood. With the help of their well-wishers they will easily be able to erect another kingdom like

Indraprastha in that forest as well. If that doesn't materialize and Dharmaraja, who is pious by nature lives on alms along with his brothers, then that too is approved by the Shastras!"

Sanjaya had to deliver that spiteful royal message to Srikrishna because it was his duty, but was extremely overcome with emotion after doing so and fell at Srikrishna's feet. The saviour of the Pandavas patted him, pulled him up while smiling and holding him in an affectionate embrace said, "Sanjayaa, be calm. Control yourself. You have done your duty. You are not at fault at all. This does not change my love for you even a slightest bit. You delivered your Maharaja's message to me as a minister. As a friend convey my message to your Maharaja. Tell him that the Pandavas have endured a lot. As a caretaker, make a conciliatory move and return the kingdom to them that their father Maharaja Pandu had won. As they have precisely fulfilled all the conditions of the game of dice, at least return the kingdom of Indraprastha to them. Let him also know that to settle this matter, I am coming to Hastinapura in person as a mediator."

Sanjaya went back to Hastinapura. He delivered the exact message of the Lord of Dwaraka to the Kaurava Maharaja. We all waited for some time expecting some response from Hastinapura. Nothing happened. Finally, all of us along with Draupadi had a last meeting in Upaplavya under Srikrishna's leadership. It was unanimously decided that Srikrishna should go as a mediator to negotiate the dispute about the division of the kingdom between the Kaurava-Pandava brothers.

As decided, Srikrishna left Upaplavya for the mediation along with Satyaki and select warriors in the month of Kartika on the MaitraMuhurta while the moon was in the Revati constellation. He left with Daruka, in his Garudadhawaja chariot.

One evening he reached a small town called Vrikasthala near Hastinapura. He camped there for one night along with all the others. The next morning after performing the morning rituals, the 'Sandhya', and after offering charities he went to the borders of Hastinapura along with Satyaki. As Kuru minister Sanjaya had informed about his arrival, flocks of men and women who were eager to see Srikrishna, arrived at the city borders.

On reaching Hastinapura, first, Srikrishna observed the formalities of meeting the elders like Grandsire Bhishma and Dhritarashtra and inquired about their wellbeing. Mahatma Vidura who had come to receive him at the borders was with him. As per his request Srikrishna went to his residence

located at the other end of Hastinapura and had lunch there. He rested there for some time and met Kuntimata in the evening. He shared the wellbeing of Vasudevababa, both Rajmatas and all others in Dwaraka. He explained to her that he had come on behalf of her sons with a proposal of peaceful negotiations.

In the evening, he told Daruka to steer the Garudadhwaaja chariot towards Duryodhana's chamber in the royal palace of the Kurus. Duryodhana-Shakuni had no idea that he was coming to meet them. At first both the cunning diplomats got flustered. This was Srikrishna's special quality indeed that no one around him could anticipate when and what he would do and how he would behave. Duryodhana-Shakuni welcomed him with an awkward smile. To make up for the mistake that he did not go to the city borders to receive Srikrishna, Duryodhana requested him repeatedly to have dinner with them. The scene was indeed unprecedented – the arrogant prince of the Kurus pleading with a lowlife cowherd, joining his palms in request. Srikrishna also joined his palms in the same manner and repeatedly denied the request politely. He had his dinner also at Vidura's residence. After dinner, he discussed matters with Mahatma Vidura till late in the night. During that discussion, he picked up clues about the views of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Shakuni and chief minister Vrishavarma on the matter. As per the information given by Vidura he strongly realized that Grandsire Bhishma was frustrated with the father-son duo of Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana.

The very next day the procession for the peace negotiations began. Taking Satyaki with him our saviour Srikrishna left the residence of Vidura in the Garudadhwaaja chariot harnessed with four white horses, steered by Daruka. His acclaim had reached such a zenith that we had no doubt in our minds that he would return successful. The citizens of Hastinapura were already aware of his arrival in the city. They cleaned and decorated their yards and the entire royal city with Rangoli designs. At many places arches decorated with fragrant flowers were erected. It took

him quite some time to reach the royal assembly of the Kurus from the residence of Vidura. Women were putting auspicious vermilion tilak on his forehead and performing *Aukshan*

for him with lamps of *Karanjel* oil and tearful eyes. At many places fistfuls of flowers were showered on him from the balconies.

Grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura and Chief Minister Vrishavarma stood respectfully at the gates of the ancient royal assembly of the Kurus and

welcomed him. They seated him on the high seat arranged especially for him in the assembly hall. Satyaki and select armed Yadava-Pandava warriors were behind him. Daruka stayed back in the chariot. In that ancient royal assembly, full of people, Srikrishna spoke for the sake of us Pandavas. Only Satyaki from among us was fortunate enough to hear that exquisite speech. I remained athirst for the rest of my life as I didn't get a chance to hear his words, my mind always felt restless for that.

But his words had no impact whatsoever on Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, and Shakuni. They rebuffed his peace proposal. Duryodhana spoke like a demented person, "Pandavas will not get even a smallest particle of dust that could rest on the tip of a needle, without war. Not only that, I am going to imprison this lowlife cowherd who is the basic cause of this dispute! That will solve all the problems." That demented soul who had reached the peak of arrogance blurted weirdly. Exactly like Shishupala!

He even gave commands to his various troop leaders in the assembly hall. At that time, he and the royal members of the Kuru assembly were forced to view a scene just like how Shishupala had been forced to see. Srikrishna had closed his eyes and incanted the divine mantras of the Sudarshan. With each mantra that he incanted, an instrumental sound which the Kurus had never heard before started reverberating in the hall, making it tremble. It was so piercing that every single person in the assembly hall got terrified and stood up. Initially, only three people kept sitting. Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Maharani Gandharimata as they were unable to see and Grandsire Bhishma. The Sudarshan chakra with twelve spokes had manifested on Srikrishna's right index finger which he had raised. The waves of its bright light had dazzled everyone in the assembly hall. Not a single person had the strength to bear the blinding light. Eventually Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Rajmata also stood up. Maharaja had joined his palms and moving his neck around, disoriented, he was pleading in a faint voice, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, please forgive, my son is not in his senses."

Only Grandsire Bhishma who continued to be seated had brought his palms together and was whispering some mantras.

He let the Kurus see him in this divine form only for a few moments. He spoke very little, "Duryodhanaa...!! I dare you to bring all the ropes in your kingdom, arrest me with all your armed soldiers and imprison me!!" Then he walked out of the hall, planting every step with determination. The Sudarshan chakra which had appeared gradually disappeared. Duryodhana had collapsed

in his seat helplessly when Srikrishna left the assembly hall with Satyaki.

To Daruka, who was standing in front of the assembly gates with the Garudadhwaaja chariot, he seemed like his usual self. But this time he had planted every step with full determination.

Insolent Duryodhana had rebuffed Srikrishna's prudent peace proposal. The Great War was inevitable now. It was in no one's control to stop it now. I was fully confident that it was only Srikrishna who would control the way in which it would be fought. When he returned to Upaplavya he had transformed inside out. After meeting him only one thought was confirmed in everyone's mind – 'war, a desperate, unprecedented war which will set the final judgment of justice and injustice'. I asked Yudhishtira who always spoke religiously and philosophically over and over again as he was the eldest, "Brother, what is your final decision?" He held his neck straight and answered, "The Great War!"

We all were in the encampment on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Srikrishna was in Upaplavya. He confirmed the date of the commencement of the Great War in a meeting with Dhaumya rishi of the Pandavas, Gargamuni of the Yadavas, Yaaja-Upayaaja of the Panchalas and many more experienced sages. The date confirmed was the second day of the dark fortnight of the month of Margashirsha. It is essential to seek the blessings of the elders to face a vital truth like a war. But all my venerable elders were in Hastinapura. Therefore, two days before the war I came to Hastinapura along with all my brothers. First, we visited Kuntimata and Mahatma Vidura. When I humbly put my head at the feet of Kuntimata my heart became completely fearless. She also pulled me up and embraced me, and though she was aged she said to me like the noble Kshatriya lady that she was, "Put up a fight that will make the Kuru dynasty proud. Never disobey Krishna's word. Remember he is not a mere charioteer. Don't forget to put your head at his feet and seek his blessings every day before entering the battlefield. Make all your brothers also do the same. It is your invincible valour on which the Pandavas are relying the most. Go, may you have a long life, be victorious, and earn acclaim." In her bright eyes I could clearly see a brilliance of the Kshatriyas like never before.

All of us took the blessings of Vidura. We went to meet Grandsire Bhishma. I didn't feel like lifting up my head that I had put on his feet. He realized it and immediately pulled me up. That towering Deodara tree of the Kuru dynasty trembled. Moved by emotions grandsire said to me, "Arjuna..."

son, do as Srikrishna says! May you live long! May you be victorious! As the last Kuru, I give my blessings to you as you are the most virtuous of the next generation!”

All of us also sought the blessings of Guru Dronacharya, Kripacharya, Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi. When we returned to Kurukshetra from Hastinapura, my mind was ready to go to war and determined. This war was no longer a battle between the cousins and only for the sake of ruling a kingdom. It was going to be a historical battle between Truth and Untruth to be remembered by generations. A great part of its responsibility lay with me. My role was going to be crucial.

Finally, the second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha dawned, which was the great day eagerly awaited by lakhs. Today my brothers and I got up at the *Brahma Muhurta* and after bathing and performing the morning rituals we arrived at the most elevated and capacious pavilion of Krishna in the Pandava encampment. Each one of us had tied thick woven strings of white jasmine flowers on our right wrists. We had strong iron armours on our chests. Each one of us carried his own special bow charged with mantras. On our backs were quivers full of arrows. Our swords were hanging, tied around our waists. In the back of each one’s chariot a variety of our weapons such as mace, chakra, pestle, Shataghni, Bhrushundi and Agnikankana were arranged.

Srikrishna sat on a neat, attractive golden seat facing the east. Though he was trying his best to refuse, Yudhishtira, Bhimsena and the rest of us had equally resolutely requested him to sit on his seat, accept our worship and give his blessings to us. He had finally given in. Yudhishtira washed his feet and worshiped him with full rituals. The rest of us put our heads on his feet one by one and sought his blessings. He said to Yudhishtira, “May you be victorious. May you be the king!” He blessed Bhimsena with, “May you be victorious and glorious.” I approached him for blessings. Without uttering any words, he immediately embraced me. I had obtained my desired blessing. He blessed Nakula-Sahadeva with, “May you live a long and glorious life”.

The Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna was with us. As per Srikrishna’s advice the day before we had entrusted him with the commandership of our army and had performed a formal *Abhishek* for him as the commander. As the commander, he was wearing a fresh white-flowered garland around his neck which suited him perfectly. The Vijayanti garland which was even longer than that was resting on Srikrishna’s chest.

With Srikrishna leading, we followed Dhrishtadyumna and left his pavilion. Every one mounted their own chariot. I also followed Srikrishna and climbed into my embellished chariot Nandighosha which was equipped with many weapons. The Kapidhwaja pennant on the flagpole was fluttering on the wind coming from river Drishadwati. The Kapi on it was as if jumping on the chest of the Unknown. The ocean of our seven-*akshauhini* army neatly organized in sections named Patti, Senamukha, Gulma, Gana, *Vahini*, Putana, Chamu, and Anakini, was spread behind us.

In front of us was the mammoth ocean of the eleven *akshauhini* Kaurava army organized in a similar manner. Leading it was the Gangaudha chariot of Grandsire Bhishma who was instated as the Kaurava commander today. On his right white-bearded Guru Drona was seen in his chariot leading the troop of chariots. On his right stood Acharya Kripa. On the left of Grandsire Bhishma were the guru's son Ashwatthama, Bhurishrava, and Vikarna.

Srikrishna had not yet taken the seat of the charioteer on my Nandighosha chariot. First, he checked that all the wheels of the chariot were properly fitted and functioning correctly, by moving them back and forth. He went near each horse and talked to each one of them in his own language by patting on the back of one, and stroking the mane of another. Then in one leap he reached the charioteer's seat. He took the eight reins used for controlling, turning and boosting the horses, in his hands and assessed them. He touched and felt the Panchjanya conch tied in the blue shawl wrapped around his waist. He threw a glance at me and smiled. I had never ever seen that smile on his determined face. Only I could know how it looked. It was not possible for me to describe it in words.

Suddenly he remembered something and said, "Wait a minute, *Dhananjaya*. I will be back. He put down the reins again. He took a wooden tube kept near the charioteer's seat and in a single leap he got down. He went near the front tall wheel of the chariot and bent down. He began applying the lubricant in the tube which he was holding, to the axle of the wheels with a cloth tied to a flexible stick. Seeing him apply the lubricant to the axles of my chariot's wheels one thought made my entire body tremble. He was indeed a 'charioteer' in the true sense of the word. Whenever the chariot of life's journey in Aaryavarta got stuck momentarily, wondering what next, hadn't he lubricated it with his divine thoughts and accelerated it? Right up to this moment!

Just as quickly he had got down from the chariot he got back onto the

charioteer's seat after lubricating all the wheels of Nandighosha. He untied the Panchjanya conch from the blue shawl tied around his waist and held it in his hands. Raising his head high towards the sky, the veins in his throat protruding, he blew the Panchjanya conch with his soul. Hearing the sound goose bumps arose on my entire body. Meanwhile, Grandsire blew his Ganganabha conch in a similar manner from his chariot in front. Acharya Drona and Kripa followed him and blew their conches. A cacophony of war instruments arose in the Kaurava army.

Innumerable conflicting thoughts began resonating in my mind like the conch sounds. Seeing white-bearded, aged grandsire I trembled. How could I shoot arrows at grandsire who took care of me as a child? How could I kill the person whom I paid my respects to? How could I slay Acharya Drona and Kripa who loved me a lot as their disciple? Only for the sake of getting a kingdom? Instead, what is wrong with surviving on alms, like Sanjaya's message said? Killing a guru – killing elders? Kingdom? Of Hastinapura? Alms – sought in holy places? Kingdom or alms? War or peace? Isn't the forest stay that blesses many better than the war that takes lakhs of lives?

I could see in front of my eyes the lifeless bodies of grandsire, Guru Drona, and Kripacharya killed by my arrows. I – I – was the only one in the entire world who was going to be considered the most sinful man!

Darkness surrounded me instantly. My throat felt dry, my mouth parched. I began perspiring profusely. My soul ached like it was being pierced by innumerable spears. Tears filled my eyes. I began seeing many blood-soaked corpses killed by my arrows. My legs got heavy.

I didn't even realize when my Gandiva bow which had never slipped from my hands, fell down. "No... No... Hrishikeshaa...! I am not going to fight at all!!" Somehow, I uttered these words, my legs gave way and I just sat down in the back of the Nandighosha chariot.

Uncontrollable streams of tears started rolling down my eyes. My head hung low like never before and couldn't be raised, like a blue lotus with a broken stem!

Hrishikesh who was sitting in charioteer's seat in front was probably stunned for a few moments. Then he jumped onto the ground and came to the back of the chariot. He affectionately put his hands on my shoulders and said, "What happened, Arjuna? Why is it that you are sitting down so dispirited? Why did your beloved Gandiva bow slip from your hands, which has never happened before?" His sweet voice had the colossal power of filling an ocean



of meaning in just a few words.

I replied in a devastated voice, with my head hanging low and shaking, “Madhusudana, how can I kill esteemed and venerable grandsire and Aacharya Drona-Kripa? How can I aim my arrows at the throats of those whose feet I touch with respect? It is better to live on alms than kill such great souls. It is acceptable to me. It is the right thing to do!”

To this reply of mine the advice that he offered is so invaluable that every man should always remember it. Did he keep advising me for hours together? Was it even possible to do so on the battlefield? The answer to this and many such questions is a clear ‘No – not at all!’

He spoke very little. But those words were full of the essence of life. I am going to tell only that much. Many people have told my or even his life’s story exaggerating it as they liked and glorifying it unduly, for many years. Similarly, this advice has also been magnified beyond the limits of truth. I have always valued the essence of this advice more than such elaborations. When he asked me, ‘Why are you quiet, why don’t you say something?’ I said to him, “Venerable guru, elders and my own cousins are standing in front of us on the battlefield and I have no desire to live by killing them. The innate quality of being a Kshatriya within me has ceased to exist by seeing them. At this moment, I am caught in a terrible conflict of what is right and what is wrong, what is *Dharma* and what is Adharma. Therefore, tell me only the determinate truth. Madhava, I am your best *Sakha*, your disciple. Give me the right guidance. I don’t really see anything that will remove this confusion and grief in my mind that has absorbed all my senses.”

Srikrishna patted me with immense affection and said, “Arjuna, you are lamenting in vain for the things which should not be lamented over. You are talking as if suddenly you have obtained some divine knowledge. Wise men never mourn, whether someone’s life is lost or saved. It is not that you, I and these warriors did never exist before. It is also highly unlikely that we won’t exist in future. The Atmatattva (Universal Soul) that has occupied this whole world is indestructible. It is immortal. No one can destroy it.

“Oh *Kaunteya*, the one who thinks that he can slay such Atmatattva, or the one who believes that it can be slain, both lack true knowledge. Oh *Bharata*, this immortal soul never destroys anyone or never gets destroyed by anyone. It never takes birth or never dies. Nor is it that after having taken birth once it will not be born again. It is indestructible, perpetual, everlasting and ancient.” Once more he gently patted on my shoulders with affection.

I simply kept staring at him with tearful eyes and a distraught mind. Explaining it to me again he said, “Just as one discards one’s old clothes and dons new ones the Soul that is the master of the body discards old bodies and takes new ones!”

His speech had such an edge today that I had never heard before. His virtuous speech was flowing like the torrent of Ganga cascading down the Himalayas with a roaring sound. He continued speaking, I kept listening. He said, “*Dhananjaya*, weapons cannot break the Soul; fire cannot burn it; water cannot soak it, and wind cannot dry it. It is stable, perpetual, immovable, ancient and everlasting.”

Every word of his was compelling me to introspect and take a deeper look into my own psyche. I kept listening, and he kept talking. He said, “Oh *Parakrami Partha*, this Soul is invisible. It cannot be seen easily by human sense organs. It is highly impossible to perceive it only with one’s intellect and mind.

“And, oh *Mahabaho – Partha!* Even if you believe that the Soul does take birth or it does die, it is not right for you to lament over it. Because one that is born is sure to die, and one that dies is sure to be reborn. Therefore, do you think it is appropriate for you to lament over the things that are not in your control at all?

“Oh *Sanyami – Gudakesha*, you are a Kshatriya. Remember that there is nothing more appropriate for a Kshatriya than to fight a war that upholds *Dharma*. If you lose courage at this point and abandon the battlefield, you will be condemned as a runaway and a coward for generations to come. You will be disgraced. And remember well that for a man of honour infamy is worse than death. All maharathis standing here will think that you retreated from this holy land of Kurukshetra because of fear. They will slander your strength in unbearably obscene words. The enemies standing against you will spread unspeakable gossips about you. Indeed, if you die fighting this war, you will attain heaven that a true Kshatriya deserves, and if you win this war you will enjoy the kingdom on earth with honour.

“Therefore, oh *Asharan – Arjuna*, rise and fight the war determinedly! Regard joy and sorrow, loss and gain, victory and defeat as the same and get ready to fight. If you do this, you will not be committing any sin.

“Oh *Savyasachi – Arjuna!* As a well loses its significance when there is flood all over, rites and rituals become insignificant to the one who has gained knowledge.

“Oh *Bibhatsu – Kaunteya!* You must remember throughout your life that you have a right only on your Karmas – performing your duty; it should never be over the fruits of your actions. Never become a person who performs his duties in anticipation of the fruitful results of his actions. And also, don’t be so foolish as to stubbornly remain inactive. Remember, Karma is inevitable for every living being, even during one’s sleep!

“The sagacity or wisdom in performing such inevitable Karma is called Karmayoga. It is to be achieved by a balanced intellect and a stable mind. Oh *Gudakesha*, Sankhyayoga preached by eminent knowledgeable people is the only remedy for your Vishadayoga – a confused state of mind. Nothing else will work.”

Now I was much composed. The commotion in my mind had reduced considerably. Instead my mind was now quite eager to hear every word coming from his holy mouth. This was the moment when I was going to get an opportunity to hear the truth about many facets of life. Pulling myself together I asked him humbly, “Oh Keshava - Hrishikesha, you mentioned a ‘Sthitaprajna’ – one who possesses a steady mind – how should I recognize him? Tell me at least once how such a person talks, walks and behaves?” This time I lifted my head and looked at him with determination. He gave me the sweetest smile. Caressing the thick *Vaijayanti* garland on his chest he said, “Oh *Jishnu* Arjuna! Listen carefully to the characteristics of a Sthitaprajna that you are so intent upon knowing. He who abandons all desires of the heart and finds satisfaction in his own self, is called a Sthitaprajna.

“Oh *Falguni – Dhananjaya!* He, who doesn’t get upset by miseries, is free from the yen for happiness, one who is free from the feelings of attachment, fear and anger is called a Sthitaprajna.

“Oh *Kiritin – Kaunteya!* The man who withdraws his senses from material pleasures and keeps his desires under control like a turtle drawing its limbs within its shell is called a Sthitaprajna.

“Oh *Jayishnu – Pandava!* He, whose mind is stable and doesn’t get elated or dejected when he receives good or bad, such a person is called a Sthitaprajna.

Many a times a person observing abstinence refrains from enjoyment of the senses yet the taste for material objects remains. The one who experiences the taste of divine consciousness and thus attains freedom from both, the enjoyment of the senses and the desire for such enjoyment is called a

Sthitaprajna.

Oh *Dhanurdhara – Dhananjaya!* Even the mind of a wise man, who is endeavouring to control his own senses, is forcibly carried away by the impetuous, powerful senses. Therefore, he who attains the stability of mind by restraining his senses and mastering control over them is known as a Sthitaprajna.

Oh *Kaunteya – Gudakesha!* Understand it well that a person who pursues material pleasures develops an attachment for the objects of enjoyment. Such attachment generates lust towards the desired object. And when there are obstructions in the path of satisfying that lust, it gives rise to anger.

Oh, my *Savyasachi Sakhya!* Such anger eventually leads to delusion. Delusion leads to loss of memory and then to loss of intellect and finally to total destruction of self.” His speech was now getting more and more interesting.

“Oh *Vikrami – Veera!* Remember well that when anger and hatred end, all senses come under one’s control. One remains in a blissful state in spite of living among material pleasures.

“Oh *Savyasachi – Dhanurdhara!* Once the mind attains such bliss all sorrow gets destroyed. Because he who has attained such a blissful state is called a Sthitaprajna.

“Oh *Digvijayi – Kaunteya!* He who is not engaged in divine consciousness has no control over his mind and hence no faith. How can he who has no faith achieve peace of mind? And how can he who has no peace of mind gain happiness of any kind at all?

“Oh *Maharathi – Arjuna!* Just as a boat on water is swept away by a strong wind, the mind of a person who dwells amongst material desires gets carried away by his senses.

“Oh *Mahabaho – Arjuna!* He whose senses refrain from material desires is called a Sthitaprajna.

“Oh *Gudakesha – Arjuna!* When it is night for all beings, the self-controlled and stable-minded person is awake. When all beings are awake, it is night for the introspective *Yogi*.

“Oh *Kaunteya – Kiriti!* The person who never loses his peace of mind by the incessant flow of desires, just as the ocean never gets disturbed when rivers merge in it from all sides, is called a Sthitaprajna. He who strives to satisfy his own material desires can never attain such peace of mind. When a person is devoid of ego and pride, and performs his worldly duties selflessly,

only then he attains peace of mind.

“Oh *Jayishnu – Dhananjaya!* This is how a Sthitaprajna attains the state of spirituality. He doesn't go astray even at the end of life and thus attains Moksha.”

At this point I came to realize subtly and strongly that he has been living like a Sthitaprajna throughout his life. I stretched my memory to see if I could find a single moment in the flow of his life, when he had acted in anticipation of getting something in return. My mind full of doubts began to clear just like the sky filled with dark clouds begins to clear with the arrival of the radiant sun! The first thick layer of delusions that covered it was removed. The ‘Sri’ in the name of Srikrishna that I couldn't comprehend before, began to unravel slowly with each word. The biggest surprise was that I began understanding my own self gradually. My limitations as an ordinary man were becoming clearly apparent to me. Half the truth was clear to me – that I am a confused man. The other half was not yet clear – who is He?

The clever and alert disciple in me was awake now. This was the right time to make him speak everything about himself. I joined my palms humbly and asked him, “Oh Janardana, you say that balanced intellect is superior to Karma. Then oh venerable Keshava, why do you want me to engage in this ghastly karma of war?”

“Oh Achyuta, why are you making equivocal statements that bewilder my brains? So Madhava, please be kind to me and tell me decisively what exactly is most beneficial for me.”

He looked at the confusion on my face and again gave me a sweet smile. Looking deep into my eyes, in his inspiring tone he said, “Oh *Nishpaap Arjuna*, merely abstaining from work doesn't give one the freedom from it. One cannot achieve perfection only by renunciation of karma. No one can live without doing something even for a moment. Basic instincts compel one to do something or the other every moment. He who outwardly restrains his senses and organs but dwells on material desires in his heart is called a hypocrite. Oh Arjuna, he who controls his senses and keeps them engaged in activity without any attachment is considered superior. And oh *Nidrajayi – Partha*, he who takes pleasure in the Self, rejoices in and is contented with the Self, is free from duty.

“In Prayaga aashrama my guru, Ghor Angirasa who had attained divine knowledge said to me once, ‘Dear Keshava, Achyuta, I have no duties to be fulfilled in the world anymore. I have nothing to gain. Still I am engaged in

my duty. Why so? Since then I have been thinking about it and I have come to understand it now that if I don't shake away laziness and do my duty, then oh *Gudakesha*, all the people will follow in my footsteps and become inactive and lazy.”

Now his speech was becoming more and more impressive. Holding my finger, making me walk with him he was going deeper into the cave of life. He said, “Oh *Savyasachi – Partha*, the material world which is surrounded by the three qualities – Satva (harmony, goodness) Rajasa (passion, active) and Tamasa (chaotic, destructive) – is constantly at work. But delusional, egotistical mankind believes that he is the doer of things! That is why he who has complete knowledge of the Self is considered a great being.

“Oh *Jishnu – Bharata*, just like the mountains look very attractive from a distance, the duties of others may appear appealing. It is better to die in the line of one's own prescribed duty. No matter how wonderful and appealing the duties of others may look, following their path is dangerous.”

Now I couldn't resist myself from asking the questions which I had wanted to ask for a long time. I asked, “Oh saviour of Vrushnis and Andhakas – oh Krishna, why is one impelled to do sinful acts against his own will?”

Now he became solemn which was rare and said, “Understand clearly *Dhananjaya* that lust and anger are the all-consuming enemies in that regard. Just as smoke covers fire, dust covers a mirror, and the womb covers the embryo, lust and anger cover Truth. Sitting in the castle of sense lust covers intellect and anger covers reason within moments. Therefore, oh

*Kiritin*, first of all you should conquer the unyielding enemy of lust.”

I was quite composed now. He had conferred upon me knowledge in the unknown cave of Karmayoga. I was realizing that I was indeed his best *Sakha*; his most favourite. To steer him towards the subjects of Jnanayoga and Sanyasa I said, “Keshava, you were born quite recently. Many great yogis are senior to you by birth. How am I to understand it when you say that you the one who preached the truth of Yoga to mankind?”

Then he gave me a meaningful smile as usual and said, “Oh *Kiriti – Kaunteya*, I know of all the previous lives that you and I have lived. But, oh *Parantapa*, you don't know them. I have to elevate you to my level. Understand that I am unborn and the master of all beings.

“Oh *Bharata*, whenever there is decline in the practice of *Dharma* (religion) and a predominant rise in the practice of *Adharma* (irreligion) I take birth. To protect the righteous people and destroy the immoral, and to re-

establish the principles of *Dharma* I reincarnate in every era.

“You need to comprehend the acute meaning of the words *Dharma* and Avatar in this context.

“*Dharma* is that which inculcates Sanskaras in the living being for his healthy development. Performing pompous rituals or meaningless verbose jabbering is not *Dharma*!

“‘Ava’ means down and ‘tar’ means to rescue. I descend on the earth in the form of Brilliance, to save Life. It doesn’t mean that I will be born with a body that has multiple hands, eyes and faces. I come as any two-handed person who stands up to tackle injustice.

“Arjuna, you are also one of my reincarnations!

“Oh *Bibhatsu – Falguni*, know very well that Jnana means to know. Everything that one comes to know is not necessarily worth remembering. Therefore, the knowledge that fundamentally benefits life is true knowledge. Nothing is as pure as knowledge in the three worlds. A person who has faith and seeks such knowledge relentlessly by controlling the sense organs that induce commotion within the body, attains it. Always remember that nothing else is as great as attaining pure knowledge in this world. Such knowledge or Vidya is always graced by humility. Such a wise person considers a Brahmin, a cow, an elephant, as well as a dog and a low-caste man as equal.”

Now a buzz had spread among the eleven *akshauhini* Kaurava army and our seven-*akshauhini* army – that is about forty lakhs armed warriors ready for the war. It was clearly audible now. I don’t know on what strength, he completely ignored it and talked only a few words about Sanyasayoga with me. “Oh *Gudakesha – Falguni*, the human body is like a city with nine gates. The Soul is happily resting in it. A *Yogi – Sanyasi* who learns to control his senses, brain, and mind attains Self-Realization, and is emancipated from life itself.”

Each one of his meaningful utterances was slowly removing the cloud of ignorance from my mind. I was gradually recovering from the initial state of physical debilitation. Even my questions decreased. I decided to listen carefully to what he was saying. His divine words kept flowing. I kept listening. He said, “Man should never undermine himself. One should uplift oneself. For that purpose, one should always remember that we are our own brothers or friends who help us or enemies who bring us down. Dhyanyoga – meditation, is the only practice that helps us realize this. Everyone must obey certain rules to follow Dhyanyoga. Oh Arjuna, he who either eats in

excess or starves himself cannot practise Dhyanyoga. So also, he who sleeps too much or keeps awake till late at night cannot achieve Dhyanyoga. Only he who is disciplined in the habits of eating, drinking, sleeping and performs his duties as required is able to practice Dhyanyoga. This kind of Yoga destroys unhappiness and gives happiness to the one who has faith in it.

“A person who practises Dhyanyoga in such a manner is able to see me in everything, everywhere. He can experience that everything is a part of me and I am a part of everything. Such a great man never gets separated from me and I also never get separated from him.”

Because of his reassuring utterances my curiosity got aroused again. I asked him, “*Yogayogeshwara* Srikrishna, I don’t think the Karmayoga that you are talking about will sustain due to the frailty of mind. This fickle and adamant mind is very difficult to control. I think controlling the mind is as difficult as restraining the wind.”

He was indeed quite determined today to not let me off the hook at all, so he casually said, “Oh *Mahabaho – Falguni*, no doubt that the mind is volatile and extremely challenging to conquer. But oh Kaunteyaa, with practice and detachment it can be curbed. To practise something is doing it repeatedly with resolve. Such practice gradually removes flaws and faults from that activity. The mind then gradually becomes more and more self-reliant.”

Now he turned to a more profound topic of Jnan-Vijnan yoga. Reminding me about Aacharya Sandipani from the forest of Avanti he said, “*Jishnu – Arjuna*, listen to what my gurudeva Sandipani had told me long back. What is a Yantra? A Yantra or a machine is a group of shapes that catches momentum due to its inbuilt construction. My Garudadhwaja, your Nandighosha chariot and my Sudarshan chakra are all machines. Lakhs of such chariots are there in your Pandava army and the Kuru army in front of you, but the Truth is beyond all this!

“Oh *Bharatashreshtha – Gudakesha*, four kinds of virtuous people remember and worship me: distressed – who are afflicted with diseases, inquisitive – who long for attainment of Knowledge, mercenary – who yearn for wealth, and the wise who are blessed due to the acquisition of the knowledge of God and hence become my ardent devotees with a detached mind.

“Remember, the human body is also a machine that runs on the complex network of seventy-two thousand Nadis. He who understands the one who runs that machine attains the knowledge of life in its entirety.



Whichever faith each devotee follows to gain the knowledge of the one who runs this machine, I confirm his faith in the path that he follows.

Faith means unwavering belief. It can never be sighted or blind. It simply exists. Only a thirsty man can understand the satisfaction that he feels after drinking water. No one else can experience or understand it only by words. Even he who says 'I don't believe in faith' has faith in rationalism! Therefore, it is possible to understand a person who is an atheist, but not a faithless person. Faith can change. He who says he has no faith is an egotist. I have travelled a lot and I am telling you so much at this moment but what if Aacharya Sandipani or Aacharya Ghor Angirasa stood in front of me at this moment? Then without wasting a moment I will climb down from this Nandighosha chariot of yours. I will, with faith, touch the feet of those great men who have explained life to me. I would rather have faith and even ignorance at times, than being a man with no faith and therefore egotistic and vainly wise.

“Dear Pandava, Desire means lust and anger means the passion for material objects. I am the strength of the strong people, which remains after abolishing these two. I am that Kama, the Desire, which resides within all beings and which is not contrary to *Dharma* – the inculcation of the Sanskaras, which is useful for the healthy development of all sentient beings. It is indeed difficult to survive my divine Maayaa which comprises various qualities. That is why only those who surrender themselves to me are liberated from the illusion of my Maayaa.

“*Dhairyaashil Dhananjaya*, after many births one experiences that ‘Everything in this world is a manifestation of Vaasudeva’. It is extremely rare to find such a great soul who has experienced it.

“I know all the beings who existed in the past, who exist in the present, and who will exist in the future. But oh *Jayishnu – Jnanlobhi – Kaunteya*, no one knows me.”

Now he entered the more mysterious, dense forest of Philosophy. He said, “Listen very carefully to what I am going to tell you while remembering Aacharya Ghor Angirasa who taught me Aksharabrahmayoga. Brahma is Akshara – that principle which can be never destroyed. He who knows it with all its subtleties is Brahmin! He doesn't necessarily belong to any particular dynasty, caste or colour. Adhyatma – Spirituality is the art or vidya of understanding such Akshara Brahma!

“Knowing all this, in the end the one who leaves his body remembering me

ultimately becomes one with me. It also means that the one who spends his entire life remembering me too unites with me in the end.”

As he mentioned the words beginning and end, a few questions arose in my mind. I said to him, “Do you mean to say Day is the beginning and Night is the end?” Realising my ignorance, he smiled and said, “Try to understand clearly the meaning of Day and Night. Time cannot be measured by the standard of human days and nights. For that you will have to understand what a single day of Brahmadeva is. One Mahayuga or Great-era consists of four eras – Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. The Kaliyuga has commenced now. A single day of Brahmadeva consists of one thousand such Mahayugas and similarly a single night consists of one thousand such Mahayugas. When Brahmadeva’s day commences, all material things come into existence from the Immaterial and when his night commences they gradually merge back into the same Immaterial in the sequence that they came. This cycle of creation and destruction of things is continuously going on. This is called the theory of ‘Undulation’.

“That means the world continuously passes through two states namely Shukla and Vadya or Brightness and Darkness. One cannot come back the same way that one has gone by. The world cannot change the direction of its motion. As the world is round, one has to go through one state and come out through another.

“Oh *Savyasachi* – *Gudakesha*, a Karmayogi who understands both these states completely never gets entangled in temptation. Therefore, oh *vikrami* – Arjuna, try to become a detached Karmayogi forever.

“To attain such level of detachment one needs to question himself – Who am I? The resulting answer to that question also culminates in me. That is why, oh *Mahabaho* – *Maharathi* – Arjuna, you are feeling contented with my answers. Therefore, I am going to tell the most beneficial thing for you again, so listen.” Now he touched the subject of divine Vibhutyoga the most alluring Yoga that reminds every sentient being of Him at every step. He started expounding to me who he is, in many different ways. I was indeed most fortunate that I was getting to hear it in person actually from him. He started telling who he is, and the surprising thing was that while hearing it gradually I started realizing who I am. By his grace the tiny Arjuna within me began expanding sky-wide like him. I came to know the various ways and the intensity of my complete involvement in him. I began merging in him like sugar dissolving in water. If a fish made of salt dived into the ocean to assess

its depth, instead of coming back up it would dissolve in the ocean – something similar happened to my consciousness. He kept talking and I kept getting the knowledge of who he is and also who I have become!

He was Narayana – the Almighty himself. The fundamental reason of the universe, detached from everything. I was Nara – the Man – merely a means to accomplish his goal.

Now his divine speech flourished like the scintillating plumage of a peacock, blooming spontaneously after hearing the sounds of roaring clouds in the Mriga constellation. I kept staring at the peacock feather tucked in his crown. He continued talking, I kept on listening. He said, “All the emotions and mental aspects of all sentient beings such as intellect, knowledge, ignorance, forgiveness, truth, vigour, self-control, joy-sorrow, faith-scepticism, fear-courage, nonviolence, equality, contentment, penance, charity, success, and failure come into existence only from me.”

Hearing his words, I started getting confused again. I brought my palms together while sitting and said pleadingly, “You are the most holy and pure Supreme Spirit. Only you are the divine and eternal element that is all-pervading. Devarishi Narada, Asit Devala and Maharishi Vyasa also say so. Now you yourself are telling me the same thing. Oh Keshava, I believe every single word that you are saying. Oh Bhutesha – creator of all beings, Lord of the universe – Devadeva, Oh Supreme Being, you know yourself in entirety. Oh Narayana, please grant me your grace and elaborate your divine powers which are over and above the three worlds even after occupying them, oh Bhagvan. Narayana, I am an ignorant human being. Please do me a favour and explain to me how and where I should find and recognize you in your many forms in daily life.”

Now his face, dazzling with the brightness of thousands of suns, started looking incredibly resplendent. It felt as if he had gone far away, even beyond the sky, within a moment, even though he was standing in front of me in the Nandighosha chariot. The next moment it felt like he was right inside my heart. The thick lashes of his fish-shaped eyes fluttered; his bow-shaped crimson lips quivered. In his melodious voice in which he had talked to the gopas of Gokul he said affectionately,

“*Nidrajayi - Gudakesha* – Arjuna, I am the Soul that resides in all sentient beings. I am also the beginning, the middle and the end of it. I am Vishnu among the twelve Aadityas.

“Among all the radiant beings I am the dazzling Sun that is shining at this

moment atop the Nandighosha chariot and your head. I am Marichi among the Marutas, Moon among the Nakshatras and among the Vedas I am Samaveda which is dedicated to Music. I am Indra among the gods.

“I am the vibrant Prana energy that pervades all beings. Among the senses, I am the Mind.”

I began grasping each and every single word with full concentration like a royal swan on Manasa sarovar picking up the fibre of a lotus stalk. He kept on talking, I went on listening. He said, “I am Shankara among the eleven Rudras, Kubera among the Yaksha-rakshasas, a Vasu named Pavaka among the eight Vasus and among the mountains I am Mount Meru.

“*Savyasachi – Jishnu – Arjuna*, listen carefully to the supreme truth, that I am the one syllable word ‘ॐ’ among the Vanis. The phonetic sounds ‘De’(A) ‘G’(U) and ‘ce’(M) in the word ‘ॐ’ are located in my feet, stomach and the crown of my head respectively.

“I am the *Ashwattha* or Pipal tree among various trees. Narada among the Devarishis, Chitraratha among the Gandharvas, Kapilamuni among the Siddhas, and among the horses’ I am the stallion Uchchhaishravasa that came out during the ocean churning.

“I am Airavata among the elephants, King among the men and Vajra among the weapons. Therefore, I have used my Sudarshan like the Vajra, only when necessary.

“*Parakrami – Partha*, I am Kamadhenu among the cows. She is dear to me as I am a cowherd.

“*Vijigishu – Dhanurdhara – Dhananjaya*, I am Kama – the libido that induces reproduction. To conquer the libido by self-control is like winning me over.

“*Falguni – Kaunteya*, I am Vasuki among the serpents, Ananta among the Nagas, Varuna among the water dwellers, the soul named Aryama among the souls of ancestors, and most significantly Yama – the lord of death who brings equilibrium to the world!

“Oh *Kiritin – Kaunteya*, I am Prahlada among the Daityas and Rama among the possessors of arms.

*Purushottama – Partha*, I am Lion – the king of the jungle among the animals, Nakra among the fish and Garuda among the birds.

“*Jayishnu – Arjuna*, I am Bhagirathi among the rivers, Vayu among the swift, Kala among the ones that swallow up. Dear friend Arjuna, I am the beginning, middle and end of the universe. I am Adhyatma-vidya –

Spirituality among the Vidyas. “Among the letters, I am the letter ‘De’, among the Samaasas I am Dwandwa and four faced Brahmadeva – that is also me.

“Oh *Kirtivan – Kaunteya*, I am the qualities of Kirti - fame, Sri- fortune, Vani - speech, Smriti - memory, Medha - intelligence, Dhriti - courage, Kshama - forgiveness among women.

“*Parakrami – Falguni*, among the meters I am the Gayatri meter of the renowned *Savitru* mantra. I am Margashirsha among the months and Vasanta, the season of spring among the seasons.

“Aajnadhari – Arjuna, I am the splendour of the splendid, I am the victory. I am the resolve and I am the quintessence.

“Oh *Satshil – Savyasachi*, I am Vyasa among the munis, Shukracharya among the poets, and the royal sceptre of the rulers. I am the knowledge of the wise. I am the germ of all beings. No animate or inanimate being exists without me.”

He said, “Dear friend Arjuna, you, *Dhananjaya*, the one who is my most favourite among the Pandavas – is also me. I am Vaasudeva among all the Yadavas of the eighteen clans!

“Consider that everything that possesses the quality of opulence and splendour has been created from a part of me.

“In the end, I would say only one thing Arjuna, why do you need to understand the scope of my colossal manifestations? In short just remember that I have occupied this entire world with just a small part of me.”

I was amazed to hear his words, ‘I have occupied the entire world’. My eyes moved over his towering figure searching for everything that he told me. I could see everything that he described to me, in his human body. Beholding that grand manifestation my throat felt dry again. Composing myself I managed to ask him “You said, I am Kala itself. I didn’t understand what it means. Oh Prabho, could you please explain it to me?”

Keeping his eyes closed he said, “It is true Arjuna. I am ‘Kala’ – the Time itself that has been inspired to destroy the countless warriors standing here.

“*Dhirodatta – Dhananjaya*, try to understand clearly what ‘Kala’ is. All sentient beings, from the minuscule insects to the humans exist in three dimensions. Those three dimensions are distance, weight and gravitational force. Each of these dimensions has a beginning and an end. The fourth dimension is Kala –Time. It has neither beginning nor end. It is only one and continuous. Understand thoroughly that I am such Kala.

“I am Time infinite which has no beginning and no end. Now I am getting ready to annihilate these countless warriors standing in front of us. I am going to do that without wielding any weapon. That is why you are going to be my instrument – with the weapons in your hands. You will not be committing any sin in killing the warriors in front of you. You will not be held guilty of any fault. A lotus leaf never gets wet in spite of being in the water all the time. Similarly, you will also remain free from any kind of fault. Therefore, oh *Kiritin – Kaunteya*, arise, hold with resolve, the Gandiva bow that you had discarded and get ready to fight the war.

“Ardent devotees who follow this affectionate advice given by me sincerely are close to my heart. *Falguni – Pandava*, the human body is like a field and the alert Soul is like the farmer that takes care of the field. He who understands this, understands life.

“*Purushottama – Partha*, just as different seasons affect the crop in the field, the three qualities also affect the soul. These three qualities are – Satva, Rajasa and Tamasa. Every being likes to eat food according to the dominance of these qualities in that being. A sattvika, holy person likes to eat sweet food made of curds and milk, a Rajasika, active person loves nourishing nutrients with salt and spices and a Tamasika, irascible person likes food that is without nutrients and is stale. Every being gets results according to the food they consume. A sattvika person gets pure results of virtuous deeds, a rajasa person gets mixed results of joys and sorrows, and a tamasika person suffers in sorrow full of ignorance. Just as an alert and skilled farmer takes good care of his field, a sattvika person keeps the terrain of life spotless and impeccable.

“He who obtains this knowledge and realizes the omnipresent nature of God almighty becomes a *Purushottama* – the supreme man.

“*Gudakesha – Kaunteya*, there are two kinds of people in the world – those who are pious by nature and others who are demonic. The pious people with divine virtues possess twenty-six rare qualities. Those are brilliance, mercy, cleanliness, courage, generosity, a meditative and pure heart and such. The demonic people possess vices like hypocrisy, arrogance, anger, cruelty, ignorance and such. The divine qualities lead one towards Moksha. The vices lead one towards suffering.”

By giving a variety of examples he had been trying in many different ways to remove the dark veil of ignorance on my intellect. I was delusional and kept falling back into a state of confusion. I was persistently asking him

questions one after the other. Even after he gave me so much advice I ended up asking him, “Hrishikeshaa, I would like to know the difference between the essence of Renunciation and Sacrifice.”

Then he explained the difference to me and without giving me a chance to ask any more questions he resolutely said to me, “Why do you need to know what is life? Why do you have to understand Truth and Untruth? You just keep your attention on me only. Be my devotee and worship me. Leave everything else and surrender yourself to me. I will emancipate you from every sin.” His eyes opened wide, and he sternly commanded me, “Arjuna... arise. Pick up your Gandiva bow and blow your Devadutta conch. Inspire the Pandava army with a resolve to

go to war. I am not going to listen to anything that you say now!”

He provoked the combatant Kshatriya within me. I got up at once like a puppet. I was holding the Gandiva bow that I had instinctively picked up. I hung it on my shoulders, untied my Devadutta conch wrapped in a shawl around my waist and took it in my hands. I glanced at Srikrishna expectantly. His renowned pure white Panchjanya conch was in his hands. This Mahayajna of the Great War couldn't be inflamed until he had blown his conch first.

On the second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha, raising his indomitable head high towards the clear skies of Kurukshetra, Srikrishna blew his auspicious white Panchjanya conch at the top of his lungs.

Responding to that grandsire Bhishma blew his Ganganabha conch as the commander of the Kauravas, in the same manner. As I heard that sound each atom in my body got excited with valour. I looked only once at Krishna who was looking back. His face was blooming with a striking, deeply meaningful smile that no one must have ever seen. It felt as if he was commanding me – ‘Blow the conch Arjuna – let the Great War of *Bharata* commence.’

I closed my eyes, paid obeisance to him and Kuntimata and blew my Devadutta conch from the bottom of my heart. Dhrishtadyumna also blew his Yajnaghosha conch as the commander of the Pandava army. After that I heard the familiar sound of Bhimsena's Paundra conch that he blew protruding the veins in his neck. Now I got excited and was filled with valour. After Bhimsena many sounds of the conches of Guru Drona-Kripa, Duryodhana, Ashwatthama and others were heard coming from the frontline. Challenging them the familiar thrilling sounds of Yudhishtira's Anantvijaya, Nakula's Sughosha, and Sahadeva's Manipushpaka conch were heard.

From both sides a cacophony of inspiring war cries arose from lakhs of throats of valiant warriors – ‘Mount! ...Onward! Attack!’

The *yajna* pit of the Great War of *Bharata* got ignited on the holy land of Kurukshetra! Troops of lakhs of pugnacious warriors from the Kaurava and Pandava army fell upon each other clanging their weapons like two high-tide oceans colliding against each other.

The battle had spun vigorously for thirteen days. I could never forget the thirteenth and fourteenth day in my entire life. There was a strong reason behind that. My own life and entity was at stake in those two days. On the thirteenth day, the war stopped after sunset as per the rules of the war. The Chakravayuha – discus – formation arranged by Guru Drona today had wreaked havoc in our army. I was utterly exhausted after fighting the whole day. Every evening while returning to our camp my charioteer, *Sakha* Srikrishna, would continuously talk to me while reporting the events of the day to me. I never saw him tired. But today he was absolutely silent. I felt it very strongly. I was about to ask him something when he brought the Nandighosha chariot to the centre of the battlefield. Yudhishtira and all my brothers, commander Dhrishtadyumna, Satyaki and major Pandava warriors had gathered there for the first time today. Definitely one of the Pandava warriors had died a hero’s death today! Srikrishna brought my Nandighosha chariot near the circle of the warriors and without saying a word he leaped down from his seat. He broke through the circle of warriors towards the centre. I also followed him as if drawn. A corpse of a valiant warrior lay at the centre of the circle. His face was thrust in the ground. It was unrecognizable as it was smeared with mud.

Srikrishna sat in the Virasana pose near the lifeless body. He gently picked up the face hidden in the lap of the Kurukshetra land and kept it next to the torso!

I was struck by a bolt! He was my most beloved son Abhimanyu. The apple of Subhadra’s eyes, the husband of Uttaraa, and Srikrishna’s favourite *bhacha* ‘Abhi’.

Krishna spread his blue shawl on the severed face of his dear Abhi that was vaguely visible to him through the veil of tears in his eyes. Commander Dhrishtadyumna placed a garland that somebody handed over to him on Abhi’s body.

Krishna was benumbed. I was speechless. Composing himself commander Dhrishtadyumna briefed us about the incident, “Bold Abhi performed



incredible matchless feats today. Breaking six chains of the Chakravyuha military formation, while intimidating major Kaurava warriors such as Drona, Shakuni, Dushasana, Jayadratha, Kritavarma, Kripa, Ashwatthama, and Duryodhana, this valiant Pandava warrior infiltrated the Kuru army like a serpent entering a hole. His mighty *kaka* Bhimsena who was protecting him eventually fell behind. Fighting against thousands of chariot warriors, elephant riders and horse riders Abhimanyu singlehandedly broke seven chains of the formation and reached the eighth chain in the centre. With the muscles in his arms quivering with excitement and valour, gallant Abhimanyu was completely engrossed in the fight. He fought alone at the centre of the formation. He furiously killed many Kaurava Atirathis like Shatrunjaya, Takshaka, Meghavega, Chandraketu, Jayatsena and Satyashravasa in no time.

Valiant Abhimanyu was not retreating at all even when evening approached. The Kauravas who were feeling utterly helpless behaved treacherously for the first time in the war. Commander Drona, Kripa, Kritavarma, Ashwatthama, Brihadbala and Karna – six Maharathis attacked Saubhadra at the same time. In fact as per the rules of engagement even though it is a double-chariot war, the fight has to be one against one. The Kauravas heartlessly broke this rule for the first time today.”

“What – What did the six of them do?” Krishna calmly asked commander Dhrishtadyumna.

Commander Dhrishtadyumna said with his chest swelled with pride for Abhimanyu’s valour, “Abhimanyu did not surrender to the six warriors. He made them retreat from the battlefield one after the other. In the end Duryodhana’s son Lakshmana and Abhi fought a fierce mace fight at the exact centre of the formation. Both of them struck each other fiercely at the same time and lost consciousness after that. Abhimanyu was lying face down. As the Kaurava warriors made Duryodhana’s son Lakshmana sniff medicinal herbs, he regained consciousness first. Without thinking anything he hit a strong, wicked blow of his mace on the head of Abhimanyu who had lost consciousness and was lying face down! He thus violated all rules of engagement.

“ Abhi whimpered indistinctly ‘*Kaka.... Bhimakaka*’ before dying, indicating some consciousness. Meanwhile the six warriors who had retreated earlier gathered there again. Even their strong hearts were shaken for a moment, hearing Abhi’s last distressed call.”

Benumbed and speechless I was staring at the blue shawl of Krishna. My heart was crying and streams of tears flowed continuously from my eyes. My soul was wailing in agony – ‘Abhimanyu – dear Abhi...!’

The concluding words of the commander fell on my ears – “At that time only Jayadratha came forward like a monster. He wanted to check whether Abhimanyu was really dead or not. But the brave warrior’s body was lying face down. More than half of his severed face was detached and stuck in the ground of the holy battlefield of Kurukshetra due to the heavy blow of Lakshmana’s mace. Insolent Jayadratha kicked his body to straighten it! Gallant Abhi’s crushed head remained stuck in the ground! Only his torso turned around. Maybe that mighty warrior didn’t want to see the faces of the Kuru warriors!”

Commander Dhrishtadyumna was so courageous but even he couldn’t control his tears while reporting the news.

Each word of his felt like embers falling on my body. For a moment, my entire body trembled with rage. My eyes dilated with anger. I stood up at once, raised my Gandiva bow as high as I could towards the skies of Kurukshetra and took a fierce vow – “I will kill the uncultured, insolent Jayadratha who ruthlessly kicked my dear son’s lifeless body, before sunset tomorrow! Or else I will enter the fire pit myself and enter the heavens to be with my dear son!”

While my body was shaking with uncontrollable rage, I had taken a ferocious vow that everyone could hear clearly. My ear lobes had become hot with rage. I couldn’t think of anything. Srikrishna was patting my sweaty back and saying to me, “Arjuna, the first part of your vow befits you. But the second part is going to be difficult.” At that time, I didn’t understand the meaning of his words. It had happened many times before. We couldn’t always comprehend the meaning of his words immediately.

Something that did not happen during the last thirteen days happened that night. Srikrishna sent an attendant and invited me to his elevated, grand pavilion located at the centre of our encampment. A royal astrologer was seated in front of Srikrishna’s seat and had spread the birch parchment of an almanac. Both of them were discussing something in low voices. Srikrishna was whispering something to him while counting on his fingers. I didn’t understand anything at all.

My heart devastated by Abhimanyu’s death was writhing in pain with millions of his memories. I was unable to sleep. I just lay down on the bed

with my eyes closed and my mind fatigued. As per Srikrishna's instruction I was going to stay in his pavilion tonight.

Around midnight I woke up hearing the fleeting words of the royal astrologer. They seemed quite irrelevant to me. He had said – “Yes Yadavaraja, there is a total solar eclipse on the new moon day tomorrow! After the third prahar of the day!” After hearing that I saw Krishna removing a pearl necklace from his neck and gifting it to him. Krishna also sort of commanded, “Go back to Hastinapura right away. Tomorrow itself leave from there and go on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas.”

The fourteenth day of the war, which I could never forget in my life, dawned. The battlefield of Kurukshetra echoed with a cacophony of sounds of various war instruments. So far everyday a new battlefield had been chosen for the war. It was essential to do so to make arrangements to dispose of the dead bodies, weapons, chariots, dead horses, camels and elephants fallen on the battlefield. According to the rules of engagement no battle was going to be fought on the same battlefield for two days. No battle was to be fought at night.

Today Srikrishna steered my Nandighosha chariot among various troops till the third prahar of the day. We could not see Jayadratha anywhere! Duryodhana and Shakuni had taken the decision to not bring him onto the battlefield at all. He was resting in a secured pavilion guarded by a thousand armed soldiers. My body started seething with fury as I couldn't find Jayadratha even after searching for him. In frustration with rage I went on slaying warriors like Niyutayu, Mitradeva and Dandadhara and slaughtered troops after troops. Shouting loudly, ‘Show me Jayadratha – who humiliated my dear Abhi's lifeless body – show me that scoundrel Jayadratha’ I made Srikrishna run my Nandighosha chariot all over the battlefield. He also kept calling the horses of the chariot by their names tirelessly and constantly kept motivating them. Whenever I got disappointed and requested him to stop the chariot he was doing it obediently. But he was not saying anything. After stopping the chariot, he would blow his Panchjanya conch at the top of his lungs. Hearing its divine sound my fatigue would vanish.

Warriors from both sides were engaged in war forgetting themselves. All of a sudden after the third prahar of the day the skies got murky. No one understood what was happening. Within a few moments, the sun was eclipsed completely. Murky darkness spread everywhere. By this time, we had reached the extreme west of the fourteenth battlefield. Due to the darkness

flocks of chirping birds started returning to their nests. The crickets started chirping loudly. The area of Kurukshetra was illuminated by the night attendants with hundreds of burning torches. Everyone thought the day was over. The Kaurava army arranged a funeral pyre of sandalwood logs for me as I had been unable to fulfil my vow. It was arranged at the centre of the encampments of both the armies so that it would be visible to all.

I was feeling confused and extremely ashamed. I hadn't felt so ashamed even while getting into a woman's costume as Brihannada in Viratanagar. I felt as if furious Abhimanyu was standing at heaven's gate and sending me back. I was completely benumbed with the thought of what everyone, including Yudhishtira - Bhimsena, Draupadi and especially Subhadra would think of me. With tearful eyes, I touched the feet of Yudhishtira, Bhimsena and aged Kuntimata. With deep grief, I embraced Nakula - Sahadeva. Lakhs of distressed warriors gathered to say final goodbyes to me. I raised my hands and humbly bowed down to them.

In the end, I approached my dear Krishna who had counselled me so wisely about life. My heart was flooded with varied emotions. Going away from Srikrishna? Forever? How is it possible? But I had taken a vow and to fulfil it I had to go away from all. I steadied my heart with resolve. I removed the Gandiva bow from my shoulders and kept it at his feet as it had become lacklustre today. He promptly said with a solemn expression, "Oh *Veera* – Arjuna, even in heavens the Kshatriyas cannot enter without their weapons! Who else is going to handle the Gandiva bow but you? Even I cannot do it!" He forcefully put the quiver on my back and tied its strings tight over my chest. The next moment he held me in a deep embrace, and taking that opportunity he whispered in my ears, "Very soon you are going to have to use your exceptional skills of archery and use the Gandiva bow as never before. Focus your attention on my index finger." He patted my shoulders effusively. I became vigilant.

I climbed the steps to get on the tall and huge funeral pyre to enter the fire with my head hanging low in utter humiliation! Keeping my eyes on Srikrishna's feet I closed my eyes. The courage-giving mantra of Bhagvan *Savitru* slipped out of my mouth inadvertently in the rhythm of the Gayatri meter – Om bhoorbhuvaha, Swaha, TatsaviturvareNyam....

I – the third son of Kuntimata, Srikrishna's most beloved friend – the master of the Gandiva bow – world conqueror master archer Arjuna got ready to face death.

An attendant touched a burning *Karanjel* oil torch to the funeral pyre with his trembling hands. I was still looking around in search of Jayadratha. He was standing silently behind Duryodhana with a shawl covering his face, like women do. He had come to quench the fire in his cruel eyes and vicious mind, by witnessing his foremost enemy Arjuna entering the fire. Even seeing him from a distance, my body seethed with rage.

Suddenly the darkness of the eclipse started lifting up. The rays of the sun started streaming on the holy land of Kurukshetra like streams of water slowly running from a crack in an earthen pot! Smiling at the bleak torches on the battlefield the bright Sun god appeared on the western horizon like before. Birds started chirping and left their nests again for the forest in search of food. The loud chirping sound of the crickets stopped at once!

Putting to shame even the sound of the Panchjanya conch, a familiar voice fell on my ears, raising goose bumps on my body, “Oh *Savyasachi* – *Partha*, see there – the sun in the sky and there – the scoundrel Jayadratha on Kurukshetra! Take aim and shoot your arrow.” Pointing the index fingers of both his hands in two different directions he stood tall, like Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas! His right index finger pointed at the Sun and left index finger pointed right at Jayadratha’s throat. I promptly mounted an arrow on my Gandiva bow and shot it in the exact direction of his left index finger. It was the Chandramukha arrow with a zigzag Jidma shaft and a crescent moon-shaped blade at the tip. Taking many twists and turns and avoiding others in the path it unmistakably cut through Jayadratha’s throat. Even I didn’t understand what happened and how!

The Pandava army put Jayadratha’s corpse on the huge funeral pyre that the Kauravas had prepared for me. The fourteenth day of battle tricked everyone with the solar eclipse and ended while witnessing the funeral pyre of Jayadratha.

During his advice Srikrishna had firmly told me – ‘Keep your mind focused on me. Be my devotee. Bow only to me. I will emancipate you from every kind of sin!’

‘Don’t be afraid!’ While responding to that I had just said to him as determinedly, ‘I promise you. I will do as you say!’

I had experienced and come to understand the priceless truth of life that I was just a simple man – Nara and he was the Almighty – Narayana!



**Satyaki**

I am Satyaki! From the renowned Vrushni clan among the eighteen clans of Yadavas. I am the grandson of Shini and the son of Satyaka. My father Satyaka was one of the ten ministers in the Sudharma royal assembly. My grandfather Shini was a close friend of Maharaj Vasudeva.

I was lucky enough to get the rare opportunity to offer my services throughout my life to the great Yadava Lord of Dwaraka who was born in Kansa's prison, raised in Gokul as Krishna and later attained epithets in higher order like Srikrishna, Achyuta, Vaasudeva and Bhagvan.

I was veracious by nature. It was only because of this single quality that I always got to be a part of the inner circle of Maharaja Srikrishna. I was one of his many Sakhas who were dear to his heart. Maybe the last one among them but I was certainly one of his Sakhas. I always felt proud of it.

I was as fearless as I was truthful. Today I feel that it was in the company of this great Yadava that this fearlessness was instilled in me and it kept on increasing.

One more quality that the great Yadava had noted about me was the way I destroyed my foes. I fought many battles along with the Lord of Dwaraka. I never faced failure even in a single one of those battles. I must clarify today that as my dauntless fighting was one of the reasons for success in those battles, the mere presence of the Lord of Dwaraka on the battlefield each time was also a strong reason for that.

Forthrightness was an innate quality of mine. Many of the Yadavas also had it. Balaramadada was the best example of that among the Yadavas. My disposition was much like him – short-tempered but also having the tendency to calm down quickly. There was only one difference between us. Maybe because of his seniority or due to his position of a prince, Balaramadada would quickly get furious any time. He would also cool down quickly. My rage would flare up on the battlefield. It would not abate until I had completely destroyed my enemy.

Possibly because of these qualities an amusing fact had manifested in my life. It all happened during the time of constructing the royal city of Indraprastha for the Pandavas in Khandavavana. During that period, I had to travel frequently with the Lord from Dwaraka to Khandavavana with a caravan of chariots and craftsmen. During that time, many of Arjuna's virtues had touched my heart. That is why one day, though I was his senior in age I implored Arjuna, joining both my palms, "Oh valiant *Partha*, though you are

younger than me please initiate me as your humble disciple in warfare and archery!” He couldn’t believe me initially. He said to me, “Oh long-armed, mighty commander of the Yadavas, are you making fun of me? I know that there are only two valiant warriors with knee-long arms among all of the Yadavas, Kauravas and Pandavas – our Krishna is the first one and you are the second one. Oh *Mahaskandha* – *Maharathi*, I am so much younger than you. How can I teach you anything?”

He spoke with humility that befitted him. But I was quite desperate to learn warfare and archery from only him.

Forgetting my seniority for the sake of learning I pleaded earnestly with appropriate modesty. He also kept my respect by accepting my request. I became Arjuna’s initiated disciple. That is why I quickly learned many of the arrow-shooting techniques from him who easily handled the Gandiva bow. Still, as an experienced commander of the Yadavas, I was well aware of the fact that only five warriors in Aaryavarta were the masters of *Dhanurveda* with all its intricacies – the first was Grandsire Bhishma, the second was Aacharya Drona, third Karna – the king of Anga, fourth Arjuna, and fifth, our Lord of Dwaraka! Was he the fifth one or the first one? He had already proved himself by fulfilling the condition of piercing the fish-eye in the Swayamwar ceremony of Lakshmanaadevi. And indeed, what if he had entered the battle of Kurukshetra brandishing his weapons - bow and arrow?

Just as I became the humble disciple of Arjuna, in Dwaraka I was already the disciple of the great Yadav Srikrishna for learning Astravidya. Krishnadeva and Arjuna were already a pair of guru and disciple. So, that means in the entire Aaryavarta I was the only person who was a disciple of both Krishna and Arjuna. But as Arjuna was younger to me he would address me using an honorific! Krishnadeva casually called me ‘Satyaki’. In other words, as guru and disciple the three of us were clearly bound in an emotional triangular relationship. I insist that our lives should be looked at from that point of view.

Only Uddhavadeva got to see the emotional life of the Lord of Dwaraka in depth. His most beloved *Sakha* Arjuna got to witness his entire life. What did I see? As a combative commander, I witnessed his ingenious heroic mind with expertise in warfare and his incomparable Kshatriya splendour. The greatest specialty that I noted about his mind was that he fought each of his wars ultimately for the betterment of mankind. It was not merely for the desire to achieve acclaim as a matchless,



valiant commander. If it was for that, he would never have participated in the Great War of *Bharata* unarmed. In his entire life, he never claimed any right over any royal throne. And yet why did he compel innumerable kings to fight vehemently against each other for both Kauravas and Pandavas who claimed such a right?

Whenever such questions rose in my mind I strongly remembered the first night of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha on Kurukshetra when he expressed his thoughts in front of all Pandava warriors.

That night the warriors such as commander Dhrishtadyumna, the five Pandavas, Drupada, Virata, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, Iravana, and I, all of whom belonged to two-three generations had gathered in the Pandava camp. I could never forget a single word that the Lord of Dwaraka spoke in that night addressing all of us. In the light of the burning torches he once ran his keen gaze over all the mighty warriors whom he had summoned in his capacious pavilion and spoke in solemn and reflective words, “I know that war cannot be the ultimate truth. A war neither solves any problems, nor answers any questions. On the contrary,

there is a danger of the society becoming degraded. The cultural foundation of a nation’s civilization may get uprooted. The dreams that mankind harboured for generations could

be destroyed. Then why am I going to ignite the great *Yajna* of Death itself in which lakhs of warriors will sacrifice their lives?

“Why am I doing all this? For what purpose? Only to punish Duryodhana, Dushasana and Karna who dishonoured Draupadi’s pure, spotless character? To make selfish Dhritarashtra’s blind eyes see the blazing truth? If that was my only intent my job was easy. Was it impossible for me to teach a lesson to each one of them separately and destroy them? Then why am I initiating this thrilling great *yajna*?

“The question of the future of entire human race is in front of me! The question of ultimate, perpetual Truth! The ultimate, everlasting, never-changing truth in this world is Chaitanya – lustrous, immortal energy! Nobody can ever experience it while living in one’s opulent royal palace!

“For that, each cell in one’s body needs to know it thoroughly and get used to the idea that death follows life just like night follows the day. Mind, body and brain, everything needs to be purely self-reliant. Then one doesn’t need to be told the truth, nor get convinced by others. It automatically manifests in each body. Emancipation or ultimate self-realization is not something that

can be received in alms.

“One’s hunger cannot be satisfied by others eating the food. One’s thirst doesn’t get quenched when others drink water. Just like that only the advice from someone can never emancipate one. It won’t happen! Wherever there is Life there is a strong urge of manifestation; yearning for emancipation. It may not be apparent but it continuously keeps working silently from within. Life means expression! Sometimes the human race needs to witness the cataclysmic form of this expression because it becomes greedy beyond the knowledge in books, sane advice and moralistic principles. It develops fondness for rest and inactivity. It gets smeared with blind selfishness. It doesn’t even have time to look at the subtle things going on beyond the visible material world. At that time, it needs to be stopped at some point! And for that purpose, there is no other most effective option but war. The Great War that is going to begin tomorrow is for this! Only for this!”

That night a question arose in my mind strongly, ‘When did I meet the Lord of Dwaraka for the first time?’ I started tracking the answer. And I got more and more amazed as the story of his life unfolded in front of me.

I saw him closely for the first time at the time of Kansa’s execution. At that time, I was sitting near Yadava commander Anadhrishti as an upcoming young Yadava. For me the way young Balaramadada and he had finished off the mighty elephant Kuvalayapida itself was amazing. I witnessed his then young form gradually evolving like the rising sun right in front of me.

It was then that I was impressed by his deep study of animal life. The animals that were mainly used in wars were elephants, horses and camels. Later, after he returned from the aashrama of Acharya Sandipani, I heard him talk about these three animals with thorough knowledge. Krishnadeva himself convinced me in various ways that though the elephant looks huge and dumb he is a very intelligent animal. While taming an elephant, spiked iron clips are to be attached to its front legs. While attaching those clips the mahout should never stand within the range of the elephant’s trunk. If by mistake he does that, the elephant, enraged by the pain due to the clips, directly picks up the mahout in the clasp of his trunk and thrashes him violently like a washer-man pounds clothes. An elephant is very sensitive to the pain in his feet as he bears the mighty weight of his body on his legs. That is why a strong thorn of Kikar piercing his foot gives him enormous pain. He never forgets the mahout who gently pulls out such a thorn from his foot.

From time to time he had actually shared his own Ashwagita with Daruka,

the royal charioteer of the Yadavas. Daruka had always considered himself as the fifth horse of his Garudadhwaja chariot. Daruka was indeed the fifth radiant, vigilant, rapid horse of the Garudadhwaja chariot of Krishnadeva. The other four horses had milky white complexion. Daruka's heart was pure white like a crystal.

The camel, the third animal used in wars, was originally from the desert. We Yadavas of Mathura and Dwaraka didn't have much experience with the camels. It was the Lord of Dwaraka who gave us that experience. Just as he had thoroughly studied the speed of elephants and their nature he had also studied the speed of camels and their nature. To make the humped and tall camel sit down it needs to be taught some symbolic words. Only if it hears those words it prepares its mind and sits down. Otherwise it can keep standing for hours.

I could never forget one warfare-related tip about camels that he gave me – considering the oblique and swaying gait of the camel, camel troops should be used when facing troops shooting zigzag-moving Jidma arrows. Later, with practice, the camel itself dodges the arrows and keeps walking forward.

I still vividly remember the days of Jarasandha's armed attacks on Mathura! After I was appointed the co-commander of Anadhrishti the first thing I had to face was the truth of war. Not just once or twice, these attacks took place seventeen times. During that period Krishnadeva had given me the responsibility to guard the western gate of the royal city of Mathura. There was a reason for that. Mathura was located directly on the western side of the royal city of Girivraja of Emperor Jarasandha. Therefore, his assaults on Mathura should have fallen on the eastern gate of Mathura first. But that was not possible due to a geographic reason. Yamuna had surrounded Mathura in a crescent moon shape. The eastern bed of Yamuna was not convenient for the enemy ships to enter. That convenience was there on the western side. That is why I was appointed the commander for the protection of this main gate for years and years.

To guard Mathura I had to be vigilant by frequently sailing on the crescent-shaped Yamuna from the western gate to the eastern gate. Sometimes, during such trips Krishnadeva also accompanied me. During our discussions at such times he would tell me many subtleties of warfare. Never let your enemy loose on the battlefield because he is defeated. A pugnacious warrior's heart never gets defeated. He can prepare himself and attack again. Therefore, you must chase him even after defeating him. Keeping this in mind I had chased

Jarasandha for a long distance during his last assault. While sailing on the waters of the Yamuna I could strongly feel the abundant love for Yamuna in his heart. He would be in a really good mood during those trips. He would talk a lot about Yamuna and about the Jala principle in general. He would say, “In this same Yamuna Balaramdada and I used to play a lot in Gokul. Dada and I even turned its flow towards the farming land of Yadavas with hoes so that the future generations of Yadavas could be nourished on her life-giving waters. Satyaki, remember, Jala is the principle from which life comes into existence and ultimately merges in to it.” Hearing his speech that was full of profound meaning, eventually I came to realize that he himself was a ‘Jalapurusha’. Right after his birth he had travelled on the waters in Gokul and in Mathura he lived near the banks of the Yamuna. The city of Dwaraka that he had erected was surrounded by water. It was his vision that lakhs of Yadavas should be blessed with the bountiful Jala principle. That is why he had developed Dwaraka into a well-planned harbour.

As a commander, I experienced the deep-rooted Jalapurusha in him during the seventeenth and last mighty attack of Jarasandha. At that time, he had annihilated Jarasandha’s two powerful commanders Hansa and Dimbhaka. For that he had taken advantage of the bountiful Yamuna.

The great Yadava would always say to me, “Satyaki, you have recognized me correctly as a Jalapurusha! There are two more like me in Kuru’s Hastinapura – just as you have knee-long arms like me they have knee-long arms too! Can you guess who they are?”

Grandsire Bhishma’s name would immediately come to mind as he was the son of Ganga. He was also a disciple of Bhagvan Parashurama who had offered the Sudarshan chakra to Krisnadeva. Bhagvan Parashurama had offered an Astra called Praswapaa to grandsire along with initiation. I would say, “It is clear that one of them is grandsire – the son of Ganga. Who could be the second one? I can’t guess.” When I would look at him with my wrinkled forehead he would smile mischievously as usual and say, “You will come to know at the right time”. That right time came too late in my life.

Just as he loved Yamuna and the water bodies he also loved the trees, vines and the forests. He deeply regretted the fact that the rich forest of Mount Gomanta was burnt for the safe escape from Jarasandha’s siege in the South. He felt remorse throughout his life that a magnificent forest like Khandavavana had to be set ablaze to erect the well-planned royal city of Indraprastha for the Pandavas.

His feet bore chakra symbols. He had travelled all over the Bharatavarsha from Mathura to Dwaraka, Dwaraka to Indraprastha, Pragjyotishapura, Dwaraka to Kundinapura, and Karvir, Sauvira to Jagannathpuri.

While travelling with him throughout Bharatavarsha as a commander I noticed many of his qualities. The most notable was his altruistic nature. For instance, he never desired for the royal throne of Dwaraka. The mission of his life was to emancipate masses from the unrestrained tyrannical rule of the unjust and arrogant emperors. While working towards that end it would have been easily possible for him to seize the defeated kingdoms but he never did it.

In the beginning, he had eradicated the unjust and uncontrollable king Shrugala of Karvir. For that he had projected the Sudarshan chakra for the first time. But he did not claim any right over the royal throne of Karvir. In Shrugala's place he appointed his son Shakradeva. At that time, I had strongly realized his uniqueness. He won the hearts of thousands of citizens there because of his actions.

Many great visionaries end up making a mistake in one aspect. They abolish the old, worn out and stagnant thoughts but they go wrong while giving new and life-giving values. Just as Krishnadeva took me under his wings as a young Yadava of the new generation he took Shrugala's son Shakradeva also. It was the mission of Krishnadeva's life to determinedly remove everything that was old, stagnated and inferior. His biggest specialty that impressed me was that he always encouraged and inspired the prowess of the new generation.

Our Lord Krishnadeva launched an armed attack on the insolent and arrogant Narakasura of the Kamarupa kingdom. I was with him too. It was a very ambitious mission – directly charging on Pragjyotishapura in the eastern region from the Dwaraka kingdom located on the shore of the western ocean. During this prolonged mission, many of his qualities dazzled me. He killed the unjust and autocratic Narakasura of Kamarupa and offered the kingdom to his son Bhagdutta. At that time, all of us Yadava warriors were astonished to see the pure respect he had for women. He offered Mangalsutras in his name to the sixteen thousand Kamarupa women victims at the hands of Uddhavadeva. He rehabilitated all those helpless women in Dwaraka with honour. He became the very first supreme man in the ancient Aaryavarta to do something like this.

I got to observe Krishnadeva's family life in Dwaraka with all its subtleties

from up close. I welcomed him at the entrance of the royal assembly when he arrived from the island of Queens' mansions in his embellished Garudadhvaja chariot along with Uddhavadeva and Balaramadada. Whenever I welcomed him like this he would hold both my hands in his with affection. Sometimes he would hold my hand and start walking towards the royal altar. While walking this way, he would very lovingly say, "Come, brother Satyaki". Those loving words would touch my heart.

I clearly remember that one such day he entered the Sudharma royal assembly without speaking a word to me. On the same day Satrajita, who later became his father-in-law, had accused him of stealing the Syamantaka jewel. That day Krishnadeva gave his word and after trying everything possible he had brought the Syamantaka jewel back and handed it to Satrajita in the assembly full of people.

All the Yadavas marvelled at the Syamantaka jewel! But I admired the lady jewel that came to Dwaraka because of the Syamantaka jewel. She was our queen Jambavatidevi! Krishnadeva had married a tribal woman in the forests of Mount Hrikshawana and brought her to Dwaraka as a queen of the Yadavas. That day I had realized that this supreme personality was indeed unique in the entire Aaryavarta. Later with the marriage of Krishnadeva and Jambavatidevi as an exemplar, Bhimsena got married to Hidimba and Arjuna wedded a child widow named Uloopi.

All the Kauravas, especially Duryodhana were eager to ruin the virtuous Pandavas on the strength of their number and power. In the renowned royal assembly of Hastinapura they had saddled the Pandavas with the rugged area of Khandavavana as their share of the kingdom. That too in the presence of Krishnadeva! The Pandavas had accepted it relying on the brilliant, prudent genius of Krishnadeva. I travelled throughout Aaryavarta as the Yadava commander. During those travels, I came to see many gallant warriors who obtained various astras by serving at the feet of their expert gurus. Not a single one of them had the astra of a matchless genius that our Lord of Dwaraka possessed. I had experienced his invincible genius many a times. Even after a lot of thinking I couldn't find the slightest fault in any of his actions. During the mission of annihilating Jarasandha he had aptly chosen Bhima and Arjuna to go to Girivraja. After he left for the mission I constantly kept wondering why the Lord of Dwaraka didn't take me with him. Finally, I gathered my courage and asked Krishnadeva himself, "Why didn't you take me with you during the mission of Girivraja?" He gave me a charming smile

and kept staring into my eyes for a moment. Then instead of answering my question he enigmatically said to me, “Satyaki, brother, do you understand now why I didn’t take you with me at that time?”

I was utterly confused. Indeed, I had not understood anything. What was I supposed to understand only through his silent glance? “I don’t understand anything. Oh great Yadava, please do me a favour and explain it to me clearly!” I said.

He patted my shoulders very affectionately and said, “Oh Yadava commander, I had gone to Girivraja as the third Pandava! On behalf of the Pandavas! Is it even possible for you to assume the role of a Pandava like this? Not only me but anyone can easily see the proud Yadava in your eyes. You can never become the first or the third Pandava. You are and till the end will always remain a thorough Yadava!”

I came to witness a very unique quality of his at the time of Shishupala’s execution during the Rajasuya *yajna* of the Pandavas. Patience was an innate quality he possessed. He had tolerated ninety-nine of Shishupala’s offences with tremendous patience. But he couldn’t forgive his hundredth offence. He launched the Sudarshan and cut off his head along with his foul-speaking tongue. In front of all, in the overcrowded *yajna* pandal! All the invitees in the *yajna* pandal were too dazed to bear his divine form and were stunned and perplexed.

But I was greatly astonished to see him after the *yajna*. On that day in Indraprastha, on the banks of Yamuna, multitudes of people feasted on the delicious food offered by the Pandavas. The Lord of Dwaraka – great Yadava Srikrishna – master of the Sudarshan who was just moments ago, honoured with the *Agrapooja* in the Rajasuya *yajna*, picked up the dirty plates of the invited guests afterwards. Many a times we had seen him holding a wooden tube of lubricant and bending down to grease Arjuna’s Nandighosha chariot and his own Garudadhwaaja chariot. I was completely astonished to see him, in a golden silk dhoti, wearing pearl strings with a Kaustubh jewel, in the pandal of the Rajasuya *yajna* picking up the soiled plates of the invitees. The Pandavas were indeed fortunate. The citizens of Dwaraka had never got a chance to see Krishnadeva like this.

Each of his manifestations was like the sun in the month of Shravana, sometimes hiding behind the clouds and sometimes making the whole world shine with its dazzling brightness. Everyone saw him differently according to their ability. It is indeed difficult for me to tell about so many shades of his

manifestations!

A gallant man may not necessarily be merciful. Today when I assess myself strictly I realize that even I wasn't so merciful. But Yadavaraja Srikrishna was. He reinstated minister Akrura who had deserted Dwaraka, in the ministry of the Sudharma royal assembly. He kind-heartedly forgave the inexcusable offence by minister Akrura with regards to the Syamantaka jewel. At that time, I had realized that he would never let the merits of a person go waste in his new kingdom. He was a true diplomat in every sense who thoroughly practised diplomacy.

He knew very well that there was nothing inane than to let an outsider meddle in a domestic dispute. He taught a lesson to Shalva along with Kalayavana who was invited by him to Aaryavarta.

He had a specific political objective in mind and the Kuru kingdom of Hastinapura was a significant part of it. Hastinapura was the second most powerful kingdom after Jarasandha's Magadha. Its foundation was the Himalayan valour and sacrifice of Bhishma.

Krishnadeva had not been to Hastinapura often. He may have visited at the most three-four times. He had picked up detailed information about the Kurus of Hastinapura from Dwaraka itself. The leaders of any of the surveillance teams could directly meet him anywhere, any time without any restriction. Even the private chambers of his eight queens on the island of Queens' mansions were no exception to this. Sometimes an informer would flinch, seeing him and Balaramadada together. The Lord of Dwaraka would ease his predicament saying, "This is our own dada. Feel free to speak." There used to be two intentions in doing so. First, the hesitant informer would be free from the dilemma and second, Balaramadada would automatically come to know how much his brother loved him, beyond diplomatic strategy.

He would astonish me by giving me the news in Kurus' Hastinapura that even I wouldn't know in spite of being the Yadava commander. He had precise evaluation of all men and women of political significance in Hastinapura at his fingertips. In his opinion the most significant person in the Hastinapura kingdom was grandsire Bhishma. After Bhishma he gave importance to Karna, the king of Anga!

He would describe each one of the great men in Hastinapura in very few but precise words.

"Grandsire Bhishma is the only person in Hastinapura who knows and cares about the Truth! But he is helpless due to old age. No one in



Hastinapura understands that even if an ember is covered with ashes it is not extinguished! Even today grandsire Bhishma is incredibly valiant.

“The most difficult and complicated mindset is that of Maharaja Dhritarashtra. Two different Dhritarashtras are hiding in his mind. One is a greedy father who in spite of being blind is shrewdly dreaming of Duryodhana’s coronation due to the fatherly love for his son. The second is a hypocritical king who pretends to follow the royal protocol. There are two personalities of Dhritarashtra – the one in the assembly hall of the Kurus and a completely different one in the inner chambers of the palace. Between those two his behaviour in the assembly hall of the Kurus is completely influenced by Gandhara king Shakuni, and ambitious Duryodhana has taken over his life in the inner chambers. Maharaja Dhritarashtra, the possessor of the puissant royal throne of the Kurus is clearly divided into two puppets. One is controlled by Shakuni and the other by Duryodhana. Duryodhana and Shakuni’s crafty diplomatic machinations

are honed by the brain of Kanaka, the astute minister of the Kurus.

“All of them are trying their best to involve mighty Karna, the king of Anga in every plot of theirs. He has full confidence in his own valour. The minds of all these have been revealed with all their shades at the time of the incident that Draupadi had to face in the gambling hall.

“Rajmata Gandharidevi is the most virtuous lady among the Kaurava women. She is the one who has somehow controlled ambitious Duryodhana with her harsh reprimand.

“Mahatma Vidura and Sanjaya are my devotees. Both of them are in Hastinapura, holding high positions. If at all, this is the only hope to obtain some kind of justice for the Pandavas.”

Just as the great Yadava knew everything about the Kauravas so also, he had all the information about the Pandavas. He regarded Rajmata Kuntidevi with utmost respect. He would regard Kuntidevi in the place of Yashodamata who had been left behind in distant Gokul. He spoke a lot about the courageous woman within Kuntidevi. He would say, “This *aatya* of mine has proved herself by making her five sons’ lives blossom, in all adversities. Each one of the Pandavas is blessed with different qualities. Draupadi has the knack to unite their power in one strong fist. The Pandavas are the ideal not only today but will also remain so in future. We should

actively support them with all our might whenever necessary.” Whenever I heard him speak like this I would feel something more in him beyond the

skilled diplomat and the *Chakravarti* warrior.

There was not a single soul among the Yadavas of Dwaraka whom Krishnadeva didn't know by name. That is why nobody could ever argue with him intellectually. Akrura who had fled to the Kashi kingdom a while ago fearing his wrath, was back and settled in Dwaraka again.

Krishnadeva knew Dwaraka very well, like the palm of his hand. Vasudevababa and Devakimata had now somewhat overcome the grief of the killing of their six new-born sons by Kansa back in Mathura by smashing them on a boulder. Krishnadeva alone had brought such happiness to them, as big as the Himalayas, way more than what their six dead sons would have offered together had they been alive.

Vasudevababa and both rajmatas were now old. They spent most of their time in religious activities and in the company of Acharya Sandipani and royal priest Gargamuni along with the sages and hermits who came to Dwaraka. They were contented to witness Krishnadeva's untainted acclaim. Their lives were fulfilled.

The true treasure of opulent Dwaraka, which had reached the zenith of acclaim, was one royal lady. Rukminidevi now graced opulent Dwaraka like Mahalakshmi, the goddess of wealth. She never returned to Kundinapura even after being repeatedly invited by her Rukmidada who had now developed cordial relations, and by her other brothers. From time to time she sent letters of her wellbeing to her mother Shuddhamatidevi. Gift salvers were also exchanged. She had invited her Aakrutikaka to Dwaraka many times – he was skilled in the art of mesmerizing and curing the snake bite. She had made him spend many hours in the company of Krishnadeva. Krishnadeva, who had the knack of picking up any qualities of the persons coming in his contact, be it children or adults, also learned this art of mesmerizing from Aakrutikaka.

Rukminidevi considered all the children of her seven co-wives as her own. Under her watchful eye the Queens' mansions of Krishnadeva had blossomed well with virtuous sons and daughters. Pradyumna, Samba, Bhanu, Vira, Shruta, Sangramjita, Vrika, Praghosha, Charudeshna, Subhanu had now grown hefty and become mighty warriors. Due to the way Rukminidevi had handled Bhamadevi and her children, Bhamadevi's attitude had also become considerably calm. She had also become dear to the citizens of Dwaraka like Rukminidevi. The citizens of Dwaraka also loved the other

devis – Jambavati, Bhadra, Lakshmanaa, Kalindi, Satya

and Mitravinda. All of them had consciously made efforts to ensure that their sons and daughters became virtuous and were blessed with good sanskaras, by keeping them in the good company of various kings who visited Dwaraka, princes, sages, hermits, and artists. Krishnadeva's family tree had blossomed in all respects.

Balarambdada's brothers Gada, Sarana, and Rohitashwa had also got married and become family men. They were also blessed with sons and daughters. Dada's sons Nishatha and Ulmuka blended so well with the sons of Krishnadeva that no one could believe they were cousins. They all seemed like blood brothers. Revatidevi had maintained close contact with her family on Mount Raivataka. As her family was close she frequently visited Mount Raivataka for many religious rituals. Recently, she had also started working on an aashrama as per the instruction of her father Maharaja Kakudmin. According to the Raivatikas, Ghor Angirasa rishi of Prayaga was going to live in that aashrama. The most special thing I felt about Balaramadada was that he had only one wife. Therefore, all the Yadavas except Uddhavadeva were in his awe. Occasionally, even Krishnadeva!

After Krishnadeva, Uddhavadeva was the one whom the citizens of Dwaraka held in high regard. He had gained that place due to the virtuous qualities he possessed. Right since birth he was different from all the other Yadavas. He looked different, behaved differently and spoke differently. Dwaraka was an island in the ocean where the royal city of the Yadavas was located, far away from the land of Aaryavarta. Uddhavadeva was a unique human island of his own that was very far away from the lakhs of Yadavas on the island of Dwaraka. He was a *Sanyasi* by disposition, unmarried and a celibate. That is why his father Devabhaga had got both his brothers, Chitraketu and Brihadbala married to expand the family. Their families had also blossomed with children. Uddhavadeva was the only Yadava in Dwaraka who everybody, including Krishnadeva, felt close to.

His great rapport with Rukminidevi was very charming. Uddhavadeva was well aware of the fact that Rukminidevi had cut off all ties with her brothers and parental home to come to Dwaraka. He knew very well that she would never return to Kundinapura. Uddhavadeva had given her tremendous respect and plenty of brotherly love without making any pretentious statements like – 'I am like your brother. Living in Dwaraka is like living in Kundinapura.' I was greatly influenced by these rare qualities of Uddhavadeva. That influence would deepen on hearing his casual utterances like – 'Wherever there is

Yogeshwar Srikrishna and master archer *Partha*, *Dharma* and Victory will always be there.’ Rukminidevi also respected him a lot.

Balaramadada was quite a different character. His valour was awe-inspiring, but that was not the case with his disposition. The funny part was that he was very unpredictable as it was very difficult to say when he would start scolding someone due to his open-minded, outspoken, and simple nature. Krishnadeva had purposely and skilfully planted this awe of his among the citizens of Dwaraka. When the Lord of Dwaraka accepted the seniority and awe of his elder brother, there was no question of anybody else not accepting it. Sometimes there were occasions of a basic difference of opinion between these two brothers. One major example of this was Subhadradevi’s wedding to Arjuna. During the period of her wedding both these brothers would sometimes avoid looking at each other. Vasudevababa and both rajmatas would try to bridge the gap between the two brothers. They did not always succeed. The reason behind that was Balaramadada’s short-tempered attitude which did not allow any compromise at all!

On every such occasion Uddhavadeva became the bridge connecting the two brothers. Rukminidevi also assisted him skilfully. I had noticed a peculiar thing about that. Balaramadada wouldn’t listen calmly to anybody except Rukminidevi.

I frequently visited Indraprastha along with Krishnadeva. Sometimes I was with him, sometimes Uddhavadeva accompanied him and sometimes both of us would be there. During each visit to Indraprastha I gradually came to know the five Pandava brothers one by one. The five brothers had basically very different temperaments since birth. But one thing was common among all of them. All of them had utmost devotion to Krishnadeva.

Yudhishtira – the eldest among the Pandavas was a complex mixture of good and bad qualities. He was valiant but did not have any eye-catching feats of gallantry to his credit. He was sacrificing but also covetous. He was senior by birth but not necessarily so in his actions. From Yudhishtira, he became Dharmaraja due to the knowledge he obtained. But he did not necessarily implement *Dharma* with full understanding. Does that mean he did any Adharma? It was not that either! He was responsible for the unforgivable blunder of playing the game of dice. Sometimes an amusing thought would cross my mind. What if my Krishnadeva had faced the situation of playing a game of dice with Kauravas as a Kshatriya? He would have avoided it using many excuses. And what if he still had to play the game

of dice? I am confident that he would have never lost it!

In Indraprastha, sometimes I strongly wondered, what if Bhimsena had been crowned king instead of Yudhishtira? What if Arjuna was? How would be the Indraprastha kingdom and the life of its citizens then? How would be the life of all Pandavas?

Bhimsena – the second among the Pandavas, was like Balaramadada. Bhimsena's prowess was dazzling, like at the time of the killing of Jarasandha. Many people had even accepted his prowess many times. Bhimsena was not just gallant, but also thoughtful and intelligent. It was just that he frequently displayed his physical power and not so much his intelligence. What if Bhimsena had displayed it with all its subtleties? Would he have become Krishnadeva? Certainly not! There were only two ways to comprehend the matchless magnitude of Krishnadeva – either the 'Neti Neti' way – reaching the ultimate reality by way of negating and removing the obstructions produced by ignorance or the 'Asti Asti' way – by believing in his presence by assertion. And yet no one could comprehend his magnitude in its entirety. Bhimsena's intellect was evident in what he had said to Kuntimata in the lacquer house, while living in the forest. In the entire journey of the Pandavas' life the armour of Bhimsena's valour was of great value. Imagine the Pandavas without Bhimsena. It had become clear, at least to me, how many difficulties they would have faced then. The notable thing about Bhimsena was that he himself never claimed to be the armour of his brothers. Draupadi always sought support in quiet Bhimsena. Keeping this quality of Bhimsena in mind once

I asked Krishnadeva, "Would you find Bhimsena to be an apt Pandava commander in the future if such an occasion arises?"

He didn't at all get flustered by my unexpected question and smiling casually he promptly answered, "Bhimsena is perfectly suitable to be the commander of any army. But I wouldn't do it if such need arises! Because just as it is quite hard to motivate Bhimsena's valour, it is even harder to control him once he is motivated. There is also a reason why Bhimsena becomes so motivated and uncontrollably gallant on the battlefield. Whatever he wants to say about the fair rights of Pandavas, wife Draupadi, and mata Kuntidevi, remains unexpressed in his subconscious mind. Those suppressed emotions manifest in very aggressive valour on the battlefield."

"Isn't anybody strong enough to control him?" I would ask Krishnadeva.

He would say, “It is not exactly so. Bhimsena’s foremost quality is his devotion to his mother. But there is a big difference in his devotion and Yudhishtira’s devotion towards their mother. In Yudhishtira’s devotion, there is a tinge of obedience as he is older in age. Bhimsena’s devotion to his mother is pure. It is spontaneous. If Kuntimata tells him to ‘stop’ he would never go forward. And I am the second person who can make him ‘stop’. But I am going to be unarmed on the battlefield, and I am not even going to be his charioteer. And to tell you the truth commander, my wish is that Bhimsena should be uncontrollably valiant instead of being the commander of the Pandavas. The responsibility of being a commander sets limitations on one’s valour.”

I would ask him the next question, “Then master archer Arjuna is the only one who remains as the commander of lakhs of Pandava warriors of Indraprastha! What do you think of him?” Hearing my question, he would give his usual pure, charming smile. Approaching me he would keep his arm on my shoulder and say, “Satyaki, there are many reasons why Arjuna is my most favourite. I cannot think of the Pandavas, Indraprastha and even the entire world including Dwaraka without Arjuna. He is not only *Savyasachi* who uses both hands equally skilfully for brandishing all kinds of weapons but he is also a cautious and humble disciple who exercises the most potent weapon of his intellect with all its facets. I like his attitude of being a perpetual student from the bottom of my heart. That is why whatever I want to convey to all the people I say only to Arjuna, as I consider him as their representative. He understands that knowledge multiplies by sharing it with others. To add to that he is also polite and humble which is a rare quality. Throughout his talk about Arjuna he would of course skilfully avoid telling me that he himself was the Narayana. But that was what would touch me the most. And I would feel that Arjuna was Krishnadeva’s shadow.

Then I would ask Krishnadeva many things only about Arjuna. I would feel convinced that just like commander Skanda was the perfect commander for the Gods, master archer Arjuna could be the perfect commander of the Pandavas, Yadavas and Kauravas. My assessment of Arjuna was that the most powerful Narayana – Krishnadeva had adjudged him as the best Nara. I felt my assessment of Arjuna was quite apt.

Still, I wanted to know more about the remaining two Pandava brothers from Krishnadeva. So, I would ask him, “What do you think of Nakula and Sahadeva, the sons of Madri?” Here too, correcting my unintentional mistake

he would say, “Satyaki, they are not only Madreyas or sons of Madri but also of Kunti. They are twins. Both are experts in horses. Nakula is exquisitely handsome like our Pradyumna and therefore very attractive. As they were born together it is necessary to think of their lives as a coexistence. Just as both of them are connected to each other they are also connected with the other three Pandava brothers. This second connection usually escapes the attention of the common man. Then they unwittingly end up separating Nakula-Sahadeva from the Pandavas by calling them Madreyas. If you observe carefully you will come to know that Kunti *aatyas* unmistakably noticed this and brought them up as ‘Pandavas’ inculcating the same sanskaras in them, and not as Kaunteyas or Madreyas.”

Whenever the topic of Kuntimata came up in a discussion, the Lord of Dwaraka would talk abundantly about her. The whole world knew that Krishnadeva had two mothers. His biological mother Devakidevi, and foster mother Yashodadevi who nurtured him. Very few people had realized that Kuntidevi was like his third mother; Bhavamata – the one emotionally connected with him! Krishnadeva was her *bhacha* but she herself was also an ardent devotee of Krishnadeva. She always said to him, “Krishna, never keep me without any adversity. Whenever there is adversity I remember you without fail. I cannot forget the fact that your other *aatyas* forgot you as they were always happy and faced no problems. Some of their sons even went against you. I don’t mind if the whole world doesn’t support me at all. But your blessings should always be with me and my sons.”

Just as Krishnadeva had three mothers he also had three sisters. As he and Uddhavadeva used to say, Ekananga, the daughter of Nandababa and Yashodadevi of Gokul was his first sister. Subhadradevi from Dwaraka was already well known as the beloved sister of two great Yadavas – Balaramadada and Krishnadeva. The third sister was Draupadidevi. She was more fortunate than the first two sisters. She was not only his sister but had also become his beloved *Sakhi*. She was lucky to have achieved what no other woman could – to be the wife of five great men and the sister-*Sakhi* of the one and only Narayana. It was because of this fortune of hers that I had utmost respect for Draupadidevi in my heart, as much as for the mother of the Pandavas.

Thus, whenever I began thinking about the Pandavas and their ladies, the Kurus of Hastinapura and their ladies, and we Yadavas of Dwaraka and our ladies, various charming facets of Krishnadeva would become apparent to

me. He was the focus of all these men and women. Indeed, his life was like the Kaustubh jewel in his pearl necklace resting on his chest, dispersing various shades around. His life was like the iridescent peacock feather that he bore on his head – colourful!

Many different men and women from the three centres of power – Hastinapura, Indraprastha and Dwaraka held a specific position in the life of the Lord of Dwaraka. One thing in the royal palace of Dwaraka had also acquired such a position. That thing had sort of become a living being. It was the Srisopana in the royal palace of the Yadavas. The Lord of Dwaraka loved the Srisopana as much as he loved Dwaraka. He had paid personal attention in the making of the Srisopana from time to time as much as he had focused on the creation of the city of Dwaraka. The number of its broad golden steps had increased considerably now. It had become much grander. The wide, quite tall and spacious staircase with many glistening golden steps had now become venerable like an esteemed forefather to all the Yadavas. There were two golden lions with thick manes and their jaws wide open at the starting points of the railings on both its sides. They symbolized strength.

Nowadays the Lord of Dwaraka had started sitting on the stone seats located near the western Aindra gate of Dwaraka for hours together. Often Uddhavadeva and Daruka would accompany him. There would be various warriors such as Chief Minister Vipruthu, Shini, Avagaha, and Kritavarman. But I would always be there every time without fail. Staring at the foaming, continuous waves of the western ocean in high tide he would say to me, “Commander Satyaki, human life is also like this ocean. It is characterized by change every single moment.” At such times, I would keep silent and just keep listening to him attentively. Lately, his speech was such, which made one listen to him attentively. You never had enough of it no matter how much you heard him.

During one such talk he asked me, “Commander, in the Kuru army how exactly would you place the world conqueror, *maharathi* Karna who has donated his Kavacha-kundala?”

“After giving away the Kavacha-kundala, Karna, the charioteer’s son, went to Mount Mahendra and obtained the divine astra called ‘Brahma’ from Bhagvan Parashurama. But a holy cow named Shubhada was killed by his arrow unknowingly while hunting. There itself the Brahmin owner of the cow inflicted a heart-breaking curse on him – ‘Mother earth will consume the wheel of your chariot right at the time of war just like you have consumed my



aashrama by killing this cow.’ Even before that, after he obtained the Brahmastra, Gurudeva Parashurama had also cursed him saying, “You won’t remember the mantras of Brahmastra during wartime.” The reason behind this curse was that Karna had lied about his caste to gain the Brahmastra. The cursed Karna today without the Kavacha-kundala is just like the king of the jungle, the lion, with his claws removed. In my opinion he doesn’t have any significant standing in the Kuru army.” I put forth all the details about Karna that I knew as a commander.

He looked once at the western ocean and once at me and smilingly said, “Commander Satyaki, you are wrong! This ocean in front of us is also bound by high tides and low tides, but could it be considered any less powerful because of that? Karna is also the same in the Kuru army. What if the Kauravas appoint him as their commander? Then it’s going to be very tough for the Pandavas. That is why I am going to try my best to see that the Pandavas get all their rights in a peaceful manner. For that I will have to go to Hastinapura for diplomatic talks. During that visit, Satyaki, as my loyal escort I want you with your troop of extremely loyal bodyguards with me. I am telling you right now that as per his nature Duryodhana will not listen to my diplomatic advice. Rather it is quite possible that he may try to sabotage me. The arrogant, mighty, insolent kings whom I have obliterated were nothing compared to Duryodhana. It is going to be Duryodhana who we will have to deal with. It cannot be said now how things will turn out eventually.”

Now I got a tiny glimpse of what was going through his mind.

A royal envoy arrived in Dwaraka from Upaplavya with a message from Yudhishtira. As per the wish of the great Pandava Yudhishtira who had come out of incognito living, the Lord of Dwaraka left for Upaplavya. As decided I was with him along with my loyal escort troop. Upaplavya was a town in the Matsya kingdom located on the southern border of Indraprastha and the western border of Hastinapura. As we had travelled on the path from Dwaraka to Indraprastha a number of times, we knew it like the back of our hands. Our escort troop of select Yadava warriors arrived at Upaplavya along with Krishnadeva. As soon as we arrived here first of all the Lord of Dwaraka sent Dhaumya rishi and Gargamuni to Hastinapura. They finished their assigned duties and came back to Upaplavya. Sanjaya, the royal minister of Hastinapura, arrived in Upaplavya right after them. He had brought a persuasive message from Maharaja Dhritarashtra for the great Pandava Yudhishtira. In the council at Upaplavya Sanjaya presented that message to

Krishnadeva in the presence of all five Pandavas, Draupadidevi and Kuntimata. As he was a Krishna devotee Sanjaya had to harden his heart and read the message in a very low voice. The so-called kind-hearted Maharaja Dhritarashtra had an atrocious and merciless message for his *putane* who had just come in the open after spending twelve years in forests and one year incognito. But it was in a deceptively sweet diplomatic language, ‘Pandavas are used to forest living. They are used to living on alms. They should spend their remaining lives in forests seeking alms and praying to God. They should not bother to come to Hastinapura!’

Hearing that hypocritical and humiliating message Draupadidevi burst out with rage as per her nature. She spoke directly in clear words, “Who are the people of Hastinapura

to decide whether we should seek alms or make others seek alms?”

Kuntimata had respect in her heart for Sanjaya who was a Krishna devotee. Trying to abate the sharp response of her daughter-in-law she said, “Oh Sanjaya, we are not seeking alms from the Kurus. We are asking that justice be served. If we ask for the kingdom of Hastinapura Maharaja Dhritarashtra should dutifully return it to us as he was appointed the trustee of the kingdom. My sons have completed twelve years of living in the forest and one year of incognito life as per the conditions. Now as per the condition he should honourably return the kingdom to my sons. His actions will safeguard the pride of his kingdom and the honour of my sons.”

But Krishnadeva sent a message through Sanjaya to Dhritarashtra as if it was for a devotee. It said, ‘If we are to seek alms we will begin from Hastinapura itself. Oh Kuru minister Sanjaya, let the great Kuru know that I am coming to Hastinapura in person for mediation.’

Kuru minister Sanjaya left from Upaplavya. Krishnadeva immediately called for a meeting of the Pandavas on the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Kartika. He said to all the Pandavas, “Brothers, on your behalf I am going to appeal for your rightful share of the kingdom in the ancient royal assembly of the Kurus. Whatever I will speak, it will be in your favour only. Still, I want to know clearly whether I have your unconditional permission including that of your wife and mother for this mediation. Would every word that I say be agreeable to you? What do you think?”

Hearing that, all Pandavas whispered among themselves for some time. They spoke with Draupadidevi and Kuntimata in subdued voices. Then they quickly took a unanimous decision and presented it through Yudhishtira and

Kuntimata. The eldest Pandava Yudhishtira said, “Srikrishna, we all will accept whatever mediations you do.”

Kuntimata seconded her eldest son who always obeyed his mother and said, “Krishna, I firmly believe that *Dharma* and Victory go hand in hand in your presence. Whatever you do will always be right. My sons, daughter-in-law and I am giving you complete authority to speak on behalf of us whatever you deem right in the royal council of the Kurus.”

The day of Kartiki Purnima dawned, tearing the veil of fog. From the western gates of Hastinapura Krishnadeva, Daruka and I entered the royal capital of the Kurus along with the escort of select Yadava warriors.

Today the citizens of Hastinapura were going to see Krishnadeva after a long time. That is why the entire city was bursting with energy and vigour. We were not directly going to the royal assembly of the Kurus. We took a halt in a small town called Vrikasthala on the outskirts of Hastinapura, on the banks of Ganga. A devotee of Krishnadeva lived here. He was also a friend of Vidura. We had dinner at his place. Mahamantri Vidura had made arrangements for our other troops.

The first day of the dark fortnight of Kartika dawned. The news of our arrival at Vrikasthala had reached the royal capital. As usual Krishnadeva had woken up at the *Brahma Muhurta* today. He performed his morning rituals including *Sandhya*, worshipping the cows, remembering the gurus, offering water to the manes, chanting of mantras, and giving charities. The spirited citizens had decorated the entire path from the town to the royal city.

Grandsire, Vidura, minister Sanjaya, Chief Minister Vrishavarma and Acharya Drona arrived in Vrikasthala to welcome the Lord of Dwaraka. Karna, the king of Anga and the guru’s son Ashwatthama also accompanied them.

White-bearded grandsire spread both his arms wide and calling him ‘Oh Vaasudeva’ he held Krishnadeva in a deep embrace. The other three also inquired about his wellbeing. Karna directly touched Krishnadeva’s feet saying ‘my respects to you, Yadavaraja’. I clearly heard Krishnadeva whisper ‘May you be victorious Karna’.

The four of us – Krishnadeva, Gargamuni, Daruka and I climbed into the Garudadhwaaja chariot. Tall grandsire Bhishma was also with us in the chariot standing on the right of Krishnadeva. Daruka steered our chariot. Many lines of chariots and armed troops followed us. Krishnadeva’s procession for mediation began in Hastinapura. The citizens of Hastinapura continuously

showered fragrant flowers and vermilion on him with devotion amidst the cacophony of various instruments.

Krishnadeva began acknowledging the affection of the people of Hastinapura with a smile on his face joining both his hands. Charioteer Daruka's dress was also covered with vermilion. He couldn't even steer the Garudadhwaja chariot properly as the eyes of the horses were filled with vermilion powder. In half an hour, our Garudadhwaja chariot had barely moved a few inches forward. As the Sun god began ascending in the sky the slogans welcoming Krishnadeva reached their peak.

Duryodhana was the only one who had not come to see and welcome my Lord – Krishnadeva! As he had not come Shakuni had also not come. Their brothers also had not come. How unfortunate all of them were!

In the scorching midday heat Daruka brought the Garudadhwaja chariot in front of the gates of the ancient royal palace of Hastinapura. My Lord Krishnadeva calmly descended from the chariot with a smile while shaking off the vermilion powder spread over his body and gathering his shawl together. Then the royal Kuru ladies approached with salvers of lamps to perform *Aukshan*. Leading them were rajmata Gandharidevi, Duryodhana's wife Bhanumatidevi, Karna's wife Vrishalidevi, Vidura's wife Parasavidevi, Dushaladevi visiting her parental home, Chief Minister Vrishavarma's wife, and Drona's wife Kripidevi.

Krishnadeva crossed the threshold of the palace gate looking at the triangular royal pennant of Kurus on the dome of the royal palace, muttering something. Someone whispered in a low voice, 'The royal palace is blessed today!' I stared in that direction. It was the great Krishna devotee Mahatma Vidura.

Krishnadeva came into the great Kuru Dhritarashtra's chamber with everybody. The blind Maharaja Dhritarashtra who approached the door to receive him said in a deceptive tone, "Welcome to Hastinapura, Lord of Dwaraka."

Innately cultured and polite Krishnadeva touched his feet to offer obeisance. Holding both his hands the Lord of Dwaraka said, "Maharaj, I don't wish to go anywhere else. Let's go straight to the assembly hall."

He also acceded to the request, saying, "Let's go Yadavaraja."

We left for the assembly hall with all Kuru warriors. While climbing the staircase in the grand royal palace of the Kurus he stopped on a step. I was

standing right behind him. Unknowingly, I was counting every step. I strongly remembered the esteemed ‘Srisopana’ in Dwaraka. The step that he stopped on was the one hundred and fifth step. Krishnadeva momentarily waited on the step and smilingly glanced at Karna, the king of Anga standing next to grandsire Bhishma. Then he stepped on the last and one hundred and sixth step of the staircase.

As soon as he entered the assembly hall of the Kurus Krishnadeva bowed slightly and paid obeisance to the ancient renowned royal throne of the Kurus. He calmly took the seat shown by Vrishavarma, the Chief Minister of the Kurus. After him all the others took their seats. Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi sat on the royal throne. This was a conclusive, probably the last royal assembly.

Vrishavarma, the Chief Minister of the Kurus raised the royal sceptre and presented the agenda of the council. He welcomed Krishnadeva with his honeyed words and said, “Now Yadavaraja Bhagvan Srikrishna himself will share the purpose of his visit. All Kurus should think about it carefully. This is a very crucial time. It is going to be decisive!”

Krishnadeva calmly got up from his seat and gathered his shawl. Due to that small movement of his, the vermilion powder stuck in the folds of his shawl rolled down from his yellow dhoti onto the rug below. In his sharp, keen voice the asset of generations of Yadavas began speaking. His rosy lips quivered, keen eyes glanced over the assembly calmly. “Grandsire Bhishma, Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Maharani Gandharidevi, world conqueror Karna, Acharya Drona – Kripa, Mahatma Vidura, acharya’s son Ashwatthama, Gandhara king Shakuni, Chief Minister Vrishavarma, expert politician Kanaka, Dushasana and Duryodhana! All the Kuru warriors who are present here and the citizens of Hastinapura! Today I have not come to your city as a Yadavaraja. I have also not come as the *mame* bandhu of the Pandavas! And not at all as Srikrishna, the Lord of Dwaraka. I have come here today as a supporter of a fair party to seek justice from this ancient royal throne. Because the renown of this royal throne, prominently for meting out justice, is famous in the entire Aaryavarta.

“You have stretched the tolerance of the Pandavas beyond limits. Will the eldest Kaurava Duryodhana explain to me today who taught him the warfare of setting the Pandavas along with Rajmata Kuntidevi on fire in the lacquer house? Will Shakuni mama who offered the freakish kingdom of Khandavavana full of thick and thorny trees and creepers, echoing with the

loud roars of wild animals to the Pandavas bereft of their father's love, leave the royal capital of his Gandhara kingdom, go to the Dandakaranya and build a new royal city there if I offer it to him as his new kingdom? If I sit today to play the game of dice putting my Dwaraka at stake, would he play the game with me and put his Gandhara kingdom at stake? Would he put his wife at stake and after losing her in the game of dice, allow me to bring her in this assembly hall in front of all, even if she is in her menses? What if my commander Satyaki touches her vesture to remove it in this hall full of people? Would Shakunimama just watch along with Duryodhana and Dushasana? Would he endure thirteen years of forest life and incognito living? Would you accept it if the lakhs of Yadava warriors in Mathura and Dwaraka attack Hastinapura to seize your cows just like all of you Kuru warriors did? Each one of you possesses an eternal pure voice within you. With that voice as a witness, tell me honestly what justice have you offered to the Pandavas so far? Are you even aware today of what meting out justice means?

“Still, I consider the Kauravas and Pandavas as equal, as two sides of the same royal seal. I consider all of you as Kurus of the *Chandravansha*. That is why I am ready to forget all the bitter events in the past and tell you this Maharaja Dhritarashtra! Give half of the kingdom to the Pandavas which is rightfully theirs and put out the mammoth inferno of destruction that is looming on the future! In fact, Maharaja Pandu appointed you as the trustee of the kingdom for its protection, and so you should return the entire kingdom as it is to his sons. So, tell me,

are you ready to do justice in this matter?” The entire assembly hall was filled with terrifying silence with his sharp words

like the cracking of a whiplash. Maharaja Dhritarashtra was not ready to give him an answer. So many great men were sitting in the assembly hall but no one dared to utter a single word. Breaking that silence Krishnadeva's words roared again, “Come on, any one of you stand up and tell me what your final decision is!” His eyes kept moving rapidly through the entire assembly hall.

The members of the assembly were unnerved to hear his sharp words and the harsh truth that left them nonplussed. A stunned silence enveloped the assembly hall. “I will do that. Once and for all I will tell you the final decision of all the Kuru warriors who are benumbed by your preposterous speech here. The Pandavas will not get even half of the kingdom!”

Duryodhana stood at once and spoke raising his eyebrows. He waved his short and stubby fingers in the air in negation.

“Why not?” the question arose in response with equal resolve leaving the assembly hall rattled. Now Krishnadeva stared only at Duryodhana with his fish-shaped eyes.

“They have nothing to do with this kingdom. Not even if they are the sons of Maharaja Pandu! Dividing the kingdom today will break it into a hundred pieces tomorrow and a thousand pieces later. Do the Pandavas think of the kingdom as a coconut that ten aashrama disciples can share among themselves?” Duryodhana was also hell-bent on being stubborn today. His reddish eyes moved quickly over his brothers sitting in the assembly hall.

“If not half the kingdom would you at least return the Indraprastha kingdom that they raised and brought to prosperity in Khandavavana as per the conditions of the second gambling game? Duryodhana, do not shut out justice and truth with your arrogance!” Krishnadeva said in a very persuasive tone.

Duryodhana discarded his entreaty arrogantly and said, “No! They have lost the kingdom in the game of dice. They haven’t completed the year of their incognito life. There are still two more days of the year remaining. They have come out in the open before that!”

“No! They have completed the incognito life. You have made a mistake with the time calculation. You didn’t take into consideration the extra lunar month Duryodhana, return the Indraprastha to the Pandavas!” Krishnadeva was not going to let him get away with any excuse today.

“No!” The already stubborn son of Dhritarashtra was not going to give in today.

“Why not?” The great Yadava asked him in minimal words precisely.

“They are not the sons of our Maharaja Pandu! They may be the sons of Kunti and the sons of Madri but they are not Pandavas.”

These ultimate and heart breaking detestable words of Duryodhana caused a commotion in the ancient royal assembly of the Kurus. Duryodhana was thoughtlessly trying to tarnish the esteemed character of Kuntidevi openly and without any shame.

Now grandsire Bhishma stood up at once. Tightly holding the shawl resting on his chest he roared, “Reckless Duryodhana, shut your mouth. I know exactly what you want to say. You know nothing about politics and ethics. It was impossible for Maharaj Pandu to bear a son in the forest due to the curse of Kindama rishi. Ashamed Pandu who couldn’t bear the thought of an

emperor dying without bearing a son shared his pain with wife Kuntidevi. To save him from going to hell, Kunti as a dutiful wife agreed to bear him a son by way of *Niyoga*. Both of them sent such a message to us with Maharishi Vyasa. After receiving that message Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Vidura and I held an urgent meeting. We sent them our approval for the *Niyoga*. Pandavas are the sons of Maharaja Pandu borne by way of *Niyoga* and which is approved by *Dharma*. They belong to the Kuru dynasty. They are the rightful heirs of this kingdom!”

Duryodhana had already surmised that during this assembly of Krishnadeva for the mediation, the grandsire was going to attack him and would create a problem for him. He wanted to spit out his deep-rooted hatred for the Pandavas in front of all the people in the assembly. He threw his stubby finger in the air again and standing up he said, “Then what status do me and my brothers hold in Hastinapura? Grandsire should clearly tell the assembly what is our status as Kurus after all.” Now the assembly hall started buzzing with whispers. It had to be curbed immediately. Aged grandsire stood up again. In words raging with the fire of penance and determination he said, “Duryodhanaa, indeed you are quite ignorant. You Kauravas and Pandavas – none of you are born in the Kuru dynasty!” This was the second powerful shock of astonishment for the royal assembly of the Kurus. Now a buzz of whispers started in the Kaurava section among Duryodhana, Dushasana, Shakuni mama, their brothers, and Karna, the king of Anga. Some decision was finalized in low voices. With that as support Gandhara king Shakuni arose and said, “The Maharaja’s sons Duryodhana and his brothers are not Kurus. Yudhishtir and his brothers born by way of *Niyoga* are also not Kurus. Then who are Kurus after all? Who does this kingdom belong to?” His sly words pierced through the hearts of the members of the assembly.

Grandsire Bhishma stood up again with resolve and said firmly, “I am that last Kuru! The son of Shantanu, Gangeya Bhishma! Long ago the Kuru dynasty had adapted the *Niyoga* system with the permission of my mother Satyavatidevi to avoid its extinction. Maharaja Dhritarashtra, Maharaja Pandu and Mahatma Vidura are all sons of Vyasa by way of *Niyoga* which is sanctioned by *Dharma*. So, I am the last and only Kuru. I earnestly request you Kauravas and Pandavas that you should not let a single word of Srikrishna go unheeded. At this moment, it will be an unforgivable Himalayan blunder that can never be fixed. You Kauravas and Pandavas are fortunate enough that he has come in person in this assembly hall today to



mediate between you. I earnestly feel that you should not disrespect his words.”

Absolute silence spread in the assembly hall now. Taking advantage of the atmosphere that was routed back by Bhishma, Krishnadeva said, “Kauravaa – Duryodhanaa, if not the kingdom of Hastinapura and not the kingdom of Indraprastha, then where should your brothers go? Are you at least ready to give five towns of this kingdom like Avisthala, Vrikasthala, Makandi, Varanavata and such to the five brothers just for shelter?” It broke the hearts of all the warrior members to hear that desperate appeal.

There were whispers. Today Duryodhana was not at all ready to let the buzz spread. It was as if Kali had entered his mind today. He instantly discarded Krishnadeva’s proposal with arrogance and said, “No! No! No! Never ever. We are not the heirs of this Kuru kingdom. Because we are not Kurus! The Pandavas borne by way of *Niyoga* also are not the heirs. They are also not Kurus. Grandsire Bhishma is the only Kuru! But he has taken the vow of lifelong celibacy! Then should this ancient throne of the Kurus be left without any heir? Only the battlefield will now decide who is going to inherit the kingdom on the basis of strength.

Forget five towns, without a battle the Pandavas won’t get even the tiniest dust particle trembling on the tip of a needle!!”

Now Duryodhana who was trembling with rage fixed his angry, fire-breathing eyes only on Krishnadeva. With extreme disrespect, rejecting Krishnadeva’s authority as the esteemed Vaasudeva he insanely raved, “Not only that but I would have even told my servants to wipe the dust particles sticking to your feet when you go back with this denial so that they wouldn’t fall in the hands of the Pandavas. But even for that I wouldn’t want my servants to touch your dirty feet smeared in cow dung! Go, wrap these tatters of your deal of compromise around yourself and leave the borders of Hastinapura as soon as possible! Or else –”

“Duryo...dha...na!!” Krishnadeva’s lips quivered with rage now. His fish-shaped eyes became blood red! I stood up at once as if struck by lightning. My whole body was trembling with rage. I didn’t even know when my hands clasped the scabbard of my sword tied around my waist. Shouting loudly ‘insolent scoundrel...’ I promptly pulled the sword out! Ninety-nine brothers of Duryodhana and all the brothers of Shakuni were also standing now. Duryodhana raved deliriously, “Karna, the king of Anga, I am going to capture this cowherd today who is the reason of all this chaos! This cowherd

born in the prison of Mathura should perish in the darkness of the prison of Hastinapura! That is the place he deserves!!”

His words entered my ears like molten iron. They began stinging my brain like a lethal slithering serpent. So, this insolent Duryodhana was about to imprison my Krishnadeva! A lightning of thought flashed instantly through my mind. Now I clearly understood why the Lord of Dwaraka instructed me like never before to take the escorts with us for this mission.

Without thinking about anybody or anything, I walked urgently out of the hall holding the scabbard of my sword tightly in my fist – to command the escorts to encircle Deva. Suddenly I could hear the same unclear mixed sounds that I had heard in the *Rajasuya yajna* – those of various musical instruments. After that, the last fleeting words of the Lord of Dwaraka fell on my ears –

“Oh Karna, the king of Anga, tell him that I dare him to gather all the chains that he has in his kingdom and detain me if he can!”

The very next moment, hailing Krishnadeva, ‘Hail Lord of Dwaraka Vaasudeva Krishna, Hail Idamata!’ I dashed into the assembly hall with the armed escorts of Yadava warriors standing outside the assembly hall. The armed warriors in the escort troop burst into the assembly hall, brandishing their naked weapons, hailing the name of Goddess Ida. They surrounded Krishnadeva from all sides like the waves of Yamuna’s flooding waters surrounding an island. Fortunately, the Sudarshan was not launched today. Whose luck was that? Only Krishnadeva knew it. Brandishing the bare sword in my hand, moving around Krishnadeva like a whirligig, I brought Krishnadeva safely out of the assembly hall with the assistance of the escort troop.

He walked briskly and mounted the Garudadhwaaja chariot that Daruka had brought to the front. There were a few warriors who followed him as if dragged behind him with a bond through ages. Among them were a few chosen ones like grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura, Karna, the king of Anga and Sanjaya. Krishnadeva accepted all their salutations and saying only to Karna, ‘Come king of Anga, there is something I have to tell you!’ he gently pulled Karna into his chariot with a smile. Daruka steered the chariot. We also got into our chariots. A line of chariots followed the Garudadhwaaja towards the border of Hastinapura. Krishnadeva’s mediation was over!

That day under a sprawling banyan tree on the border of Hastinapura, Karna and Krishnadeva discussed something of utmost importance for half an

hour on the shores of river Ganga. It was only between the two of them and completely confidential. I waited under a tree along with the escort troops near Daruka's Garudadhwaja chariot until the discussion between the two warriors was over. After some time both the great warriors returned. Saying 'let me take your leave' Karna bowed respectfully and bade farewell to Krishnadeva. He took that munificent son of a charioteer in a deep embrace. Krishnadeva mounted the chariot. Daruka steered the chariot. Our chariots also followed it. I looked back with curiosity. Karna's contour with its back to us could be seen getting tinier and disappearing towards Hastinapura. Alone and lonely! Krishnadeva was standing in front of me in the Garudadhwaja chariot holding the rails of the chariot. Oh, how tall he looked – like the sky – limitless!

We came to Upaplavya. The very next day a messenger of Kuru's Chief Minister Vrishavarma came to Upaplavya. A special meeting was arranged on the holy land of Kurukshetra. This special meeting was organized to decide the date and the rules of engagement between both parties for the inevitable war between the Kauravas and Pandavas. In this meeting grandsire Bhishma, Acharya Drona, Kripa, Ashwatthama, Duryodhana and Karna were going to represent the Kauravas and Krishnadeva, Virata, King Drupada and his son prince Dhrishtadyumna and I were going to represent the Pandavas.

We left for Kurukshetra on the decided day. The Kaurava representatives came directly to Kurukshetra. The meeting began in a very solemn atmosphere. All the charge of this meeting was with grandsire Bhishma on behalf of the Kauravas and with Krishnadeva on behalf of the Pandavas. Chief Minister Vrishavarma announced the purpose of the council to commence it.

Grandsire announced the first rule of engagement – "Every day the war will commence exactly at sunrise."

"And will end exactly at sunset." Krishnadeva completed the rule.

"The entire war will be fought in the form of a duel." Grandsire started speaking – "It means an elephant rider will fight another elephant rider, cavalry with cavalry, a camel rider with a camel rider, and a foot soldier with a foot soldier. A chariot hero will fight a chariot hero. It will be a chariot duel. Foot soldiers combating on the ground will fight with the same kind of weapon in their hands. A swordsman will fight with a swordsman, a mace wielder with mace wielder, a chakra wielder with a chakra wielder, and a

pestle holder with pestle holder.” Hearing that, Krishnadeva nodded in approval and said, “Nobody will attack an unarmed warrior or charioteer with any weapon or astra!” After hearing this rule told by Krishnadeva grandsire Bhishma laughed and was about to say something when Acharya Drona said, “The group wars should also be defined in this council itself.” I said, “Where many warriors are fighting with same kind of weapon it will be considered a group war for that particular weapon. Where a group of chariots of one party are fighting another group of chariots it would be considered a group war of chariots. Similarly, a battle between cavalries will be a cavalry war. The group wars of maces,

swords, Agnikankanas, and pestles would be considered in the same way.”

The council now got engrossed in detailing the subtle rules of war.

“A group of warriors will be prohibited from surrounding a single warrior. It would be considered against the rules of engagement.” said Grandsire Bhishma.

“The holy land of Kurukshetra will serve as the battleground for this Great War. It is expected that no disregard for *Dharma* takes place here. The battlefield should always be clear. Therefore, both armies will have to arrange their military formations on a completely new battlefield every day.”

The Lord of Dwaraka had mentioned an unarmed charioteer. “What about an unarmed warrior?” Karna, king of Anga questioned Krishnadeva.

“Good question, munificent Karna!” Krishnadeva said smilingly and continued, “Weaponry as well as Astras will be used in this war. Therefore, it will have to be defined as to who should be considered unarmed. I think it should be decided according to the situation.”

“In the Great War between the Kauravas and Pandavas no woman would be allowed on the battleground. What if that happens?” I raised a question in the council.

“A woman is not expected to participate in this war of gallant warriors. If she comes at all, her life should be spared.” said grandsire Bhishma.

“Un-charioted and injured warriors should be permitted to retire from the battlefield.” Acharya Drona looked expectantly at Krishnadeva.

“Indeed, it should be allowed. But acharya, a real warrior does not retire even in his sleep.” The Lord of Dwaraka answered smilingly.

“This is the month of Kartika. The cold weather is severe. Therefore, an appropriate day for the commencement of the war should be fixed in this council itself.” Experienced Drupada said while looking at grandsire.

“Vaasudeva Srikrishna knows the perfect technique of measuring the time. He should decide the appropriate day for commencing the Great War.” The grandsire said coming towards the conclusion of the council.

“I will set the date after going to Upaplavya and checking everything thoroughly and will let everybody know. But the battleground will be this holy land of Kurukshetra only. Does anyone have any objection to that?” Krishnadeva asked with a pure smile as usual.

“No...!” Everybody responded in unison. The special council at Kurukshetra was over.

The very next day select warriors like Grandsire Bhishma, Drona and Duryodhana on behalf of the Kauravas and Krishnadeva, Dhrishtadyumna and I on behalf of the Pandavas surveyed the vast land of Kurukshetra. At many places, there were various sprawling trees. It was decided to cut down the trees and level the land out. As this land was naturally thriving with plenty of lakes there was no question of water availability for drinking, cooking and bathing. Orders were also given to remove the thick reeds near the banks of the lakes.

We bade farewell to Grandsire and returned to Upaplavya with Yadavaraja. Krishnadeva summoned the expert astrologer of the Viratas and after having a thorough discussion with him finalized the day for the commencement of the war. It was conveyed everywhere – to Hastinapura, Panchala, Madhyadesha, the eastern and western region. The day of the commencement of the Great War that was going to take place between the Kauravas and Pandavas that Krishnadeva had declared was – ‘The second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha’.

Then we had to go to Dwaraka again to seek the blessings of the elders. So, the Lord of Dwaraka and I began preparations for that. The Lord of Dwaraka summoned Maharaja Virata and Drupada and gave them final important instructions. Drupada’s son Dhrishtadyumna began huge preparations for the Great War in Kampilyanagar with the assistance of his brothers Shikhandi, Sumitra, Priyadarshana, Chitraketu, Suketu, Dhvajaketu, Viraketu, Suratha and Shatrunjaya.

The Matsya kingdom of the Viratas was much closer to Kurukshetra than the Panchala kingdom. That is why it was possible only for the Matsyas to supply food to the Pandava army. They were given that responsibility. Though Indraprastha was the closest kingdom to Kurukshetra it was now under the rule of the Kauravas. It was going to be advantageous for

Hastinapura to supply food for their mammoth army from Indraprastha. It was an irony. The puissant kingdom that the Yadavas and Pandavas had strived to erect in Khandavavana was going to be advantageous for the Kurus. Indraprastha was located right between Kurukshetra and Viratanagar of the Matsyas. A rival like Duryodhana was never going to refrain from taking political advantage of that situation. If he sealed the borders, then the food supply to the Pandava army on Kurukshetra would be completely blocked. Then it would be mandatory to go around Indraprastha to reach the kingdom of Mattamayura. Only after forming alliance with their ruler, the food could be supplied to the Pandava army. That is why the Lord of Dwaraka had promptly dispatched the Chief Minister of Viratas along with a royal emissary to the kingdom of Mattamayura.

Now as the final authority on the Pandava side the Lord of Dwaraka took charge of the Great War in his hands. I came to Dwaraka along with him. Meanwhile the news that there was going to be a Great War between the Kauravas and Pandavas, had already reached Dwaraka. As soon as we reached, Krishnadeva had to face a very difficult situation.

Balaramadada had become irate over all the events that had taken place in Hastinapura, Upaplavya, Viratanagar and Kampilyanagar. Without waiting for Krishnadeva to come to visit him, he himself came to his young brother's chamber, stomping his feet. Castigating his brother as usual he directly said, "Srikrishna, what are you up to? Both Kauravas and Pandavas are closely related to us. You went there for reconciliation! And came back after fixing a catastrophic Great War between them! I am tired of your political games. You should have just left and come back to Dwaraka once you realized that reconciliation between them was not possible. Instead you have also dragged the Yadavas into this old dispute between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Our Yadava kingdom itself has clearly got divided into two factions of Kritavarma and Satyaki. Why are you doing all this?"

Dada's questions were apparently appropriate to a listener. But were they really appropriate? Not at all. The objective of the war was no longer just the right of the Kauravas and Pandavas over the Hastinapura kingdom. Almost the entire Aaryavarta and the region from Kapisha to Kamboja were involved in it. In such a situation, would Dwaraka have been able to protect itself in future by staying aloof from the war? Once Duryodhana had defeated the Pandavas wasn't he going to swindle the remaining eastern, central and northern parts of Aaryavarta by the end of the war? Had that happened wasn't

it going to create a risk for our allies in the east – the Magadha and the Kamarupa kingdoms? After that for how long would we have been able to keep the Dwaraka kingdom safe? Before forcing an entry into one's home the enemy first takes over the front yard! This is what dada did not understand. As his best disciple, he always considered Duryodhana as his friend. Due to his short-tempered nature, no one could stand up to him and explain it to him.

The Lord of Dwaraka could think of only one person who could be assigned with that task – Uddhavadeva. He summoned Uddhavadeva. The three of them decided to organize a final conclusive royal assembly of the Yadavas before leaving Dwaraka to go to Kurukshetra.

The Sudharma royal assembly in Dwaraka today was unprecedented. Every single Yadava had made it a point to be present in this assembly.

As per the tradition Chief Minister Vipruthu raised the jewel-studded royal sceptre of the Yadavas and stated the objective of the assembly. He said, “Very soon the Lord of Dwaraka, Maharaja Srikrishna is going to enkindle a great *yajna* on the holy land of Kurukshetra. It is going to be the great *yajna* of an unprecedented decisive Great War to determine the fate of justice and injustice of not only the Kauravas and Pandavas but also of the entire Aaryavarta, and the human race!

“Recently, Duryodhana on behalf of the Kauravas and Arjuna on behalf of the Pandavas had come to Dwaraka to meet Krishnadeva to seek military assistance from the kingdom of Dwaraka. During this visit the eldest Kaurava Duryodhana accepted the assistance of the fourfold Yadava army. But Arjuna selected only Srikrishnadeva as his charioteer. He will do charioting without carrying any weapons. He will only offer his wise advice to the Pandavas if need be. He will be holding only the whip to steer the four white horses of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot. Only time will decide who will be the winner between the whip and the fourfold Yadava army!

“The Lord of Dwaraka has granted the freedom to all Yadava warriors to choose whatever side they deem appropriate between the Kauravas and Pandavas. That is why mighty Satyaki is going to fight on behalf of the Pandavas with his troop and gallant Kritavarma is going to fight on behalf of the Kauravas in this Great War along with one *akshauhini* Yadava army. All sons of Krishnadeva are going to remain in Dwaraka for its protection with the remaining Yadava army. Prince Pradyumna will be leading them. Balaramadada's sons and brothers will also stay in Dwaraka and assist him.

“Prince Balarama and Krishna's *sakha* Uddhavadeva have not expressed

their views about this Great War. I request them to share their views about this.”

Balaramadada got up to speak his mind in front of the overcrowded Sudharma royal assembly of Yadavas. It was his first time ever to openly speak his mind in public. He cleared his throat for a moment trying to find words. Then in a husky voice he said, “Politics is not my forte. I am just an unsophisticated Yadava warrior. I lay bare my heart so all my Yadava brothers will understand my clear views about the war. In my opinion the Yadavas should take no part at all in this dispute between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Both sides are equally close to us. No good will come out of it if we participate. Therefore, today itself I am leaving Dwaraka and going towards the Himalayas. I will come back only when I feel like doing so. I might not come back at all if I don’t feel like it. Therefore, I pay obeisance to everyone from the bottom of my heart. If I have unwittingly insulted anybody so far due to my short-tempered nature and straight talk, I request them to kindly forgive me,” Balaramadada requested the entire assembly. Many people felt sad on remembering his previous sentimental reunion with Krishnadeva in the same assembly hall.

Hearing Balaramadada’s firm decision the assembly hall fell silent. Now Uddhavadeva got up from his simple sandalwood seat located next to Acharya Sandipani and Gargamuni. His glowing, virtuous, round face was tranquil. There was no turbulence whatsoever on his face, and in his eyes. Moving his loving, peaceful eyes over the assembly hall once Uddhavadeva said, “Oh Yadava brothers, I am also going towards the Himalayas like Balaramadada! But there is a difference in his leaving and mine. Both of us have talked about it. We will leave Dwaraka together. Both of us will travel together till the holy place of Badri-Kedara on the banks of river Ganga. I will stay at that holy place. Balaramadada will travel further to go wherever he wants.

I am going to Badri-Kedara as per the wish and command of the Lord of Dwaraka! Krishnadada wants to raise an aashrama like that of Acharya Sandipani’s Ankapada aashrama in that tranquil and holy place of Badri-Kedara. He has chosen me to make preparations for that. Therefore, I consider myself most fortunate. I give my word to this assembly in front of Vasudevababa, both rajmatas and venerable Acharya Sandipani that I will make preparations for the Srikrishna aashrama befitting the acclaim of Dwaraka.



“Krishnadada will certainly succeed in the Great War for which he is going to Kurukshetra. For the past many days, I have been attentively listening to his thoughts about this great *yajna*. He is going to participate in this Great War as an unarmed charioteer of Arjuna holding only the whip. Yet I have full confidence that whatever he will do with master archer Arjuna will guide many future generations of the Aaryavarta. I believe that *Dharma* and Victory will be present where master archer Arjuna and Sudarshan-wielder Srikrishna will be present. All you elderly Yadava men and women should give your blessings to my dearest dada for that. At this moment, I pray to our Goddess Ida that, ‘My dada should always have her blessings for success!!’”

Upholding the words of Uddhavadeva all Yadavas in the assembly hall raised both their hands and looking at Krishnadeva they shouted with irresistible love and devotion – ‘Hail Lord of Dwaraka!!’

Finally, Krishnadeva on whom the eyes of the entire assembly hall were fixed stood up. He bowed to pay obeisance to Maharaja Vasudeva, Rajmata Devakidevi and Rohinidevi sitting behind her, Balaramadada and Revativahini. Immediately turning his eyes to Aacharya Sandipani he paid obeisance to him also. He threw a smiling glance at Rukminidevi sitting on his left. He cast a glance over the Sudharma royal assembly once. Then only three words came out of his mouth. Those two words were so powerfully inspirational that goose bumps arose on everybody’s body and within a moment the Sudharma royal assembly of Yadavas reverberated with continuous rounds of loud applause like the rain showers of Mriga. Those inspirational words were – ‘Hail...Goddess Ida!!’ The entire assembly hall shouted again and again – ‘Hail...Goddess Ida!’ The conclusive Sudharma royal assembly in Dwaraka was over.

The next day Kritavarma left Dwaraka to go to Kurukshetra after paying obeisance to Maharaja Vasudeva and both rajmatas. One *akshauhini* Yadava army was with him. As announced in the royal assembly Balaramadada left for the Himalayas with Uddhavadeva and select Yadava warriors. Finally, Krishnadeva left Dwaraka after seeking the blessings of all elders and meeting all his queens and sons and daughters. Daruka, a few Yadava warriors that he himself had selected and I were with him. All of us crossed the creek of Dwaraka and reached the shore of the western ocean. Daruka had kept Krishnadeva’s adorned Garudadhwaaja chariot ready. As per Krishnadeva’s wish the royal priest Gargamuni had already gone ahead to the Shiva temple at Somanath with Aacharya Sandipani. All of them had made

thorough preparations for Maharudra *Abhishek*. Daruka brought our Garudadhwa chariot near the Somanath temple. We came to the square in front of the of the Somanath temple. Krishnadeva stopped near a stone statue of a tortoise at his feet. Putting his arm around my shoulders he said, “Satyaki, one should regard the tortoise as his ideal. It has drawn in six enemies such as lust, anger, pride, greed, and envy along with its legs. It is sitting at Shiva’s feet with a stable mind. In a similar manner one should also go with a stable and pure mind to seek the blessings of the cosmic dancer Shiva. Gargamuni, Acharya Sandipani and many more sages who were standing at the entrance of the shrine approached Krishnadeva respectfully when they saw him. Stooping down Krishnadeva descended into the shrine along with everybody. The smooth, stone *Shivapindi* of Somanath was shining under the trickle of water falling from the gold-plated vessel for *Abhishek*. Many hands had contributed in the thorough preparations for the Maharudra-*Abhishek*. The Lord of Dwaraka sat on a short stool placed in front of the Pindi. Gargamuni, Acharya Sandipani and other sages

began singing the hymn of Shiva as described in the Vedas. Krishnadeva closed his fish-shaped eyes. Seeking control over the seventy-two thousand Nadis in his blue-complexioned body he began meditation as a Shiva devotee. Daruka and I stood in a corner of the shrine with hands joined in prayer, and our eyes closed. The shrine echoed with the inspirational hymns of Shiva’s praise.

All the assembled Shiva devotees were offered *Tirtha-Prasada* of Maharudra *Abhishek*. The people gathered outside to seek blessings were offered charities. From there we came to another Shiva temple at Nageshwara in Aanarta. Here also a Maharudra *Abhishek* was performed. Devotees were offered *Tirtha-Prasada* and charities. After the Shiva worship at both these places Krishnadeva’s virtuous face began looking very different. It looked as lustrous as the *Shivapindi* glowing under the trickle of the *Abhishek*. Looking keenly at him I clearly felt that his blue throat had become dark blue now.

Our first stopover was in Kuntibhojanagar. We intentionally did not wait in the Avanti kingdom. Vinda and Anuvinda of Avanti were brothers of Mitravindadevi. They were Krishnadeva’s paternal cousins. But they were going to participate in this war on behalf of Duryodhana’s Kaurava army. They had already left for Kurukshetra with one *akshauhini* army equipped with weaponry.

Our second stopover was in the kingdom of the Dasharnas. The Dasharnas

were going to participate in the war on behalf of the Pandava army. They had also left for Kurukshetra. Our last stopover was in Upaplavya of the Matsyas. The Matsya king Virata had also reached Kurukshetra with his army and his sons Uttara, Shweta, Shatanika and Vasudana.

Now it was the second week of the dark fortnight of the month of Kartika. The atmosphere was still chilly. Towards the end of the month of Kartika our troop entered Kurukshetra along with Krishnadeva. From the direction that we entered, first we came across the huge camp of the Kauravas' united army. While passing through their camp only by looking at it Krishnadeva had estimated the size of the Kaurava army. He also told me, "Satyaki, for sure the Kuru army is more than ten akshauhinis. It looks well organized. The soldiers are exercising regularly. This war is not going to be easy for the Pandavas!"

Worried by his words I was also keenly watching the Kaurava encampment. Our charioteer Daruka had to stop the chariot in front of a huge pavilion. It was the pavilion of grandsire Bhishma who was appointed the commander of the Kaurava army. He was standing right in the middle of the path with his attendants. Seeing grandsire in a warrior's attire and armour Krishnadeva promptly descended the chariot. He started bending down to touch grandsire's feet for blessings. Without allowing him to do that, grandsire quickly pulled him up and embracing him he muttered, "Vaasudevaa...! I don't care if I die on the battlefield of Kurukshetra now. I got to see you first. The Kurus have formally appointed me as the commander. I am going to appoint the rathis and maharathis today."

We bade farewell to grandsire and arrived at our Pandava base. Here too the news of Krishnadeva's arrival had spread everywhere.

Meanwhile the Pandavas, Dhrishtadyumna and many other warriors had cordially welcomed Krishnadeva. With them finally we reached the tallest and capacious pavilion raised for Krishnadeva at the centre of the Pandava base. Maharaja Virata and Drupada were inside the pavilion. Krishnadeva politely offered obeisance to them.

We took some rest and had some fruits. The first evening of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha descended on Kurukshetra. In the capacious pavilion of Krishnadeva a statue of Goddess Ida was placed facing east. Now for the duration of the Great War all military tactics of the Pandava army were going to be determined from this pavilion of Krishnadeva. In this pavilion the Pandavas offered red flowers to Goddess Ida and arranged their

first council in the presence of selected rathis, maharathis, and atirathis. Yadavaraja Srikrishnadeva sat on an elevated golden seat covered with tiger skin at the centre of the pavilion. On his right sat Panchala king Drupada, Matsya king Virata, Draupadi's brother Dhrishtadyumna, and Pandava brothers Yudhishtira, Bhimsena, Arjuna, and Nakula-Sahadeva. On the left were me, Shishupala's son Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, Jarasandha's son Jayasena, Malayadhvaja of the Pandyas, Uttamauja, Vyaghradutta, Sihasena, Satyajita, and Shikhandi of the Panchalas, Uttara of the Viratas, his brothers Shweta, Shatanika, Vasudana, next to him Pauravaraja, Malavaraja and many more warriors.

The important council to choose the commander of the Pandava army began. Gently opening the subject Krishnadeva said, "All of you should unanimously, collectively choose a warrior who is capable of competently leading our seven *akshauhini* army. Everyone should speak their mind openly. Just remember that this person of your choice will be responsible for the lives of innumerable warriors. Leaders of seven divisions to work under this commander are also to be chosen right now."

Now the council turned very solemn. A few moments passed by. Then first the youngest Pandava Sahadeva spoke, "The Viratas have helped us a lot during the tough and testing time of our incognito living. They are participating in this war with their one *akshauhini* army. In my opinion Maharaja Virata should be appointed as the commander of the Pandava army."

There was some discussion in the council about that name in soft voices. Without stretching the matter any further Maharaja Virata himself spoke, "I am not afraid of taking any responsibility. But I feel this council should select a young warrior as the commander, considering the fact that aged grandsire Bhishma is the commander of the Kaurava army."

Krishnadeva smiled at his honest statement. With his usual playfulness, he said, "Then does it mean that the Kauravas have made a mistake in appointing aged grandsire as their commander? I don't think so. Nakula, what do you say?" He directed the question towards the exquisitely handsome son of Madri. Nakula stood up promptly, and said, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka, in fact you should have been the commander of our army. But you have taken a vow of abstaining from the war. You have renounced your weapons. You are going to be only the unarmed charioteer of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot! In such circumstances, I feel that the leader of the Panchalas who form the

largest part of our army should hold this responsibility. Maharaja Drupada should accept the commandership of our army.”

Hearing that the experienced, aged Drupada himself stood up and said, “Aren’t Bhimsena or Arjuna of Pandavas capable of holding the commandership? Only a large number of soldiers should not be the criterion for this. Why don’t we appoint Bhimsena as the commander?”

Drupada’s remark was worth considering. In a few moments Bhimsena himself stood up and said, “Grandsire is the Kaurava commander, so in my opinion it would be apt to appoint Panchala-son Shikhandi as the commander.”

Now there was a clearly audible buzz of conflicting thoughts in the council. At that point Krishnadeva said, “With consideration of all aspects Satyaki of the Yadavas and master archer Arjuna of the Pandavas are perfectly fit to be the commander of Pandava army. But in war the end result is considered important. So, taking all this into consideration I think all of us should appoint Panchala’s young prince Dhrishtadyumna as the commander of Pandava army!”

All mighty warriors in the council unanimously hailed Panchala Prince Dhrishtadyumna and accepted him as the commander. The face of Dhrishtadyumna who was born out of a *yajna* became flushed, bright like *yajna* fire, while accepting that responsibility. As his chest puffed, the iron armour on it tightened.

Dhrishtadyumna who was selected as the Pandava commander politely offered obeisance to aged Drupada and Virata. As per Yudhishtira’s instruction Pandava soldiers brought the golden seat specially made for the commander in front of the pavilion. The salvers prepared with all the things required for *Abhishek* were also brought in front of the pavilion. Everyone came out of the pavilion. Dhaumya rishi and the Matsya priest ignited the fire in the *yajna* pit, and offered various sacrificial sticks in to it. Then they requested the Pandava commander to take his seat. Dhrishtadyumna sat on the golden seat in a warrior pose. Oblations were offered in the *yajna* pit in front of the commander’s seat amidst the mantras incanted by the disciples of both aacharyas. Holy sanctified water of seven rivers such as Ganga, Sindhu, and Yamuna was sprinkled from a golden vessel on the Pandava commander’s head by aacharya, amidst the incantation of mantras. Gallant Dhrishtadyumna got completely drenched under that holy water. He left for his pavilion nearby to change into the new and special war costume of the

commander. The attendants wiped the seat of the commander clean with a dry cloth and placed it facing east. On both sides of this seat the golden seats of all major warriors were placed. As per Krishnadeva's instruction a simple sandalwood seat was placed for him on the right of the commander's seat.

Now this council arranged outside the pavilion was formally under the charge of the commander. Taking his seat Dhrishtadyumna brought his hands together and requested, "As the commander of the seven *akshauhini* army of the Pandavas I request the Lord of Dwaraka to announce the leaders of the seven regiments of our army!" I looked at commander Dhrishtadyumna with utmost pride. He was undoubtedly proving to be a perfect commander by making this request to Krishnadeva. Krishnadeva smilingly arose from the sandalwood seat and demonstrating the ideal behaviour of a warrior to all the Pandava warriors he said, "As per our commander's instruction I am announcing the names of the leaders of the seven regiments. The total number of our army has come to seven *akshauhini*. Commander Dhrishtadyumna himself would lead one *akshauhini* of the Panchala army. Panchala king Maharaja Drupada will be leading the second *akshauhini* of the Panchala army. The third *akshauhini* will be led by Matsya king Maharaja Virata. The fourth *akshauhini* will take orders from Drupada's son mighty warrior Shikhandi. My Yadava commander, *maharathi* Satyaki also known as Yuyudhana will lead the fifth *akshauhini* comprised of a large number of our Yadava warriors. The sixth *akshauhini* will follow orders of *maharathi* Chekitana and the seventh *akshauhini* will be led by *Maharathi*, gallant and mighty Bhimsena." Krishnadeva concluded the commander selection council in front of the pavilion.

Krishnadeva and I along with a few selected armed warriors started walking towards the area at the far back of the army encampment in torchlight. The pavilions for the Pandava army's royal ladies were located here. We arrived at Kuntidevi's pavilion. Draupadidevi was also present here. The other wives of Bhimsena and Arjuna also sat around her. As soon as we entered, the Lord of Dwaraka started leaning forward to touch the feet of Kuntidevi. Holding him in deep embrace just like grandsire, she said, "Krishna, it is good that you did not yoke my Arjuna with the responsibility of a commander. He should always remain free and unrestrained to fight dauntlessly. You have kept him as such. Indeed, I do feel that *Dharma* and Victory are bound to be there wherever you and he will be."

Krishnadeva inquired about Draupadidevi's wellbeing. Putting his hand on

Subhadradevi's head he blessed her, 'May you live long'.

We bade farewell to all and after examining all armouries came back to Krishnadeva's pavilion. Krishnadev assigned me a special task as soon as we came in. He said, "Satyaki, you meet the Kuru commander Bhishma and let him know that Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna has been unanimously chosen as our commander."

So, I took his leave and left for grandsire Bhishma's pavilion in the Kuru army with two Yadava soldiers carrying burning torches in their hands. Right at the entrance of the pavilion an armed guard stopped me. Probably some crucial discussion had taken place recently in the pavilion of the Kuru commander. I heard fleeting words of Karna, the king of Anga, "Until this old and egotistic Bhishma who calls me an ardhraathi falls on the battleground I will not step onto the battleground at all! I will remain in my pavilion worshipping the sun god."

After that world conqueror Karna came out of the Kuru commander's pavilion and briskly walked towards his pavilion in front me. I curiously entered commander Bhishma's pavilion. There I came to know what had just taken place, from the whispering discussions among the kings and gallant warriors who had assembled.

Grandsire Bhishma had just announced the list of *maharathi*, rathi and ardhraathi warriors in the Kaurava army. While doing that, at the end he had mentioned world conqueror Karna, the king of Anga who had obtained the Brahmastra from Bhagvan Parashurama, as a mere ardhraathi. Karna felt very piqued by that. I was also upset to hear that. But Karna's reaction spoke for itself. He had left declaring that he will not enter the battleground until Bhishma falls. That he will not fight under egotistic Bhishma who considered himself to be a *maharathi* and he will not take orders from him as his mere ardhraathi subordinate.

As soon as I got this information I met Bhishma, shared the news of the Pandava commander's appointment with him and came back. I directly went to the pavilion of Krishnadeva and shared this information with him. Then he let out a sigh of relief and said, "Has Karna refrained? That is good for Arjuna. Satyaki, I tried so hard for exactly this to happen! I had sent a message to grandsire through Chief Minister Vrishavarma that, 'I don't see any other *maharathi* in the Kuru army except for Karna! That is why your Kaurava army is not going to be able to survive against our maharathis.' Grandsire has responded to that message as expected. He has kept his word. I

may sometime have to keep his word in future. Let's see how Goddess Ida helps me at that time!" he spoke very mysteriously. I didn't understand anything. I was about to ask him something when diverting my attention, he said to me, "Come Yadava commander, let's go on a round of our seven *akshauhini* army and inquire of the wellbeing of the major warriors." He asked me to summon Daruka. So, I presented myself in front of him with Daruka. Now I realized why he had made sure to bring Daruka, Garudadhwaja and all his horses to Kurukshetra. He said to Daruka, "Tomorrow you are to groom all the four horses of our Garudadhwaja, feed them well, adorn them and harness them with your own hands to Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot. Understand that the four horses of his chariot are also white like the horses of my Garudadhwaja chariot. But I am not at all used to them and they are not used to me. From tomorrow, I shouldn't at all feel that I am steering the Nandighosha chariot! I should feel that I am steering my own Garudadhwaja chariot."

He gave some more precautionary instructions to Daruka who was standing in front of him with his palms joined. He said, "Now we will leave for the inspection of the army. But that will be in Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot with Kapidhwaja along with its horses. Our exhausted horses will rest during that time. I haven't brought you with me to watch the war on Kurukshetra. I have brought you to look after both the Nandighosha and Garudadhwaja chariot. Relying on you I am also going to take rest like my dear horses Shaibya, Balahaka, Meghapushpa and Sugriva will. Duryodhana has not put a condition of not bringing the Garudadhwaja chariot and charioteer on Kurukshetra!"

Daruka said, 'Your wish is my command Sire', and went out and within a short time he stood with Arjuna's embellished Nandighosha chariot with the Kapidhwaja in front of our pavilion. Krishnadeva, Dhrishtadyumna, Arjuna and I climbed onto the chariot, and Daruka steered it. Until midnight we carefully surveyed all our military regiments.

At midnight Krishnadeva retired to the bed chamber in the inner sanctum of his pavilion. Within a short time, the words of a prayer fell on my ears –

"Om Ishavasyamidam sarvam.... Om Shanti Shanti Shantihi"

I left his pavilion. Far away in the distance burning torches dancing here and there were visible in the encampment of the Kuru army. Probably the Kuru commander grandsire Bhishma had just returned to his pavilion after surveying their eleven *akshauhini* army.



Our commander Dhrishtadyumna's pavilion was very close to my tent. Within the night, the tents for other five regiment leaders were also raised around the pavilion of the commander. This arrangement was made for the convenience of initial formation, prompt movements of the army and having necessary meetings of all the regiment leaders. Each regiment leader also had his own tent in his own division also. After the midnight hour, some kind of commotion was heard from the direction of our commander's pavilion. I went there with selected Yadava warriors like Shini and Avagaha. The commander was standing right at the entrance of his pavilion. He was actually embracing Duryodhana's brother Yuyutsu! Yuyutsu who was Dhritarashtra's son born to a maid, had taken the decision of his own accord to leave their side and join hands with the Pandava army. Dhrishtadyumna welcomed him genially.

I also greeted him and came into my pavilion. I had to be present in the service of commander Dhrishtadyumna early in the morning. Saying nightly prayers of Goddess Ida I lay on the bed. Within a moment, I was overcome by sleep. The second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha was about to break. I woke up at the *Brahma Muhurta* listening to the cawing of the wild crows. I looked at my palms and sought forgiveness from the holy land of Kurukshetra saying 'Please forgive me for putting my feet on you'. I came out of the camp and washed my face. With select Yadava warriors I went to Jyoti sarovar located nearby, bathed in it and came back. With the assistance of the Yadava attendants in my service I put on my Yadava commander costume along with the iron armour on my chest. One attendant fastened a thick-bladed, sheathed sword around my waist. I put my quiver full of various arrows on my back and tied its knot on my chest. On my left shoulder, I hung my 'Idaprasada' bow which was worshiped and bedecked with a flower garland. On my right shoulder, I held my huge mace.

As soon as I came out of my camp about twenty-five troop leaders in my *akshauhini* regiment greeted me saying 'Hail Idamata'. With them I came to Commander Dhrishtadyumna's pavilion. The capacious round pavilion of the Pandava commander was surrounded by five other regiment leaders and their assistants. From among the Pandavas only Bhimsena was here. First, the seven regiment leaders greeted each other saying 'Hail Krishnadeva' and embraced each other.

The commander entered the pavilion with me, the Panchala king Drupada, Matsya king Virata, Shikhandi, Chekitana, and Bhimsena following him.

Two rows of three seats on each side were arranged inside. Between the two rows the elevated seat of the commander was placed. Commander Dhrishtadyumna took his seat. Each one of us also took our seats. Last night itself our commander had thought of our army formation for today. A small clay replica of that formation was placed on a mat on his right hand. Befitting the fact that he was a *yajna* child he had thought of a *yajna* pit formation for the very first day of war. With the help of the clay replica he explained the formation with intricate details to all of us. We had some fruits, drank freshly drawn milk and left the pavilion. We explained the *yajna* pit formation to all the troop leaders in our *akshauhini*. Along with them we left for the actual battlefield. Soldiers had woken up and after bathing in sarovars such as Jyoti and Sanneth and rivers such as Drishadwati and Saraswati they had returned to their respective camps. They had picked their weapons from the armouries while going back. There was a complex of various armouries. In the armoury of arrows, thousands of arrows such as Chandramukha, Shilimukha, Sarpamukha, Gomukha, Gajasthi, Gavasthi, Bastika, Anjalika, Jidma, Suchi, Naracha, Agnipankha, Suvarnapankha, Chandrapatti, Sannataparva, Grudhrapatra, Kankapatra, Nataparva, and Balla were filled in various quivers and placed in a row on one side. On the other side thousands of differently shaped and different kinds of bows charged with mantras and with strong and sinewy bow strings were displayed resting against the wall.

Next to the armoury for arrows was the mace armoury. Inside there were hundreds of different kinds of shining gold-plated iron maces such as Suryafuli, Kantakakankana, and Suryabimbi, displayed in rows.

Similarly, in the sword storage room thousands of big and small, sheathed and unsheathed sharp-bladed swords, shields and long-shafted spears were arranged in rows.

Then there were separate armouries for all the weapons like Chakra, Ankusha, pestle, Bhrushundi, Shataghni and Tomara. The entire complex of armouries was surrounded by armed soldiers. Soldiers from all camps were moving towards the armouries in queues. They were picking up their weapons from the chief of each armoury after examining them carefully. Everyone entered the armoury as only a soldier, but left as an armed warrior.

All regiment leaders brought their troops segregated according to weapons in front of commander Dhrishtadyumna. Now Commander Dhrishtadyumna started moving with much agility. He appointed young warriors of Panchalas like Uttamauja, Vyaghradutta, Sihasena, Satyajita and Shatanika, and

Vasudana, Uttara and Shweta of the Viratas to work under the six of us. He appointed his brothers Sumitra, Priyadarshana, Dhvajaketu, Chitraketu, Viraketu, Suketu, Suratha and Shantrunjaya to fight under him.

Under the ingenious leadership of *maharathi* Dhrishtadyumna the formation of our Pandava army in the shape of a *yajna* pit was complete.

The total number of our soldiers was fifteen lakhs thirty thousand nine hundred. Grandsire Bhishma had arranged the Kaurava army in a crocodile formation in front of us leaving enough space in between. The Kaurava army was comprised of a total of twenty-four lakhs five thousand seven hundred soldiers. The grandsire had appointed eleven regiment leaders for his army including himself. Those were Kritavarma, Bhagadutta, Jayadratha, Shalya, Drona, Shakuni, Susharma, Bhurishrava and Kripa. One *akshauhini* army was going to battle under each one of them.

Grandsire Bhishma had very skilfully arranged the eleven *akshauhini* well-equipped soldiers of the Kuru army. His army included proficient Maharathis such as Drona, Kripa, Jayadratha, Shakuni, Ashwatthama, Duryodhana, Dushasana, Shalya, Vivinshati, Bhagadutta, Bhurishrava, Susharma, Vikarna, Chitrasena, Dusaha, Purumitra, Satyavrata, and Jaya. Dressed up in war costumes, well equipped with weaponry they were all leading their own divisions of chariots, their chests puffed with pride and looking in the direction of their commander grandsire Bhishma for the signal to attack. Their chariots were filled to the capacity with various weapons such as many quivers full of a variety of arrows and bows, maces, swords, pestles, spears, chakras and Agnikankanas.

Some of the chariots had installed huge catapults like Bhrushundi and Shataghni for propelling stones and were filled with a variety of stones. Some chariots were harnessed with thirteen horses, some with eleven, some with nine, seven, four and a minimum of two horses. Precaution was taken to make sure that all the horses of a chariot would be of equal height. Some chariots had ten, some had eight, some six, four and some had two huge Kikarwood wheels of equal height. Separate troops were assigned for the maintenance of the chariot wheels of Maharathis. Grandsire Bhishma's Gangaugha chariot had ten wheels and eight pure white horses of Kamboja. The Taladhwaja pennant fluttered proudly atop his chariot.

The grandsire had positioned adorned elephants of his mammoth elephant regiment one after the other in front of the right and left wings of his army thus strengthening them and making them impenetrable. The howdahs on the

backs of the elephants were also full of various weapons. Commander Bhishma himself stood at the mouth of the crocodile-shaped formation of the Kaurava army bearing his bow on his shoulder. His thick, white beard was flowing gently on the wind. On his right, many pugnacious warriors like Drona, Duryodhana, Dushasana, Shakuni, all brothers and sons of Karna were ready in their own chariots and on his left were Kripa, Ashwatthama, Kritavarma, Jayadratha, and Shalya. Sanshaptaka Susharma from the Trigarta kingdom was in the line behind him. On both his sides were his renowned Sanshaptaka brothers – Satyaratha, Satyadharmana, Satyavarmana, Satyakarmana, and Satyeshu. These Sanshaptakas and their followers were famous for destroying an entire troop or a single warrior on oath.

Behind all of them Grandsire had positioned his mammoth camel and cavalry unit in the shape of a crocodile's midriff. The infantry unit and a few single horse riders were positioned at the tail end of the crocodile.

Grandsire had taken the utmost precaution to make sure that the Kaurava army was indestructible from any side by planting atirathis like Kshemadhurti, Vinda-Anuvinda, Aparajita, Ulooka, Sahadeva, Bhagadutta, and Lakshmana, ardharathis like Kuhara, Karkasha, Gavaksha, Kratha, Ambashtaka, and Aarjava and great warriors like Brihadbala of the Kosala kingdom, Kalinga king Bhanumana and his son Shakradeva, Nishadha king Ketumana, Shrutayu and Sudakshina together in various places of his army.

Kaurava commander Grandsire Bhishma had woken up at *Brahma Muhurta* today and bathed in Surya sarovar. With the assistance of his regular attendants he had put on the iron armour on his chest, and bore many weapons all over his body. A knee-long white flower garland around his neck suited him well. Except for the white beard resting on his iron armour no sign of his old age was apparent anywhere at all. As per the instruction of the Kuru priest he had worshiped the holy land of Kurukshetra with formal rituals.

Our Pandava army had also gotten ready under the guidance of Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna. All five regiment leaders including myself had taken their places in the army. The *yajna* pit formation of our seven *akshauhini* army was in position. On the right of our commander stood Panchala king Drupada, Matsya king Virata, Chekitana, Shikhandi, along with the Pandava army Bhima and his three brothers Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva mounted on their own chariots. Behind us were Panchala princes Vyaghradutta, Sihasena, Satyajita, and Virata's sons Shatanika, Vasudana,

Uttara and Shweta in their chariots. Behind them were kings like Paurava, Malava, and Sudarshana, Drupada's sons Sumitra, Priyadarshana, Chitraketu, Suketu, Dhvajaketu, Viraketu, Suartha and Shatrunjaya in their chariots.

Behind Bhimsena the second line of Pandavas, comprised of Yudhishtira's son Prativindhya, Bhima's sons Sutasoma and Ghatotkacha, Arjuna's sons Shrutakirti, Iravana and Babhruvahana, Nakula's son Shatanika and Sahadeva's son Shrutasena mounted their chariots.

Our commander Dhrishtadyumna also worshiped the holy land of Kurukshetra with formal rituals under the guidance of Dhaumya rishi. Now two gigantic, continuously roaring oceans of Kaurava and Pandava armies stood facing each other for a bloodthirsty war. The scene looked like two lions with thick manes from the valleys of Giranar standing against each other, roaring constantly at each other, assessing the power of their rival for a lethal fight.

Millions of combative, armed warriors from both sides were awaiting Krishnadeva – the host of his great *yajna* of the Great War and his best disciple Arjuna and his Nandighosha chariot.

Today Krishnadeva woke up at *Brahma Muhurta* as usual. Along with Arjuna and his regular loyal attendants he went to the nearby Jyoti sarovar. Taking a dip in the lake, he offered *Arghya* to the Sun god, about to rise, with his eyes closed. After bathing he returned to his pavilion and performed his morning rituals. While doing that, he got engrossed in his meditation of Shiva like never before. That was the reason it took him so long to come to the battleground.

As soon as the tiny spot of the Kapidhwaja pennant of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot came into sight from a distance, a wave of energy arose in our Pandava army.

At the mouth of Bhimsena's *akshauhini* the space for Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot was vacant. To take that space the Nandighosha chariot with four white horses was approaching us. I recognized those horses unmistakably.

Krishnadeva brought Nandighosha with Arjuna and his weaponry assistants in the Pandava army. As he tugged at the reins in his hands, the four horses responded by raising their front hooves high and neighed loudly. Within a trice Krishnadeva took in his hands his big, auspicious Panchjanya conch tied in his shawl. We got gooseflesh in anticipation of his blowing the conch with all his might raising his head high towards the sky. Everyone brandished their

weapons like bows, maces and swords. From the Nandighosha chariot, master archer *Dhananjaya* moved his glance over the twenty-five-lakhs army that stood in front. And who knows what happened, but I saw the Gandiva bow literally slipping out of his hands! Not only that, the next moment with his left hand he stopped Krishnadeva from blowing the Panchjanya conch and shaking his head in negation, saying something like ‘No.... no... I can’t fight’ he just sat down at once.

Everyone could see that valiant Arjuna was nervous and was literally sitting in the back of the Nandighosha chariot. He was constantly moving his head in negation and saying something to Krishnadeva. He was seen bringing his palms together in request and pleading. Nobody could understand what kind of drama was unfolding in the Nandighosha. Forty lakh armed warriors from both armies were restlessly waiting. Everyone saw Krishnadeva dropping down the reins of his horses. Now he had turned towards dejected and dispirited Arjuna. He had focused his all-encompassing eyes on Arjuna’s distressed, teary eyes. He always used to tell me, ‘I could never forget the way Aacharya Sandipani fixed his eyes on mine and gave me incredible blessings by transferring his powers to me in his aashrama.’ Probably something similar was going on right now.

Krishnadeva was occasionally patting Arjuna’s strong shoulders covered with iron armour with his blue, lean-fingered palm of his knee-long arms. At times, he was pointing his index finger towards him and speaking something rapidly.

Almost ten-fifteen minutes had passed by. Lakhs of pugnacious armed warriors on both sides for whom the war fever had become unbearable, started getting more anxious. The horses became uncontrollable and started neighing. The elephants swaying back and forth in their places began making trumpeting sounds. Nobody could understand the sudden cessation of war movements!

Krishnadeva was exhausted trying to boost Arjuna’s morale. It had been almost half an hour. He had turned towards the horses again and picked up the reins in his hands. A heart-wrenching suspicion tormented me. Was he going to steer Nandighosha out of the battleground now? I frantically leaped out of my chariot, and ran towards Nandighosha. As I approached Nandighosha Krishnadeva’s determined words fell on my ears –

‘Keep your mind focused on me. Be my devotee. Bow down only to me. I will emancipate you from every kind of sin!’

Hearing those words of Vaasudeva Arjuna's face had lit up like before. His face was again overflowing with the passion of a valiant archer. I clearly heard him saying with resolve while picking up the Gandiva bow –

“Oh Achyuta, your advice has removed all my attachment now. I have become aware of my duty again. Now that all doubts are removed from my mind I will certainly fight the war as per your wish!” As Krishnadeva heard these words befitting a warrior, his face brightened in such a way that I had never seen before.

He signalled me to get into my chariot. Then he determinedly cupped his hands around the big, auspicious Panchjanya conch tied in his shimmering blue shawl wrapped over his lustrous yellow dhoti and blew it with ultimate resolve and all his might!

The resonating sound was so inspirational that the lakhs of horses in both armies puffed their tails and pricked their ears. The elephants raised their trunks high like war horns and trumpeted excitedly. Whosoever heard that sound of the Panchjanya got gooseflesh. By this time the Sun god had ascended in the sky. Srikrishnadeva picked up the reins of Nandighosha – as an unarmed charioteer!

As soon as he heard the sound of the Panchjanya, grandsire also blew his Ganganabha conch with equal profoundness. In response to that our commander Dhrishtadyumna blew his Yajnadutta conch. Following that Arjuna blew his Devadutta conch, Yudhishtira blew his Anantvijaya conch, Bhima the Paundra conch, Nakula the Sughosha conch and Sahadeva his Manipushpaka conch. Following this rhythm of the peals of the conches, the regiment leaders in both armies blew various conches charging their armies with war spirit. Thereafter the bands of war instruments positioned at various places in the army raised a cacophony of various war instruments like

kettle drums, war tabors, and war horns. Hearing that sound the already neighing horses, trumpeting elephants and grunting camels screamed with more excitement. The roaring war slogans of ‘Ready, Onward, Charge’ excitedly given by the soldiers of various kingdoms blended with it. The clanging and banging sounds of various weapons of forty lakh soldiers while attacking each other fused with the war slogans and filled the atmosphere.

An uproar of mixed sounds of the soldiers’ sky-rending peals, weapons, war drums, slogans and animal shouts permeated the atmosphere of Kurukshetra.

The chariots of commander grandsire Bhishma and Dhrishtadyumna raced forward with the flags fluttering atop them.

On the holy land of Kurukshetra, the inferno of an unprecedented great *yajna* of the Great War enkindled by Krishnadeva flared up passionately, that was going to evaluate justice and injustice, and bring mankind face to face with Truth and Untruth.

Only Krishnadeva knew how the war was going to end and what its outcome was going to be. And only Bhagvan Vaasudeva knew what principles of life were going to emerge from this war for the human race which were going to be worth preserving for future generations. But every single being, whether big

or small, fighting in this war had come to know for sure that this Great War was not just a war between Kauravas and Pandavas for the sake of a kingdom or for the honour of a lady or for

the destruction of sinful people. It was so much more than that!

Like two catastrophic, hideous and roaring dark clouds dashing against each other, both well-equipped armies finally fell upon each other. Even in such a tumult of war I could clearly hear the penetrating roar that Bhimsena gave while wielding his heavy mace in the air of Kurukshetra. The first shock of it was so unbearable that his own charioteer Vishoka got startled! His whole body trembled for a moment. In that fit itself he propelled Bhimsena's well-equipped chariot with seven horses in front of everybody else.

First of all, a fierce battle eclipsing the sun took place with bow and arrows, between him and Duryodhana on their chariots.

Now Draupadidevi's five youthful sons who had had no opportunity to showcase their valour so far started fiercely wedging through the Kaurava army. A flank of five sons of the Pandavas, namely *Dharma's* son Prativindhya, Bhima's son Sutasoma, Arjuna's son Shrutakirti, Nakula and Sahadeva's sons Shatanika and Shrutasena, like five mountain ranges, marched forward, protecting each other, slicing the heads of the enemy soldiers and shouting inspirational war slogans. Sutasoma was holding a heavy mace in his hands like his father's. No one could contain him in mace fight. Shrutakirti was beautifully handling the bow and arrows, just by the touch of his fingers he was recognizing various arrows promptly and his ability to shoot five arrows at the same time, was simply incomprehensible. Facing one side he was even shooting arrows to the opposite side, hitting his



target unerringly.

From Bhishma's Gangaugha chariot hundreds of arrows started swiftly swooshing from his flower-bedecked bow that was as tall as him. Their only target was Pandava warrior master archer Arjuna. First, Arjuna greeted him with a humble bow from a distance. Then he brandished his auspicious, invincible Gandiva bow bedecked with white flower garlands in his hands. He twanged its taut bow string once. It dispersed far away like the continuous roar of the ocean surrounding Dwaraka. While doing all this, he had skilfully dodged Bhishma's arrows by turning his neck around. As if he was respectfully paying homage to the initial eight-ten arrows shot by venerable grandsire Bhishma, with whom he had played in his childhood. He was indeed Arjuna! He had also acquired the noble virtue of humility. He was a grandson that befitted grandsire Bhishma.

Now the invincible Gandiva bow in his hands was not going to rest till a clear result was in sight. For the first half an hour, he simply blocked Bhishma's various nonstop arrows and rendered them ineffective.

My troop and I had the primary responsibility of protecting the wheels of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot. Therefore, my chariot was constantly going to be moving around keeping a keen eye on the pennant of the Nandighosha chariot which Krishnadeva was steering. I was going to get the opportunity to closely watch all his subtle movements on the battleground. So far, I had closely observed many of his qualities on life's battlefield. At times, I was amazed at his sky-high intellectual genius. I was bedazzled.

On the very first day of the Great War in Kurukshetra when the sun was shining atop our heads I resolved in my mind to carefully watch and fiercely protect the wheels of master archer Arjuna's chariot and observe the wheel of Krishnadeva's ingenious intellect by keeping my brain alert, without saying a word. It was indeed going to be useful for me in future.

Our own *maharathi* Kritavarma was the first one to attack Nandighosha. I blocked him moving forward with my chariot troop. Though we both originally belonged to Dwaraka, and both were from the Yadu dynasty a fierce fight took place between us.

Duryodhana attacked Bhimsena with years of pent-up rage. Bhimsena overthrew his assault within a short time just like the ocean in high tide repels the incoming water of a stream. Arjuna's son young Abhimanyu began fighting tenaciously with the experienced Kosala king. Dushasana hounded our handsome Nakula with his arrows. Nakula's body, bloody with

Dushasana's arrows, started looking like a blooming *Palash* tree during summer. Krishnadeva deftly steered the Nandighosha chariot within his vicinity. Making wounded Nakula aware of his self, Krishnadeva said from the Nandighosha chariot itself, "Nakula... you are looking as your name suggests! Like a Nakula – a Mongoose that has just bitten a snake! That snake called Dushasana is also biting you like he bit Draupadi. Don't be afraid!" Those words of Krishnadeva worked like magic. Injured Nakula prepared his bow and within moments with his arrow he hurled Dushasana's crown into the air and tossed it on the ground.

Pandava commander Dhrishtadyumna aggressively charged at Drona's *akshauhini* with the support of combative Panchalas. Drona who was enraged by the past insult by Dhrishtadyumna's father Drupada due to his poverty, broke his bow into pieces. *Maharathi* Shishupala's son Dhrishtaketu had attacked Balhika. Shouting war slogans loudly like his father, Bhima's son Ghatotkacha assailed Alambusha. Shikhandi and Ashwatthama, Virata and Bhagadutta, Drupada and Jayadratha were engaged in vicious fights. Gandhara king Shakuni attacked Yudhishtira's son Prativindhya along with his ten brothers.

The afternoon of the first day was now on the decline. Commander grandsire Bhishma who had the powerful support of five Kaurava warriors – Kritavarma, Kripa, Durmukha, Shalya and Vivinshati – began damaging the Pandava army irreparably in front of our eyes. Like the gusty winds of the Mriga constellation thrashing a sprawling mango tree, instantly knocking down hundreds of mangoes, infuriated grandsire Bhishma started knocking down Pandava soldiers by his unerring arrows. Just as its name denoted his Gangaughra chariot began moving amidst our Pandava army like the torrent of Ganga's waters flowing unrestricted through the valleys and mountains of the Himalaya. Abhimanyu, who was enraged to see that, moved forward. With a single arrow, he broke the pennant of the chariot of Kritavarma who was covering grandsire Bhishma. He restrained Shalya with five arrows. Shooting a Sannathparva arrow he cut off the head of Durmukha's charioteer. He shot a Jidma arrow and broke Kripacharya's bow unerringly. That broke the wall of protection around grandsire.

Watching the breath-taking valour of young Abhimanyu, grandsire Bhishma stood still for a moment in his Gangaughra chariot. Throwing an admiring glance at Abhimanyu he exclaimed, "Bless you *Partha's* son, gallant Abhimanyu, victory to you!" During this time, he had moved nimbly

and rendered many arrows coming from various directions ineffective by bearing them on his iron armour.

On the left of grandsire, a fierce battle was going on between Virata's son Uttara and Madra king Shalya. Uttara was sitting in a canopied seat on a tall and mammoth elephant. The army of the Viratas was fighting behind him. Uttara instructed the mahout to direct his elephant towards the chariot of Shalya. The mahout was an expert. He pricked the back of elephant's ear with the goad and attacked the chariot of Shalya who was shooting arrows. That mammoth elephant whacked the horses of Shalya's chariot with strikes of its trunk. He grabbed Shalya's charioteer in his trunk, whirled him in a circular motion and threw him away. From the broken chariot, Shalya shot a snake-like iron arrow at Uttara. It tore the iron armour on Uttara's chest and pierced his heart. Virata's son Uttara who was fighting and shouting war slogans collapsed from the back of the elephant. He squirmed in pain and died. His death caused chaos in our army.

Uttara's brother Shweta attacked Shalya furiously. Jayatsena, Rukmaratha, and Anuvinda blocked him. A fight broke between grandsire Bhishma who had come to assist Shalya and Uttara's brother Shweta.

Virata's son valiant Shweta performed a remarkable feat of valour today on behalf of the Pandavas. First, he broke the bow of the Kaurava commander Bhishma- the disciple of invincible, master archer Parashurama. That got the Pandava soldiers excited and they let out slogans of 'Hail Virata's son Shweta – victory to you'. Those slogans infuriated grandsire Bhishma. He picked up another bow. In the very first attack he killed all horses of Shweta's chariot. Then with an arrow he beheaded Shweta's charioteer too. Injured Shweta launched a very potent Shakti at Bhishma. Bhishma recognized it unmistakably and shot eight arrows in such a formation that they confined that Shakti and rendered it useless on the ground.

The evening was approaching now. The splendid disc of the sun touched the western horizon. A few moments before the end of the first day of the battle Bhishmacharya shot Virata's son Shweta with a shining arrow charged with Brahma mantra. It pierced Shweta's chest. Shweta collapsed dead in his chariot. The sun set and the war stopped.

The elongated evening shadows of the second day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha spread on Kurukshetra. Various birds that used to chirp during the day had permanently fled from this area full of beautiful lakes and greenery to distant places today morning itself after hearing the terrifying war

cries. In a few nests the nestlings had exhausted themselves screaming for their parents. Many generations of Kshatriyas had regarded this place as auspicious to offer charities on the day of the solar eclipse after bathing in the Suryakunda on Kurukshetra. Every year on the day of the solar eclipse countless charity-offering platforms were raised along the shore of the lake. In the same place, today many rows of funeral pyres with the woods of holy trees like mango, sandalwood and *Bela* were prepared by the regulating troops on both the sides. The Viratas had prepared two elevated sandalwood funeral pyres for Uttara and Shweta. The now aged Matsya king Virata had to ignite the funeral pyres of his valiant sons. The reflection of the blazing funeral pyres along the shore of the lake reflecting made the lake itself look like it was on fire.

After dinner, a meeting of the seven regiment leaders, rathis, atirathis and maharathis in the Pandava army along with all the Pandavas was arranged in the capacious pavilion of Krishnadeva.

With a crestfallen, gloomy expression eldest Pandava Yudhishtira said to Krishnadeva, “If grandsire keeps slaughtering the Pandava army like this our defeat is certain!” Krishnadeva smiled on hearing that. He said to Yudhishtira, “*Dharma*, don’t give up just yet. Don’t worry. We will lose some of the battles for sure, but the ultimate victory will certainly be ours. Our army has warriors like *maharathi* Satyaki, valiant Virata, and courageous Dhrishtadyumna.

“Your brother Arjuna, the master of Gandiva, who had once fought against Shivashankara, the source of the tempestuous *Tandava*, is in our army. We have mighty, powerful Bhimsena on our side. So, don’t worry. The final victory will be yours indeed. You and all others should keep it in mind that my devotees will never get destroyed. I will never allow it to happen. Na Me Bhaktaha PraNashyati!”

Hearing those reassuring words of Krishnadeva all assembled warriors got relaxed and bowed down to him devotedly. I couldn’t resist asking, “Is the Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna going to remain our commander tomorrow also?” He smiled again and looking at me he said, “The valiant commander of an army never changes until he falls on the battleground while fighting. My guess is that the Kauravas will follow the same. Grandsire Bhishma’s grit is not stagnant. He has the experience that comes with age. Everyone should boldly stand ground against his impeccable shooting of arrows. Right now, I am thinking of only one thing – how to face him tomorrow.”

Though no one else had noticed the brilliant intellectual move of Krishnadeva that he had played on the battleground I had noticed it. Today in the violent combats on the battlefield many charioteers were killed. But not even a single scratch was there on the blue body of Krishnadeva who was steering Arjuna's chariot! By declaring himself to be an unarmed charioteer he had secured himself completely, according to the rules of engagement. No one including Duryodhana had realized the genius of his intellect.

We started returning to our pavilions after finishing the meeting of the first day. The regulating troops could be seen making preparations for tomorrow's new battlefield.

The third day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha dawned. Our commander Dhrishtadyumna arranged our army in the Krauncharuna or heron formation. Four maharathis from among the seven regiment leaders were kept at its very long beak shape. Those were Bhimsena, Dhrishtadyumna himself, Chedi king Dhrishtaketu, and I. Virata, Jarasandha's sons Jayasena and Pandya were at the abdomen and the tail of the heron.

Grandsire Bhishma arranged the Kuru army in the Arrow formation. At the triangular tip of this arrow Duryodhana himself stood on the right of commander Bhishma along with his ten brothers such as Durmukha, Dushasana, Dusaha, and Durgharsha.

Raising his thick and crooked eyebrows he threw a contemptuous glance at the heron bird of our army and roared, "Oh Kuru warriors! Today we will pierce the heart of this worthless heron of Pandavas in front of the grandsire." Protruding the veins in his throat he blew his conch named 'Vidaraka' with all his might. His eyes became bloody red. As grandsire Bhishma blew his 'Ganganabha' conch Duryodhana raised his heavy mace from his shoulder and dancing it in the air, inspiring his army, he shouted very loudly, "Ready, Onward, Charge". The Kaurava army fell upon the Pandava army like a tiger assaulting its prey. Amidst the shouting of war slogans swords clanged, maces clashed, pestles collided against each other and the war began. Bhimsena, Abhimanyu, Dhrishtadyumna, Virata and I attacked grandsire. Indomitable warrior, grandsire confined all of us in one place with rapid-fire arrows. He cast a trap of seven Naracha arrows around me. I broke it with much efforts. He separated the two impenetrable parts of the beak shape of our Krauncharuna formation. With his thick white beard shaking he commanded the chariots regiment behind him 'Onward...' At his command

his chariot regiment attacked and broke through our Krauncharuna formation. Our chariot warriors and horse riders began retreating. Master archer Arjuna who was watching all this from a distance got enraged. He said to Krishnadeva, “Vaasudevaa, now you must take my Nandighosha chariot right in front of grandsire.”

It was only yesterday that this same Arjuna was tormented by the thought of shooting deadly arrows at grandsire Bhishma with whom he used to play as a child. On hearing his words of the other extreme today, Krishnadeva smiled naughtily and said to *Partha*, “*Dhananjaya*, are you sure you want me to take your chariot in front of grandsire?” Then Arjuna hurriedly said, “Yes, certainly. Otherwise those five warriors of the Pandavas won’t stand a chance in front of grandsire for a long time.” As soon as he heard those words Krishnadeva blew his Panchjanya conch in such a way that the Kaurava army felt that the Hanuman on Arjuna’s pennant himself was howling and coming to attack them.

A fierce battle ensued between grandsire Bhishma and Arjuna. In that Duryodhana, Shalya, Jayadratha, and Shakuni came to assist grandsire. There was now a crowd of fights between pairs of chariots on the battlefield near grandsire. Hundreds of arrows littered around on the land of Kurukshetra. Injured and dead soldiers on both sides lay amidst them. Great archer *Dhananjaya* stood his ground like a mountain, fighting against four great warriors, including grandsire, one after the other.

There, a violent battle was going on between Dronacharya and Commander Dhrishtadyumna. Drona mounted a deadly arrow like the Kaladanda on his bow. He closed his eyes, chanted some mantras, and shot it at Dhrishtadyumna. Its sound was so terrifying and loud that soldiers on both sides held their breath and kept staring at it. Alert Dhrishtadyumna recognized the arrow. He counter-attacked it with another power. That power broke Drona’s arrow into two in mid-air.

Drona got furious and showered arrows on Dhrishtadyumna continuously to confine him. So Bhimsena came forward to protect the commander. Then Kalingaraja and his mammoth Kalinga army blocked Bhimsena. They surrounded the mighty warrior from all sides. Just as a wildcat confined in a closed room hisses and attacks anybody in its sight, Bhimsena descended on the battlefield from his chariot and assaulted the Kalingas while roaring.

In the mace fight Bhimsena first killed Kalingaraja’s son. Seeing his son collapse the infuriated Kalingaraja also got down from his chariot with his

mace. An intense mace fight took place between him and Bhimsena. Soldiers on both sides kept watching it with their mouths agape. In the end Bhimsena made a quick movement and unerringly struck a heavy blow of his mace right on the chest of the Kalingaraja. That strike cracked the iron armour on the Kalingaraja's chest and a trickle of blood started flowing. The Kalingaraja was also killed. The Kalinga army began running amuck trembling with fear looking at the mace on Bhimsena's shoulder.

Gallant Abhimanyu was besieged by many including Duryodhana. Seeing him in trouble Krishnadeva called out to his horses 'Megha, Bala, Shaibya, Sugriva' and steered the Nandighosha chariot closer to Abhimanyu. Arjuna showered rains of arrows from his Gandiva bow to free his son surrounded by many warriors. It made Duryodhana and the others flee helter-skelter. On the second day of the war the sun set on the horizon of Kurukshetra. The battleground of Kurukshetra that was vibrating with the sounds of kettle drums and war horns calmed down with the sound of grandsire's conch, indicating the end of the day. The exhausted soldiers dropped their weapons wherever they were and returned to their own pavilions.

After dinner, as usual our meeting was arranged in Krishnadeva's pavilion. Master archer Arjuna started explaining tomorrow's crescentmoon formation to all of us. Staring at his gallant face we got lost in the thought of how to face the day tomorrow. Suddenly the surveillance team leader Vaayusena of our army entered the pavilion hastily while gasping. He bowed down to Krishnadeva sitting on the elevated seat in the centre and presented important news that he had picked up from the pavilion of the Kaurava commander.

"Duryodhana rebuked Commander Bhishma severely in the Kaurava camp – 'Lakhs of Kuru soldiers got killed within two days. We made you the commander because you are senior and have the experience. You haven't demonstrated any real valour yet. You are partial to the Pandavas. You are not being fierce enough with them on purpose.' Thus, he clearly accused the venerable valiant grandsire in front of all with sharp, humiliating words.

"On hearing that Bhishma, who was humiliated and angry, furiously took a vow that 'Tomorrow I will compel unarmed Srikrishna the Lord of Dwaraka to hold a weapon in his hands! Or else I will die on the battlefield!!'

"Because of his vow the Kaurava camp is bursting with energy. In that meeting itself Duryodhana declared his further policy.

"Once the Lord of Dwaraka holds a weapon in his hands, Duryodhana is planning to raise a hue and cry that, 'A rule of engagement has been broken.

Srikrishna who is supposed to be an unarmed participant of the war has held a weapon in his hand. Now he is disqualified to enter the battlefield. He should be removed from the position of the charioteer of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot.””

On hearing that news our council became utterly solemn. Kurukshetra without Krishnadeva meant our clear defeat! No one could even imagine that.

Baffled Arjuna said, “In my opinion Srikrishna should not enter the battlefield at all tomorrow! Then taking up a weapon would be out of question.” Many people seconded him. All Pandava warriors who knew very well that grandsire's promise is like a promise carved in stone, absolutely unalterable, began whispering among themselves.

But Krishnadeva was calm!

After some time, he calmly said to all, “I will see how to handle Bhishma's promise! You get back to the daily preparations of war as usual. Take a good night's sleep! Hail Goddess Ida!” He directly concluded the meeting at that.

The fourth day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha stood behind the horizon of the blood-soaked land of Kurukshetra. The day was yet to break. Surrounded by Drona, Duryodhana and his five brothers, Kripa, Ashwatthama, Jayadratha, Kritavarma, and Shalya on both sides, today the Kaurava commander, Shantanu's son Gangeya Bhishma looked like the Sun god dispersing thousands of rays. His face was emitting the glow of determination. With all the warriors, he walked to the battlefield to survey the disciplined formation of his army. Within two days two *akshauhini* soldiers combined from both sides had been slaughtered. Among them our Pandava soldiers were more in number. Under the command of the grandsire about ten *akshauhini* armed soldiers of the Kaurava army had gathered the Garuda formation – in the shape of the eagle, the king of birds. The most vital part of this eagle was its beak at the foremost end. The great grandsire Bhishma was going to stand at the tip of the beak. Behind the beak was the neck of the eagle, which was going to be protected by the Kekeyas and Gandharas. In the spread of the right wing of the eagle, Kritavarma of the Yadavas and Sindhu king Jayadratha were going to stand along with their armies. Bhagadutta and Bhurishrava were going to guard the left wing of the eagle. In the abdomen of the eagle kings like Sudakshina and Neela were going to cover Duryodhana.

Madra king Shalya and princes of Avanti – Vinda and Anuvinda were going to stand at the tail end of this gigantic eagle of the Kaurava army.

The talons of both feet of the eagle are very important. It is in these strong



talons that he holds his prey tightly. The talons of this eagle of the Kaurava army were going to be safeguarded by the Sanshaptaka brothers on the left side and troops of Barbaras and Nishadhas on the right side.

This formation of grandsire's army was indeed ingenious, impenetrable and aggressive.

With his warriors, grandsire walked through the throat of the eagle formation, both his wings and came into his abdomen. He said to Duryodhana who was there, "Suyodhanaa, today I will compel Krishna to break his vow for sure. Then it will be up to you to see how to drive him out of the battlefield. Once he leaves the battleground victory will be certainly yours!" Hearing that Duryodhana's chest puffed with pride and he insanely ranted as per his nature, "If that happens grandsire, then as the Kaurava prince I am going to send the sinful Pandavas to the forest again, without playing any game of dice. This time I am going to send them even beyond the Himalayas!"

Grandsire put his arm around his shoulder and smiling weakly he said, "As per my information the Pandavas are going to structure the army in the shape of a crescent moon. Think about how you can eclipse that moon. I am telling you firmly that as long as Vaasudeva is on the side of the Pandavas it is going to be highly impossible for you to gain victory."

While talking to everyone, hefty grandsire dressed up in his war costume came to the tail end of the eagle formation. Here Shalya was a bit upset. He had left from the Madra kingdom to join the Pandavas who were his *bhache*. But Duryodhana met him in the middle of his journey, offered him countless gifts and with his sweet words convinced him to join the Kaurava side. During yesterday's council Duryodhana had instructed grandsire to keep him at the tail end of the Kuru army.

Now this war drama on Kurukshetra was getting intriguing beyond imagination. The foremost strength of us Pandavas was Krishnadeva. The second strong point was the unity of all Pandavas. All the assembled kings and warriors on the Pandava side had complete and unfaltering faith in the valour of Bhima and Arjuna.

The Kaurava army of Duryodhana was full of many rifts of secret differences that were seemingly masked. I did not have the slightest doubt that Krishnadeva was astutely going to take advantage of these rifts. Krishnadeva steered Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot, overflowing with weaponry and brought it in the centre of the Pandava army. He descended

from the Nandighosha chariot along with Arjuna. First, he spoke with his four horses in a language that no one else could understand. He patted the rump of one, the back of another, affectionately stroked the mane of another. The next moment He and I left, walking to survey our army along with many leaders such as Bhimsena, his son Ghatotkacha, Panchala king Drupada, Matsya king Virata, Yudhishtira, Nakula and Sahadeva. We surveyed the crescent-moon shape of our army that had two edges – one on the inside and one on the outside, and returned to the original place.

The distinctive feature of this crescent-moon shape was, its two end points facing each other. If agile, expert war soldiers were posted at both these endpoints then at the right time they could be brought together by the commander's order and our whole army could swallow any bird entirely whether it was a hawk, a vulture or an eagle.

Both commanders took their places. Now a breath-taking scene was set on the land of Kurukshetra – that of the strong eagle made of lakhs, hankering to claw at the moon and the crescent-moon made of lakhs, yearning to swallow the eagle entirely if needed.

As the radiant sun disc appeared on the horizon Krishnadeva held his head high and blew his milky white, divine Panchjanya conch. Following that both commanders, grandsire Bhishma and *maharathi* Dhrishtadyumna, blew their conches. After that, the divine conches of the five Pandava brothers resonated. Then various sounds of many conches blended with each other. The horses in the chariot troops and cavalry neighed. Thousands of elephants began raising their trunks while trumpeting. Amidst the inspiring shouts of 'Onward...Attack' the oceans of both armies collided against each other like huge, dark black roaring clouds of Mriga.

Bhishma and Drona were unyielding today. They strongly attacked many times, to break open the crescent moon formation of the Pandava army. Bhimsena and Ghatotkacha overthrew them effortlessly. Then furious Duryodhana came forward. He covered Ghatotkacha under a shower of arrows. As Bhima couldn't see his son anywhere he got furious and lost his temper. He shot a powerful arrow at Duryodhana's chest. It penetrated through his iron armour and pierced his chest. Duryodhana's flower-bedecked bow slipped from his wounded hands. Then he himself lost consciousness and collapsed in his chariot. Seeing their leader collapse, the terrified Kaurava army started running helter-skelter. Raising both his hands Dushasana tried to stop them in vain. His charioteer pulled aside the

unconscious Duryodhana's huge chariot with seven black horses.

Abhimanyu and I infiltrated in the Gandhara army of Shakuni and his ten brothers shouting war slogans of 'Onward...Attack'. Master archer Arjuna's army was supporting us strongly from our right side.

By this time Duryodhana's charioteer who had pulled his chariot aside, sniffed him medicinal herbs and brought him back to consciousness. The moment he regained his consciousness he roared, "Where is that gluttonous Pandava? Why are our soldiers running away like this?" As the charioteer made him aware of the situation, he composed himself. Hastily racing his chariot through his army, raising both his hands he howled at the top of his lungs, addressing his soldiers, "You cowards, where are you running? I am your master. Don't you feel ashamed of yourselves to run away like this leaving me unconscious? Come back and fight." His howling made his soldiers stop and come back with their weapons. Duryodhana sighed in relief and commanded his charioteer to take the chariot right in front of the grandsire and Drona.

He admonished grandsire in harsh words saying, "Grandsire, in spite of phenomenal archers like yourself and Acharya Drona being present in our army the terrified soldiers of our army are running everywhere. Do you think that is right? Are you really fighting for me or just pretending to do so? Watching my soldiers run away I am completely convinced that you are the advocate of my enemies – the Pandavas. Both of you are not fighting from the bottom of your heart today. Every action of yours is full of charade. Your body is in my service but your heart longs for the Pandavas.

"Grandsire, if you would have cleared this right in the beginning I would have appointed world conqueror, invincible master archer Karna, the king of Anga as the commander with formal rituals. Then I wouldn't have had to face such humiliation at all."

Grandsire Bhishma remained calm in spite of Duryodhana's harsh words, and said to him, "Gandhari's son, I got tired of telling you to give half of the kingdom to Pandavas! Don't become a part of an unjust act. The Pandavas are invincible – they are protected by the shadow of Srikrishna-Vaasudeva's blessings. You didn't listen to anything or anybody.

"Stop talking nonsense and keep your eyes open to see that Bhishma's vow is like an indelible line carved on the black boulder of Kala."

Grandsire Bhishma commanded his charioteer sternly to take his chariot directly in front of Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot – 'Nandighosha...

Nandighosha!’ Looking for Krishnadeva his old and skilled charioteer brought his chariot moving swiftly like Alatachakra – a revolving Agnikankana in front of Nandighosha. He spoke so loudly that it would have made the warriors and their charioteers around him tremble in fear and drop their weapons, “Foolish Kaurava, if I don’t make Vasudeva’s son Vaasudeva, the son of Yashoda who has never obtained anything else except success in his life, to hold a weapon in his hands then I will not call myself Ganga’s son Bhishma.”

Indomitable Bhishma’s swift, swishing arrows unerringly killed my charioteer. He collapsed on the battlefield from the charioteer’s seat. Because of that my chariot got stuck in one place. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t think straight. Furthermore, seeing my charioteer getting killed many charioteers in my chariot troop protecting Arjuna’s chariot wheels abandoned their chariots and started running away. Due to that the protective cover around Arjuna’s chariot slackened. War expert warrior Devavrata Bhishma grabbed this opportunity correctly and commanded the chariot warriors behind him to besiege Nandighosha. Furious master archer Arjuna was telling Krishnadeva, “Oh great Yadavaa, who is going to stand against me? I have killed many incredibly powerful Rakshasas. Take the chariot forward.” Saying thus he showered a rain of arrows on Bhishma.

That offensive attack of Arjuna provoked Bhishma.

Now Gangeya Bhishma got wild with rage. After all, in his eyes our master archer Arjuna was just a youngster. Bhishma’s face started looking like tempestuous ocean at the time of a catastrophe. Though he was agitated, his fighting spirit, made him an archer even younger than Arjuna. He began tossing the heads of Arjuna’s soldiers in the air like tossing balls. Whosoever came within the range of his sight got wounded by the shower of arrows swiftly shot from his twanging bow. Many of his arrows like Anjalika, Sarpamukha, Bhalla, Naracha and such pierced the temples of the elephants in our army. Arrows like Chandramukha, Bastika, Kankapatra, Gajasthi, Shilimukha and such wounded the hefty horses in our cavalry. The camels, agitated by grandsire’s arrows such as Jidma, Suchi and Bastika, began trampling upon our own soldiers while running everywhere. The Kaurava commander was indeed proving his epithet Bhishma, meaning ghastly.

Krishnadeva who was the charioteer of Nandighosha was using all his expertise of charioting. Sometimes all four horses of the chariot were springing high in the air on the signal of the reins in his hands. At other

times, they were kneeling down unanimously at his signal rendering Bhishma's arrows ineffective. But Bhishma's experienced charioteer steered his chariot around Nandighosha in such a skilful way that Arjuna began seeing flashes of the grandsire everywhere – standing in front of him in a moment and behind him the next moment. He was confused. The Gandiva bow in his hand steadied for a moment. Grabbing this opportunity grandsire Bhishma made him drop his bow in the chariot itself, by showering arrows at him. Disabled Arjuna, injured by Bhishma's arrows which had pierced his body at many places, leaned against the flagpole of Nandighosha and slid down as he lost consciousness. Immediately chaos erupted in his division. Raising their weapons awkwardly in the air everyone began pleading Krishnadeva desperately – 'Save us – oh Lord of Dwaraka – save us from the arrows of grandsire. Spare our lives.'

Similar kind of wailing cries started coming from all sides. Krishnadeva had no other choice but to get down from Nandighosha. Meanwhile I had found another charioteer and came closer to Nandighosha to help Arjuna. My foremost duty was to bring Arjuna back to consciousness. For that, I made him sniff the divine herb in the wooden tube kept in Nandighosha. He regained his consciousness. As soon as he came around he asked, "Where is Krishna?" We began looking everywhere on the battlefield. There, even in grandsire's mind,

a commotion ensued as he couldn't see Krishnadeva anywhere on the Nandighosha chariot. He had dropped his bow and stopped shooting arrows. He was also asking his charioteer, "Where is Krishna?" He had also got out of his chariot onto the battlefield.

Krishnadeva was walking towards his chariot only, but he was looking for something on the ground. By this time, Arjuna and I had left the Nandighosha chariot and had caught up with him. Meanwhile Krishnadeva saw Kuru commander Bhishma walking slowly towards him. The moment he saw Bhishma he picked up a chariot wheel lying on the battlefield and furiously rotated it on both his palms. He tossed it in the air for a moment and caught it in both his hands again. Then as he was about to rush fiercely towards Bhishma, Arjuna who was walking next to me leaped forward and grabbed his feet in his arms. He pleaded with Krishnadeva – 'Achyuta...! Please don't use this chakra!' Krishnadeva balanced the chakra in his hands and looked smilingly at Arjuna.

White bearded grandsire Bhishma in his war costume stood calmly in front

of him with his palms joined and eyes closed. Looking at Bhishma standing still in front of him Krishnadeva smiled and dropped the chariot wheel on the ground. Spreading both his arms wide he held grandsire Bhishma in a deep embrace, who was the first one to unmistakably recognize him and address him with the epithet ‘Vaasudeva’.

Jalapurusha of Hastinapura united with the Jalapurusha of Dwaraka!

Both great men separated from each other without speaking a single word.

At that moment, the sun set on the western horizon of Kurukshetra. The war stopped. Both great men started walking calmly towards their pavilions.

That night in our meeting that took place in Krishnadeva’s pavilion after dinner the only thing discussed was the formation of our army for the next day.

But in the meeting of the Kaurava warriors in grandsire’s pavilion all plans of Duryodhana had gone waste. Mentioning that Krishnadeva had held the chakra-weapon in his hands he was loudly telling his commander, ‘That cowherd has broken his promise. Send a messenger promptly to his pavilion and reprimand him that he has broken the rule of engagement and hence has been removed from the position of Arjuna’s charioteer. Rising from the elevated seat of the commander and patting his muscular shoulders as an elder, grandsire said to him, “Duryodhana, you can still stop this catastrophic, atrocious war! Neither you, nor any of your brothers and none of whatever is remaining of our eleven *akshauhini* army – can be compared to Srikrishna even remotely! You are making a mistake in understanding him. Compose and control yourself. Srikrishna has not broken any rule at all. He had held a chariot wheel in his hands – not a weapon! Why did he even do that? Only I can understand it. By holding it he allowed me to keep my promise. That too without breaking his own promise! That is why I am telling you firmly for the last time as your elder, stop this war now. Return the kingdom of Indraprastha to the Pandavas. Only then that cowherd will go back to Dwaraka. But that also he will do only after sending us Kauravas to Hastinapura and the Pandavas to Indraprastha!” It was impossible for Duryodhana to accept it.

On the horizon of Kurukshetra which was perpetual and unmoved by any events, the sun of the fourth day began to shine. As per the precise instructions of Commander Bhishma, the Kaurava army was ready at dawn itself in the formation of a bull, ready to attack. Bhishma himself stood at the end of the tapering mouth along with warriors like Drona, Kripa,

Duryodhana, and Ashwatthama. Vinda and Anuvinda took the places of the flared-up nostrils of the bull. King Chala and Shalya spread their soldiers in the area of the sharp, spiked horns of the bull. Sudakshina and Neela took the places of the strong shoulders of the bull. The Kekeyas lined up their soldiers in the big hump of the bull leaning to the right. Bhagadutta, Bhurishrava and Jayadratha stood at the huge abdominal area of the bull. Yadava *maharathi* Kritavarma arranged his Yadava army in the shape of the curved tail of the bull and himself stood at the front. In this manner, grandsire had given some respite to these Yadava troops. The combative wild tribes were placed mainly at the two front and two back legs of this gigantic bull. Daradas and Yavana soldiers were in the position of the front legs and Barbaras and Nishadha soldiers were at the rear legs.

When our spies brought in the news about the bull formation at night Krishnadeva advised commander Dhrishtadyumna to lay out the Pandava army in the form of an elephant ready to fight. With his head tilted forward this elephant stood ready in a pose to slam anyone that approached him. The vital area of the temples was covered by my troops of staunch lifeguards ready to fight with their lives and the forbearing Pandya soldiers who came from near the sea. The Chedi soldiers of Dhrishtaketu stood in the elephant's trunk rolled inside. The abdominal area of our mammoth elephant was filled with all five Pandavas and the Magadha soldiers of Jayasena. Virata and Drupada's soldiers had been placed at the rump and the posterior area. It was a significant war strategy of Krishnadeva to give rest to both the armies that had been fighting continuously for the last three days. The short-tailed rear end of our elephant was given to the few Mlenchchhas.

Amidst the cacophony of war drums the gruesome battle of the fourth day ensued. Grandsire Bhishma's Gangaugha chariot with seven white horses, surrounded by the chariots of Drona, Duryodhana, Balhika, Durmarshana, and Jayadratha, sprinted forward. All of them attacked Arjuna. Five warriors besieged gallant Abhimanyu in our army fighting on the right side. Arjuna-Abhimanyu, the father-son duo courageously kept fighting and overthrowing these group assaults on them with their war skills. Arjuna's divine Gandiva bow began shining like the thunderous lightning of Mriga. Dhrishtadyumna beheaded the son of King Chala, which wreaked havoc on that side. Chala and Shalya with each other's support surrounded Dhrishtadyumna and broke his bow. Seeing Dhrishtadyumna get unarmed valiant Abhimanyu promptly came to support him. He confined Shalya with his swift arrows so much so

that his soldiers started calling for Duryodhana to help them. Hearing their screams Duryodhana blew his 'Vidaraka' conch, with a reddened face and veins protruding. He steered the mammoth elephants of Jayadratha's Sindhu troops to assist Shalya. Duryodhana's loud war cries blended with the trumpeting sounds of the elephants raising their trunks high – "Attack... trample the troops of Abhimanyu- Dhrishtadyumna and destroy them!"

Bhimsena realized that Abhimanyu wouldn't be able to hold it against the elephantry of Duryodhana and descended from his chariot. With his eyes enlarged and shouting 'Attack...' he began swinging the gold-plated heavy iron mace on his shoulder very swiftly. He started striking the temples of any elephant that approached him so skilfully and quickly that many elephants who bore the strike went wild and turned back. Screaming 'chee.... chee...' the elephants, terrified of Bhima, started running back trampling their own soldiers. In all that commotion, no one realized where Duryodhan was lost.

Bhima saw eight sons of Dhritarashtra moving forward in chariots to confront him. He immediately mounted his chariot and shouted, "Vishoka, let the reins loose and signal the horses to take the chariot in front of those eight." As soon as the eight brothers of Duryodhana came within sight Bhimsena continuously shot arrows at them with lightning speed and made them fall down from their chariots like the wind of Mriga beats and ceaselessly shakes down the ripened mango fruits from the tree.

Seeing not one but eight of his brothers killed, Duryodhana got furious and attacked Bhima. He shot a potent Shakti at Bhima. Due to that Bhima's head began reeling. He took support of the flagpole and sat down in his chariot. Seeing his father get unconscious for the first time, Hidimba's son Ghatotkacha came to his assistance. He spread terror in Duryodhana's army by his demonic illusive technique of war. At that time Bhishma said to Duryodhana, "Kauravaa, the Rakshasas get powerful at evening time! Ghatotkacha is from the Rakshasa family. The sun is setting now. So, stop the war."

Duryodhana stopped the war according to grandsire's instruction. The fourth day of the war was over. When Krishnadeva came to know that the Pandava army had taken unconscious Bhima to his pavilion he directly brought the Nandighosha chariot in front of Bhimsena's pavilion. He got down from the chariot while holding the wooden tube with medicinal powder in his hand. All Pandava soldiers greeted him and made way for him. Bhima was laid on a sheet and was unconscious. As soon as Krishnadeva entered the



pavilion he affectionately put Bhima's head in his lap. He held the tube of holy medicinal herbs in front of his nose.

After some time Bhimsena recovered. He sat up like a whale springing out of the western ocean. He immediately questioned, "Where is that scoundrel son of Dhritarashtra?" Then our Lord of Dwaraka gave him a pure smile and said, "He is in his pavilion! The war has stopped for the day. You are exhausted due to the fight with the elephants. Take rest. We will see him tomorrow." He forced Bhimsena to sleep in his lap again. Sometime later when Bhima began snoring he gently put his sweat-covered, round head down just like he would gently put down Balaramadada's head in his childhood when Balaramadada would go to sleep in his lap while grazing the cattle in Gokul. Without speaking anything with anybody he left for his pavilion. I followed him.

At night, as usual our council took place in Krishnadeva's pavilion. Our surveillance chief bowed down to Krishnadeva and presented the news that he had picked up from Bhishma's pavilion. Grandsire Bhishma was going to arrange the Makara - crocodile formation again tomorrow for the fifth day of the war.

Krishnadeva gave instructions to Bhimsena and other regiment leaders about how to arrange the army in the Shyena-hawk formation tomorrow. He wrapped up today's meeting a bit sooner. All regiment leaders touched his feet and left for their pavilions to rest for the night. I was also about to leave. At that time saying "Satyaki, you wait for some time" he made me wait. I could feel a bit more affection in his calling me 'Satyaki' today than usual. When all warriors had left, he asked me very lovingly, "Yadava commander, do you have any idea how many soldiers we have lost in the war so far?" I became alert. This question was unexpected. I answered, "No sire, no idea."

He got up from his seat and coming closer to me, putting his right arm on my left shoulder he said with a stable mind "Six *akshauhini* soldiers from both sides collectively – that is about fifteen lakh soldiers have got a hero's death in the battle. What must their families, their wives be feeling? *Sakha* Satyaki, in a war we lose control over everything. The end result of the war is only that, whatever is agreeable to Kala - Time. You act befitting a Yadava commander tomorrow in the hawk formation of our army. Go now, and have a good night's sleep."

While stepping out of his pavilion after touching his feet I strongly felt that he had made only me wait. And since the last four days of war for the first

time he had addressed me as '*Sakha*'. I convinced myself that it could be because I was the only senior Yadava at Kurukshetra who was close to him.

The sixth day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha dawned. At the sound of Krishnadeva's Panchjanya conch the hawk of our army collided against the crocodile of the Kaurava army, giving out loud war cries. Panchala son Shikhandi along with his *akshauhini* attacked Bhishmacharya and Chitrasena. At the centre of the army a fierce battle ensued between Acharya Drona and his disciple master archer Arjuna. Arjuna's quick movements got Guru Drona surrounded from all sides. So Kaurava commander Bhishma signalled Kalinga, Jayadratha and Shakuni with his conch to assault Arjuna with their armies. Bhima charged on Jayadratha. Yudhishtira began fighting with Madra king Shalya. From one wing of the hawk formation Sahadeva attacked Vikarna. From the other wing Dhrishtadyumna collided with the army of Kripacharya along with Nakula.

Along with my ten gallant sons, five on my right and five on my left I attacked Bhurishrava. His brothers Bhuri and Shala had protected him. This Bhurishrava was the son of Somadutta. He was the grandson of the great Kuru Balhika and *putanya* of grandsire Bhishma himself. He was a gutsy and invincible Kuru warrior in the duel of swords.

In the first assault, Bhurishrava vanquished my soldiers at the front with his potent Sarpamukha arrows. But my ten sons who were devoted to their father kept pushing forward while giving me protection. A tenacious bow and arrow fight ensued between them and Bhurishrava and his brothers. Keeping my chariot in the centre my ten sons kept fighting without getting tired for half an hour. Within moments they encircled Bhurishrava. My sons were determined to kill Bhurishrava by shooting arrows at him. But his skilled archer brothers Bhuri and Shala had given him a strong protective cover. After about an hour and a half, infuriated Bhurishrava commanded both his brothers to move aside and sprinted forward with his chariot like a crocodile springing out of the ocean. He was not only an invincible swordsman but also an expert archer well trained in *Dhanurveda* by Grandsire Bhishma himself. He acutely shot ten rapid-fire Sarpamukha arrows in quick succession at my ten sons. Those arrows pierced the chest of one, neck of another and directly pierced the heads of some. My ten obedient and valiant sons collapsed one by one. Some fell inside their chariots, some on the battleground. I was benumbed for a moment to witness that carnage. My heart, a father's heart, was shattered into a hundred pieces.

Witnessing the death of ten valiant sons collapsing one after the other was like a jolt of lightning to me. I flared up with anger right from my toes to the crown on my head. I was not going to get any relief till I killed Bhurishrava myself now. Controlling the tears in my eyes I put down the head of my eldest son on the battleground. Around him the soldiers had arranged the heads of my nine dead sons in a circle. I looked at each son's face for the last time. I intensely felt that at that moment I needed Srikrishnadeva, the Lord of Dwaraka, to console me. But he was at the other end on the other wing of the hawk, on the Nandighosha chariot of Arjuna who was fighting with Dronacharya.

“Bhurishrava, you scoundrel, this Yadava commander, Satyaka's son Satyaki declares that I will not rest until I kill you on the battlefield today! Hail Idamata!”, shouting thus I held my bow and mounted my chariot. The silent cry of my infuriated heart burning with vengeance broke out – ‘Bhurishrava... Bhurishrava...!’

In a fit of fury, I collided my chariot with Bhurishrava's and destroyed his chariot wheels first. His chariot broke. Thinking that as long as he was holding the bow and arrows in his hands, it was fair to hit him with an arrow as per the rules of war I told my charioteer to circle around his chariot. Bhurishrava realized my intention and immediately dropped down his bow. Holding a bare sword in his hand he jumped onto the battleground. Challenging me to a sword duel he said, “I have already killed your ten sons. You are the eleventh one, dear friend of the runaway leader of savage Yadavas, you coward who claims to be a gallant commander!”

Hearing those words my entire body seethed in anger. It didn't bother me that he had called me a coward, it didn't bother me that he called the Yadavas savage – I couldn't stand the fact that he had called my beloved Krishnadeva a ‘runaway’.

I also challenged him fiercely, “You descendant of the Kuru dynasty – a cajoler of Duryodhana who gave the loathsome command of undressing a royal lady in her menses in a crowded hall, today with the corpses of the ten sons that you killed as my witnesses, I will teach you a lesson!”

A duel of swords took place between us, clanging our wide-bladed swords. It continued even when the end of the fourth prahar was approaching.

Bhurishrava was not retreating – I was not going to back off in any case. Suddenly from among the spectators, blood-soaked Bhimsena emerged holding his mace on his shoulder and stood between us like a mountain. Our

duel came to a halt. I was not going to strike Bhimsena. He couldn't strike Bhimsena as Bhimsena was holding a mace and both of them didn't have the same weapon in their hands. Bhimsena patted my back saying, 'Let's go commander'. Bloody droplets of sweat flew from my sweaty back. Bhimsena took my sword in his hand and assisting me he took me in his chariot. The sun set. From the other end of the battleground, first the sound of the Panchjanya and then Ganganabha was heard declaring the end of the battle for the day.

While returning to my pavilion in Bhimsena's chariot now I came to realize why Krishnadeva had told only me to wait last night. Why he had called me '*Sakha*' with so much affection!

As I was mourning the deaths of my sons I did not attend the nightly meeting in Krishnadeva's pavilion. Benumbed, I stayed in my pavilion. Around midnight Krishnadeva himself came to meet me in my pavilion along with a Yadava soldier holding a torch.

Seeing him in person my heart ached with the agony of the death of my sons. Yet, I stood in my place to show him respect.

Without saying a word, he came close to me in the light of the torch. He opened both his arms and held me in a deep embrace. The warm tears flowing from my eyes in the agony of the death of my sons went streaming down his back. The hand of a stable-minded father of eighty sons was consoling the back of a father grief-stricken by the death of his ten sons. Just the touch of his hand had gently calmed my heart.

On the seventh day of the dark fortnight of Margashirsha, the sixth day of the war, Kuru commander, grandsire, organized his army in the Krauncha - heron formation. In response to that Commander Dhrishtadyumna had arranged the Pandava army in the shape of an arrow with the assistance of Bhimsena. The moment the first rays of Aruna, the charioteer of the Sun touched the horizon Krishnadeva blew his Panchjanya conch and grandsire blew his Ganganabha conch to commence the battle. Today Duryodhana was hell bent on destroying Bhimsena completely. Bhimsena had proved to be like a Kikar thorn in the foot of the Kuru army as he had killed more than twenty of Duryodhana's brothers. Within moments, along with his ten brothers, he besieged the chariot of Bhimsena that his charioteer Vishoka had brought forward. Those included rathis like Dushasana, Durvishaha, Dusaha, Durmada, Jaya, Jayasena, Vikarna, Charumitra, Durdharsha, and Suvarma. Bhimsena who had consumed pots of Maireyaka wine in the moving chariot

and who was possessed by the war spirit just jumped onto the battleground brandishing his huge mace with berry red eyes. More than the intoxication of the wine the sight of ten sons of Dhritarashtra made him go berserk. An exciting, thrilling group fight of maces began between him and the sons of Dhritarashtra.

Sleepless, I was awake throughout last night. In front of my open eyes the faces of my ten dead sons kept revolving one after the other. Many of their memories had flooded my heart.

At early dawn, I bathed in Brahma sarovar and directly went to the pavilion of Krishnadeva. Dressed in a charioteer's costume, holding a whip in his hand Krishnadeva was about to leave his pavilion. As I was touching his feet he gently pulled me up and patting my shoulders he said to me, "*Sakha* Satyaki, looks like you did not sleep at all last night. I know the pain in your heart. Do not worry." By now I was quite used to reading between the lines of his speech. His words reassured me.

Today a really close fight took place between Acharya Drona and Panchala king Drupada. Dhrishtadyumna approached Bhimsena in his chariot to support him while skilfully avoiding the carcasses of elephants on his way. Bhimsena was surrounded by the sons of Dhritarashtra. He was unwaveringly fighting the mace war. Realizing that Duryodhana's brothers, like outraged red ants, were going to kill Bhimsena, Dhrishtadyumna used an astra called Sammohanastra for the first time in the war. The arrows he shot released such torrents of smoke that after inhaling it the sons of Dhritarashtra lost their consciousness and collapsed one after the other. They lay motionless. Dronacharya came to their assistance in his tall embellished chariot. Launching Prajnastra with the first set of arrows he dissipated the smoke of Dhrishtadyumna's Sammohanastra. With the next set of Agnibana arrows he dispersed a fragrance of divine herbs and brought the brothers of Duryodhana lying motionless, back to consciousness. Today Dronacharya had become uncontrollable, being possessed by the war spirit. Even mighty powerful mace warrior Bhima and Pandava commander Dhrishtadyumna couldn't face him for long. They blew specific tunes of their conches and called Arjuna's young son Abhimanyu for help. Subhadra's son Abhimanyu surrounded by twelve rathis came to assist them. First, valiant Abhimanyu climbed down on the battleground and managed to get Bhima into his chariot by pleading and praying. Other rathis helped Dhrishtadyumna get into another chariot. The evening was approaching now.

Today Bhurishrava and I fought many duels with a variety of weapons. Seeing that the evening was approaching Bhurishrava caught hold of a wide-bladed bare sword and got down from his chariot. Throwing me a challenge of a sword duel he shouted, “You, so called Yadava commander who is a runaway coward like Krishna, you were saved yesterday because of Bhimsena. Let me see who comes to save you today!” Hearing the electrifying sounds of the clanging of our swords the soldiers around us stopped fighting and assumed the role of spectators. Shouting ‘Hail Goddess Ida’, I resolutely began fighting with Bhurishrava. Neither one of us was surrendering or backing off. Both our bodies were bathed in blood due to the strikes of swords on each other. Neither one of us was aware that our blood mixed with our sweat was getting offered like oblations on the battleground of Kurukshetra. And a moment came when severely wounded I knelt down on the battleground. My sword had slipped out of my hands and fallen at a distance. Quickly grabbing this opportunity Bhurishrava raised his blood soaked wide-bladed sword to behead unarmed me. I realized what was going to happen the next moment. Closing my eyes, from the bottom of my heart I remembered Krishnadeva whom I had followed like a shadow and served my whole life. Now the next moment Bhurishrava’s sword was going to fall upon my neck and cut my head off. In front of my closed but alert eyes was only charioteer Krishnadeva, holding the whip in his hands.

That moment passed by, the next and the next moment also passed by. I heard a loud thud on the ground and opened my eyes at once. Krishnadeva himself was standing in front of me in the Nandighosha chariot holding the whip in his hand just the way I had envisioned him. In the back of the Nandighosha chariot Arjuna holding his Gandiva bow stood smiling at me. The Kapi on the pennant of his chariot was fluttering on the wind in the soaring position. Krishnasakha Arjuna had shot a potent Chandramukha arrow and cut off Bhurishrava’s raised arm holding the sword with which he was about to cut off my head! That day I returned to my pavilion in the Nandighosha chariot itself. Before Bhurishrava could break the rule of engagement Arjuna had cut off his hand on the prompt signal given by Krishnadeva.

In our nightly meeting, we heard the news from the Kuru camp that in their nightly meeting which had taken place under the leadership of Grandsire Bhishma, Duryodhana had created a big scene. He had raised an objection that Arjuna who called himself a master archer had broken a rule of

engagement by shooting an arrow at Bhurishrava from behind. He wanted a royal envoy to be promptly dispatched to the Pandava camp and wanted severe action to be taken in case of Arjuna, forcing him to retire from the war.

The experienced and senior Kuru commander grandsire listened to his tantrums calmly for a long time and then answered, “When ten sons of Dhritarashtra first surrounded Bhimsena who was alone and started the group war of mace, that itself was against the rules of engagement. You yourself led that attack Duryodhana. Would you be the first one to retire from the war? Besides, Bhurishrava was going to kill unarmed Satyaki. Didn’t Arjuna stop him from breaking that rule?” Hearing that, an upset Duryodhana had left the meeting in frustration. Hearing that news, a fleeting smile flashed on Krishnadeva’s face.

Yudhishtira organized our army in the Vajra formation with the assistance of Dhrishtadyumna on the seventh day of war. This formation was in the shape of the well-known Vajra weapon of Indra, the king of Gods. In response to that grandsire had arranged the Kuru army in a Mandal formation – the shape of a circle.

At the frontal serrated sharp edge of our Vajra formation Bhimsena’s son Ghatotkacha and I stood guard today. Behind us, in the central part of the Vajra, Matsya king Virata and Panchalaa king Drupad stood guard with Arjuna and the army. The tail end of the Vajra was occupied by warriors such as Arjuna’s son Iravana, Chekitana, Nakula and Sahadeva. Today Bhimsena was going to guard the edges of the Vajra moving throughout the army, roaring loudly in his chariot with seven copper coloured swift horses, with the assistance of charioteer Vishoka.

Our army’s serrated sharp-edged Vajra fell upon grandsire’s army standing in a circle, with a roaring sound. From amongst the leading Kauravas Bakasura’s brother, Rakshasa Alambusha collided with me and Ghatotkacha. Alambusha was proficient in the deceptive war technique of the Rakshasas. In a moment, he was seen along with his chariot on the east side and the next moment he would appear on the west side of the army. He would run his chariot from south to north while fighting. The fight between Alambusha and me went on resolutely till noon. Skilfully breaking my protective cover given by the army of Ghatotkacha, Alambusha pushed him in front of Bhagadutta.

At the centre of both the armies, ferocious fights between Drona and Virata, Vinda-Anuvinda and Iravana, grandsire Bhishma and Bhima-Arjuna took

place. Realizing that the tenacious fighter, Narakasura's son Bhagadutta, was getting out of control, Ghatotkacha shot a Mayavee Shakti at him. *Asura* son Bhagadutta broke it into three pieces and dropped them on the battlefield. Seeing that Ghatotkacha got terrified and leaving the battlefield started running towards the camp. Narakasura's son Bhagadutta had forgotten the favour that Krishnadeva had done him in the past and had participated in the war from the Kauravas' side. The sun of the seventh day set, witnessing Bhima's son running away from the battlefield. The war stopped.

So far, this Great War had taken place on different battlefields of Kurukshetra. The detailed information of the daily encounters on the different battlefields during the last seven days was being reported daily to Hastinapura, Dwaraka, and also to the royal cities of other kingdoms nearby through informers. In Hastinapura, first of all it was conveyed to Kuru minister Sanjaya – the charioteer chief. He would then convey it to his blind Maharaj Dhritarashtra and Gandharidevi with detailed description. So far about forty sons of Dhritarashtra had been killed. Most of them were killed by Bhimsena alone. While hearing their names and the news of their death blind Maharaj Dhritarashtra would get furious with Bhima and tremble with anger.

The eighth and ninth day of war witnessed sky-high valour of Bhishma alone. On the eighth day, he arranged his army in a Mahavyuha formation. Our commander Dhrishtadyumna responded to that by an intricate Shringataka-horn formation. During the first prahar of the eighth day itself Bhimsena killed Duryodhana's brothers Sunabha, Aadityaketu, Panditaka, Mahodara, Aparajita, Vishalaksha, Bavhashi and such whom he had sent to protect grandsire Bhishma with their lives. Uloopi and Arjuna's son Iravana proved his grit on the eighth day.

On the ninth day, the Kuroo commander, grandsire Bhishma, organized his army in the Sarvatobhadra formation and standing at the front line of his army he blew his divine Ganganabha conch. He had performed incredible feats of valour during the last eight days destroying three *akshauhini* army of the Pandavas. But except for the death of Virata's sons Uttara and Shweta on the first day not a single one of the prominent Pandava warriors was killed. That is why Bhishma himself was dissatisfied with his performance as the commander, and therefore the sound of his conch was so terrifying today that just by hearing it Krishnadeva surmised that no one will be able to control grandsire today. And that is exactly what happened. In just one day by



evening along with maharathes like Dronacharya, Duryodhan, Susharma and Bhagadutt, grandsire slaughtered one *akshauhini* army of the Pandavas. Terrified by the thought that if grandsire isn't controlled the Pandava army will be completely annihilated, all four brothers of Arjuna gathered around his Nandighosha chariot. I also took my chariot closer to Nandighosha. Great Pandava Yudhishtira put his

bow down and joining both his hands pleaded to Krishnadeva, "Oh Great Yadavaa, now only you can save the Pandava army."

Seeing that Pandava commander Dhrishtadyumna who was terrified of grandsire Bhishma's valour in the battlefield was also approaching the Nandighosha chariot Krishnadeva gave a special signal to his four obedient horses Shaibya, Balahaka, Meghapushpa, and Sugriva and brought the Nandighosha chariot in front of grandsire's Gangaugha chariot.

During the last eight days Krishnadeva had never given out any inspiring war slogan. Not even of Goddess Ida whom he hailed regularly! But at this moment Krishnadeva was also astounded to see master archer *Dhananjaya* remain idle, just holding his Gandiva bow in his hands in spite of coming in front of grandsire. Pulling the eight reins in his hands he steered Nandighosha chariot quickly around the Gangaugha chariot and for the first time protruding the veins in his throat he shouted 'Hail Goddess Ida.... Attack'. Still Arjuna didn't move. While controlling his beloved horses Krishnadeva reminded him, "*Partha*, have you forgotten my advice given before the commencement of the war so soon? Are you afraid of grandsire's potent arrows or what is it?"

Arjuna simply nodded in negation. But he still did not pick up his Gandiva bow. He had got confused again. He was debilitated due to his attachment! Now it was imperative to awaken the fighting spirit in him with actual action and not by using any words. Krishnadeva resolutely said to him, "Fine then. For the sake of grandsire, I broke my vow to not hold any weapon in my hands. It seems that I will have to break it again for you too!"

Putting down the reins in his hand the Lord of Dwaraka held the whip in his hand and leaped down onto the land of Kurukshetra.

Now master archer Arjuna got really baffled. He also left his Gandiva bow in the chariot and jumped down. Spreading both his arms and blocking the way of great Aarya Krishnadeva who was running furiously towards the chariot of grandsire he pleaded, "Hrishikeshaa, wait! Please don't break your

vow. Tomorrow I will fight with grandsire determinedly!”

While hearing those words the sun set on the ninth day on the battleground of Kurukshetra.

Grandsire smilingly watched all the commotion that went on between Krishnadeva and Arjuna. He put down his bow in the Gangaugha chariot and bringing his palms together in prayer the warrior-sun among both armies prayed to the setting sun.

Krishnadeva wrapped up the nightly council quickly today after giving instructions for the tenth day to all regiment leaders. As all Pandavas were leaving the pavilion he said only to Arjuna, “Arjuna, wait. I want to talk to you about something!”

Obedient Arjuna waited. He was preparing himself for a severe admonition. So Krishnadeva got up from his seat, went close to him, put his right arm on his muscular shoulder and patting him, said, “Don’t worry. I am not going to ask you now, how come you were confused again. Just do one thing. You go to the royal ladies’ camp in person right away and tell *Sakhi* Draupadi to come and meet me!”

Saying ‘Yes Aarya’, Arjuna left. I was also about to leave, wondering ‘What could a woman do in war?’ He stopped me also and said, “*Sakha* Satyaki, you have to wait for some time. You have to fulfil a duty – as a Yadava commander!”

Within a moment many thoughts flashed through my mind – What could it be? Which formation is he going to tell Dhrishtadyumna to arrange for tomorrow? What will be my responsibility in that?

There, infuriated Duryodhana had stormed into Kuru commander Bhishma’s pavilion in a frenzy along with Shakuni and Dushasana. To ask him only one thing – why did he leave confused Arjuna alive, while he was standing in front of him?

Grandsire had finished his evening rituals and was meditating in the inner chamber of his pavilion. Duryodhana discourteously summoned grandsire outside through a servant. Speaking in his usual haughty, arrogant way he said, “Grandsire, is this a war or just an entertaining cock fight going on? It’s been nine days. Bhima and Arjuna have slaughtered more than half our army. More than fifty of my brothers have died on the battlefield. But not a single Pandava has got even a scratch of an arrow on their body? What is this? Have you forgotten your duty as a commander due to your love for the Pandavas? Or is this just a stroke of my bad luck? I have come here to request you that if

you cannot give up your love for the Pandavas then resign from the commandership. Then we can summon world conqueror Karna, the king of Anga and appoint him as our commander. I am confident that he will bring victory to us for sure. What should I do? Please feel free to speak your mind openly.”

Hearing his words determined grandsire Bhishma who was renowned for his feats, was saddened. Still, controlling himself he advised Duryodhana with extreme patience as Krishnadeva had advised Arjuna, saying, “Duryodhanaa, you are making a mistake in knowing Krishna and Arjuna. You have forgotten that I myself addressed Krishna as ‘Vaasudeva’ very thoughtfully. As an experienced elder I am telling you, return the Indraprastha kingdom to the Pandavas! That will be beneficial for all.”

Duryodhana discarded grandsire’s wise advice like the ocean in high tide repels even the waters of Ganga. He said, “That time is well past. I have lost more than six *akshauhini* of my army in the war. Are you going to resign as the commander or are you going to wholeheartedly fight for the undoubted victory of the Kauravas?” That insolent son of Dhritarashtra straightaway accused the grandsire of being guilty.

This was rather too much to bear for the disciple of Parashurama who was veracious, master of the Brahmastra and celibate throughout his life. To make sure that Duryodhana left his pavilion as soon as possible, grandsire Bhishma said very calmly and determinedly, “Tomorrow I will annihilate all Pandavas! Or else I will offer my own body as a sacrifice in the *Yajna* of this war! You may go.”

After all it was ‘Bhishma’s vow’! It couldn’t remain a secret for long. Riding on the winds it reached the pavilion of Krishnadeva. I noticed that hearing that news he became restless like never before. There was only one question in front of him now. That was of protecting all the Pandavas including Arjuna. And if need be, of killing Grandsire Bhishma!

The midnight of the ninth day was approaching. Draupadidevi who had received the message through Arjuna arrived in the Nandighosha chariot driven by Daruka and descended in front of Krishnadeva’s pavilion. As soon as he saw her, Deva said in his usual loving tone, “*Sakhi* Draupadi, at this moment you have to carry out a big task to protect your husbands and the Pandava army! You have to leave immediately with our Satyaki to meet Kuru commander grandsire Bhishma. Take only one precaution while going there. Make sure that your face will be covered with your shawl while seeking

grandsire's blessings. Due to old age, he won't be able to see your face clearly in the dim light of the torches. You have to take only one precaution, not to speak a single word before he says anything to you. Don't forget to make a clear tingling sound of your golden bangles when you bend down to seek his blessings. Once he speaks you will automatically know what to say next!"

As per the command I left with Draupadidevi towards the pavilion of Kuru commander grandsire Bhishma. I was given strict instructions to wait outside the pavilion and tell grandsire's guard only that 'a lady wishes to meet grandsire'.

The chirping sounds of crickets echoed around the battleground of Kurukshetra. The hooting of owls could be heard in between. Far away the cries of jackals and wolves that were clawing at the organs of human bodies were audible. As decided, when we came closer to grandsire Bhishma's pavilion I delivered the message to the guard of the Kuru commander and waited outside. Draupadidevi covered her face with her shawl and went inside. As the guard gave him the message, muscular, virtuous commander Bhishma came out from the inner chamber wondering 'A lady? To meet me? On the battlefield? Who could she be?' In the dim light of the torches Draupadidevi scurried and bowed down to seek the blessings of the disciple of Parashurama making clear tinkling sounds of her golden bangles three times.

Words of blessing slipped out of the sublime mouth of veracious, celibate grandsire, 'May you be a Saubhagyavati - fortunate to enjoy married life forever. May you have a long life!'

Even I could hear his words standing outside. I pricked my ears with curiosity to hear what Draupadidevi was going to say now.

Draupadidevi said in her clear and strong words to grandsire, "Grandsire, today itself you have taken a vow to annihilate all Pandavas. And just now you have blessed me to be a Saubhagyavati forever. Forgive me if I sound disrespectful as I am younger to you in age. Which of these words of veracious grandsire are the true words?" The gallant warrior who looked like a snow-clad tall Deodar tree looked at his grand daughter-in-law Draupadidevi who had removed the shawl from her face and smiling pleasantly he said, "The blessing that I have given you is real. Convey only one message of mine to Krishna, that I am extremely happy that I have given him the perfect epithet of 'Vaasudeva'. Draupadi, this is Bhishma's promise

– that you will remain a Saubhagyavati forever!!

“To keep your husbands safe, tell Krishna only one thing, take the Panchala son Shikhandi who has a woman’s soul in a man’s body, on the Nandighosha chariot tomorrow as Arjuna’s protection. The whole world knows that Bhishma the disciple of Parashurama, the son of Shantanu and Ganga would never shoot an arrow at a woman.

“Go, Draupadi, the manliness of Shikhandi, whom you and your brothers ridiculed as effeminate and unmanly is going to be Arjuna’s protective shield tomorrow!” That great Kuru raised his hand and with a broad smile on his face blessed Draupadi, his grand-daughter-in-law, wife of Pandavas.

Draupadidevi who was speechless and overwhelmed with emotions on hearing that again touched the feet of the tall Kuru commander.

I returned to Krishnadeva’s pavilion with Draupadidevi. While coming back only one thought lingered in my mind – even if the Pandavas would have spent a whole night in a meeting along with all regiment leaders, would they have come up with such a simple solution to the problem of voracious, long-armed Bhishma who was like a storming ocean and had set his heart on performing incredible valiant feats?

At that hour of midnight, I had to go to Panchala son Shikhandi’s pavilion also, as per Krishnadeva’s command. I took him along with me and presented him to the Pandava-charioteer. Then for a long time the great Yadava discussed the details of tomorrow’s war and advised Shikhandi in his own Krishna style on how to handle things the next day.

The tenth day of war appeared on the eastern horizon of Kurukshetra. Today grandsire Bhishma let Krishnadeva blow his renowned Panchjanya conch making a divine sound, to his heart’s content. He filled his ears with its inspirational sound.

One after the other, the inspirational sound waves of the Panchjanya conch which soldiers of both the armies had never heard before kept rising. With that sound of the Panchjanya the battleground of Kurukshetra resonated in a unique way like never before during the last nine days. While blowing the Panchjanya conch Krishnadeva’s blue face reddened. Tears collected on the long thick lashes of his fish-shaped eyes due to the force of blowing the conch. I clearly saw him wipe those tears with the shawl on his chest. Such a thing had not happened with him before on the battleground of Kurukshetra.

After quite some time, in response to Panchjanya’s sound, Grandsire Bhishma blew his Ganganabha conch just barely audible to the Kuru soldiers.

Today while giving him protection, selected Kuru warriors like Drona, Kripa, Duryodhana, Ashwatthama, Jayadratha and Bhagadutta charged at the Pandava army. At the front line of our army, Shikhandi standing with his bow could be seen today between Krishnadeva and master archer *Dhananjaya*. Along with my army I fell upon the left wing of grandsire's army supported by Drona's son Ashwatthama. Abhimanyu attacked Duryodhana. At the centre of the battlefield thrilling duels ensued between Virata and Jayadratha, Yudhishthira and Shalya, and Dhrishtadyumna and Shakuni. Roaring loudly and wildly Bhimsena fell upon the elephantry of the Kurus.

Today in the Nandighosha chariot Arjuna, Shikhandi and Krishnadeva began making inconceivable and swift movements. An incredibly intense and catastrophic battle ensued between grandsire Bhishma and Arjuna. The blazing sun on Kurukshetra was overcast by the showers of arrows shot by both of them like the rain showers of Mriga. Seeing a line of arrows shot by grandsire targeting Arjuna, iron-armoured Shikhandi would quickly cover Arjuna by putting himself in between. Seeing him in the line of target grandsire would lower his bow and stop shooting arrows. Shikhandi grabbed that opportunity unerringly and killed grandsire's charioteer first with six Naracha arrows. With the next set of arrows, he broke grandsire's Taladhwaja pennant and with the third set of arrows eunuch Shikhandi destroyed the macho grandsire Bhishma's bow completely. That mighty old man quickly picked up another bow. He put arrows like Suchi, Jidma and Chandramukha which required different skills and pressures to shoot, on his bowstring at the same time. Realizing that in spite of Shikhandi being his cover Arjuna had no hopes now Krishnadeva signalled his four obedient horses to lift the entire front portion of Nandighosha chariot in the air. As the chariot was lifted from the front, Arjuna and Shikhandi disappeared from grandsire's view. Smiling to himself grandsire took his bow down instead of shooting the arrows at Arjuna. Krishnadeva had demonstrated an unimaginable feat with the help of his trained horses. He was not just an ingenious orator, but also an expert charioteer who indeed could make all his white horses dance to his tune with the slightest pressure of the reins in his hands.

Today, the thrilling war between Bhishma and Arjuna was so breath-taking that even Maharathis like Jayadratha, Shalya and Bhagadutta stopped their fights and watched it all agape.

The evening was approaching. Now grandsire Bhishma started looking like

a fully blossomed red *Palash* tree on the inclines of Mount Aravali in summer. In the Nandighosha chariot the charioteer and Shikhandi were perfectly safe. Only a few fleeting arrows had pierced Arjuna's blue body. When Shikhandi got an opportunity, he pulled them out and threw them on the ground. He quickly put medicinal herbs on the wounds. Draupadi's husband was safe and secure indeed.

When the sun touched the western horizon Arjuna shot two sets of ten different arrows like Sarpamukha, Suchi, Kankapatra, Bastika, Naracha and Shilimukha, showering them on Grandsire Bhishma. Some of those arrows broke through the iron armour and pierced his chest. Grandsire Bhishma whose bow was destroyed, charioteer was killed, who had many arrows pierced in his valiant body, who looked like a blood-soaked radiant sun disc on the western horizon, collapsed from his chariot onto the battleground! It was a meadow of 'Shara' grass where he collapsed. Seeing him fall down in front of the setting sun the news spread in the Kuru army – commander Grandsire Bhishma has fallen on the Shara meadows.

As the very first commander of the Kurus fell on the ground there was havoc in the Kuru army. Soldiers of both armies dropped their weapons to the ground and got around in long lines to take a last look at the aged, gallant commander. I also followed Krishnadeva along with all the Pandavas to see grandsire. He was calmly lying on the bed of the Shara grass. As soon as he saw Krishnadeva he said in a feeble voice, "Come here Vaasudevaa!" Krishnadeva who had brought me and the five Pandavas along with him sat in the Virasana pose next to him on the Shara grass. The son of Ganga affectionately held the right arm of the Lord of Dwaraka sitting in the Virasana pose and said to the son of Yamuna, "Vaasudevaa, whatever you wish will happen! Don't worry. I won't leave my body right now. Just like you are, I am also the devotee of the Sun. I will leave my body only when the sun starts moving towards the summer solstice from the winter solstice!"

Krishnadeva lovingly pressed grandsire's hand in his hand and said, "It will be fifty-six days more till the sun's position moves towards summer solstice. Oh, long-armed son of Ganga, I know why you are waiting for the sun to start moving towards the summer solstice, but it is essential that all these warriors who are here to see you, should also know about it. Therefore, you should explain it to all."

Grandsire who had become feeble due to continuous bleeding smiled slightly and said, "Oh son of Yamuna, you only explain why this son of

Ganga is waiting for that moment. Bestow your grace on me Vaasudevaa to hear your melodious speech at this moment!” That gallant warrior had borne many arrows from Arjuna during the day, but this arrow of Krishnadeva he reverted back towards him!

All the assembled warriors got to hear every word of Bhishma on the deathbed from Vaasudeva’s mouth.

Krishnadeva said, “Every human body has two poles – the south and the north. The south pole is in the lower part of the body below the waist where the apparently unsanctified but essential job of excreting faeces and urine is carried out. In the north pole of the body is the brain controlling the seventy-two thousand Nadis in the body – the holy abode of the intellect.

“In this north pole of the body the Brahmarandhra is located which has been considered holy by sages, which has also been experienced by them.

“Grandsire wants to draw the vital energy in his lower body from his toes to the crown of his head and unite it with the Sun’s energy. And he wants to do it only after the Sun starts its journey towards summer solstice! Am I correct, oh disciple of Parashurama?”

“Sudarshanaa, how can you be wrong? Do one thing now. Make arrangements for my meeting with Karna, the king of Anga who has been sitting inactive in his pavilion for the last ten days because I called him an ardhharathi. I have to tell him something in private.”

“As you wish grandsire!” Krishnadeva gently let go of his hand and got up. He put his head on grandsire’s feet for a few moments. He began walking towards his pavilion along with all of us. While leaving, he instructed Dhrishtadyumna, “Commander, arrange for armed guards for the protection of grandsire until he doesn’t leave his body. Take enough precaution so that wounded grandsire will not be bothered by wild beasts.”

‘Your wish is my command, oh Lord of Dwaraka’ said Dhrishtadyumna and stayed behind to make the necessary arrangements.

As decided, I had to convey grandsire’s message to Karna, the king of Anga.

Munificent Karna met grandsire sometime in the night and went back to his pavilion. Neither I nor anybody else ever came to know what both of them conversed about. That was because grandsire had told the armed guards to go away and met Karna in complete privacy.

Now *maharathi*, world conqueror Karna, the master of Brahmastra was going to participate in the war! He was indeed capable of recovering the loss



of military strength in the Kuru army due to grandsire's fall.

In our nightly meeting, there was a long discussion about doing something before the eleventh day broke out and Karna entered the battlefield. Everybody gave their own suggestions. The Lord of Dwaraka heard all of them without saying anything. He let everybody take his leave after the meeting. As usual to make me stay behind he said, "*Sakha* Satyaki, you stay here." I obeyed his command. I started wondering what my next responsibility was going to be.

I was standing in front of him. He was sitting on his seat. Quite some time passed by like this. Then making a firm decision he said, "Commander, take Daruka and the Nandighosha chariot with you and go to the Pandava royal ladies' camp. You have to fetch Kunti *aatya* urgently, get her in the chariot and bring her here along with you!"

'Yes Sire' I said and left the pavilion. A strange thought came to my mind and I was baffled. Is Krishnadeva going to put Kuntidevi in Arjuna's chariot and in front of Karna like he put Shikhandi today in front of Bhishma? In spite of being so close to him for so many days I couldn't figure out what he was going to do.

Ruminating on many such thoughts and trying to guess I went to the Pandava royal ladies' camp. I paid obeisance to Kuntidevi and brought her in the Nandighosha chariot to Krishnadeva's pavilion.

The Pandavas' mother was just as confused as I was. As soon as she came she said to her favourite *bhacha*, "Krishna, how come my valiant sons need me today when you are present here in person? Is everything okay?" Hearing that, Hrishikesha smiled and said, "What is the use of my being here? I cannot be somebody's mother! All your sons are safe so far. I wish they remain so in future. Therefore, you have to carry out an important task which will change the course of this battle.

"Tomorrow your firstborn son Karna, the king of Anga is entering the battlefield for the first time. You know as well as I that including Bhima and Arjuna not a single one of your five sons would be able to survive in front of his accumulated valour.

"He has taken a vow to kill Arjuna. Will you or I be able to live without Arjuna? That is why you have to make your heart stronger and do one thing leaving the pride of a Kshatriya lady aside."

"What should I do?" Kuntidevi stuttered while staring at her *bhacha* with dilated eyes.

“Karna has left Kurukshetra already to bathe in Ganga for the last time. You will have to catch up with him on the banks of Ganga before he returns after offering the *Arghya*, as a common supplicant– for that you have to leave right away with Satyaki towards the banks of Ganga!”

Perplexed Rajmata Kuntidevi kept staring at her *bhacha*. She couldn’t help but ask, “I have to go to my son as a supplicant?”

“Yes...! If you want your five sons including Arjuna alive then you have to go as a supplicant. To the munificent Karna! Right now!”

Kuntidevi was lost in thought for some time. Then she made up her mind and looking at me she said, “Come Yadava commander, I am ready to go with you!”

I left Rajmata Kuntidevi in her pavilion after she got the promise as decided from munificent Karna to spare the lives of at least four of her sons except Arjuna and entered the battlefield.

Acharya Drona who was appointed as the new commander during the night mounted his chariot on the eleventh day. Duryodhana who had entered his pavilion at night after meeting grandsire had said, “Oh acharya! You are *Dhanurveda* incarnate. You are the possessor of qualities such as carefulness, gratitude, success and indomitable valour. You are like Kapali among the Rudras, Pavaka among the Vasus. In *Yajna* you can be compared to only Kubera. You are just like Indra among immortal kings. You are as erudite as Vasishtha among the Vipras. You are as respected as Shukracharya among the Daityas and YamaDharma among the Pitaras!” Duryodhana did not leave a single adjective of praise for his commander and acharya Guru Drona.

In the end, he joined both his palms, leaned forward and with mock humility said only one thing, “Acharya, I wish to see Yudhishtira, who claims to be the Prince of the Kurus and therefore demands his right over the thrones of Hastinapura and Indraprastha, captured alive and brought in front of me tomorrow!”

“He should not be killed. It will infuriate Bhima and Arjuna uncontrollably. Even the rest of the Kaurava army would not be able to survive in front of them then.”

Gandhara king Shakuni standing behind Duryodhana fixed his sharp, light brown eyes on Drona and said, “Commander should capture the eldest Pandava alive and present him to us. I will vex and compel him to play the game of dice again. We will win everything that is his and send him to the forest again!”

Guru Drona couldn't bear Shakuni's senseless rambling and simply ignored him. He reassured Duryodhana by saying, "Duryodhanaa, when Arjuna won't be with him I will grab that opportunity and capture Yudhishtira alive."

Our commander Dhrishtadyumna came to know about Dronacharya's vow. He became alert. During the night, we had decided in Krishnadeva's pavilion that all of us will guard Yudhishtira with our lives. He had entrusted the main responsibility of this to me with the support of Virata, Drupada, Kekaya, Vyaghradutta and Sinhasena.

The eleventh day of war dawned. To lead the Kaurava army Guru Drona stood in front of us determinedly with the triangular saffron pennant of the Kurus. Drona! He was indeed a master of all shastras and astras. The Kuru army that was shattered due to Bhishma's fall on the tenth day again became combative to see Drona assuming the position of the commander and vehemently began shouting war cries.

For the first time, today, Karna had entered the battlefield as the head of the chariot regiment under the leadership of Drona. As he was the tallest of all he looked splendid like the soaring peak of the Himalayan Mount Kailasa, in his shining pure golden Jaitra chariot embellished with vines and creepers. His fine saffron royal pennant with the emblem of an elephant's chain was fluttering on the wind.

Today the Kuru commander Acharya Drona fell upon Yudhishtira first. As per Krishnadeva's instruction I went to assist him along with the strong file of Virata, Drupada, Kekaya, Vyaghradutta and Sinhasena. But Drona was indeed uncontrollable today. With two precise Bhalla arrows he tossed the heads of Vyaghradutta and Sinhasena in the sky. Like the God of Death himself Drona stood in front of Yudhishtira's chariot. The Pandava soldiers around him who had heard of his vow were terrified to see the intensity of his war fever and started screaming, "Eldest Pandava Dharmaraja is surrounded. He is going to be captured now! Drona is going to kill him! Run...help...!"

Hearing their loud bawling valiant Arjuna pleaded with Krishnadeva to protect his elder brother, "Madhava, take the Nandighosha chariot in front of Acharya Drona first."

On hearing that, our Lord of Dwaraka who was his unarmed charioteer smiled wholeheartedly. During the course of the war so far, for the first time today Arjuna had unknowingly commanded his charioteer how to steer the chariot! Krishnadeva had smilingly obeyed his command as a charioteer.

Not just today but so long as Karna with his potent valour like a latent

volcano was going to move unobstructed in the battlefield, it was dangerous to take Arjuna in front of him. That is why through me he had instructed Bhimsena to strike Karna. It was while witnessing the relentless battle between the two of them that the eleventh day of the war ended.

On the twelfth day, the Sanshaptakas who had vowed to kill or be killed, besieged Arjuna. As I was going towards him with my Yadava army to help, he himself imploringly signalled me to go and protect *Dharma*. As I knew about the vow of the Sanshaptakas I began looking at his Nandighosha chariot in confusion. Immediately I came to know that the signal was inspired by Krishnadeva. He was pointing the whip in his hand towards Yudhishtira and ordering me to go there.

Along with Panchala warrior Satyajita, and Virata's sons Shatanika and Vasudana I began fighting with all my might to protect Yudhishtira from Drona. But today Drona was indeed so uncontrollable that nobody could stop him. Within moments he had beheaded all three of them in front of my eyes.

At that time Bhimsena had fallen upon the elephantry regiment of the Kurus which was under the leadership of Karna. He hysterically struck many elephants with his heavy mace one after the other and smashed their heads. He actually exhibited the power of a thousand elephants in his arms. The collapsing, roaring elephants raised clouds of dust.

Arjuna fought with the Sanshaptakas ferociously. Proving their vow void, first he killed Sudhanwa. Then he beheaded Susharma along with his five brothers.

Krishnadeva was overjoyed with Arjuna's valiant feat and rushed the Nandighosha chariot towards Yudhishtira for his protection. Here Narakasura's son Bhagadutta had surrounded Yudhishtira and confined him from all sides.

Bhagadutta was an *Asura*. His thick, long eyebrows would actually hang over his eyelashes covering his eyes. To curb that obstruction in his vision he had tied his eyebrows with a strip of cloth around his forehead.

Krishnadeva was the only one who knew this weakness of that *asura*. He told Arjuna to tear off that strip of cloth first. Arjuna succeeded in doing that with just one arrow. As the strip of cloth was torn off, his thick eyebrows fell upon Bhagadutta's eyes. It made Kurukshetra barely visible for him as if he was looking at it through the strip of cloth. He got distracted. He couldn't figure out how to control his bow and brows both at the same time. Meanwhile *Dhananjaya* shot a crescent moon-shaped arrow at the temple of

his elephant. The mammoth elephant collapsed. Then Bhagadutta who had fallen on the ground got up and started running while holding the bow in his hands. After the killing of Narakasura, Krishnadeva had offered him the kingdom of Pragjyotishapura and had requested him to assist the Pandavas at the right time. He had forgotten that.

Arjuna shot one more Chandramukha arrow and beheaded him. Seeing that, Shakuni was furious and charged at Arjuna along with his staunch Gandhara soldiers. Arjuna launched an Astra for the first time today. He launched the Aditya Astra and chased away Shakuni along with his Gandhara army. In a raging battle Ashwatthama killed King Neela.

Around the time when evening was approaching Karna's Jaitra chariot came in front of Arjuna for the first time today. Both of them barely got a chance to shoot arrows at each other. On the holy land of Kurukshetra from the Nandighosha chariot itself Krishnadeva joined his hands and looking at the setting sun with a smile he chanted the *Savitru* mantra. At the same time, Karna, a devotee of the Sun was also chanting the same *Savitru* mantra on his Jaitra chariot with his hands joined in prayer and eyes closed. The lord of the sky, the Sun god set after accepting both prayers.

At night, the usual meeting of all regiment leaders took place in Krishnadeva's capacious pavilion in the light of burning torches. Everyone was extremely worried. The news that our surveillance chief had gathered from the Kuru camp was indeed alarming. In the Kuru commander's pavilion Duryodhana had admonished Commander Drona in front of all, discarding all the proprieties of their sacred relationship "Within twelve days we have lost twelve lakh soldiers, and yet not a single Pandava is dead! More than half of brothers have been killed but not a single Pandava has got even a scratch! You made me a promise that you will capture Yudhishtira alive. Then what is going on? Is this a war or a feast for Vishnuyaga *yajna*? Oh, Guru Drona... if your bow is incapable of slaying the Pandavas then hand over the royal pennant on your royal chariot to Karna tomorrow! We will fight the war in our own way!"

Guru Drona who could not bear the harsh words of ignominy got up from his seat and took a solemn vow – "I will prove it to Duryodhana who is imprudently doubting my prowess that tomorrow the sun will not set until it witnesses the body of at least one of the Pandavas lying lifeless inside the Chakravyuha – wheel formation!"

Krishnadeva sat quiet in the meeting for a long time, hearing all the

suggestions of the worried Pandavas about the situation. The question was how to break open the extremely complex wavy circles of the wheel formation!

That is why all were distraught and silent. After some time with a solemn face the great Yadava ordered me, “Commander, summon valiant Abhimanyu here!”

Saying ‘As you wish great Yadava’ I caught up with *maharathi* Abhimanyu in his pavilion. He had just removed his attire and was resting while talking to his attendants. I hesitated even while giving the message to that sixteen-year-old young warrior. ‘Your mama has summoned you’, as soon as he heard my words he promptly left saying ‘Let’s go commander’.

As soon as he entered the pavilion Krishnadeva called him in a hoarse voice drenched in love, ‘Come Abhi...!’ I had never heard Krishnadeva speak in such a hoarse voice before.

That perceptive son of Arjuna also instantly realized that his mama had called him ‘Abhi’ today instead of ‘Abhimanyu’ like usual. He moved forward with a smile saying, ‘Yes mama...!’ He touched the feet of his venerable mama and then holding his hands together he stood politely with a smile. For a moment, I was startled to see his pure white teeth shining like the meteors even in the dim light of the burning torches. Just one year back the young son of Arjuna had got married. His pregnant, virtuous, beautiful wife Uttaraa was staying in the ladies’ camp.

Noting everyone sitting in silence the son of Arjuna himself asked, “Why are you all so quiet? So tense?”

Krishnadeva got up from his elevated seat, went near him and putting his right arm on his muscular shoulders he said, “Guru Drona is going to arrange his army in the complicated Chakravyuha tomorrow. The mission of breaking it open...” even Krishnadeva couldn’t say anything further!

“It would be my honour if that responsibility falls on my shoulders. With blessings from all of you I will be glad to accept it!” The son of Subhadra paid obeisance to all humbly, and immediately left the pavilion graciously as he did not have the immodesty of taking a seat among his elders and seniors.

Overwhelmed, I kept staring at his disappearing figure with thick, curly hair hanging down his shoulders.

He was indeed a gallant *bhacha* befitting his legendary mama – the Lord of Dwaraka!

The thirteenth day of war became memorable due to the indomitable, sky-

high prowess of Abhimanyu. To break open the Chakravyuha that Drona had arranged today Abhimanyu entered the Kaurava army along with Bhimsena. Breaking open circle after circle of the enemy he directly went to the centre of the wheel formation. There a violent mace fight took place between him and Duryodhana's son Lakshmana. Both of them fell unconscious at the same time. Lakshmana who regained consciousness first, killed unconscious Abhimanyu with a strike of his mace. Insolent Jayadratha literally kicked dead Abhimanyu to roll over his body that was face down. As Arjuna heard about the disgraceful treatment for his dear son he took a vow – 'To kill Jayadratha by the end of the next day! Or else, he would enter the sandalwood funeral pyre himself!'

On the fourteenth day Kuru commander Drona organized his army in a Shakata or bullock cart formation. Dronacharya who had worn white armour, dress and headgear entered the battlefield while blowing his conch with a terrifying sound. Krishnadeva brought the Nandighosha chariot of Arjuna who had taken a solemn vow of killing Jayadratha in front of him and blew his Panchjanya conch. The Kurus had taken thorough precautions today to not bring the Sindhu king Jayadratha on the battlefield at all.

Arjuna, enraged with the grief of losing his son, was lamenting irately 'Show me Jayadratha! Where is Jayadratha?' His unarmed charioteer steered his chariot all over the battlefield throughout the day. But in vain! As hour after hour passed by and he couldn't find Jayadratha anywhere, exasperated Arjuna slew the brothers Vinda-Anuvinda of Avanti who attacked him in the meanwhile.

In the evening, according to his solemn vow Arjuna ascended the sandalwood funeral pyre and taking advantage of the clearing of the eclipse, looking precisely in the direction that Krishnadeva pointed his forefinger he shot a Chandramukhi Jidma arrow and beheaded insolent Jayadratha. Watching that chilling event the remaining few lakh soldiers from both armies were horrified. The Pandava soldiers ecstatically gave out continuous war slogans of 'Hail Narayana Srikrishna – son of Yashoda, son of Devaki. Hail invincible, master archer, greatest of men Arjuna – son of Kunti.' Even as those thrilling war slogans were being shouted the sun of the fourteenth day set.

Due to the unanticipated killing of Jayadratha all Kuru warriors including Drona, Kripa, Karna, Ashwatthama and Duryodhana got furious. Since then the night war began as never before. In the light of hundreds of torches Guru

Drona fell upon King Shibi.

Somadutta and I fought a fierce night war. Guru Drona who had slain Shibi and Balhika began slaying the Pandava army. Karna who was surrounded by all five Pandavas from all sides began showering them with a rain of arrows. Yudhishtira who had been defeated and chased away by him stood in front of Drona. Nakula faced Shakuni. Arjuna and Karna came face to face for the first time today – that too in the night war!

Karna was familiar with night war also. He shot at Arjuna over and over again. In his form a big river of molten iron began flowing unhindered among the Pandava army. His Jaitra chariot moved freely, trampling many troops of the Kekeyas, Panchalas, and Maharathas. Like a turbulent hurricane churning the ocean, he stirred up any Pandava regiment that came face to face with him. Bhima, Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Dhrishtadyumna and I, none of us could hold ground in front of him. Terrified Yudhishtira was asking every warrior, ‘Is this Radheya going to spare any of our army till morning or not? Or is he going to turn it into a silent river full of blood like river Drishadwati?’ It was such a tough time that if Karna was not stopped the Pandava army wouldn’t be able to see the next day.

Dhrishtadyumna and I along with the four Pandavas approached Arjuna’s Nandighosha chariot. Joining our hands together we pleaded charioteer Krishnadeva, “Oh *Yogayogeshwara*, do whatever is required but please stop Karna!”

From amongst us he called only Bhimsena near Nandighosha. As we were engaged in a night war there was no time for any secret meeting also. Controlling the reins of the Nandighosha chariot in his hands the Lord of Dwaraka spoke loudly today for the first time and said to Bhimsena, “Tell your son Ghatotkacha to confront Karna with his Rakshasa army!”

Hearing that, Bhimsena commanded his charioteer Vishoka, “Let’s get hold of Ghatotkacha.” At that time Ghatotkacha was fighting at the other end of the battlefield – on the western side along with his son Anjanaparva. Bhima’s charioteer caught up with him quickly. Bhimsena descended from his chariot and mounted on the *maharathi*’s chariot. Both father and son approached Karna in the huge chariot covered by bear skin. That huge chariot with fourteen hefty, dark black horses looked ghastly with the flag having an emblem of a terrifying vulture. That blood red Rakshasa pennant was decorated with wet intestine garlands. The army of one *akshauhini* Rakshasas stood behind the chariot. In the leading Rakshasa chariot Ghatotkacha looked



frightening like a burning mountain summit. The Kaurava soldiers got terrified looking at his conical ears, big, beady eyes, thick eyebrows, and his hairy stomach that looked like a cauldron upside down.

Ferociously looking at Karna, Rakshasa leader Ghatotkacha roared, 'Hail Hidimbamata...!' To encourage his son Bhimsena also shouted loudly – 'Hail Kuntimata...'

A breath-taking night battle ensued between Karna shielded by Rakshasa Alayudha at the front line and Ghatotkacha covering Bhimsena. Finally, at midnight Ghatotkacha slew Alayudha in a horrifying, violent way. Then the panic-stricken Kuru army began wailing in fear, raising their arms in the air, 'Oh world conqueror Karna, the king of Anga, save us from this Rakshasa, oh munificent Karna, the king of Anga, please offer us the charity of our lives.'

Charity! That word had always enticed that munificent warrior. Karna acceded! For a moment, he closed his eyes and chanted something in his Jaitra chariot. Then from his quiver he pulled out the Vaijayanti Shakti that Indra had blessed him with when he had offered his Kavacha-kundala in charity to Indra and pleased him. Closing his eyes, he charged it with a mantra and shot it at Ghatotkacha! It was the only Shakti that he was left with to protect himself. The moment he shot it his life became like an empty quiver.

As that Shakti pierced the Ghatotkacha's chest, he screamed horribly in agony. While falling down screaming loudly, he magnified his body so enormously that it felt as if the firmament itself was falling down. Many Kuru soldiers got crushed under his gigantic body and got killed like innumerable ants getting crushed under a toppling Ashoka tree! The night war was over.

As per Krishnadeva's planning Ghatotkacha's life mission to leave Karna devoid of the Vaijayanti Shakti was also over.

The day had not yet dawned. Exhausted soldiers from both the armies dropped their weapons and went to various lakes on the land of Kurukshetra to take a bath. While they were performing their morning rituals I presented the eldest Pandava Yudhishtira alone in front of him as per Krishnadeva's command.

Krishnadeva advised Yudhishtira to beware of Karna. He suggested that Yudhishtira should go and meet Bhishma on the deathbed once. For about half an hour he informed Yudhishtira about the strategies of different

regiments. I didn't understand one thing, why had he summoned Yudhishtira alone to discuss all those things? Why didn't he ask for Dhrishtadyumna when he was the commander? Finally, Yudhishtira got ready to leave for his pavilion. At that time Krishnadeva got up from his seat, went close to him and putting his arm on the shoulder of the eldest Pandava he said, "And Yudhishtira, keep in mind two things which I am going to tell you now. There are many mammoth elephants in our army. There is also an elephant named 'Ashwatthama' in the Kuru army. Don't forget to send Bhimsena to attack him tomorrow. You do only one thing. If anyone asks you in the battlefield tomorrow, just say only one thing 'Ashwatthama has been killed – human or elephant, no idea!'"

I was completely confused as I didn't understand a thing. But from Yudhishtira's face he also looked confused.

On the fifteenth day Guru Drona organized his army in the shape of a hawk. As the *Ingudi oil* in the torches was over only acrid fumes of smoke were coming out of the torches. As Krishnadeva blew his Panchjanya conch from the Nandighosha chariot and Guru Drona blew his conch both armies fell upon each other shouting war cries of 'Arise... Onward...Attack'.

As the sizes of the armies on Kurukshetra were shrinking river Saraswati and Drishadwati were bulging in size taking in the streams of the soldiers' hot blood. The muck of blood, flesh and dust was accumulated all over the battleground. The reflections of burning funeral pyres on the banks of the blood-filled Drishadwati looked ghastly. Neither the Pandavas nor the Kurus were ruling the battlefield. Merciless, hideous Death had become the uncrowned ruler there.

For two prahars Guru Drona fought tenaciously. But suddenly somebody gave out a fake cry 'Ashwatthama fell! Ashwatthama fell!' In fact, it was the elephant named Ashwatthama of the Malava king Indravarma. Bhima had slain him.

To check the authenticity of the news Drona steered his chariot all over the battlefield and finally brought his chariot near truth-loving Yudhishtira. In agony, he pleaded with Yudhishtira saying, "Oh Yudhishtira, everyone is screaming that Ashwatthama has fallen! Tell me if it is true that my dear Ashu has been killed? I believe in your veracity!"

"Gurudeva, it is true that Ashwatthama has fallen! But I don't know if it is the man or the elephant!" For the first time in his life Yudhishtira had uttered a lie! He had whispered the second sentence, barely audible even to

himself!

Grieving Drona, mourning the death of his son threw away his bow and sitting down in his chariot he began meditating in Padmasana. Meanwhile Dhrishtadyumna, with bloodshot eyes, descended from his chariot like lightning falling on a tree. Brandishing his sword, he ran towards Drona. While the Pandavas were running after him shouting 'wait, wait', he climbed onto Drona's chariot in one leap. Before anyone could comprehend what was happening, he tightly held the long-matted hair of the old man, chopped his head off in a single strike and threw it on the ground between both the armies! The venerable guru who had taught hundreds of young men in Hastinapura, and ruled their hearts with love lay dead in dust.

The dawn of the second day of the bright fortnight of Pausha descended on the land of Kurukshetra with the sprinkling of golden sunrays like showers of Prajakta flowers. The Lord of the sky had nothing to do with the atrocity or compassion of mankind!

Duryodhana gathered the Kuru army and appointed Karna as commander, like all the gods had come together and instated Skanda as their commander to destroy the Asuras. The original battlefield where the war had commenced was now about three *kosa* away to the north. Battlefields were being changed every day and the location kept moving towards the south.

Commander Karna selected a place convenient for the formation of his army. The Kaurava army stood at the ready in the shape of a gigantic crocodile.

Shakuni and Ulooka took the places of the crocodile's eyes. Vehement Ashwatthama accepted the head position. Kritavarma stood in place of the left leg and Gautama in place of the right leg. Madra king Shalya assumed position at the rear legs and Karna himself stood at the front line of the jaw, hiding Duryodhana amidst lakhs of Kuru soldiers in the centre of the crocodile.

As soon as Duryodhana blew his 'Vidaraka' conch from the centre of the crocodile to indicate the beginning of the battle, Karna raised his Vijaya bow decorated with flower garlands and rotated it rapidly. With the veins in his throat protruding he blew his Hiranyagarbha conch so loudly that some birds of prey lingering around the battlefield in the hope of finding flesh, flew away in terror. The elephants' hair stood on their end.

'Onward....! Attack...!' he raised his iron armour-clad strong, muscular arms high in the air and gave out the war slogan for the Kuru army to begin

the war. The gigantic crocodile of the Kuru army with Karna in the place of its jaw marched forward to swallow the Pandavas!

Our Pandava army marched forward today under Arjuna's leadership in the half-moon formation.

As Radheya couldn't see Arjuna's Kapidhwaja pennant anywhere he got confused momentarily and then he moved his chariot directly towards our mammoth elephantry! He shot arrows with poisoned tips so consistently like the rain showers of Mriga that within the first half an hour itself he had busted our mammoth elephantry.

As the sun came overhead Bhima killed a powerful warrior, Kshemadhurti, making him fall out of his chariot. Fighting with the Sanshaptakas, Arjuna killed the kings Danda and Dandadhara. That infuriated Ashwatthama and he ferociously leapt on Arjuna. Group wars had begun where Karna had infiltrated the Panchala troops.

Seeing that Karna was slaughtering many valiant troop leaders of the Matsyas and the Panchalas, Krishnadeva was trying to signal Nakula to get him under control by blowing a specific tune of the Panchjanya conch over and over again, 'Nakula...! Nakula...! Take your chariot towards Karna!' In that utter commotion of war Nakula somehow got his message after almost half *ghatika*! As the second prahar of the day was coming to an end he took his army and entering through the Matsya troops he took Karna upon himself.

But the commander that he was dealing with was like a bolt of lightning! Easily rendering Nakula's arrows ineffective he broke Nakula's chariot many times and with a smile he said to unarmed Nakula, "Go and send your elder brother Arjuna in front of me! I am sparing your life just for that."

Contrite Nakula turned back with his head hanging low.

As the mild, slanting rays of the evening sun were spreading long shadows of the tall trees around Kurukshetra, Krishnadeva brought Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot in front of Karna's Jaitra chariot! Seeing each other they both became fiercely aggressive, and loudly screamed at each other. Targeting each other both of them shot arrows from their heavyweight Gandiva and Vijaya bows consistently and overcast the skies of Kurukshetra. For one *ghatika*, their potent, swift and swishing arrows collided with each other fiercely. Fiery sparks flew from their iron tips. Those sparks scorched Karna's charioteer Satyasena. In the end, he got killed by Arjuna's arrows! The second day of the bright fortnight of Pausha, the tough sixteenth day of the war, ended with difficulty!

That night Duryodhana asked him, “Oh king of Anga, you have lost your charioteer Satyasena. Who is going to be your charioteer tomorrow?” Even in the dim light of the torches Duryodhana’s sharp nose looked very prominent.

Karna answered, “Oh Prince, get me an expert and loyal charioteer, then you will see that my chariot will storm through the battlefield tomorrow with such speed that will put the wind to shame!”

‘An expert and loyal charioteer?’ Like the stone statues in the royal palace of the Kurus both of them stood still for a moment.

Then Duryodhana’s stone statue spoke, “Oh king of Anga, if you don’t mind I would like to recommend only one such warrior who is perfect to be your charioteer!”

“Who?” Karna removed his crown and the heavy iron armour.

“Madra king Shalya!” Duryodhana rested his muscular right arm on his broad shoulder.

“Shalya? Oh king, you are forgetting that Shalya is the Pandavas’ mama! He is Rajmata Madridevi’s brother!”

“Karna, even before this war began I have given Shalya more distinct and honourable treatment than other kings. He had left the Madra kingdom and was travelling towards Kurukshetra to join hands with the Pandavas! But I erected luxurious camp sites, appointed royal envoys on his way, and by offering him many valuable gifts I convinced him to join our side. For the last sixteen days, he has been fighting for us genuinely with loyalty. Trust me, Shalya will never go back now. True Kshatriyas don’t regret. They don’t return, they embrace death if needed.”

The news of Madra king Shalya being appointed as Karna’s charioteer reached our camp!

Today for the first time, Krishnadeva ordered me to summon Madreya Nakula. Wondering what kind of war strategy was he going to plan with Madreya I went to Nakula’s pavilion. To obey the command of Vaasudeva that exquisitely handsome son of Pandu, the Madana lookalike came with me.

“Nakula, you are to go to your mama Madra king Shalya’s pavilion right now.” Krishnadeva told Nakula.

As a Yadava commander I expressed my doubt, “For the last sixteen days Madra king Shalya has sincerely fought on behalf of the Kurus. Why will he take the Pandavas’ side now?”

Krishnadeva looked at me smilingly and said, “We don’t want him to fight on our behalf as such. Nakula is supposed to meet his mama and request him

only one thing – he should frequently remind Karna in the battlefield tomorrow that he is the son of a charioteer, and a dependant of Duryodhana! Nakula should astutely seek such a promise from his mama and come back.”

Saying ‘As you wish Lord of Dwaraka’ Nakula left alone to meet his mama Shalya. Later he returned after successfully accomplishing his task.

Without stretching the nightly meeting any further Krishnadeva advised everyone to take a good night’s sleep. I understood that though the new moon phase was over the upcoming nights were going to be darker!

The seventeenth day of war dawned. It was the third day of the bright fortnight of Pausha. The number of soldiers on both sides had gone down to less than half!

As per Krishnadeva’s instruction the area near the southern foothills of a towering hill was selected as today’s battlefield. The Kuru army from the east and the Pandava army from the west were approaching the battlefield. Madra, Magadha, Matsya, Mathura, Malava, Vatsa, Vanga, Videha, Vidarbha, Kulinda, Kirata, Kashi, Kosala, Kapisha, Kamboja, Kamarupa, Nishadha, Abhira, and Gandhara – all the remaining ready-to-fight warriors from various kingdoms of the Aaryavarta had assembled around Kurukshetra wondering about the end result of the war. They were all set to fight faithfully. The colourful and variously shaped royal pennants of many kingdoms such as Shakala, Dwaraka, Girivraja, Viratanagar, Avanti, Prayaga, Tamranagar, Mithila, Hastinapura, Kusumpura, Kundinpura, Chandanavati, Kasthamandapa, Varanasi, Ayodhya, Champavati, Mahishmati, and Pushkaravati, began fluttering in salutation on the battlefield.

Today the Kuru army was in the formation of a circle like the sun disc. This circle of a well-equipped army with an enormous circumference spread behind Commander Karna’s Jaitra chariot. Radheya bowed down to his Jaitra chariot and circumambulated it. He was chanting the hymn of the sun.

Today Krishnadeva had arranged the Pandava army behind Arjuna’s Nandighosha chariot in the form of a buffalo – the vehicle of Yama, the Lord of Death. The last troop was directly touching the base of the hill. I took charge of the left side of the buffalo along with the remaining Yadava army.

As Karna mounted his chariot, charioteer Shalya took his seat. He held the reins of the ivory white, tall, hefty horses and the whip in his hand.

Shalya, the Pandava’s mama, Karna’s charioteer! I smiled to myself.

Krishnadeva told Arjuna standing in front of the Pandava army to get into the chariot. But he stood still. He was not going to get into the Nandighosha

chariot today until Krishnadeva took his seat. Krishnadeva smiled for a moment and put his foot on the footrest of Nandighosha. It was his left foot!

As Krishnadeva took his seat and blew the inspirational war tune from his white Panchjanya conch Arjuna ascended the chariot.

For the first time, today, both armies caused a ruckus hailing only two names – ‘Hail Arjuna – the son of Kunti!’ ‘Hail generous Karna – the king of Anga – the son of Radha!’

As soon as he heard the war slogans from the Pandava army the commander of the Kurus got excited like a sunflower blooming instantly – now he was neither Karna, nor Radheya, or *Kaunteya*... anymore! He was only the commander, only the scorching sun!

Raising the Vijaya bow high in his right hand over and over again, he advanced like a stormy ocean giving out war peals of ‘Arise...Charge.... Onward’. Giving cover his sons Vrishasena, Prasena, and Chitrasena; Ashwathama, Shakuni, Dushasana, Kripa, Duryodhana, Kritavarma and all atirathi Kaurava warriors also began furiously attacking the Pandava army.

Krishnadeva got down from the Nandighosha. He applied the lubricant that was a mixture of castor and *Ingudi oil* from the wooden tube to all the wheels of the Nandighosha chariot.

Giving cover to Nandighosha the chariots of Bhima, Uttamauja, Dhrishtadyumna, Nakula, and Sahadeva sprinted along. Huge clouds of dust leapt skyward. A bizarre mixed sound of the war drums, war peals, the elephants’ trumpeting, the neighing of horses, the squeaking sound of chariot wheels, and the twanging of stretched bowstrings echoed after thudding against the walls of the hill.

The soldiers of both armies charged at each other shooting arrows. Both armies collided against each other.

Nobody understood when Karna’s Jaitra chariot with five white horses, producing terrible tremors in the ground below infiltrated the Panchala troops at the front line of the Pandava army!

As he came closer, the Panchala army of Dhrishtadyumna on our left that was a bit ahead of us intercepted suddenly and stood in front of our army! As he saw the Panchala troops in between, he got furious and directly penetrated into the Panchala troops. Raising his Vijaya bow high in the air he began shooting continuous rounds of lethal arrows on the enormous elephantry division of the Panchalas like the rain showers of Mriga. Within half a *ghatika*, he had slaughtered all the leading troops of the Panchalas.

Within the first *ghatika* itself Karna slew renowned Panchala warriors like Bhanudeva, Chitrasena, Senabindu, Tapana and Shursena. Krishnadeva astutely pulled out Arjuna's troops which were behind the Panchalas and sent them charging at the army of the Sanshaptakas. Arjuna's swooshing potent arrows kept flying continuously over their heads. The Sanshaptakas were running everywhere they could. Arjuna's army chased them and shot arrows at them.

Karna had broken through the front line and faced Yudhishtira in the inner circle. He harassed Yudhishtira for quite some time and finally made his charioteer Indrasena drop down from the chariot. Indrasena died instantly. Utterly helpless Yudhishtira ran away from the battlefield.

Bhima, the son of Vayu holding a grudge against Karna who had killed his mighty son Ghatotkacha was searching for an opportunity, glancing around rapidly to find Karna's son so he could strangle him with his muscular arms. And he indeed got such an opportunity!

Karna's valiant son Prasena fought with Bhima for half a *ghatika*, but in the end, he fell on the ground wounded with a Chandramukha arrow shot by Bhima. He writhed in pain and died.

I fought a raging battle with Karna's son Vrishasena. But within a short time, I shot a lethal arrow leaving Vrishasena unconscious. Dushasana came forward swiftly and carried the unconscious warrior out of the battlefield.

Yudhishtira grudgingly seeking vengeance for his defeat again stood in front of Karna along with the selected troops of Dravidas and Nishadhas. But the *maharathi* fuming with anger due to his son's death immediately slaughtered Yudhishtira's chariot wheel guards Dandadhara and Chandradeva! Yudhishtira also tenaciously collided against his chariot. He overcast Karna's chariot with his arrows but in an instant Karna overthrew his arrows.

As Karna's arrows got unbearable Yudhishtira, Yuyutsu and I got into one chariot and fled from the battlefield. Yudhishtira shot a Suchi arrow that precisely hit a vital point near the right ear of Radheya, and he fell down, unconscious.

Yudhishtira had fled from the battlefield and sat still in his pavilion. As Arjuna was extremely worried about his safety he started missing his targets. He was not going to regain his composure until he was convinced about Yudhishtira's safety. Krishnadeva gradually reduced the speed of Nandighosha and snuck Arjuna out of the battlefield. He brought the chariot



in front of Yudhishtira's pavilion. Hearing the sound of the chariot wheels Yudhishtira darted outside.

But when Arjuna told him with his head hanging low that he hadn't met Karna on the battlefield yet, that Bhumiputra who was honoured by everyone as a composed and a calm person, lost his temper.

In a fit of fury Yudhishtira said to Arjuna, "Arjuna, why don't you throw your Gandiva bow in the Suryakund on Kurukshetra?" As Arjuna whose blood was already boiling due to fighting on the battlefield heard his words, he raised his Gandiva bow and stormed towards his beloved eldest brother whom he had regarded like a father throughout his life.

Sometimes some occasions test the limits of man's self-control. Yudhishtira and Arjuna faced such an occasion today.

Krishnadeva intervened between the two sons of Kunti. Arjuna made a solemn vow, 'I will not return to the campsite until I kill Karna!'

Along with Vrishasena who had regained consciousness, Dushasana entered the turbulent ocean of the Kaurava army again like a torrent of water gushing in. Seeing him Bhima screamed stretching his broad jaw, "Wait, you scoundrel!" Infuriated Bhima pushed Vishoka aside and took the reins of the chariot in his own hands.

Violent Bhimsena caught up with Dushasana in no time while indiscriminately crushing Kaurava soldiers as well as his own soldiers under his chariot. As he was overcome by the unbearable feeling of revenge the son of Vayu let out thunderous laughter. 'Dushasanaa, you scoundrel!' Letting out an explosive scream that would have left even Death itself trembling he directly crashed into Dushasana's chariot.

For about half a *ghatika* they were oblivious to lakhs of other warriors on the battlefield. Finally, Bhima struck Dushasana down with a powerful blow. He threw the mace in his hand. Running forward swiftly, the son of Vayu seized Dushasana's right arm which was holding a mace, in the tight grip of both his hands. He pressed his heavy right foot on Dushasana's muscular right armpit. The mace had already slipped from Dushasana's hands.

Screaming wildly, "I am tossing into the sky this sinful arm of yours that dared to touch Draupadi's sacred vesture!", that incredibly mighty mace fighter wrenched out Dushasana's arm from the shoulder blade with one swift jerk! He looked skywards as if possessed and whirled the blood-stained arm decorated with various ornaments before tossing it far away.

That did not satisfy the enraged Bhima! He picked up Dushasana's mace

that had slipped from his hands. He raised it high above his head and striking a powerful blow on whimpering Dushasana's insolent chest he shattered it along with the iron armour on his body.

Dushasana let out a sky-shattering final scream and lay dead. Fountains of blood spurted out!

Bhimsena flung the mace far away and knelt on the ground. "Come, I dare you to stop me!" He screamed dreadfully addressing the Kaurava warriors such as Duryodhana, Shakuni, Kripa, Ashwatthama, and Karna standing around him at a distance.

He thrust his round, tiger-like face in the blood flowing from Dushasana's chest and gulped his hot blood hastily! Everyone was horrified by that sight, including me!

Everyone covered their eyes! Many fainted. Only Krishnadeva descended from the Nandighosha chariot and controlled him. Now I came to realize why Krishnadeva refrained from appointing him as the Pandava commander. Krishnadeva himself wiped his blood-stained face with his blue shawl and sent him towards Draupadidevi's pavilion to make her open hair with his hands covered in Dushasana's blood as per his vow.

Now the battlefield was divided into two parts. On the north side were Bhima, Dhrishtadyumna, Sahadeva, Yudhishtira and I, fighting with Duryodhana's brothers, Kripa and Saindhava, and on the south side were Nakula, Uttamauja and Arjuna who were targeting only Vrishasena from among the circle of Vrishasena, Ashwatthama, Shakuni and Duryodhana.

Karna had barely reached the circle surrounding Vrishasena after much effort to protect his son from the showers of Arjuna's arrows! Just then Arjuna who was throwing challenges at Shakuni, Ashwatthama and Duryodhana shouted loudly, addressing Karna standing in front of him, "Son of a charioteer! Here I am killing your son Vrishasena in front of all of you, just like all of you killed my dear 'Abhi'" and shot a Chandramukha arrow in such a way that the head of Vrishasena who was already pinned behind the fence of arrows around his chariot, instantly fell to the ground with a thud!

Karna got down from the Jaitra chariot, cuddled Vrishasena's head for some time and let out a sky-shattering war cry 'Charge...!'

The Kuru soldiers terrified of Arjuna's prowess, and running everywhere stopped at once in their places. Reuniting the survivors of the Kuru army Karna was now approaching Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot like the sea wind. The third prahar of the day had begun now.

Krishnadeva positioned the Nandighosha chariot at a strategic place where Shalya couldn't bring Karna's chariot in front of Arjuna without entering the marshland on the south. Proficient Shalya circled the fringe of the marshland for a long time to check if he could find at least a few feet of dry patch in the mud. Finally, he stopped as there was no other choice and said to Karna, "Radheya, today is not a good day to fight with Arjuna! It is risky to put the chariot in this marsh!"

Without uttering a word Karna pointed his finger and commanded Shalya to steer the chariot into the middle of the bog!

Now Arjuna's Nandighosha and his Jaitra chariot stood face to face. Krishnadeva quickly got down and applied a thick layer of lubricant to all the wheels of the Nandighosha chariot.

Maddened soldiers from both armies completely tore off the half-broken garlands on their chariots and showered the flowers on their commanders while hailing them.

Krishnadeva blew his Panchjanya conch with much passion!

Raising their strong muscular arms smeared with sandalwood paste Krishna-Arjuna blew their Panchjanya and Devadutta conches from the bottom of their cores. Karna also wholeheartedly blew his Hiranyagarbha conch in the Jaitra chariot.

Silence prevailed for a moment, then at once they began shouting ear-splitting war slogans and started shooting arrows at each other! Their arrows were going at such speed in the sky that both the armies felt as if the sky full of stars was crashing down on them. Even I had not seen such a gripping war of arrows during the last sixteen days! Their battle was much more catastrophic than the battles of Bhishma, Drona and Abhimanyu. It was a hair-raising experience for everyone.

They were shooting hundreds and thousands of Kapisha arrows in the sky making them shower on their rival like the downpour of Mriga. They shot white, lightning-like zigzag Jidma arrows targeting troop leaders of the rival army, thus weakening their adversary. The soldiers were utterly bewildered as they couldn't figure out where the arrows were coming from.

Now the bog around the chariot started to thicken. To inspire and encourage their respective commanders, soldiers nearby began hailing their names continuously. Their intensifying, victorious, sky-piercing peals overpowered other sounds. For one *ghatika*, they vehemently showered each other with arrows. Warm blood started trickling from the wounds on their

open arms. They had no time to think about it! A much-agitated Karna had now just forgotten that their blood had delicate familial ties.

Both of them now prepared themselves to attack their rival with the divine astras that they had laboriously obtained by putting their lives on the line. Even if rajmata Kuntidevi, who had given them birth, would have been present on the battlefield, it would have been difficult for her to accept that they were brothers. Both of them were standing at the opposing poles of life now. Each yearned for only one objective – the lifeless body of his rival! Each was athirst only for that! They had forgotten themselves completely!

Karna drew a divine Sarpamukha arrow from his quiver to shoot it at Arjuna! Unbeknownst to him it was charged by a Shakti of a serpent! Targeting Arjuna's throat Karna intoned a mantra and shot the lethal arrow! Arjuna had no clue at all that an arrow was coming at his throat at the speed of wind. Krishnadeva quickly jerked the reins, making all five horses fold their legs and sit down. The deadly arrow barely missed Arjuna's throat! As the chariot tilted forward that swiftly moving lethal arrow hit his crown, flinging it away. The headgear under the crown also rolled away and fell in the chariot. Arjuna heaved a big sigh of relief! His black, curly hair were set free. Krishnadeva smiled at him.

Arjuna untied the white shawl around his waist and promptly wrapped it around his thick hair. The challenge of destiny was now getting more and more aggressive.

Arjuna showered arrows and confined Karna's charioteer Shalya in one place like a caged hawk! The dexterous charioteer could no longer make a move! The Jaitra chariot was grounded in one place now.

Karna's arrows were flying over Krishnadeva's crown. During the course of the fierce battle he did not shoot a single arrow at Krishnadeva even by mistake.

Agitated Arjuna determinedly began intoning the mantras of Aagneyastra – Astra of Fire. An incredibly divine glow emanated from his face. Countless fire-spitting Agnibana arrows shot from Arjuna's Gandiva bow whizzed across over Krishnadeva's head. Fearing that the entire firmament had transformed into a *yajna* pit Kaurava soldiers fled everywhere. Arjuna's arrows rained fire.

To render Arjuna's fire-spitting arrows ineffective Karna knelt down, closed his eyes and intoned the divine mantras of Varunastra – Astra of Rain. All the water of the oblations he had offered through his cupped hands all his

life came to his assistance now in the form of rain accompanied by black clouds and the unrestrained *Tandava* dance of lightning. By that water the munificent Karna unknowingly had given the gift of life to the half-dead soldiers.

But he was unaware that due to his own Varunastra the marsh around the wheels of his chariot was thickening!

To blow away the clouds of Karna's Varunastra Arjuna skilfully invoked his Vayavyastra – Astra of Wind. Blustery winds blowing with blinding speed dissipated the cluttering clouds. Kurukshetra basked in the glow of the sunrays again. Rapturous Arjuna let out victorious cries and intoning the mantras of the Vajrastra he hurled the Astra at Karna who shot many sharp weapons at the same time. Karna who was not at all disturbed by that, countered it with the Bhargavastra that he had obtained on Mount Mahendra. He also tenaciously countered the celestial, all-consuming Brahmastra that Arjuna launched. Both of them hurled all kinds of weapons at each other – Pinaka, Paasha, Tomara, Bhindipala, Chakra, Trishula and many more. Neither of them seemed tired. No conclusion of the battle was in sight. The third prahar of the day had ended now and the sun had begun its descent in the west.

Nishita, Naracha, Jidma, Sannatparva, Kankapunkha, Bastika, Rukmapunkha, Kshura and countless such arrows were lying scattered in heaps all over the battlefield. Countless warriors had died as the result of the fusillade of their celestial weapons though they had never wished that to happen. Neither one retreated. Even the land of Kurukshetra couldn't bear to watch this battle that was even more gruesome than the battle of the last sixteen days.

Ultimately, Karna shot the Atharvana Astra at Arjun that he had laboriously obtained from Parashurama on Mount Mahendra. Krishnadeva swiftly turned the horses in a full circle to evade the Astra. The Atharvana Astra missed its target.

As Shalya saw the Nandighosha chariot approaching his chariot backwards, biting his lips he tried to steer the chariot. He tried to motivate his horses shouting loudly and swiftly flicking the reins on their backs. The horses dug their hooves in and with all their might tried to turn the chariot around. But the Jaitra chariot did not move – even an iota of an inch. It was stuck now.

The chariot that had remained in the bog for about one *ghatika* was rooted in the ground as the heat of the sun had thickened the bog around its wheels.

The left wheel of his chariot was stuck in the ground.

Arjuna's Nandighosha chariot started circling his chariot. Karna was still hurling arrows.

"Oh, king of Anga, the chariot is not moving. The left wheel is stuck in the ground!" Shalya shouted in fear.

"King of Madra, don't worry! I will pull the chariot wheel out!" He descended from his chariot in one leap, with the quiver on his back and the Vijaya bow in his hands, with which he was continuously shooting the arrows.

He thrust his right hand and held a strong spoke of the left wheel and used all his strength to pull it out. The wheel did not budge.

Seeing the bow in Karna's hands Arjuna was still shooting arrows. Those arrows pierced his bare arms. He sat down and thrust his bow in the ground as far as he could and made it stand firmly. Now he assumed the shooting posture in a sitting position.

Due to one scathing arrow shot by him with one hand Arjuna became unconscious. Seeing that, he determinedly put down his Vijaya bow for a moment. Using both his hands he was now struggling with all his might to pull the wheel out. The wheel did not give way at all.

Krishnadeva held the wooden tube with medicinal herbs near Arjuna's nose. He revived in an instant and stood up.

But seeing Karna unarmed Arjuna also lowered his Gandiva bow!

Krishnadeva pointed his right forefinger towards the volcano that was struggling to release the chariot wheel and said to Arjuna, "Arjuna, pick up a crescent moon-shaped Anjalika arrow!"

"But – he is unarmed, and standing on the ground! I am in my chariot!" Arjuna hesitated. He was confused again!

"Arjuna, this is an order." Krishnadeva's voice was harsh and sharp.

Obedient Arjuna swiftly pulled an Anjalika arrow from the quiver and twanged the bow string once to test its tautness.

Hearing even that faint sound Karna turned his eyes, focused on the chariot wheel, towards Nandighosha. Seeing Arjuna prepare his bow to shoot he shouted –

"Wait Arjuna! I am unarmed, standing on the ground! It is against the rules of engagement to attack an unarmed opponent on foot. You are valiant, a Kshatriya!" Meanwhile he must have tried his best to recall the mantras of the Brahmastra that he had obtained on Mount Mahendra. No matter how

hard he tried he was unable to do so.

“*Dharma*, Radheya, do you even know what *Dharma* is? Son of a charioteer, where was this sacred *Dharma* of yours when you called Panchali a prostitute in the crowded ancient hall of Kurus? Why didn’t your *Dharma* object to hearing the news of the Pandavas being burnt to ashes in the lacquer house? Son of a charioteer, when the six of you besieged the sixteen-year-old boy Abhimanyu, why didn’t you recall the same *Dharma* then that you mention now? Son of Radha, where was your *Dharma* then? Arjuna, take aim!” Krishnadeva pointed his forefinger straight at Karna’s throat!

The Anjalika arrow zoomed from Arjuna’s bow, sliced through the iron armour covering his thick neck and embedded itself in his throat piercing it half way! That *maharathi* slid in the mud besides the chariot wheel!

As soon as Karna collapsed Krishnadeva blew his conch to indicate the end of the day’s battle. The sun set witnessing Karna and his divine conch Hiranyagarbha lying in the slush of flesh and blood. The battle ended.

While I was getting out of my war costume Krishnadeva’s attendant came. He had immediately summoned me. Dressed in plain clothing I presented myself in his service. He had just returned after meeting munificent Karna who had fallen on the battlefield a short while ago. Just as grandsire Bhishma had told Krishnadeva why he was waiting for the sun to begin its journey towards the summer solstice in front of all of us, Karna, the king of Anga also told something in Krishnadeva’s ears in a low voice. Only both of them knew what it was.

As I approached Krishnadeva he said, “*Sakha* Satyaki, come with me.” I followed him silently. We came to the place where Karna’s lifeless body lying on the holy land of Kurukshetra was being guarded by armed soldiers of the Anga kingdom. His most favourite horse of his Jaitra chariot – white-coloured Vayujita stood nearby looking at his master’s body. The circle of soldiers around him moved away on Krishnadeva’s signal. As Krishnadeva gestured I moved forward. Both of us picked up Karna’s tall golden complexioned body that looked as if it was in a state of slumber and put it horizontally on Vayujita’s back.

Krishnadeva said to me, “It was the final wish of the generous king of Anga, Karna, that I should be the one to light his funeral pyre on a virgin piece of land! I am going to light his funeral pyre on the huge boulder on the summit of this hill – with my own hands, only me! You wait here at the base till I return!” He had already made arrangements to send sandalwood logs on

the hill through his attendants.

For the first time, today Krishnadeva himself was going to perform the final rites of a fallen warrior, a son of a charioteer, that too, on a virgin piece of land? I just couldn't fathom what was happening.

I waited at the base of the hill. Krishnadeva began climbing the hill holding a torch in one hand and the reins of Vayujita in another. After some time, I vividly saw a sandalwood funeral pyre burning on the summit of the hill and a woman dressed in white running towards it from the Kuru's campsite. Who could she be? I couldn't guess.

In a short while Krishnadeva came back alone to the base of the hill. He had no torch in his hand. He was silent. I just followed him. Both of us came to his pavilion. He would always read my mind and the volley of questions rising in it without my asking him. He came close to me and holding my arm in his he gently said, "*Sakha* Satyaki, today you inform all the regiment leaders in person that I am not going to arrange any war-related meeting today! In the relentless battle between Karna and Arjuna both sides have lost almost their entire armies. Only Duryodhana who is the root cause of all this is alive. I will handle him tomorrow! So only you stay back in my pavilion tonight. So, I did. I assisted Krishnadeva to remove his charioteer's costume. While putting his peacock-feathered crown in the salver he shared a shocking truth with me. He said, "Satyaki, during the course of the last seventeen days I have taken utmost care not to let a single drop of blood splatter this peacock feather. I have always respectfully taken care of the gift of love that *sakhi* Radha had given me in Gokul."

First, the news came that Duryodhana had appointed Madra king Shalya as the commander for tomorrow. Following that a competent surveillance chief named Malaya who had come from the royal ladies' pavilion of the Kurus stood in front of Vaasudeva. Checking me out from top to bottom once he opened his mouth to give the news to Krishnadeva. He said, "I have picked up a very significant news from the royal ladies' pavilion of the Kurus. But it is of such confidentiality that I should share it only with Hrishiksha. So – therefore..."

Krishnadeva went near Malaya, put his arm on his shoulder like he would do with everybody else, and reassured him, "Malayaa, feel free to share the news. Commander Satyaki is my right hand. My best friend!"

Gathering his courage, in the dim light of the torches, Malaya said, "The Kuru Maharani Gandharidevi has summoned Duryodhana for a meeting.



‘Come and see me immediately – just as you took birth from my womb! Naked, like the sky!’ Venerable Kuru Duryodhana is preparing to leave for this meeting.”

Hearing the news, I was utterly perplexed. Though I did not have an iota of affection for Duryodhana, Dushasana and the majority of their brothers who were killed in the war, I had tremendous respect for Rajmata Gandharidevi. Why would such a pious lady send such a strange message to her own son? I was totally lost.

Without giving me a chance to ponder over it Krishnadeva said to me, “Come on commander.” We left and came to a spot on the border from where the camp of the royal ladies of Kuru began. I was holding a burning torch in my hand. Within a short time, we saw Duryodhana approaching, dressed in his usual royal attire followed by torch-bearing guards. Saying ‘let’s go’, Achyuta-Keshava moved forward. Catching up with Duryodhana he said as if casually, “Kauravaa, I know where you are going in such a hurry. I can also reckon why you are so confused at this moment. Gandharidevi has summoned you to meet her in the same state that you were born – that is, stark naked. She is not at fault. She still considers you an innocent child. It looks like she wants to advise you to stop the war just like all others did. So, are you going to really meet her all naked just because she insists?”

Fixing his cat-like eyes on Krishnadeva Duryodhana said, “You are well known for your crafty schemes! Except for Arjuna no one else is benefited by your advice. I have a gut feeling that you are playing some kind of game. Yet I am also confused about how to meet my mother completely naked even if I am her son. As I can’t think of a solution to this problem I am just thinking of fending off the meeting!”

“It will be a big mistake to disobey her! It will be an insult to her! It is indeed possible for you to go and meet rajmata alone in the way she wants you to – it is also possible for you to keep her respect as a mother!”

“How? Tell me in straight words without any political machinations.” Duryodhana asked hastily. Stressing every word, Krishnadeva calmly told him, “Wear your regular royal attire till you reach the door of rajmata’s inner chamber. Take a big banana leaf with you. Before entering the chamber remove all your royal attire and wrap the banana leaf around your waist. That way you will be completely undressed as per rajmata’s instruction and you will be remembered for generations to come as an idol of devotion to your mother, because a banana leaf is not a clothing article!”

Duryodhana's eyes shone brightly with the joy of relief from a terribly awkward situation. He said, "Indeed, if I had had only you in the royal council of Kurus instead of having many people like Kanaka and Shakunimama all my wishes would have already been fulfilled. I will go and meet rajmata exactly as you told me!"

He indeed went to meet Rajmata Gandharidevi as was discussed. And later the detailed news that we got was that for the first time ever Rajmata Gandharidevi admonished her son severely, saying, "Duryodhanaa, you are not only stupid but also utterly unfortunate. You believed in Krishna more than your mother who gave you birth. You moron, seeing you as you were born in front of me I was going to bless you with the boon of an indestructible body with the potent power of my pure eyesight. Now you have got the boon only partially. All your body upon which my motherly eyesight fell has become indestructible. The part hidden behind the banana leaf has remained destructible! Go, no matter how badly a son behaves a mother can never be a bad mother! You have my blessings."

Now the eighteenth day of war broke on the eternal horizon of Kurukshetra. Today Balaramadada who had gone somewhere in the Himalayas had come back to Kurukshetra along with Uddhavadeva in the pavilion of Krishnadeva. The Kaurava army now had only a few thousand combative soldiers. The Pandava army had an even lesser number of soldiers. Now there was no question of arranging any Chakravyuha. The Sudarshan chakra of Krishnadeva's ingenious intellect had brought victory within sight for the Pandavas despite being less in number. Duryodhana formally appointed Madra king Shalya as the commander in front of the remaining army. His mind desirous of victory was so ambitious that he was still dreaming of success!

Dhrishtadyumna blew his 'Yajnadutta' conch as the Pandava commander from our army, after the Panchjanya conch. Shalya responded by blowing his conch. Both armies dashed against each other like a wildfire attacking a small area of verdure left after consuming an entire thick forest like Dandakaranya. Today a notable fight took place between Kunti's son Yudhishtira and Kuru commander Shalya. On the other side a ruthless battle took place between Panchala prince Dhrishtadyumna and Ashwatthama who was infuriated due to the gruesome killing of his father Drona by Dhrishtadyumna. None of them was backing off. Yudhishtira fought relentlessly for about two prahars and beheaded Shalya who was actually his own mama. At the southern end of

the battlefield in the bog of flesh and blood, Gandhara king Shakuni along with his remaining one or two brothers was fighting Madreya Sahadeva. Shakuni's wicked, merciless and crooked brain that worked like a camel of Gandhara, was behind every crafty machination of Duryodhana. Sahadeva was not going to let him off the hook today. He struck two fatal intersecting blows of his sword on Shakuni's chest on which the cord of his quiver was fastened. Fountains of blood spurted out. The vicious villain of the Gandhara kingdom who had destroyed the lives of lakhs fell in the mud. A chapter of villainy came to an end.

As soon as the Kaurava commander Shalya and Shakuni mama who constantly kept the embers of his ambition burning with his cunning words fell in the battle, scared Duryodhana disappeared from the battlefield along with his chariot. He actually went and hid in the holy Sanneth sarovar alias Suryakunda in which lakhs of warriors had taken their baths!

Mace warrior Bhima who had taken a stern vow – 'I will break Duryodhana's lap that he had shamelessly shown to Draupadi in front of the crowded gambling hall', wandered all over among both armies flinging his mace in the air and shouting 'Show me Duryodhana – where is Duryodhana?'

Feeling desperate because he couldn't find Duryodhana, Bhima approached the Nandighosha chariot of Krishnadeva. With his fire-breathing eyes he shouted angrily, "Hrishikeshaa, I want to destroy the root of all this destruction. I want to kill that deadly snake of the Kurus, vile Duryodhana in front of all. He has run away from the battlefield. Where should I find him?"

For the first time, today Krishnadeva instructed Arjuna to follow him and alighted from the Nandighosha chariot. He approached Bhimsena's chariot walking briskly. He signalled Arjuna to steer the Nandighosha chariot himself and follow him. He sent Bhima's charioteer Vishoka in the back of the chariot and took his place. First, he approached Yudhishtira's chariot. With Yudhishtira following him he maneuvered Bhimsena's chariot towards shore of the Sanneth sarovar. Duryodhana was hiding in the centre of the lake and peeped out of the water after long intervals. He kept hiding under water for a long duration by holding his breath, and was not ready to get out of the lake even after Yudhishtira called out to him many times. Finally, when he was hiding under water Krishnadeva took the opportunity to advise Yudhishtira. To force Duryodhana out of the lake Yudhishtira now shouted loudly, "Duryodhanaa...! Get out of the water and fight a duel with any one of us five brothers of your choice. If you don't do that then we will have to

mix safflower toxins in the waters of Brahma sarovar and Jyoti sarovar and all our soldiers will have to pour jars filled with those waters in this lake. Then not only will you be forced out but all innocent animal species in the water will also die in vain.”

This advice of Krishnadeva had immediate effect on that vicious Kuru. To confirm the proposition Duryodhana asked Yudhishtira again “Will you give me a chance to fight a duel for sure?” and when he nodded in affirmation, from inside the lake Duryodhana expectantly glanced at Gurudeva Balaramadada on the shore. Balaramadada had full confidence in Duryodhana’s mace-fighting skills. As he also nodded in affirmation, Duryodhana swam out of the Suryakunda. He wore the mace warrior costume presented by a servant. Seeing Bhimsena who had killed his ninety-nine brothers, in a fit of fury he challenged him to a mace duel saying, “My dead brothers won’t get the offerings of *Tarpana* unless I break open the chest of this gluttonous, vile son of Pandu who killed my ninety-nine brothers. My dearest brother Dushasana’s soul would not feel contented until I drink the hot blood from his ruptured chest like the Maireyaka wine. I, Duryodhana, the prince of Kurus challenge this gluttonous Bhima for a conclusive mace duel in front of you all.”

A breath-taking, riveting mace duel ensued between those two intoxicated princes of the *Chandravansha* near the shore of Suryakunda which was considered holy and in which countless Kshatriya sons bathed on the day of the solar eclipse. “You coward, who always acted under Shakuni’s influence; wicked villain who shamelessly ordered the disrobing of my beloved wife in the gambling hall in front of all elders; you savage beast, who showed his bare thigh to my wife in a crowded hall, this Bhimsena, son of Pandu accepts your challenge!”

Krishnadeva, Balaramadada, Uddhavadeva, all Pandavas, Kripacharya, Kritavarma, Dhrishtadyumna, Ashwatthama, all soldiers in both the armies and I – we all formed a circle to witness the blood-tingling mace duel.

Their heavy maces clashing with each other made loud clanging sounds. Hearing that, the birds returning to their nests in the evening again turned towards the forests while chirping in fear. Their clobbering strikes produced fiery sparks as their maces struck against each other. For one prahar they fought a spine-chilling mace duel striking fear in the hearts of the spectators. Their agile movements destroyed the meadows under their feet. Streams of blood mixed with sweat began trickling from both their muscular, huge

bodies. Both their head gears had been tossed aside in the dust while dodging the opponent's strikes. Their open, thick, curly hair was hanging down on their shoulders. Bhimsena bit his lips and with all his might kept striking Duryodhana sometimes on his broad chest, his muscular shoulders, or on his big back. Valiant Pandava warriors were shouting to encourage him 'Well done mace warrior! Glory to Mahabali!'

But those strikes did not affect Duryodhana at all and they were not going to. Giving out peals of laughter he was provoking Bhimsena while roaring out loudly – "Have you lost the power in your iron arms that crushed the temples of elephants? You, gluttonous eater who keeps on eating through days and nights, where is the strength of a thousand elephants that you possess?"

Confused Bhimsena frequently kept looking at Krishnadeva under the pretext of wiping the sweat on his forehead with his forefinger. Since long Krishnadeva was giving him some kind of hint by thumping on his thigh. But Bhimsena simply couldn't understand it.

Gandharimata had rendered Duryodhana's body indestructible with whatever power she had gained as a dutiful wife of her husband by her virtuous conduct. Bhimsena knew nothing about it. Naïve Bhimsena was fighting the mace duel relentlessly in credulous expectation that he would be able to crush Duryodhana's chest with the blessings of Gurudeva Balarama and the grace of Krishnadeva. He was blocking Duryodhana's mace strikes in the air and was getting severely soaked in blood. He didn't understand why Krishnadeva was thumping his thigh frequently. All Pandavas had fallen silent with the fear now that if the duel continued the way it was going on, by evening Duryodhana would succeed in killing Bhimsena.

Now it was essential to do what Duryodhana had done – pulled up his dhoti and showed his bare thigh to Draupadi in the gambling hall of the Kurus. Krishnadeva pulled his yellow dhoti aside and bared his muscular, bluish ruddy thigh, and indicatively thumped his tight fist on his thigh. Now Bhimsena precisely understood what Krishnadeva meant. The next moment, mammoth Bhimsena fiercely struck a powerful blow on Duryodhana's muscular thigh. 'Oh mata...!' Duryodhana moaned loudly and flinging his mace away in the air he collapsed crookedly with his crushed right thigh. Then Bhimsena who was besides himself struck another powerful blow on Duryodhana's left thigh also. Fountains of blood spurted out. The other thigh was also crushed. With both his thighs smashed completely Duryodhana fell

face down on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Balabhadradada who was the guru of both the mace fighters trembled with fury as he saw what had happened and brandishing his mace he dashed towards Bhimsena saying, “You fool of a disciple, hitting below the waist you have broken a vital rule of a mace duel. Now I will have to kill you to offer *Tarpana* to my beloved disciple! Hail Goddess Ida!” Krishnadeva controlled him by spreading both his arms wide and saying, “This mace fighter bared his thigh in front of a noble lady in a gambling hall full of people. Isn’t it fair to crush his thigh, or should the noble lady Draupadi be brought back and made to sit in his lap? Dada, if I were in your place at this moment I would have proudly offered the Kaumodaki mace on my shoulder to my valiant disciple Bhimsena.”

“Dhakatya, you are the reason behind all this! In fact, you should be punished before Bhima – but what to do? After all you are my younger brother!” Balaramadada said helplessly. He rushed towards his wounded disciple who had fallen face down.

Just as he was upset, Kritavarma, Kripa and Ashwatthama were upset for the same reason, they tried to attack Bhima protesting, ‘This is not fair – he has broken the rule’. I, along with the remaining four Pandavas including Arjuna blocked them sternly with our weapons. Then among the four Pandavas addressing only Arjuna Krishnadeva said, “Come, let me show you the sprawling tree of Ego.” All four Pandavas followed him. With Uddhavadeva walking on his right and I on his left, all of us approached Duryodhana lying face down. Krishnadeva leaned forward and giving an ultimatum to the arrogant eldest Kaurava he asked, “Duryodhanaa, do you feel even an iota of remorse for all your sins now? If yes tell me, I will still emancipate you from all your sins.”

At that the arrogant Kaurava who was lying face down lifted his body above the waist on his elbows because his thighs were crushed, like a serpent raising its hood. Turning his head towards Krishnadeva he looked at Krishnadeva with utter contempt and twisting his already crooked and thick eyebrows he said in clear words, “No way! How would a lowly cowherd like you with feet soiled in cow dung and urine understand, what kind of honour it is for a Kshatriya to die while fighting a battle!”

All of us were stunned to hear his words.

Looking at his venerable gurudeva Balarama he said, “Gurudeva, I bow down to you for the last time. Please explain the rules of a duel to this younger brother of yours who is smaller in every sense – this cowherd

Srikrishna.”

Balaramadada who was sitting in the Virasana posture near him holding his hand arose at once. He said to Krishnadeva, “Bhimsena has broken the rule of a mace duel by hitting below the waist.”

“Dada, what kind of brotherly duty did this best disciple of yours fulfil when he dumped Bhimsena in the waters of the Ganga in the name of swimming after he poisoned him by feeding toxic sweets even as a child? In the gambling hall of the Kurus he ordered that his *vahini*, noble Draupadi be disrobed in front of all elders. What kind of royal duty did this so-called prince who is your disciple fulfil at that time? This favourite disciple of yours, utterly lacking in discretion, didn’t he re-invite the Pandavas to play the game of dice again through Shakuni? With whose support did the six warriors collectively dare to besiege our beloved Abhimanyu? Dada, consider it lucky that this gallant Bhimsena has not drunk the blood from the crushed thighs of Duryodhana also, like the king of the jungle gulps down the blood of an insolent wild boar!” Hrishikesha who was feeling upbeat due to the imminent death of Duryodhana told Balabhadra calmly.

“Whatever excuse you want to give Dhakatyā, a rule of war has indeed been broken. And it has happened in front of me. When it is the rule of engagement to not strike your opponent below the waist, Bhima has broken it because of you. I don’t want to see your face or his anymore. Feel free to continue the war! I am going to Dwaraka!” Balaramadada spoke harshly befitting his straightforward nature and immediately left Kurukshetra.

The sun set. All of us returned to our tents. In the nightly meeting Krishnadeva was having a discussion with Dhrishtadyumna ‘With Duryodhana’s death the war has come to an end. The remaining soldiers should take down their tents and leave Kurukshetra.’ While he was having the discussion the same surveillance-chief Malaya presented Krishnadeva with the news that he had brought.

Before Duryodhana passed away he had earnestly beseeched Kripacharya who had come to meet him, to formally appoint Ashwatthama as the last commander of the Kurus! Though both his thighs were crushed, his indomitable, enraged royal heart was not – he was not yet ready to accept defeat! He was still daydreaming about seeking revenge.

Kripacharya performed the *Abhishek* to appoint Ashwatthama as commander, and Duryodhana himself put the crown of commander on his head while lying down. Even Drona’s son Ashwatthama became

overwhelmed with emotions by Duryodhana's faith in him. Duryodhana, who was at death's doorstep fixed his eyes into Ashwatthama's and said, "Oh, son of our guru, Kuru commander Ashwatthama, you are our last valiant commander. Even though Krishna is the master of the Sudarshan chakra the mantras of that divine Astra have escaped his memory as he has not launched it for a long time. If that was not the case, there have been many occasions during the last many years when he should have used the Sudarshan. He is in the same state that the cursed Karna was, who had given away his Kavachakundala in charity, and in which I am today, like a powerless lion whose claws have been clipped. You have with you the divine Brahmastra that our aacharya, your father Guru Drona has given you. You will be the ultimate source of our success! As the last Kuru, I instruct you and as a friend I request you to wipe out the Pandavas completely!"

"Kauravaa, I will fulfil your wish! I will destroy the Pandava family line completely!" The son of the guru gently pressed wounded Duryodhana's hand to reassure him.

'Hail Gandhari...' before he could even say 'Mata' arrogant Duryodhana breathed his last on the banks of Surya sarovar, still holding Ashwatthama's hand in his.

A ghastly night descended on Kurukshetra. From the vast spread of the battlefield of about forty *yojanas* a stretch of only about half a *yojana* was barely left dry. The remaining battlefield was defiled with the blood of more than forty lakh warriors from both sides, lakhs of elephants, horses and camels. Around the vast battlefield many funeral pyres were set ablaze every day. The river beds of Drishadwati, Sharavati and Saraswati, and lakes such as Brahma sarovar, Surya sarovar, and Jyoti sarovar had turned black as the ashes of the dead soldiers were dumped into them. The entire battlefield was littered with piles of broken chariot wheels, broken parts of weapons like swords, maces, spears, and iron clubs, scattered body parts of human corpses, cut-off elephant trunks, and horse tails. Some funeral pyres were still burning near the waterfront. The entire land of Kurukshetra was filled with the mixed cries of vultures, hyenas, foxes, wolves, wild dogs and tigers. The ghastly hooting of owls echoed in the hollows of the remaining trees. The torches burning in the night were dimming as there were no soldiers to put oil in them. The acrid smoke of torches that had completely extinguished had dispersed everywhere. Kurukshetra was no longer a holy land. It had become a vast crematory.



I was lying on a rug in my tent along with a few Yadava soldiers who had survived. I was constantly tossing and turning. The images of the war during the last eighteen days were dancing frantically in front of my eyes. No matter how hard I tried I could not sleep tonight. How could one sleep in an atmosphere filled with the growling of wild animals and bizarre sounds?

It was about midnight. I heard the heart-wrenching cry of a woman coming from a distance. I pricked my ears, my already open eyes dilated. Sharp words like the pointed tip of Suchi arrows were falling on my ears – “Achyuta... Madhava... Milinda... Madhusudana.... betrayal! The scoundrel did not spare a single one of my sleeping sons! Oh Hrishikeshaa, you are awake when all beings are asleep, how come you are asleep today? Arise, Krishnaa.... Get up!”

I sat on the rug at once. That wailing woman was none other than the Pandavas’ wife Draupadidevi herself! I lifted a burning torch and rushed in the direction of the voice. My Yadava soldiers followed me. I had no clue what was going on. The wailing sound seemed to rush in the direction of Krishnadeva’s pavilion. I also rushed in the same direction. I entered Krishnadeva’s pavilion. His peacock-feathered crown was still sitting in the salver. Uddhavadeva, dressed in a saffron cloak, was standing on his right. Both of them were trying to console Draupadidevi who was giving out heart-wrenching cries while beating her chest, “What is it Krishney...? What happened, Panchali?”

The royal lady could barely speak as she was beating her chest in uncontrollable agony. She was just crying loudly in distress – ‘My Prativindhya... Shrutakirti..., my Sutasoma..., Shatanika..., my Shrutasena!’ All we could comprehend was that she was talking about all the five sons of the Pandavas. Why? For what reason? We had no clue. Her wailing wouldn’t stop and our confusion was not getting cleared. Krishnadeva sat next to her, lovingly patted her hair made by Bhimsena and even more affectionately asked her, “*Sakhi* Shyamale, what happened? Be calm. Get a hold of yourself. What happened to your sons?”

Then while still sobbing with tears streaming down her eyes continuously Draupadidevi said, “That scoundrel – has killed my five sons while they were asleep – with his sword! He has also beheaded my brother – Dhrishtadyumna!”

By this time all five Pandavas had entered Krishnadeva’s pavilion and circled their wife. Bhimsena was stroking his wife’s back with his mighty

arm and asking over and over again, “Draupadi, be calm. Tell us clearly, who committed such a sinful act?”

Overwhelmed with sorrow Draupadidevi looked at Bhimsena with hopeful eyes and in desperation she said, “I am still a widow in spite of having five powerful husbands like you! Of what use is your valour after all? They touched my saree in the gambling hall full of people I kept quiet. I should have been sitting on the royal throne of Indraprastha but they sent me bare-foot to live in a forest – I endured that without protest. Today that vicious villain has beheaded my beloved sons – your own progeny leaving me, a mother, bereft of her children. Yet you tell me to stay calm?”

Finally, shaking Draupadidevi frantically Bhimsena spoke harshly, “Who committed this sin? Tell me his name.” Srikrishnadeva also patted on her head and asked her the same thing, “Give his name Draupadi!”

Then controlling her outburst firmly, the noble lady uttered each word while sobbing – “Your – your guru Drona’s son – that – scoundrel Ashwatthama!”

“What?” All five Pandavas exclaimed unanimously in shock. As soon as he heard the name of the killer of his sons Bhimsena put his huge mace on his muscular shoulders and immediately left the pavilion. Krishnadeva promptly followed him. Uddhavadeva and I rushed after him.

Bhimsena entered the pavilion of Dhrishtadyumna, who had been the Pandava commander from the beginning. A gruesome scene lay in front of him that would have benumbed anyone’s senses. Pandava commander Dhrishtadyumna’s head had been cut off in his sleep, and his torso lay askew in a pool of blood. Corpses of his beloved *bhache*, all five sons of the Pandavas, sleeping on both sides lay cluttered chaotically in a pool of blood. Most of them had long brutal strokes of the sword visible on their chests. A very long stroke was visible on Prativindhya’s back, who was sleeping peacefully on his stomach resting his hand on his mama’s chest. All the sons of Pandavas had probably died in their sleep. Reddish black puddles of coagulated blood were spread all around. After watching his sons and the commander in such a dreadful state even Bhimsena, so hefty and strong, covered his face with his hands and slumped for a moment. The next moment he got up and in that dim light of the early morning, went towards the west side of the battlefield in search of Ashwatthama shouting loudly, ‘Somebody just show me the merciless killer Ashwatthama – show me Ashwatthama...’

He was oblivious to the elephant trunks, skulls of dead soldiers, their body parts, and horse tails being crushed under his feet. In that dim light of early morning for almost a prahar he wandered all over the battlefield with his fiery red eyes while roaring ‘Show me Ashwatthama.... Show me Ashwatthama’. We also dragged ourselves behind him. Ashwatthama was nowhere to be found. In the end, exhausted Bhimsena helplessly sat on a boulder near the trunk of a Tamala tree to the west of the battlefield. We caught up with him. Seeing that he was almost on the verge of crying Krishnadeva said to him, “Oh son of Vayu, get a hold of yourself. I can understand your rage! Ashwatthama’s time has not yet come. I can’t tell you when it will come!”

The fifth day of the bright fortnight of Pausha dawned on Kurukshetra. Krishnadeva who was bringing Bhimsena back to his pavilion saw a human figure far away near the base of a hill, sitting on a boulder in the shadow of a sprawling *Palash* tree. At that point he said to Bhimsena, “Pandava, you who otherwise look like a sprawling *Palash* tree on the battlefield, why are you looking greenish black like a teak tree? Look ahead. How that *Palash* tree has bloomed!”

Bhimsena looked in front with his big tearful eyes as if he was looking through a veil. His sight fell on the *Palash* tree blooming with red flowers and then on the boulder. He recognized Ashwatthama even from such a long distance. Immediately he howled loudly, “Ashwatthama...you, merciless killer of the sleeping sons of Pandavas. I appeal to you in the name of your father. Wait where you are. I dare you to strike this Bhimsena’s chest with your sword.”

Taking long leaps Bhimsena reached him within no time. The blood-stained clothes which Ashwatthama was wearing were parched as the blood had dried, but his eyes still reflected the same indomitable rage of war. A mace duel ensued between the two of them in the dry patch that was left on the west side of the battlefield. We all encircled them and kept watching. Though the sun god had ascended high up in the sky, their duel that initially began with mace fighting and later continued with many other weapons, did not appear close to concluding. Now the sun was directly overhead. Bhimsena tossed the sword in his hand aside and thumping his iron like arms challenged Ashwatthama for a conclusive wrestling bout. Even though Ashwatthama was well aware of the reputation of invincible Bhimsena who had made many wrestlers eat the dust including Jarasandha, he accepted the challenge. He also thumped his arms, and dared Bhimsena. Now the Lord of Dwaraka

Srikrishnadeva stood in the middle of the two and said, “Bhimsena, this challenge of yours will never come to an end. You fought the wrestling bout with Jarasandha for twenty-seven days. It will be pointless if you fight with Ashwatthama for not one but even for twenty-seven years. Ashwatthama is immortal, he won’t die!”

Turning towards Ashwatthama he also tried to convince him, “There is no other wrestler like Bhimsena in the Aaryavarta after Jarasandha! Don’t try to dare him! If both of you still don’t want to listen, then I will hand you both the soil to commence the bout and I would also like to watch it!”

Both of them stood facing each other like a snake and a mongoose. Both were unaffected by Krishnadeva’s words.

Both of them accepted the soil from Krishnadeva to commence the wrestling bout and got into a simple pit prepared by the soldiers. They fought using various maneuvers against each other like Abhyakarsha, Rajakaprushtha, and Aakadi. The remaining soldiers encircled the pit. Both of them were perspiring, neither was able to overpower the opponent. Finally, when the third prahar of the day began Bhimsena fastened the Bahukantaka hold around Ashwatthama’s neck. But a very strange thing was happening today. Even when Bhimsena used all his strength in the Bahukantaka hold that he had used as the ultimate weapon all his life, Ashwatthama was holding his breath using the power of Yoga and was protruding his veins in such a way that ultimately Bhimsena himself was getting exhausted. This went on for a long time. Then Krishnadeva moved forward and putting a sword near Bhimsena he whispered in his ears. In his own Krishna style, he gave Bhimsena conclusive instructions, “Son of Kunti, listen to me carefully, Ashwatthama is immortal! He will never die. There are two ways a human being can die – one is physical death and the other is public humiliation! He has a bead of flesh on his head since his birth, cut it off with the sword I have given you. The wound on his head will never heal. It will keep bleeding forever! Just like the dead bodies of the Pandavas’ sons! Ashwatthama will live forever carrying the perpetually bleeding wound! That humiliation will be like death to him! Hurry up and cut off the bead of flesh on his head with the sword!”

Sweating Bhimsena did exactly as Krishnadeva told him. Holding Ashwatthama’s neck with his left hand he removed the bead of flesh on his head using the sword.

Flinging the blood-stained sword on the battlefield he returned to the

Pandava pavilion with the precious bead of flesh in his hand.

He handed it to beloved wife Draupadidevi and described to her what had happened. Consoling her, Krishnadeva also told her about Ashwatthama's immortality to reduce the sorrow of her sons' deaths.

The evening of the nineteenth day approached. The Lord of Dwaraka commanded us to uproot the poles of his spacious pavilion and wrap it up. As per his instructions Uddhavadeva, Arjuna and I – all his beloved Sakhas wrenched out the pegs of the pavilion from the land of Kurukshetra. Krishnadeva himself yanked out the central wooden pillar of the tall pavilion. A troop leader counted the remaining Pandava army. It numbered only a few hundreds. In the Kaurava army there were only three warriors alive now – Kripacharya, Kritavarma, and Ashwatthama!

The religious duty of offering final *Tarpana* to all the dead soldiers was still to be done. For that purpose, we all came near the shore of river Drishadwati. Krishnadeva had invited Dhaumya rishi to perform the final rites of *Tarpana*. While he was instructing Dhaumya rishi about the preparations for *Tarpana* all of us breathed a sigh of relief that the Great War was over. River Drishadwati, which had been flowing for ages was tranquil. She had nothing to do with the human disaster on her banks.

While Uddhavadeva, Daruka, all Pandavas including Arjuna and Achyuta, the Lord of Dwaraka, and I were observing the preparations for the ritual of *Tarpana* made by soldiers and the priest sitting on a stone step on the ghat of Drishadwati the surveillance-chief Malaya reached the banks of Drishadwati while gasping for breath. He had brought the final shocking news of the Great War of *Bharata* which was not yet over. Bowing down to Krishnadeva he said while trembling, "Oh Lord, I have bad news. Before Ashwatthama disappeared into the forest with his bleeding wound, he launched the Brahmastra."

"What? Brahmastra?" Krishnadeva got up from the step at once. "Yes, my Lord, Brahmastra! That missile has killed all our remaining soldiers who were packing up their tents as the war had come to end and also descended upon the foetus in the womb of Uttaraadevi in our ladies' camp. All Pandava women are beating their chests and wailing loudly because of losing the one and only scion of the third generation of the Pandavas. They are calling for you. The Pandavas are lucky enough to be alive only because they were with you. I was also spared because I went to summon Dhaumya rishi. All Pandava women are beating their chests, wailing out loudly, 'Save our clan!

Do anything but save the son of Uttaraa!”

All this while, all of us were stunned and staring at Krishnadeva. No one knew what to say and what to do. Only Uddhavadeva tightly held both arms of the Lord of Dwaraka and earnestly said, “Vaasudevaa, only you can save the Pandava clan from this destruction now. Oh Narayana, it is now inevitable for you to recall the sadhana of your life and sip the *Aachamana* of Drishadwati’s water to remove the effect of the Brahmastra on Uttaraa’s unborn child. Or else the Pandava clan will be wiped out from the world! Let’s go.”

With Krishnadeva walking behind him Uddhavadeva went towards the bed of river Drishadwati. He spread a small rug. Krishnadeva sat on it in the Padmasana. He closed his fish-shaped eyes. Uddhavadeva picked up palm full of water thrice and released it in Krishnadeva’s cupped hands. Releasing it on the ground he spoke in clear words audible to everyone, “If I am the son of renowned Maharaja Vasudeva and Devakimata, if I am entitled to be called the son of Nandadeva and Yashodamata of Gokul, if I am the true disciple of renowned Acharya Sandipani and sage Ghor Angirasa in every sense, if I did not act selfishly in any manner whatsoever while uprooting injustice from Aaryavarta to emancipate justice, if I did not perform any kind of sin whatsoever during any event in my life through the day or night, then as I sip the *Aachamana* the scion of Pandava’s third generation growing in the womb of noble Pandava lady Uttaraa will take his first breath of life!” Narayana took a sip of *Aachamana* and opened his eyes. Looking at Uddhavadeva he smilingly said, “Udho, dear friend, go straight to the Pandava ladies’ camp, and come back after getting the news about Uttaraa’s foetus.”

‘As you wish dada’ said Uddhavadeva and hastily climbing the stairs of Drishadwati’s ghat he rushed towards the camp of the Pandava ladies. Since Abhimanyu’s death Uttaraadevi had been staying in the Pandava ladies camp at Kurukshetra.

As the sun was about to set, tall Uddhavadeva clad in saffron clothes returned hurriedly with a smile on his face. All of us except Krishnadeva surrounded him with utmost curiosity. He immediately said with a lot of excitement, “Uttaraa’s foetus has begun moving again. The scion of the Pandavas’ third generation is safe!

“Only ten warriors have survived the Great War. Kritavarma, Kripa and Ashwatthama on the Kaurava side and all the Pandavas, *maharathi* Satyaki

on Pandavas' side." Breathing a sigh of relief that their clan had been saved none of the Pandavas realized who the tenth warrior was. I could never forget him. Still, to make sure that everyone heard his name from Uddhavadeva's mouth I asked him, "Uddhavadeva, you said ten warriors! But told us only nine names! Who is the tenth warrior?"

Then Krishnadeva's closest friend Uddhavadeva smiled and putting his hand on my shoulder he exclaimed "Yugandhar Srikrishna!"



**Uddhava**



I am Uddhava! Son of Devabhaga and Kansa. My father Devabhaga was Maharaja Vasudeva's brother. My mata Kansa was the sister of Maharaja Kansa, king of Mathura. Thus, I was Krishna's *chulat bandhu* as well as *mavas* bandhu. More than any of these relations I was Srikrishna's favourite 'Paramsakha' – his confidant. This relation with Krishna was the most valuable for me throughout my life.

I was not his self-proclaimed 'confidant'! In fact, he had casually conferred that epithet upon me. It is because he had given it, that I remembered it for my entire life.

As Srikrishna was my elder brother I used to earnestly address him as 'dada' with respect. It was not just out of respect that I called him dada. In fact, so many other emotions were involved in it. There was not a single event in his life that he did not share with me. Actually, sometimes he spoke to me as if he was speaking to himself.

The eighteen families of the Yadavas had a tradition of having *Rasa* dance after major wedding ceremonies. I did not get married. That is why I particularly avoided the *Rasa* dance. As soon as dada noticed it, he was the one who held my hands and pull me inside the *Rasa* circle for the first time, saying 'Udho, brother, come let's dance. He always called me 'Udho' with love.

My father, Thorale baba, my mother, both Thorali and Dhakali mata, Balidada, my own elder brothers and many Yadavas asked me whenever they got a chance as to why I didn't want to get married. But my dada – the Lord of Dwaraka never questioned me about that. That was the prominent reason why I had so much respect for him.

I did not have the temperament of a warrior. What I acknowledged was the tug of war that goes on in a human mind day and night. Dada was well aware that I was the only one amongst lakhs of Yadavas, in whose mind such a war would go on. That is why among all his favourite Sakhas including grandsire Bhishma, Mahatma Vidura, dear friend Sudama, Sanjaya, Balidada, Jalapurusha Karna and master archer Arjuna whom he gave the advice of a lifetime on the battlefield, he considered me as his 'Paramsakha'. He was well aware of what I was, and I tried throughout my whole life to understand who he was, as per my capacity. He was just like the wind that is invisible but occupies the entire world rapidly with tremendous speed! He was blue complexioned, like the endless sky above us! His blue colour had a darkish

tinge to it, like the limitless dark space beyond the vast skies! In the Ankapada aashrama Aacharya Sandipani had explained the difference between aakasha, the sky and avakasha, the space in so many ways to all of us. It is now that I came to realize why gurudeva addressed him as ‘Krishna, Shyama’ on many occasions and especially on the day of *Gurudakshina*!

Recently, I realized that each time his smile was different – like the earth! The earth never shows the same beauty of colours during all seasons. Every season has its own beauty. He was indeed like the earth – merciful.

I witnessed first-hand, his natural attraction towards water – right from Mathura, to Dwaraka, Hastinapura and Indraprastha.

His life, that was like the river Yamuna, had some prominent and elegant turns. Gokul, where he spent his childhood was the very first most elegant, beautiful milestone that would have made a deep and lasting impression on anybody’s mind. The second equally beautiful turn was the life in the Ankapada aashrama of Aacharya Sandipani in the forest of Avanti in which he absorbed all the knowledge that he obtained. When he arrived in Mathura from Gokul I was the only Yadava of Mathura to meet him first. Since then I constantly lived in his company till the commencement of the Great War of *Bharata*. I witnessed how he overthrew Magadha emperor Jarasandha’s assaults on Mathura. This turn of Avanti-Mathura in his life was also splendid indeed.

With the support of innumerable dexterous Yadavas he erected the new kingdom of golden Dwaraka on the turbulent, roaring, vivacious western ocean.

When he left Mathura determinedly and came to Dwaraka he taught me something without uttering a word. It was an invaluable lesson that at times one has to leave behind even one’s beloved motherland – for the sake of fulfilling one’s duty! Every event in his life taught me something or the other that was pro-life.

In spite of living and enjoying a comfortable life in Dwaraka with lakhs of Yadavas he consciously took interest in the life of the displaced Pandavas. The Great War of *Bharata* that he masterminded was the zenith of his divine genius. It became a Great *yajna* where forty lakh soldiers were sacrificed in the war. He participated in this war for eighteen days without holding any weapon in his hand. It is because of his unarmed participation that this war turned out to be a Great *yajna*.

Didn’t this Great *yajna* of his prove to be the eternal lesson of ‘How

mankind should not behave’? The eighteen-day Great War on the holy land of Kurukshetra that he engineered, was the biggest and most thrilling turn of his life. Because of that he became ‘Yugandhar’ – the epoch-maker.

Whatever I understood from all these turns in the life of my dada ‘Srikrishna’, is what I am going to share as per my intellectual ability. I am well aware that no matter how much ever I try, it cannot be shared in its entirety.

It was his hearty wish to erect an aashrama in the area of Badri-Kedara near the base of the Himalayas. I had gone to Badri-Kedara to make preparations for that. It was many days before the commencement of the Great War of *Bharata*. I selected an appropriate place for an aashrama in the holy place of Badri-Kedara near the Himalayas. I checked whether all materials necessary for the aashrama were readily available nearby. During my travel in the Himalayas I met many yogis, ascetics, sages, and hermits. I did not make any one of them my Guru. As I had taken formal initiation from Aacharya Sandipani and spent my whole life in the company of dada I didn’t find any necessity for that. But now I had donned the saffron clothes after a great deal of thought.

While going back to Dwaraka, I received the news of the war in Kurukshetra from time to time from many sages and hermits whom I met during the journey. Hearing all the news my feet inadvertently turned towards Kurukshetra. With only one yearning in my heart, that was of checking the wellbeing of my dada.

I reached Kurukshetra in the last phase of the Great War of *Bharata*. Just like me Balidada had also come there straight from the Himalayas.

For the sake of the offspring of the Pandavas’ third generation – Uttaraa’s unborn child – Srikrishnadada took a sip of *Aachamana* and prayed with all earnestness on the strength of his virtuous merits on the bank of river Drishadwati. As a result, Uttaraa’s foetus came back to life. The descendant of the Pandavas’ third generation was safe – their lineage was saved.

Only one ritual was left to be performed now for the cessation of the Great War that lasted for eighteen days like a Great *Yajna*. It was of performing the last rites, ceremonial *Tarpana* offering to more than forty lakh soldiers slain in the battle from both sides. For that purpose, the Pandava family priest, Dhaumya rishi who was invited by dada was present on the holy land of Kurukshetra along with his disciples. According to his and dada’s instruction Yudhishthira as the eldest of the Pandavas was going to perform the last rites

by offering *Tarpana* on behalf of all. All Pandav ladies including Draupadi, all Kaurava ladies who could come except for Gandharidevi had arrived at Kurukshetra for the ritual of offering *Tilanjali* after *Tarpana*. Dhaumya rishi commenced the *Tarpana* ceremony at the given *Muhurta*. First Yudhishtira remembered all the ancestors and performed the *Pindadana* and then mentioned the names of each one of the prominent warriors like Acharya Drona, Dhrishtadyumna, Abhimanyu, and Ghatotkacha and performed the *Pindadana* for them. A single *Pindadana* ritual was done for all the others together. All the assembled men and women offered *Tilanjali*. Grand sire Bhishma was still alive on the Shara grass bed, surrounded by guards.

Today Yudhishtira had discarded his war costume and was dressed in simple clothes as a family man. The other four Pandavas were still wearing their war costumes. Bhima held his huge triumphant mace on his shoulder. Arjuna held his invincible Gandiva bow adorned with flower garlands on his broad shoulder. Nakula had his favourite sword tied around his waist and Sahadeva carried his tall, polished pestle on his shoulder. Rajmata Kuntidevi who was now much aged and weary, dressed in white, sat on one side of the *Tarpana* fire pit. On her left sat all the Pandava ladies – Draupadi, Chitrangada, Uloopi, Pauravi, Vijaya, Hidimba, Subhadra, Uttaraa and such, who had come to offer *Tilanjali*. Dada and I sat on a grass mat next to Dhaumya rishi.

All rituals were performed with the chanting of mantras. As per Dhaumya rishi's instruction Yudhishtira left his seat from near the fire pit and walked towards river Drishadwati to offer the final *Jalaanjali* of *Tarpana* after the *Tilanjali* to all the warriors who had died a hero's death in the Great War of *Bharata*. He was carrying a salver with lamps, consecrated rice, haldi-kumkum, and flowers. First, he was going to worship river Drishadwati. His heart was overwhelmed by emotions in memory of many warriors. Dhaumya rishi had given him instructions about the rituals, that first he should worship river Drishadwati. After that he should mention the names of all the relatives who had died as heroes, according to their seniority and offer the *Jalaanjali* of *Tarpana*.

At that exact moment *aatya* Kuntidevi signalled dada to come close. She whispered something in his ears. Hearing that dada nodded in affirmation and whispered something in the ears of Dhaumya rishi – the chief priest of the ritual of *Tarpana*. Dhaumya rishi then hurriedly got up from his grass mat. To stop Yudhishtira, who had meanwhile reached river Drishadwati he

loudly called, “Pandavaa, wait...!” I suspected that there was probably some error in the *Tarpana* ritual when he did not address Yudhishtira as ‘eldest Pandava’ as usual. *Aatya* Kuntidevi had probably instructed him about the same.

Yudhishtira stopped in his place. Hurrying towards him Dhaumya rishisaid, “It is Krishnadeva’s instruction that the very first *Jalanjali* of *Tarpana* should be offered to Karna, the king of Anga! He was the ‘eldest’ brother of you Pandavas!”

Yudhishtira began trembling in his place with an overwhelming volley of emotions. The golden salver in his hands containing the articles required for *Tarpana* started rattling. He must have felt that the shining sand on the banks of Drishadwati was slipping from under his feet.

Wondering why Yudhishtira was not offering the *Jalanjali*, first Bhima and Arjuna and after them Nakula-Sahadeva rushed forward.

Yudhishtira had not yet recovered from the shock. He was still shaking. Bhima asked him, “What happened, *Jyeshtha*?”

Looking at Bhima with tearful eyes and trembling hands, in a trembling voice Yudhishtira said, “Don’t call me ‘*Jyeshtha*’ from today onwards! Brother Bhimsena, I was not *Jyeshtha* then and I am not *Jyeshtha* now!”

Arjuna came forward and lovingly said to him, “What is wrong Yudhishtira? Are you not our elder brother? Is it not that because you were the eldest you performed all these *Tarpana* rituals?”

“No! I am not your *Jyeshtha*. The world conqueror, munificent, *maharathi* king of Anga was the eldest. Karna, who we disparaged all the time as the son of a charioteer!”

‘What?’ Bhima – Arjuna both took a step back in shock with their eyes opened wide. Then immediately Arjuna went close to Yudhishtira and violently shaking his shoulders he said in a heart-wrenching voice, “What are you saying Yudhishtira? Have you gone crazy because of the carnage of lakhs of lives?”

Sometimes in a fit of fury Bhima used to prick the pointed edge of his mace in the sand of Drishadwati and speak insanely. He spoke now in the same way, “Looks like you are still under the influence of the Maireyaka wine that you drank last night after the end of the war! *Jyeshtha*, offer the *Tarpana* and go take some rest.”

“Bhimsena, didn’t I tell you just now not to call me ‘*Jyeshtha*’! Your – mine – our – our older brother was Karna...! I am going to offer the very first

*Jalanjali* of *Tarpana* to him now – as per Krishna’s instruction! Each one of you will have to do the same after me!” said Yudhishtira.

Arjuna who was disconcerted by all this stood silent for a few moments as if hit by lightning. The next moment he turned around and rushed towards the ladies sitting near the fire pit. Within moments he reached Kuntidevi. He pulled out the divine Gandiva bow from his shoulder, with which he had beheaded many valiant warriors, in the just-concluded Great War of *Bharata* that had lasted for eighteen days. Looking at the expression on his face terrified Kunti *aatya* stood up trembling in fear.

“You, sinful woman...! You made me murder my own brother!” Shouting thus he put his divine Gandiva bowstring around the neck of his own mother like a noose! Shaking it violently, regretting the fact that he had killed his own brother’s sons Sudamana, Vrishasena and Karna’s foster brother Shona, *Dhananjaya* raved insanely. He shouted at his own mother, “Evil woman..., I used this Gandiva bow to kill my own elder brother and many others. Now I, who have reached the gates of hell due to committing the sin of killing my own brother, will tighten this bow string around your neck and take your life too!”

Everyone was stunned to see Arjuna’s violent emotional outburst. The fear that the religious ritual of *Tarpana* might turn into a bloody scene, confounded me too. In one leap, I grabbed Arjuna’s hand holding the Gandiva bow and said to him, “Pandava, be calm. Compose yourself.”

Dada came from behind me, put his arm on Arjuna’s back and gently patted him for a few moments with affection. Then in his usual sharp and sarcastic style that brought many arrogant people to their senses he said, “Well done my pupil! You are going to kill my venerable *aatya* of whom even today I do not consider myself worthy of seeking blessings! *Sakha* Arjuna, without even hearing her side of the story you assaulted her with uncontrollable rage! Then how are you going to console my sister Subhadra who lost her son, my beloved *bhacha* ‘Abhi’? How are you going to offer her solace?”

With each of his words, Arjuna’s boiling anger gradually subsided like the western ocean retreating in low tide. Exhausted he leaned on dada’s shoulder. Seeing the trickle of warm tears running down his eyes I also kept gently patting his back. No one ever understood whether his tears were that of the guilt of killing his own brother unknowingly or for consciously humiliating his own mother. Except for dada nobody could have understood it.

There in the waters of Drishadwati Yudhishtira was offering the first

*Jalanjali* of *Tarpana* to the barely visible sun disc with tearful eyes and while chanting the Gayatrimantra.

Arjuna sought the blessings of Kuntimata, offered *Jalanjali* of *Tarpana* in the waters of Drishadwati and came out from the water after washing his hands and face. Dada and I walked Arjuna to our Garudadhwaaja chariot which Daruka had kept ready.

From river Drishadwati we came into the camp of the Pandava ladies. Those tents were not yet dismantled. Kunti *aatya* had returned along with all the women in the chariots of Pandavas and was sitting in her pavilion. As I entered the pavilion with dada, crying Subhadra came running first. Draupadi followed, to comfort her. Actually, her pain of losing all five of her sons was the most severe among all the Pandava women. But she had become very tough as she had gone through many testing times in her life one after the other. Draupadi was the one who recovered before others.

Subhadra threw her arms around dada's neck and cried convulsively, 'Krishnadada, where is my Abhi – show me his face at least once.' For a few moments dada's lean blue fingers gently stroked her back with affection, as if silently telling her – 'My dear sister Subhadra, compose yourself and listen to me carefully.'

The next moment he said in a very calm and steady voice, "Subhadra, our Abhi has attained the zenith of glory. He was the only one who performed such a valiant feat at such a young age in the Great *yajna* of war. He has brought acclaim not only to the Kuru dynasty of the Pandavas but also to us Yadavas because of you. Don't cry over his death – be proud of him!" Each word of his, especially his divine touch had so much strength that very soon sobbing Subhadra calmed down. I also came forward and gently patted her shoulder. Then echoing dada's sentiment I said to her, "Sister Subhadra, as you are the mother of a valiant warrior I feel proud of you. Many future generations will revere you. Now that you have calmed down remember Goddess Ida and get detached from everything!"

More than anybody else, now I was curious to know what dada was going to say to his dear *aatya*. She was already sitting placidly on her seat like a statue as if she had gone beyond everything. Dada moved forward. He touched her right foot with his fingers. Then moving them over the crown on his head respectfully he sat on a mat near her right foot. I also touched *aatya*'s left foot and sat on the mat.

A few moments passed by in utter silence. No one was saying anything. All

of us were waiting for the Lord of Dwaraka to speak. He was waiting for his *aatya* to say something. She was a senior lady who had lost her eldest son. And yet she was calm. Finally, dada spoke in his mellifluous voice that completely transformed the atmosphere as usual.

With utmost tenderness, he brought his palms together and said to her calmly, “Pardon me! Consider me in his place and forgive me!” All of us sitting around didn’t understand what he was referring to. But Kunti *aatya* probably understood it. She said, “Forgive you and for what? Am I even worthy of forgiving you? You haven’t done anything wrong.”

All of us – at least I thought, that he was seeking pardon from Kunti *aatya* for getting Karna killed by Arjuna, by expounding to him what *Dharma* is.

To clear the misapprehension from our minds including *aatya* Kunti’s he said, “I am seeking forgiveness for the fact that my dear friend Arjuna forgot his duty as a son and assaulted you out of ignorance in front of me. As for your eldest son Karna – he has achieved even higher acclaim than our Abhi. You are indeed great – as a mother and also as a grandmother.”

At that point Kunti *aatya* arose from her seat. Exclaiming ‘Oh Krishna’ she spread both her arms and embraced him with the satisfaction that at least one person understood her completely with all the intricacies of her mind.

Dada instructed Satyaki who had returned from Dwaraka, to safely dispatch all Pandava ladies from Kurukshetra to Hastinapura. All the Pandavas left for Hastinapura along with their wives. Kritavarma had already left for Dwaraka. Nobody came to know when and towards which forest Ashwatthama left with the bleeding wound caused by Bhima when he cut off the bead of flesh on his head.

In the very end Daruka, Satyaki, my dada and I – the four of us left the desolated land of Kurukshetra in dada’s Garudadhwaaja chariot harnessed with pure white horses.

We also started our journey to Hastinapura. In the town of Vrikasthala near the border of Hastinapura we stayed at the residence of one of dada’s devotees.

The next day we entered the city of Hastinapura in the Garudadhwaaja chariot at dawn. When dada had come here for the mediation, how zealously the citizens of Hastinapura had welcomed him with pomp and splendour. Now not a soul was there on both sides of the road. At least one person from each household in Hastinapura had died a hero’s death in the war of Kurukshetra. Those left behind were aged, women and children. And they



were also drowned in grief behind closed doors.

We came near Vidura's residence on the border of the city. I don't know how but even without having sent any intimation, Mahatma Vidura was standing there to welcome dada with his hands joined in greeting. He quickly approached Garudadhwaja. Dada said to him, "*Sakha* Vidura, you also join us in the chariot. We are here to meet the Kuru Maharaja. You are his Mahamantri."

'As you wish, oh Lord of Dwaraka', saying thus Vidura quickly boarded the Garudadhwaja chariot.

I strongly noticed that dada had addressed him as '*Sakha*'. That was because all four of us – Daruka, Satyaki, Vidura and I, standing in Garudadhwaja today at this moment were his Sakhas.

The magnificent ancient royal palace of the Kurus built with the reddish Jambha stone came into sight. All of us descended from the chariot. All five Pandavas who had already reached there as per dada's instruction came forward to greet dada. Dada whispered something in Vidura's ears.

Vidura left in person towards Maharaj Dhritarashtra's chamber to convey the news of the arrival of dada and the Pandavas. As soon as he left, dada called all the Pandavas close to him and instructed them in front of me, "Dear brothers, as a duty you are to bow down to your *kaka* and meet him from a distance. No one should go close to him. Especially you Bhimsena, you should stay farthest than the others. Whatever curses he inflicts upon you in the agony of losing his hundred sons, you are to hear them quietly without fidgeting with your mace."

All the Pandavas heard dada's instructions attentively. Taking all of us with him dada started walking straight towards the armoury of the Kurus. In front of the armoury there was an open ground on which the royal wrestling pit of the Kurus was located on the east side. There was a single iron statue standing on the west side. It looked like a replica of Bhima holding his mace on his shoulder. Dada stood right in front of that iron statue with all of us.

Bhimsena couldn't restrain his curiosity and asked, "An iron statue resembling me and how come it is located in the wrestling pit of the Kurus' armoury, Srikrishna? Who placed it here?"

Dada looked smilingly at him and said, "Don't feel flattered *Kaunteya*! It is not placed here for your worship or to offer flowers. Duryodhana himself got it made by his proficient ironsmiths by creating a mould of your size and pouring molten iron in it. For the daily practice of mace fighting! Every day

he practised mace fighting here for hours along with his selected brothers such as Dushasana, Durmukha and Durgharsha. Whenever he got a chance to make a fatal strike on his opponent he would gently hit his erring brother and let him go and then would land the fatal strike on your iron statue with full power shouting your name with rage – ‘Bhimsena’. If you observe closely, you will see many dents on the statue caused by such heavy strikes.”

Not just Bhimsena but the other Pandavas were stunned while hearing Krishna’s account.

Just then Mahamantri Vidura entered the armoury holding Kuru Maharaja Dhritarashtra’s hand, guiding him, saying ‘This way Maharaja, please come this way’. Then dada signalled us as decided earlier. All of us scattered around. Only dada stood in front of Bhimsena’s iron statue. Mahamantri Vidura who had brought the blind king of Kurus holding his hand said, “The Lord of Dwaraka who has returned from Kurukshetra seeks your blessings Maharaja”. Dada promptly moved forward and sitting in Virasana he touched the feet of Maharaja. That cunning diplomatic Maharaja asked ‘who is it?’ to determine the voice. In the Virasana pose itself dada said to him, “Maharaja, I am Srikrishna – the son of Vasudeva-Devaki of Dwaraka.” Still, the shrewd Maharaja touched the crown on dada’s head to check if it had a peacock feather. Then in his usual pretentious manner, hiding his real feelings, outwardly he said, “Srikrishna? You are not at fault. You were unarmed! A charioteer! Srikrishna, I understand that you have come to offer your condolences to me as my hundred sons who went after meeting me haven’t returned at all. But whether it is you Yadavas of Dwaraka or us Kurus of Hastinapura – we are after all Kshatriyas! A Kshatriya never expresses regret or mourns the carnage of war. They consider that whatever happens goes as an offering at the feet of Ranamardinee – the Goddess of War. I do the same, and I guess you might also.” For a moment, the wily king paused to gauge dada’s opinion.

Dada also stood up and letting him blindly follow his thoughts he said, “Yes Maharaja, I have come to offer my condolences. I should have visited Rajmata Gandharidevi first, her being a lady. But I know how afflicted you are due to the bereavement of your hundred sons. I thought it was appropriate to meet you first as the ruler of this ancient royal throne, hence I am here. Maharaja, please be calm and compose yourself.”

“I am calm already. If my dear brother Pandu’s sons rule the kingdom of Hastinapura it would be like my own sons ruling the kingdom. Isn’t it? I

consider that with the end of the war our enmity has ended. I am anxious to meet the Pandavas. I am especially looking forward to meeting Bhimsena and holding him in my embrace. It is true that as a father I do lament the death of foolish Duryodhana and all his brothers. But I have drowned my sorrows in river Ganga already. Our sages and hermits have taught us that enmity should end with the death of the enemy.

“Oh Srikrishna, dear son, have you come alone? Vidura actually told me that my beloved Pandavas have also come with you. Where are they? Where is my dear Bhimsena?” Meanwhile dada quickly moved behind Bhimsena’s iron statue. From there he said, “Maharaja, now that you have pardoned them they are feeling relieved. They have been silently standing here in front of you wondering what and how to speak to you. Bhimsena is standing right in front of you. Please take him in your deep loving embrace. He is yearning to seek your blessings.”

Hearing that, Maharaja Dhritarashtra left Vidura’s hand at once. Spreading both his strong arms he said in clear, loud words, “Oh dear Bhimsena...! Come here son. Let me embrace you tightly.” With our eyes dilated we all kept witnessing an unprecedented thrilling drama. Nothing like this had ever happened since the creation of Hastinapura.

The aged father lamenting the death of his hundred sons embraced Bhimsena’s iron statue thinking it was actually him, so tightly that even the mace-holding arm of the iron statue came loose from the joining socket and fell on the floor! Hearing its clanging sound, he thought that Bhimsena was standing in front of him in person and his mace had dropped from his hands. In that delusion, the mournful Kuru father embraced the remainder of the statue even harder. The left hand of the statue also fell down. Then the old mournful father kept embracing the iron statue continuously calling Bhimsena, ‘Bhima... son, oh warrior Bhima...’ He crushed the upper body of the iron statue into small pieces which fell clanging on the stone floor.

While crushing the statue of iron, thinking it was Bhimsena, the aged Kuru’s body also got stained with blood. With the warm touch of his own blood he came to his senses and covering his gray bearded and gray moustached face, sinking on the floor the helpless aged father screamed strangely, “Oh my hundred sons, I have crushed your killer, vile Bhimsena to pieces! Come and see them. Where are you my boys?”

Mahatma Vidura affectionately patted his blind brother’s back first. Then giving him support Vidura slowly carried him towards his chamber.

I approached dada with all the five Pandavas. Satyaki was standing by my side. But Daruka was waiting in the Garudadhvaj chariot outside.

I picked up one of the pieces of Bhimsena's iron statue fallen on the stone floor. It had a few drops of blood on it. But they belonged to a melancholy father. Looking at those pieces I said to dada, "From Satyaki I have heard the accounts of various tactics of your ingenious intellect on Kurukshetra during the eighteen days of war while slaying every great warrior. But today I witnessed the culmination of your genius in person. Indeed, what would have happened to mighty Bhimsena if you were not here today?"

That night all of us stayed at Vidura's residence on the border of Hastinapura.

Vidura's wife Parasavidevi got busy preparing food for all of us with the assistance of her servants. All of us sat in a room outside. Dada sat on a golden seat in the centre of the room. We sat in front of him. Vidura stood on his right, with both his palms respectfully joined together. All the Pandavas and their ladies, including Kuntimata and Draupadi went to take some rest in the resting chamber adjacent to the sitting room.

Dada said to Vidura, "*Sakha* Vidura, all these years you were the Mahamantri of the Kauravas, and you performed your duties devotedly. Henceforth you will have to carry out the same task for the Pandavas. First, get all the preparations done for Yudhishtira's coronation. Grandsire Bhishma is still awaiting the sun to start its journey towards the northern solstice, to breathe his last. When he breathes his last immediately inform me in Dwaraka."

"As you wish Lord of Dwaraka. I will follow your instructions to the letter," said Mahamantri Vidura, bowing slightly with utmost respect.

"Let Yudhishtira rest here for a couple of days. Then immediately send him to Kurukshetra. Grandsire is waiting for him. He wants to speak to Yudhishtira in private about something important."

While hearing that I strongly remembered that even when Karna had gone to meet grandsire, he had sent all others away. As Yudhishtira was the eldest after Karna, he probably wanted to talk to Yudhishtira from that angle. Probably, he was going to impart some advice from his experience, about politics, *Dharma*, warfare, and the duties of a king, to Yudhishtira. As it is all the Pandavas had left Kurukshetra only after meeting him. Notably, Rajmata Kuntidevi had met grandsire along with Draupadi and all other Pandava ladies. While talking to her grandsire had given her a specific

instruction. I came to know about it from Arjuna. Grandsire had wisely advised our Kunti *aatya*, ‘Once Yudhishtira is crowned as the king of Hastinapura you should take up *Vanaprasthashrama* the very next day. Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gandhari will never stay in Hastinapura after that. They will strongly insist on living in the forest. You should not leave the company of your brother-in-law and his wife irrespective of whatever has happened in the war. You should accompany the desolate couple in the forest also.’

Notably, *aatya* Kuntidevi had put her head on grandsire’s feet and nodded in affirmation, agreeing to his instruction.

When I came to know all this, it became crystal clear to me why my dada had so much respect for *aatya* Kuntidevi. Some men and women were indeed difficult to comprehend irrespective of whether they were from among the Kurus or the Yadavas. As for dada, I had not yet understood him at all. My only satisfaction was that he had undoubtedly considered me as his *paramsakha*. While talking to many people he had undoubtedly mentioned my name as his *confidant*.

As it was time for dinner Mahatma Vidura came to invite all of us. Joining his palms together he requested dada, “It is dinner time. The Lord of Dwaraka should join us all.”

At that dada smiled and asked him, “Vidura, what is there for dinner tonight?”

“Aarya, knowing that having food should be considered as important as *yajnakarma* we have kept it simple. Though I did not tell her, Parasavi has cooked your favourite soft rice mixed with salt and buttermilk. Please come.”

Dada rose from his seat, went close to Vidura and putting his arm on his shoulder he said, “Vidura, today I don’t feel like eating even the rice. Please tell Parasavidevi to pardon me. I will drink only a glass of milk – as *yajnakarma*.”

As dada said ‘No’ to food Vidura promptly responded ‘As you wish, Aarya’ and greeted him while bowing. He immediately held my hand with affection and said, “Come Uddhavadeva, please.”

“I will also drink only milk!” I humbly rejected his offer.

Dada and I sat in the room. Vidura took Daruka and Satyaki towards the dining room. After some time, an attendant brought the news of royal charioteer Sanjaya’s arrival.

In a few moments, the Kurus’ royal charioteer Sanjaya stood in front of

dada with his palms joined in greeting. He was also dada's *sakha* in Hastinapura. Stepping forward, dada held both his hands lovingly and said, "Dear Sanjaya, we will leave for Dwaraka tomorrow, so today itself convey our message to Rajmata Gandharidevi that we are coming to meet her in the morning." 'Yes, sire' said Sanjaya and left.

The next day while performing my morning rituals I came to know from Vidura that as dada didn't eat anything for dinner last night, Mahatma Vidura and our charioteer Daruka also had nothing but milk. Only *maharathi* Satyaki ate his fill.

Various birds from many gardens of Hastinapura soared in the sky while offering the *Arghya* of their melodious chirping to the rising sun of Hastinapura. They flew towards the forests to find the meaning of the new day in their lives. Efficient Daruka got dada's favourite decorated Garudadhwaja chariot in front of Vidura's residence. Daruka took his seat. The chariots of all five Pandavas were behind us. As usual dada graciously touched his lean fingers to the first step of Garudadhwaja chariot, then to his head as a gesture of respect to it and then in a single leap he boarded the chariot. Imitating him, Satyaki and I boarded the chariot from one side. From the other side, Kuru's Mahamantri Vidura climbed into the chariot. On the flagpole of the Garudadhwaja chariot the Yadavas' royal pennant was fluttering gently in the morning breeze coming from river Ganga. The Yadavas' insignia, the golden Garuda, imprinted on it with its wings spread wide to soar high also began fluttering. Daruka pulled out the whip from the leather socket, quickly paid obeisance to dada in his mind and cracked the whip in the air as usual making a snapping sound. As usual he called all four horses with their short names – 'Megha... Shaibya... Bala...' and pulling the reins in his hands he signalled them to sprint forward. They neighed knowingly, lifting up their front hooves. Now as Garudadhwaja was about to go in the direction of the Kurus' ancient royal palace, a cawing flock of crows flew above the chariot. The droppings of one of the birds streaked across both the golden wings of Garuda, the king of birds, the royal insignia of the Yadavas! Standing next to me dada prayed to Goddess Ida with his eyes closed!

Within a short time, our skilled charioteer Daruka steered the chariot under the golden full moon image on the arch at the huge entrance of the royal Kuru palace. He brought it right in front of Rajmata Gandharidevi's residential palace. The chariots of the Pandavas followed. Satyaki and I alighted from

one side of Garudadhwaya. Kuru minister Vidura alighted from the other side. In the end dada put down the bluish sole of his foot with lean toes on the floor of the Kurus' royal palace.

All of us followed Vidura. Just then we all heard a deafening, shrill and lingering shriek of a lapwing flying over river Ganga nearby. Dada looked at the azure sky above our heads and closed his fish-shaped eyes. His bluish, lean fingers gently brushed over the fresh Vajrayanti garland hanging down his chest.

We reached in front of rajmata's chamber by walking on the winding path leading to it. Royal charioteer Sanjaya was standing right there. He earnestly approached dada, greeted him and holding his right hand lovingly he took dada to visit rajmata. Vidura walked on dada's left hand while Satyaki and I walked on his right. All the Pandavas followed us. As Sanjaya had already conveyed the news of our arrival to rajmata, a couple of Kuru maids came forward to welcome dada.

In the inner chamber rajmata sat on a polished rosewood settee. Many Kuru ladies including Duryodhana's wife Bhanumati, Duryodhana's sister and Jayadratha's wife Dushaladevi, and guru Drona's wife Kripidevi sat on a rug spread near the settee.

Seeing dada and all of us coming, all of them except rajmata stood up covering their faces with their shawls. A few clear and a few muffled sobs were heard. But Rajmata Gandharidevi who had for years blindfolded herself with a white strip of cloth, sat motionless on the settee – calm, like a marble statue. As dada saw her even his feet hesitated for a moment. The next moment he quickly stepped forward, knelt down and putting his head straight on rajmata's fair wrinkled feet dangling from the settee he said, "I, Srikrishna – son of Vasudeva-Devaki bow down to you rajmata."

Rajmata Gandharidevi got flustered for a moment.

The next moment that royal lady, heartbroken due to the death of her hundred sons hastily pulled both her feet up and sobbed uncontrollably. To avoid the touch of dada's hands she sat cross-legged on the settee, which she had never done before. Many men and women from various kingdoms of Aaryavarta had passionately fallen at dada's imperial feet till today just to touch them. This was the very first experience for him to be snubbed by someone.

I was shaken inside out to witness such a scene. All the Pandavas and dada's sakhas felt the same. The entire room was now packed with many

suppressed emotions. When dada who had spoken so charmingly all his life himself was dumbfounded and could not open his mouth, who else could dare to speak?

Everyone's eyes were fixed only on rajmata who was sobbing uncontrollably with her whole body shaking convulsively. No one could imagine the state of mind of that ascetic, exceptionally dutiful wife and royal lady who had lost one hundred sons in the Great War of *Bharata*. Not even dada!

She cried with convulsive gasps for quite some time and finally stopped, getting calmer on her own. She was exhausted by wiping away the tears streaming down her eyes continuously with the edge of her white shawl. She composed herself and spoke something vaguely as if she was speaking to herself – “I don't – I don't understand what is on your mind! You have destroyed my one hundred sons, killed them ruthlessly and on top of that you have come to meet me!” My dear dada held rajmata's wrinkled hand resting on the settee, covered it with his palms and patting it affectionately he said, “No rajmata – never. Even when a son becomes a bad son, a mother can never be a bad mother. I have really come to only see you, and not to offer solace. I have given so many philosophical speeches but even I have no words at all to console you.”

“Do you think that you can fool me with your web of words like you fooled others? Once I had removed my blindfold and blessed my son Duryodhana with an invincible body. If I wish so today, at this moment I can again remove my blindfold and in a single glance burn you to ashes in front of all those who are present here! You are under the illusion that all the words of the world have surrendered themselves to you – you wrongly imagine that you are the only one who knows politics.” Gandharidevi roared.

Even dada who could otherwise guess precisely what was going on in anyone's mind got confused. Still he said politely, “I know that too! Still I have come to see you with respect, earnestly.”

Now Rajmata Gandharidevi rose from the settee and stood erect. Gathering all the strength of her meditative powers the rajmata uttered a terrifying curse on dada in clear, sharp words that raised the hair on the skin of all present, in fear, “You are the one who ignited the Great War that got my hundred sons killed mercilessly, you left the Kuru clan bereft of an heir. You are the one who got all my daughters-in-law widowed. Obliterating only you is never going to give any solace to a mother's heart. Therefore, this daughter of the



Gandharas, rajmata of the Kurus, and devotee of Shiva, Gandhari, curses you from the bottom of my excruciated heart that Oh Srikrishna, the Yadava leader of Dwaraka, son of Vasudeva, Devaki, within thirty-six years from now you will also be destroyed like us with the entire Yadava clan! The Yadava women will also be widowed like our women. Oh Srikrishna, you who told Arjuna proudly that if he gets killed in the war he will attain heaven, and if he wins the war he will become the king of Hastinapura, I, the mother of one hundred sons curse you profoundly that you will not achieve the death of a hero, fighting as a brave warrior but you will die worthlessly, alone in some unknown forest and no one will even know about it. Both Devakimata and Rohinimata will be left heartbroken for you just as I am heartbroken in the grief for my sons. Your eight wives will become widows like all my daughters-in-law.” The old rajmata who was trembling pressed her thin fingers against her temples and cracked her knuckles loudly. Dada heard the curse with extreme composure while sitting on the rug at her feet. Even more calmly he said, “Oh rajmata, please calm down. Presuming that I will receive some kind of a terrible curse from you I have come here to see you! Don’t worry. I am not going to seek any kind of remission from your curse! I have accepted your curse with a composed mind. Even at this moment I respect you as much as I respect Devaki and Rohini mata. I regard you like Goddess Ida herself. Taking that into consideration, give me your blessings now – which will give me the strength to bear your curse.” With utmost humility dada put his head again on her feet. The rajmata who had considerably calmed down now leaned forward and with trembling hands she pulled dada up. The rajmata who had achieved sky-high greatness with her penance and veracity, held dada in a deep embrace effusively just like she would have held Duryodhana. For a few moments, both of them stood silently in each other’s embrace. As if, even the ever-running Time was brought to a standstill at that moment by both of them. Even Time may or may not have understood what and how much both of them spoke to each other silently in that moment except for themselves!

Without speaking a word further, dada started to leave the chamber after meeting Rajmata Gandharidevi. All of us who were moved by overwhelming emotion touched rajmata’s feet while lost in our thoughts and automatically followed him as if drawn. Once we came in the square he told eldest Pandava Yudhishtira, “All of you brothers should go to Vidura’s residence and stay at the feet of your mother. She will also be leaving for the forest later as per

grandsire's instruction. All of you should spend as much time as you can with Kunti *aatya*, and take care of her." Saying 'As you wish Lord of Dwaraka' all Pandavas including Yudhishtira paid obeisance to dada and took his leave.

Now Garudadhwaaja began the journey towards Dwaraka. Passing by Aanarta we came to the Shiva temple of Nageshwara in Saurashtra. Dada and I had been to this temple many times before. This temple and the Shiva temple at Somanath were dada's favourite holy places. After performing *Abhishek* on the *Shivapindi* at Nageshwara we arrived at the western ocean creek near Dwaraka.

Dada sent Satyaki by a boat to go across the creek to give intimation of our arrival to Pradyumna. Within a short time, he came to greet us in two big boats with Chief Minister Vipruthu who had become very tired now, and his brothers and cousins such as Samba, Sangramjita, Vrika, Charudeshna, Brihatsena, Unnada, Praghosha, Vira, Shruta, and Bhanu. We boarded the boats and sailed to the Shuddhaksha gate of Dwaraka on the east side. Many times before I had entered Dwaraka from this gate along with my brothers Chitraketu and Brihadbala, Balidada and his brothers Gada and Sarana with a grand welcome from the citizens of Dwaraka. Today our entry into Dwaraka along with Daruka and Satyaki was so very different. We had returned after losing over one akshauhini Yadava soldiers on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. For a few moments dada kept gazing at the royal insignia on the gate. Then he simply whispered 'Hail Idamata' and leaning forward he touched the first step of the eastern gate and touched his head. He stepped on it with his right foot and began walking calmly, peacefully. I realized that from this moment a new chapter in his life had begun – because never before had he touched the step of the Shuddhaksha gate while entering from the east side and chanted the name of Idamata.

Detailed news of the war at Kurukshetra had already reached Dwaraka. That is why more than feeling jubilant for the Pandavas' victory everyone was feeling dejected due to the sacrifice of lakhs of our soldiers in the war. Balidada, Vasudevababa, ministers of the Sudharma assembly – no one had come to the Shuddhaksha gate. It was the first time ever that dada was entering Dwaraka in such a dismal atmosphere. But he was calm. He was greeting everyone who had come to meet him with a smile and a polite bow. But this smile was not his usual smile. The citizens of Dwaraka felt it strongly.

First, he went to meet Devakimata. After entering her chamber, he touched

her feet and took a seat. I stepped forward and touched the feet of Devakimata, but still she did not recognize me. Many saffron-clad yogis and ascetics visited Dwaraka frequently, she mistook me for one of them.

Pointing his finger at me dada said, “Soon I am going to send him to Gokul. Thorale, you did not recognize him! He is our Uddhava.” Devakimata kept staring at me. All the questions about the war at Kurukshetra that she had kept ready in her mind to ask dada vanished instantly like a wild bird flying away. Our Thorali mata who had now become quite old, her face wrinkled, approached me while narrowing her eyes. Staring at me to make sure she said, “Indeed, this is our Uddhava. I couldn’t recognize him. Son, why are you wearing such kind of clothes? Anyway, are you doing well?” She stroked my face and cracked her shaking, old knuckles near her temples to avert the evil eye. I couldn’t resist myself and put my head on her feet. Then for a long time she and I talked about many different subjects like the aashrama of Badari-Kedara, my journey, and everybody’s health. No mention of the war at Kurukshetra at all.

Again, I came to witness dada’s precise genius. With just one sentence he had turned the atmosphere in the room around. How powerful a single word of his was that it could transform the atmosphere completely even if it was overcast with big, dark clouds. I got to see it one more time.

After meeting Thorali mata we went to see Vasudevababa. When we met him, he put his head on the feet of Vasudevababa and asked him, “Any news of Maharaja Ugrasena?”

With that question the mind of Vasudevababa who was older than everybody else in Dwaraka instantly reached Mathura. Shaking his head, he said, “It’s been a long time, no news from him. Only Goddess Ida knows how he and Mathura are doing!”

To ease his worries dada promptly said, “Maharaja, don’t worry about it. You have let our aged Chief Minister Vipruthu retire and take rest at home. His son Sukrita has been appointed in his place. We should send him to Mathura! What do you think?”

“How can I change your decision? It is the right thing to do.” said Vasudevababa.

Looking at me purposefully he smilingly said, “So be it then! I will send Uddhava to Chief Minister Vipruthu’s residence. He will also feel gratified.”

Weary Vasudevababa also did not broach the topic of Kurukshetra at all. Seeing dada safe and sound in front of him he just kept all his questions in his

mind.

Then we met Rohinimata, Balidada, Revativahini, Acharya Sandipani and his wife. As they all saw dada in person their depressed faces were refreshed. Only Balidada was still upset with his dear brother – due to the unlawful death of his beloved disciple Duryodhana. He spoke to dada using exactly the same words as Gandharidevi, “You are the sole reason of the catastrophic war of Kurukshetra. That poor rajmata lost one hundred sons. What must she be feeling? He may have been egoistic but Duryodhana was still the father-in-law of your own son. It was I who had taken the initiative to get Samba married to Duryodhana’s daughter Lakshmana, with only one objective in mind – that at least sometime in future you and Duryodhana will come together as friends!”

Hearing his naïve dada’s political calculations Krishnadada smiled with amusement. He said, “*Jyeshtha*, I thoughtfully met Gandharidevi and have returned to Dwaraka only after calmly receiving the terrible curse that she put upon me. As my elder brother, you will also have to bear the brunt of that curse. If you are upset about that and if you too want to curse me for that, I am ready to accept that too – with the same calm mind!”

“A curse? What kind of curse?” Balidada widened his big eyes.

“That of the extinction of the Yadava race!”

Now Balidada, who was such a great mace warrior, tough like Mount Raivataka and dynamic, also was benumbed – speechless.

Seeing him dumbstruck dada said to console him, “Balabhadradada, everything that comes to exist in this world is ultimately bound to be destroyed some time or the other! It is going to be consumed by fire. Can you tell me confidently that venerable Rajmata Gandharidevi who cursed me will never be engulfed by the flames of fire! I know it is not true that *Dharma* and victory will be present wherever master archer *Dhananjaya* and Srikrishna, possessor of the chakra are present. *Dharma* is only that which is the wish of Kala or Time which has no beginning and no end! And He is the only victor – this is the only truth. I would advise only one thing to you as a brother...”

“What advice? It has been already proved that your advice always involves some wily politics! Go on, what’s it?”

“Dada, you should control your temper. You get angry very quickly – and of late you have lost your old habit of calming down quickly. Just give it a thought whether you can get rid of both these habits and be stable-minded.”

Dada turned around to leave the chamber without giving Balidada any

chance to raise any doubts or objections as usual. I followed him instinctively.

Within two days Balidada summoned the Sudharma royal assembly in his capacity as the crown prince of the Yadavas. The royal assembly was overflowing with Yadava men and women. Everyone was curious as to what dada was going to say. All the news of the catastrophic war of Kurukshetra which had gone on for eighteen days had reached Dwaraka. In this war, only nine warriors, along with an unarmed charioteer had survived except for Bhishma waiting on the bed of Shara grass for the sun to begin its journey towards the summer solstice. The Yadavas of Dwaraka had lost more than one *akshauhini* of soldiers in this war. Almost every family had lost at least one soldier on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Everyone was anxious to hear what dada was going to say about them.

Chief Minister Vipruthu had been practising disciplinary control over the proceedings of the assembly till date with his lofty frame and firm voice. Now he was really exhausted. But still because of his utmost love and devotion for dada he was present today to perform his duty. His recently appointed son Sukrita also sat next to him. As old Vipruthu took the place of the Chief Minister and raised the jewel-studded royal sceptre of the Yadavas, the assembly hall fell silent as if someone had switched off the volume except for the roaring sound of the western ocean that was audible.

Aged Chief Minister commenced the council in broken words, saying, “This is an – an auspicious occasion for – for the citizens of Dwaraka to – to see the Lord of Dwaraka in person after – after so many days.

“Since the time of Jarasandha’s attacks we – we Yadavas are used to – used to fighting battles. We – we have already – already prepared our hearts to bear the loss of lakhs of lives. One truth has been ingrained in every drop of our blood – that – lakhs may die while protecting Truth and *Dharma* – but their patron should remain safe.

“On behalf of all Yadavas and my own self I pray to Goddess Ida that – that the Lord of Dwaraka – Krishnadeva may live a long and healthy life! And I request Haladhara Balarama to take charge of the assembly.”

“Hail Goddess Ida!”

Though weary, the aged Chief Minister made the customary pounding of the royal sceptre quite forcefully so that everyone could hear it clearly.

Yadava prince Balidada arose from his grand golden seat. He glanced over the crowded assembly hall once and said, “Yadava brothers, giving speeches

is not my forte. In fact, I am not going to speak at all today. I am only going to listen. Your Lord of Dwaraka, my younger brother Srikrishna should lay his heart bare in front of us today.” Balidada sat down while looking at us.

Now all eyes in the Sudharma royal assembly were fixed only on my dear dada. *Vahini* who was sitting near him and I also started looking at him with curiosity.

He stood up. With his peaceful eyes, he glanced around the Sudharma assembly once, in half circle. With his eyes, he paid obeisance to Aacharya Sandipani and the aacharya’s wife and began speaking. His eternal, mellifluous speech that was simply unforgettable to the Yadavas began flowing through his divine lips. Even today his speech was as melodious as his flute. He said, “Oh my dear Yadava brothers, the descendants of eighteen families, I can clearly see only one curious question in your eyes. Before I answer that question as per my understanding, I request Chief Minister Vipruthu who has been serving lakhs of Yadavas throughout his life and who is now exhausted due to old age that he need not stand waiting in this assembly as a formality. An attendant should arrange a seat for him. I assure the Chief Minister that if he sits down, the Yadava rule or the kingdom is not going to get any setback. It will always keep rising high like Garuda, the king of birds in our insignia, ready to take a flight and it will be everlasting!” The Yadavas responded to each word of his with a clamorous round of applause.

As the round of applause died down dada spoke again, “I have said earlier that I can clearly see only one question lingering in your eyes. That question is what did the war of Kurukshetra achieve? What did the Lord of Dwaraka gain by sending lakhs of soldiers of Aaryavarta in the jaws of death, putting forth the cause of the Kauravas and Pandavas? Who is going to console the lakhs of widows of Hastinapura, Dwaraka and Aaryavarta and how? Was this war really necessary for Bharatavarsha Why was this Great *yajna* of Death ignited?” He clearly worded the question lingering in every one’s mind. Because of that the already stifling silence became even more unendurable as if it had come charging in with the roar of the ocean. He intentionally stopped for a moment and glanced around the Sudharma assembly.

He continued further, “My dear brothers! Whether it is you or I, we tend to think about life from only one angle. We don’t even try to think from another point of view. All of you should also think what if the Great War of *Bharata* on Kurukshetra would not have taken place at all? Then what would be the state of affairs in the various kingdoms of Aaryavarta?

“Wouldn’t it be possible that kings of various kingdoms would have followed in Yudhishtira’s footsteps and played a game of dice by putting anyone – even their own mothers at stake? Wouldn’t they? Wouldn’t it happen that similar to Draupadi’s humiliation by the Kurus in the gambling hall many helpless noble women would have been put to shame on the streets of many royal cities? Should we have just kept watching it? What if the rulers of various kingdoms had felt inspired by Duryodhana’s arrogant attitude and self-centeredness to behave in the same manner? In what condition Aaryavarta would be then? What if cunning outsiders would have come here to settle down taking inspiration from Shakuni who came to Hastinapura from the distant kingdom of Gandhara and created political turmoil in Hastinapura?

“Oh brothers, just as sometimes the human race reaches the zenith of humanity, sometimes it also hits the rock bottom of brutality. Just as there is a day following the night, twilight also exists between them. This constantly roaring western ocean has the highest limit of the high tide as well as the lowest limit of the low tide. The ocean cannot feel sorry for the water that seeps into the sand on the shore at both these times.

“The Great *yajna* of the Great War of *Bharata* at Kurukshetra was also the same. I have always told my dear friend Arjuna, and my brother Uddhava that whether it be Duryodhana, Dushasana, selfless grandsire Bhishma or the world conqueror, munificent Karna, no one can experience the eternal truth by remaining confined in their life. To experience that, sometime or the other everyone will have to enter the battle of life under the glowing sun in the sky.

“Who knows, maybe tomorrow all of you and even I will have to enter a battlefield.

“You should never forget the experience of the lakhs of warriors who died at Kurukshetra. Lakhs of you here might have to face even more heart-rending circumstances in future. That is why I am going to repeat only a selected part of the advice that I imparted to Arjuna on the battlefield to understand the philosophy of life. Remember, life is not all about enjoyment of endless material pleasures. Every human being possesses five senses. Let’s take the example of the tongue which gives the experience of taste. There are countless fruits with a variety of tastes in this world. If one obstinately insists on tasting every single one of them at least once in life, then even one entire life won’t be enough for that. The same is the case with the other senses.

“The only and easiest way to understand life efficiently is to do one’s duty

without expecting anything in return. It is indeed difficult to put into practice but it is as beneficial as a bitter medicinal herb that works wonders.

“I don’t want to tell you anything more than that at this point. But I intend to do two things for sure. The first thing is a radical reform to improve the Sudharma royal assembly. I recommend that the aged members of the Sudharma assembly be relieved from duty. Prince Balaramadada will appoint the new ministers.

“The most important thing that I am going to do today concerns my best friend, my brother Uddhava. I find him perfectly suitable for it among lakhs of you Yadavas. In the presence of and with the permission of all my Yadava brothers and sisters I confer the epithet of ‘Avadhuta’ upon him.

“Avadhuta means one who is detached from all kinds of desires, like the lotus leaf – a truly emancipated soul. A *Sanyasi* also yearns for Moksha. But an Avadhuta has no desire even for that!”

With his declaration thousands of assembled Yadavas showered a roaring round of applause. Dada arose from his seat and approached me. I instinctively stood up due to my respect for him. Then quite unpredictably he removed the fresh white Vaijayanti garland around his neck and put it around my neck. Looking at the assembly hall he said, “I could never forget the *Kadamba* garland that this Avadhuta Uddhava had put around my neck on Yamuna’s shore when we met for the first time on the day I came from Gokul to Mathura!”

Countless exalted Yadavas gave a big hand again. Slogans arose from all sides, ‘Hail Avadhuta Uddhavadeva... glory to you!’ “Say something Avadhuta Uddhavadeva! Go ahead and speak.” Everyone insisted.

Respectfully honouring the request of all dear Yadavas I bowed down humbly and said, “First, let me offer obeisance to my dear dada and your Lord of Dwaraka. All my life I was seeking the answer to the question ‘Who am I’. I couldn’t find the right path to self-realization. Many times, I was stuck at a particular point of contemplation. Today I have come to know exactly who I am. What dada says is true. I lived my life to attain the epithet of ‘Avadhuta’. I earnestly yearned for it. I have the exact same feeling right now, on hearing the word ‘Avadhuta’ from dada’s mouth that he must have felt at the time when he was addressed as ‘Vaasudeva’ by the right person, grandsire Bhishma. I am privileged to accept the epithet of ‘Avadhuta’ affectionately conferred upon me by him after testing me. But honestly, I don’t think I am worthy enough to wear this Vaijayanti garland that he put



around my neck, for more than a few moments. That right is solely his as I know very well who has given it to him. From today I sincerely accept the responsibility of all the duties that he has assigned to me as 'Avadhuta'. But this Vaijayanti garland which belongs to him and is loved by his best friends and devotees, I humbly offer at his feet." I quickly removed the Vaijayanti garland from my neck and put it at dada's feet. Dada smiled, picked it up and held it close to his heart. Once again exhilarated Yadavas gave a big round of applause.

The news came from Hastinapura that grandsire Bhishma lying on the bed of Shara grass had breathed his last on Kurukshetra at the auspicious time when the sun began its journey for the summer solstice. Yudhishtira had been visiting him for some time every day and had received guidance from him about the duties of a king. Just like Arjuna had felt blessed by hearing the advice of the Gita from dada, Yudhishtira felt blessed by obtaining the advice of grandsire Bhishma. His four brothers had accompanied him. They also got to hear it.

The Pandava brothers had performed the final rites of grandsire at Kurukshetra itself, near the shore of Brahma sarovar. All the brothers were now occupied with the preparations for Yudhishtira's coronation. When dada heard the news, he dispatched Satyaki to Hastinapura. Now, after performing his daily duties, every evening he began to go without fail to the Aindra gate on the west side and would sit on the stone seat located near it with me. During one such meeting, he said to me, looking at the continuously roaring waves of the western ocean, "Avadhutaa, you must have wondered how come I did not go for the funeral of grandsire Bhishma! But I cremated Karna, the king of Anga with my own hands on the hill?

"Let me tell you why so, because only you have the capacity to understand it. All three of us spent our lives as Jalapurusha. Veracious grandsire Bhishma who had taken the profound vow of lifelong celibacy was an emancipated soul right from his birth. He had no need for any formalities of *Jalanjali*! But Karna who was engulfed by Duryodhana's cunning political friendship needed it. That is why I offered it only to Karna from among the lakhs of soldiers in the Great War. Brother Udho, only you can understand that if Kunti *aatya* wouldn't have abandoned him after his birth – if he wouldn't have come in the company of Duryodhana during his lifetime then – then grandsire Bhishma would have addressed him also 'Vaasudeva' just like he addressed me!" With each and every word of his I got lost in my

thoughts looking at the waves of the western ocean. His thoughts were just as endless as the waves.

Seeing me silent, dada held my arm and shaking me he said, “Oh Avadhutaa! Where are you lost? Satyaki has gone to Hastinapura with my message and instruction. You have to go to Gokul – just like you went to the people of Gokul with my message when I came from Gokul to Mathura for the first time.”

How many unprecedented milestones had he passed in his life! And yet he had not forgotten the curds, milk and butter that he had tasted from the innocent gopis of Gokul. He was not completely cut off from his childhood friends who played many games with him in the forests of Gokul forgetting their own parents and their homes. I kept looking into his long, fish-shaped, dark and deep eyes. He smilingly said, “Udho, brother, you and only you have to go to Gokul – as my representative – as Avadhuta – as me!”

As per dada’s instruction the next day I left through the Shuddhaksha gate for Mathura with Daruka, in the Garudadhvajja chariot. Taking sojourns in places like Saurashtra, Dasharna, and Bhojapuranagar, crossing river Yamuna I arrived at Mathura. How much it was transformed now! Today I strongly realized that what Vaasudeva Krishna had been telling was so true. The world around us keeps changing constantly. It is characterized by growth and progress. Mathura had flourished a lot as there were no longer any threats of Magadha attacks. Maharaja Ugrasena was way too old to attend the royal council anymore. The king appointed by him was looking after the administration of Mathura. After meeting Maharaja Ugrasena and taking a tour of our royal palace once, I entered Gokul along with Daruka and the chariot, by boat. Now everywhere I could see Gopas of the second and third generation after Nandababa. Our Garudadhvajja chariot harnessed with four white horses stood in front of the western gate of the same old residence of Nandababa. A young gopa from the third generation conveyed the news of my arrival to Nandababa who was now very tired and stooped. Hearing the news of my arrival Nandababa and Yashodamata came to the western gate of the residence with a group of gopas. Yashodamata with a wrinkled body and face and with her hair turned completely white stood in front of me holding her hand above her eyes. She had already left Nandababa behind. Narrowing her tired eyes under her hand she kept staring at me for a long time. Then she said in a trembling voice, “He – he is not our Kanhaiya!” Nandababa also seconded her opinion saying, “Definitely not. He is not our Kanha. He would

never don such – such saffron clothing!”

I promptly moved forward and touching their feet I said, “I am not your Kanha- Kanhaiya. He is doing well in Dwaraka. I am his *chulat bandhu*, Uddhava. He is so occupied with the administrative duties of Dwaraka that he has no time. I have come here as per his instruction. I had come once before also a long time ago. He has sent a message – Don’t worry. I am fine. Very soon I will come to visit you!”

Hearing my words the faces of that aged couple instantly glowed with joy. A large crowd of gopas who had assembled in front of me whispered among themselves, ‘Kanha is coming soon – the great Lord of Dwaraka is coming!’ While hearing their whispers I only kept thinking of one thing that dada had said. He had said that sometimes the illusion of the truth of life is more fascinating than the truth itself, it can be really life-giving.

By this time the news of my arrival had already spread all over small Gokul. I took a seat on a platform covered by a blanket in the main square of Nandababa’s residence. Daruka was sitting next to me. Just then a gopa woman of about the same age as our Revativahini entered with searching eyes. Her hair had also turned gray now. As soon as she came in front of me she did not get confused like the others, and said to me, “Paramsakha Avadhuta, do you recognize this *sakhi* of your dada?” I quickly moved forward and touched the feet of the gopa woman and said, “Not recognizing you is like not recognizing my own reflection in the mirror! Dada has sent his message of wellbeing to you. What is your message for him?”

She smiled slightly. Her smile reflected a tinge of dada’s smile. She was Radhika! She said, “Tell him that even I am fine by his grace. I have stopped waiting for him long back. My heart is in Dwaraka all the time!

“I have taken care of his gift with all sincerity so far. Now tell him to take care of it himself.” She pulled out a flute from the folds of her dress and handed it to me.

The next day I visited each and every place in Gokul associated with the divine memories of dada. In the end, I came to the same place on the shore of Yamuna where he had played with friends and had raised a *Shivapindi* of sand along with Balidada.

Now on that place was a small stone Shiva temple built by Nandababa in commemoration of that.

After staying in Gokul for two days I returned to Dwaraka after two weeks of travel by the same road that I had taken to reach Gokul. I presented a

detailed report of everything that had happened in Gokul, to dada. I handed over his beloved flute that his *gopa-sakhi* Radhika had given me. Holding it in his hand he came to the treasury of Dwaraka while talking to me. The treasury-chief had carefully kept the silver bracelet of his grandfather in a wooden casket. He stopped there for a moment and said, ‘Brother Avadhuta, listen to this.’ He closed his fish-shaped eyes and becoming one with the flute he played such canorous tunes one after another, it felt as if many rolls of fine-textured fabric were unrolling in front of my closed eyes. Then he put the flute in the same wooden casket and closed it. We went back to his chamber while chatting. The Srisopana came into sight. Now the staircase made up of glistening gold-plated sheets looked very tall and grand.

He called for an attendant and summoned Gargamuni and Vipruthu’s son Sukrita who had now become the Chief Minister. Climbing one step at a time both of us came into his chamber. He was not speaking at all. He was lost in some particular thought.

In a short while Gargamuni arrived with Vipruthu’s son. He greeted both of them with a smile and shared his plan with them. He said, “Chief Minister, summon architect Maya from Indraprastha along with his team. Gargamuni, we have to make some changes in the structure of this staircase. We have to add some steps to it in memory of some great warriors of the Great War of *Bharata*. You should look after the preparations personally.”

Both of them left to fulfil the duties assigned to them by dada.

A notable change had taken place on the island of Queens’ mansions since dada returned from Kurukshetra. There was a notable change in the temperament of his wives except for Rukminivahini. The biggest transformation had taken place in our Bhamavahini. She had completely given up her obstinacy and adamant ways which was quite hard to do. She had learned to talk and behave exactly like Rukminivahini. Such behaviour was complementary to her inborn beauty. But still dada’s most favourite wife was only Rukminivahini.

Since coming back to Dwaraka from Kurukshetra dada had not visited the island of Queens’ mansions even once. Rukminivahini now lived in original Dwaraka most of the time. Her seven sisters had also undergone noticeable transformations. Though Bhamavahini’s parental home was located in original Dwaraka she did not visit it for months together. She was occupied with the lives of her five married sons – Bhanu, Subhanu, Swarbhanu, Prabhanu, and Brihadbhanu. She constantly kept thinking of how to get her

five younger sons – Bhanumata, Chandrabhanu, Atibhanu, Sribhanu and Pratibhanu – married to appropriate brides with the assistance of Rukminivahini. But she still insisted on one thing though. She frequently kept telling dada to visit the island of Queens' mansions

Rukminivahini's daughter, dada's favourite Charumati – Charu was of marriageable age now. She looked strikingly beautiful like our Subhadra in her youth. Rukminivahini's sons Pradyumna, Charudeshna and Sudeshna were in the quest of a suitable valiant Kshatriya husband for her. All the younger sons of Rukminivahini– Charudeha, Sucharu, Charugupta, Bhadracharu, Charuchandra, Vicharu and Charu – had now gained expertise in handling weapons like the spear, iron club, sword, and bow and arrow.

Jambavatimahini's parental home was located on Mount Hrikshawana. That mountain was located near the Aanarta kingdom neighbouring Dwaraka. Her eldest son Samba was very good-looking but not as innocent as his name suggested. He was very naughty. He and his brothers – Sumitra, Purujita, Shatajita, Sahastrajita, and Vijaya would frequently visit their grandfather Jambavana on Mount Hrikshawana. Notably, they and all his younger brothers – Chitraketu, Vasumata, Dravida and Ritu were exceptionally proficient in bow and arrow skills. The eldest brother Samba had the habit of pulling pranks on his two-three youngest brothers by wearing artificial masks of wild animals like tigers, lions, elephants, and boars.

Dada's family was as huge as his acclaim. Among my vahinis, Bhadravahini and Mitravindavahini were his aate bhaginis. Mitravindavahini was the daughter of the Avanti king Jayasena and *aaty*a Rajadhidevi. Her sons Vrika, Harsha, Anila, Grudhra, Vardhana, Unnada, Mahasha, Pavana, Vanhi and Kshudhi would frequently cross the creek of Dwaraka and visit their grandparents in the Avanti kingdom as it was quite close. Before the Great War of *Bharata* these visits to their grandparents' home were never objected to. But after the war she particularly stopped all her sons from visiting their grandparents' home. All her sons were also well versed in weaponry.

Bhadravahini was the daughter of Kekaya king Dhrishtaketu and *aaty*a Shrutakirti. She and Lakshmanaavahini, both were from the Panchanada region. Lakshmanaavahini was the daughter of the Madra king Brihatsena. Obviously, both of them used to visit each other frequently. Bhadravahini's first five sons – Sangramjita, Brihatsena, Shura, Praharana, and Arijita were always in the company of Lakshmanaavahini's first five sons – Praghosha,

Gatravaat, Sinha, Bala, and Prabala. These ten sons of Panchanada always practised mace fights, wrestling and sword fighting together. They would fight a lot with each other but would calm down when their elder brothers Sangramjita and Praghosha scolded them. As Bhadravahini's younger sons – Jaya, Subhadra, Vaama, Aayu, and Satyaka and Lakshmanaavahini's five younger sons – Urdhwaga, Mahashakti, *Saga*, Oaja and Aparajita were about the same age they used to spend time together. This group of the younger sons would never meddle with the group of the elder sons. This younger group was more interested in topics like chariots, elephants, horses and camels. Whenever Nakula and Sahadeva came from Indraprasth to visit Dwaraka this group of younger sons of Bhadravahini and Lakshmanaavahini always pestered them with various questions about horses. Whenever mighty wrestler Bhimsena visited Dwaraka they would simply follow him around just to observe his towering, muscular body without saying anything, like a shoal of small fish following a giant whale.

Satyavahini from the Kosala kingdom had now withdrawn her interest in dance. She had cautiously made it a point to make sure that her ten sons were not falling behind in warfare training just as she was focused on her dance practice. Her first five sons – Vira, Chandra, Ashwasena, Chitrugu and Vegavata were interested in the protection and breeding of cows. Sometimes they would take the initiative to organize thrilling bullock cart races of the Yadavas. Satyavahini's five younger sons – Vrisha, Aama, Shanku, Vasu and Kunti would enthusiastically assist their elder brothers in organizing the races. Yes, dada himself had named one of his sons Kunti after Kunti *aatya*. Many kingdoms followed such a custom of naming their sons and daughters.

Kalindivahini whose parental home was located on the banks of the Yamuna had a very different temperament from all the other vahinis. She had won dada over on the merit of her penance. Her first five sons – Shruta, Kavi, Vrisha, Vira and Subahu spent most of their time in the company of Acharya Sandipani and Gargamuni. Their younger brothers – Bhadra, Shanti, Darsha, Purnamaasa and Somaka would occasionally get so absorbed in the gymnasium that they would avoid going to acharya and Gargamuni. Then the five elder brothers would pull them out of the gymnasium and coerce them to come to Acharya Sandipani with them.

Bhamavahini got weary of pleading with dada to visit the island of Queens' mansions. Even the other six vahinis tried to do that. Dada would listen to everybody, smile and say 'I will, I will'. Notably, Rukminivahini did not urge

him even once. She knew very well that he would visit the island of Queens' mansions only when he wanted to. In her very first meeting with him when he returned from Kurukshetra she had realized how much her husband had transformed psychologically after the war. She herself had moved to original Dwaraka and was living in the royal palace built for her. She had instructed all her sons including Pradyumna to always be in the service of the Lord of Dwaraka. She had also told her seven sisters to keep visiting dada frequently. After all she was the most senior among them. She was really different from all the other wives of dada. She had become like dada's breath!

Architect Maya, and his assistants Taraksha, Kamalaksha and Vidyunmali arrived in Dwaraka according to dada's instruction to the new Chief Minister. Vishwakarma also came. Renovation of the Srisopana commenced as per dada's instruction under the guidance of Gargamuni. Dada himself supervised this project. He was giving minute directions to the craftsmen. That is when I realized that the Srisopana was going to be dada's favourite treasured memory henceforth.

One such time while we were supervising this work, a servant brought the news that Sudamadeva had come to visit. Dada immediately sent him back to fetch Sudama and present him there respectfully.

Servants brought Sudama to us near the Srisopana. Now he also looked quite aged. But his frame was still the same thin and sinewy. He still carried a cloth bag on his shoulder as usual with his dear-to-heart sandalwood slippers in it.

Dada instantly spread both his arms and pulled him in a deep embrace. Sudama whispered as if he was talking to himself, "What – what a Great War! I couldn't get any – any news about you! That is why I couldn't resist and came here in person. Oh Keshavaa, how – how are you?"

Releasing him from the embrace dada held him in front by both his shoulders, smiled and said, "This is how I am – how are you doing? Where is the cloth bundle containing my favourite treat sent by *vahini*?"

Sudama pulled out the cloth bundle of his sentimental gift for his friend and while handing it to the Lord of Dwaraka, he glanced at me. Dada realized what he was wondering about and putting his hand on my shoulder said, "Sudamana, this is our Uddhava – my Udho – he has become Avadhuta now!"

My saffron dress had confused Sudama. At first, he did not recognize me. Then getting elated, he spread his arms and embraced me just as he had

embraced dada. None of us spoke anything for a while. How can I say that we didn't speak anything? Actually, we spoke volumes with each other, silently!

The craftsmen working on the renovation of the Srisopana stopped their work and amused, kept witnessing our emotional reunion. When dada cast just a glance at them they resumed the renovation of Srisopana.

For about a month Maya, his team and Vishwakarma worked diligently following Gargamuni's instructions for the grand renovation of the Srisopana. Now the Srisopana had more than one hundred steps with gold-plated copper sheets. It meant that dada had at least these many men and women, maybe more, in his life who were close to his heart and whom he had chosen and remembered. No one around him knew in whose memory all those steps were built and in what order. Even I didn't know it. And Arjuna was so far away – in Hastinapura.

There in Hastinapura, preparations were completed for Yudhishtira's coronation. Just as the Pandava priest Dhaumya rishi had vigilantly made preparation for the Rajasuya *Yajna* he did the same for this function too. He had Yaaja-Upayaaja of the Panchalas, Gargamuni from Dwaraka, and many learned and wise sages and hermits from various kingdoms for assistance. Now Pandava horse riders had dispersed in various directions to distribute the invitations for Yudhishtira's coronation. The Pandavas had organized this ceremony only after consulting dada from time to time. Stationed in Dwaraka, dada had held the reins of all the arrangements for Yudhishtira's coronation in Hastinapura. Therefore, the Yadavas had received the very first invitation from the Pandavas. To deliver the invitation master archer Arjuna had arrived in person along with Vrishavarma who was the former Chief Minister of the Kurus but now had become the Pandava Chief Minister, and Dhaumya rishi. Many armed troops of the Pandavas accompanied him. They were guarding various precious gifts for the Yadavas, loaded in the bullock carts.

Eager to meet dada, Arjuna had already boarded the boat to cross the creek. But dada sent him a message through Satyaki and instructed him to wait near the coast. Dada crossed the creek and went to welcome him in person along with Balidada, me and the new chief minister. He had accepted to be his charioteer not only in the Great War but also of his life. Arjuna was going to be a brother of an officially crowned emperor. Dada wanted to set an example to all the kingdoms of Aaryavarta of how respectfully to treat him. The



mission of his life was not just to help the Pandavas to gain victory in the Great War and to destroy the evil powers that wreaked havoc in the form of Duryodhana, Dushasana and Shakuni, but also to sow the seeds of precious values in Aaryavarta. Whenever he wanted to commence something new he always started it himself.

When the Lord of Dwaraka himself welcomed and brought master archer Arjuna to Dwaraka through the eastern Shuddhaksha gate lakhs of Yadava men and women of Dwaraka cheered and welcomed him like never before. When Arjuna kept the invitation for his elder brother's coronation at the feet of Maharaja Vasudeva in the Sudharma royal assembly it reverberated with a roaring round of applause. Dada had already instructed the new Chief Minister to present gifts to the future king of the Pandavas after receiving the invitation. Accordingly, the return gift salvers were presented in front of Vasudevababa and both rajmatas for the customary touch of their hands. When Vasudevababa touched the salvers with his old trembling hands the Pandavas obtained the greatest blessing in the world.

This exchange of gifts took place in the crowded Sudharma assembly in front of thousands of Yadavas. Dada was observing all these proceedings detachedly and with a stable mind and contented eye. I could clearly see that there was a feeling of satisfaction in his eyes for fulfilling his duty.

Now Dwaraka got busy in the preparations for the travel to Hastinapura for the coronation as per Yudhishtira's invitation. First, all the royal ladies crossed the creek with troops of armed guards and began their journey to Hastinapura. Then as the prince Balaramadada left along with all regiment leaders, selected Yadava soldiers and all his sons and those of dada. Dada summoned Kasheru, the leader of the Kamarupa women. She was now an aged married woman with many sons and daughters. Dada instructed her also to go to Hastinapura along with selected Kamarupa women. He did not forget to provide protection of armed soldiers to them.

In the very end, he sought the blessings of Vasudevababa and both the matas and sailed over the creek of Dwaraka in a big boat in his grand, embellished Garudadhwaaja chariot along with me. Armed troops of Yadava soldiers accompanied us too. We travelled by the usual route, going across Saurashtra, and Aanarta, taking sojourns along the banks of river Narmada through the region of Madhyadesha. We took a sojourn near Gopalgiri. Those were the days of winter. One night we lit a big campfire outside our tent and sat around it chatting and warming ourselves. Suddenly, we heard a big

commotion coming from the direction of the forests of Gopalgiri. Dada stood up at once. As he glanced at the pugnacious Yadavas in our troop, they picked up whatever weapons they could get hold of, like bow-arrow, maces, swords, and pestles and got ready to face any calamity. First, we heard the heavy tread of feet from all sides. Then we heard the rustling of bushes as they were being pushed aside to clear the way. Within moments about ten to twenty huge men holding some wild weapons in their hands came into sight. They were neither completely civil nor savage. The moment they came into our view our combative soldiers fell upon them hailing Goddess Ida. In the darkness of the night a skirmish broke out. Because of all the commotion our remaining soldiers who were sleeping in the pavilion arose and grabbing their weapons, came to our assistance. The sky-rending shouts of ‘Hail Goddess Ida’ were so loud that taking advantage of the darkness the looters retreated and disappeared like the forest wind. While going back some of the wounded looters had dropped their weapons. Some of us picked those up and showed them to dada.

All the Yadav soldiers gathered around dada while he was examining those weapons. After some time dada said, “These were wild tribes from the Maru region. It is their style to attack people suddenly. If you had not been at the ready, they might have just killed me and Avadhuta Uddhava here!”

“But who were these people, and why had they come here?” The troop leader asked dada raising his eyebrows.

“They were robbers of the Maru region who steal not only jewellery, animals, pots and pans but also abduct women – they were from the Abhira caste!”

After that we sat around the campfire enjoying the warmth for a long time chatting about looters from various kingdoms. Sometime after midnight we went to our tents and slept, keeping armed guards on vigil.

In a few days, we reached the border of the Hastinapura kingdom located on the banks of Ganga. Here Balidada met us with Revativahini and all the boys. Yudhishthira and all the four Pandavas had also come to greet us at the border, bringing Kunti *aatya* and Draupadidevi with them. Mahatma Vidura and Sanjaya were also with them. As we entered Hastinapura the men and women of Hastinapura who were now much composed welcomed us appropriately. The Pandavas had yet to restore a lot of the damage that was done, on the strength of their virtue. This welcome was not as grand and joyous as before.

In spite of Yudhishtira's repeated requests this time too dada decided to stay at the residence of *sakha* Vidura. Obviously, Satyaki, Daruka and I accompanied him.

The rituals for Yudhishtira's coronation as the king of Hastinapura commenced in proper order on the decided *Muhurta* as per the scriptures. These rituals continued for an entire week. Hastinapura was again full of hustle and bustle with guests coming from various kingdoms due to their love for the Pandavas. For the entire week dada, along with me, Rukminivahini and all her sisters attended all the ceremonies carried out amidst the chanting of mantras. But while attending these ceremonies in the ancient royal palace of the Kurus he particularly followed a rule that he was determined about. He and Rukminivahini did not sit on the specially arranged golden seats even though all the Pandavas including Yudhishtira and Arjuna were lovingly insisting upon it. He sat in the guest row of the kings who attended these ceremonies. He instructed Rukminivahini to sit among the Pandava ladies. He told me to sit in the section for the royal priest and sages and hermits.

When the golden crowns of the Maharaja and Maharani of Kurus, blessed with mantras, were placed on the heads of Yudhishtira and Draupadidevi his eyes reflected great satisfaction of having fulfilled his duty. After the coronation, Maharaja Yudhishtira and Maharani Draupadi came to seek his blessings in a hall full of guests. When Yudhishtira bearing the crown of the Kurus on his head and who was senior to him in age started to bow and touch his feet dada didn't allow him to do so. Holding his shoulders, he pulled him up and said, "Yudhishtiraa, you are elder to me. I have never allowed you and also Bhimsena to touch my feet. Now that you have become the Maharaja of the Kurus, you have become even greater. You should not touch my feet. Seek the blessings of Kunti *aatya* and other elders." While he was talking to Yudhishtira Maharani Draupadidevi knelt down and put her head on dada's feet. Dada looked at her smilingly and said, "But I gladly accept the salutations of my dear *sakhi*. May both of you live long and rule the kingdom befitting the glory of your ancestors."

After seeking the blessings of all the elders Maharaja Yudhishtira and Maharani Draupadidevi ascended the royal throne. Then they spent about one *ghatika* in accepting the gift salvers offered by various kingdoms. After that, aged, experienced Chief Minister Vrishavarma raised the jewel-studded ancient royal sceptre of the Kurus and hailed the new Maharaja – 'Hail the Lord of the Kurus, ruler of Hastinapura, son of Pandu, *Kaunteya* Maharaja

Yudhishtira – Maharani Draupadidevi...’ In response, all the attendees hailed in unison.

Chief Minister Vrishavarma, an expert in royal customs glanced at dada and said precisely, “Venerable Lord of Dwaraka along with Rukminidevi is present here for this distinguished coronation ceremony in Aaryavarta. All the guests present here know very well how significant this coronation ceremony is against the backdrop of the Great War of *Bharata*. As the Chief Minister of this new kingdom I humbly request the Lord of Dwaraka that both of them should approach the royal altar and bless the new Maharaja and Maharani.”

Dada had astutely dodged the responsibility of giving blessings to Yudhishtira. I was curious to see how he was going to dodge the request of the aged minister. Dada respectfully kept the minister’s word. He approached the royal throne on the royal altar. From there he cast a glance at Rukminidevi sitting in the section of the royal ladies. She understood his intention and went near him.

Many a times I had heard dada speak openly in the Sudharma royal assembly of the Yadavas. Now I was curious about what he was going to say in the royal assembly of the Kurus. With his bright eyes, he glanced all over the Kuru assembly. He spoke in a profound voice, like that of the roaring ocean, which once heard will be remembered by everyone throughout their lives, “The Chief Minister should announce that the era of ‘Yudhishtira-shaka’ has started in the good name of the new Kuru Maharaja Yudhishtira. To Maharaja Yudhishtira, Maharani Draupadidevi, mace warrior Bhimsena, my dear *Sakha* master archer Arjuna, Madreya Nakula, Sahadeva and rajmata *aatya* Kuntidevi and their citizens I would only say this much for the future – May all be well!!”

His speech was over at once. The applause continued even after he climbed down the royal altar and took his seat with other invited kings and Rukminidevi went to the section of the royal ladies. The people of Hastinapura and all the assembled guests of various kingdoms were cheering only one thing – ‘Hail Lord of Dwaraka, Vaasudeva Bhagvan Srikrishna!’

Blind Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gandharidevi were nowhere in this grand coronation ceremony. The couple had not come in spite of a formal invitation by Yudhishtira and Draupadidevi. *Aatya* Kuntidevi had also urged them a lot. But speaking as usual in his ambiguous language the blind father had sent I *aatya* back saying, “Both of us are blind. What are we going to see there? It

makes no difference whether we come there or stay here in our chamber. May you rule the kingdom happily! May your sons live long!”

But dada did not forget to visit the old couple with me before leaving Hastinapura. Touching the feet of the old king he said, “Maharaja – Maharani – I, Srikrishna of Dwaraka – the son of Maharaja Vasudeva pay my respects to you with my wife Rukmini.” But this time old Maharaj Dhritarashtra groped with his hands for dada’s shoulders, holding him in front of him passionately. The tears lingering at the edges of his blind eyes trembled.

The blind father tightly squeezed dada’s upper arms and heart-wrenchingly said, ‘Oh Krishna...!’ Till date as an imperial ruler he had always addressed dada as the ‘Lord of Dwaraka, son of Vasudeva or Srikrishna’. Today the father who had lost a hundred sons instinctively called him ‘Krishna’ with affection like Kunti *aatya*.

“Krishna, you have been doing so many things for so many people all your life. Now do only one thing for this father with a devastated heart, mourning his one hundred sons. Tell Yudhishtira to arrange for my *Vanaprasthashrama* along with Gandhari. We can’t stay in Hastinapura even for a moment now.”

Dada had surmised what he was going to say. He calmly said to Maharaja Dhritarashtra, “I urge both of you to remain in Hastinapura. I am going to leave Hastinapura only after instructing Pandava Maharaja Yudhishtira that Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi should always be treated honourably and respectfully by everyone. The moment you feel insulted you are free to leave Hastinapura and go to the forest. Elders should not ask something in favour, they should give. I, Srikrishna – son of Vasudeva, Lord of Dwaraka, urge you to do me this favour!”

Dada had not left any chance of argument for Maharaja Dhritarashtra. He inadvertently ended up saying, “As you wish Krishna...!”

From there dada and I, along with the others came to *aatya* Kuntidevi’s chamber to bid farewell. While going there dada said to me, “Avadhouta, our *aatya* Kuntidevi would have definitely gone to the forest to serve this old couple as per grandsire’s instruction. No one can tell what can happen in the forest and when. Now as per my wish Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gandharidevi will stay back in Hastinapura and *aatya* will automatically have to stay back.”

As dada had surmised when we touched *aatya* Kuntidevi’s feet and said our goodbyes to her she firmly said, “Krishna...! You have fulfilled all your

duties. My Yudhishtira has been crowned the ruler of Hastinapura. My daughter-in-law has become the Maharani. Now I will go to the forest for *Vanaprasthashrama*.”

I started listening more cautiously to what dada was saying. I knew for sure that dada won't be able to convince his determined *aatya*. *Aatya* will not agree with any of his clever justifications, at least not at this culminating moment of fulfilling her duty. Dada let a few moments pass by. After that he spoke in his usual playful manner to his dear *aatya* – “You are so eager to go to the forest! Is it such a bad idea to spend some time amidst the royal riches? It won't hurt the forests in any way!”

Kunti *aatya* got a bit confused. Then she said, “You are always spinning a web of your thoughts. But I am not going to listen to any of it. I am going for sure!”

Now I was curious about what dada would do. He astutely let a few moments go by. Then he pulled his ultimate ‘Krishna style’ thought and said, “Will you be going alone or is anybody else coming with you?”

This strategy of dada worked perfectly. Kunti *aatya* casually said, “As per grandsire's instruction I am going to spend my remaining life serving my brother-in-law and his wife in the forest. I am going to accompany them to the forest. Nothing is going to change my decision.”

Dada's job was done. He also smiled casually and said, “As you wish. Whenever they leave you can go with them. But for now, give me all your blessings to go to Dwaraka.” Dada and Rukminivahini both put their heads on the divine feet of Kunti *aatya*.

With utmost respect, I also put my head on the feet of Pandavas' forbearing old mother.

We came to the border of Hastinapura to go to Dwaraka. The five separate chariots of the five Pandavas following our chariot and the chariots of their commander, Chief Minister and royal ministers following them also stopped. I climbed down from the Garudadhwaaja chariot along with dada. All five Pandavas approached dada. Dada pulled Yudhishtira

and Bhimsena aside along with me. In a low voice, he said to Yudhishtira, “Oh Pandava Maharaja, remember one thing

that I tell you for sure. Take every minute precaution not to insult Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Gandharidevi who are

grieving the loss of their sons, even by the simplest action or words. Especially, don't let Bhimsena go in front of them

even by mistake. Bhimsena, you should also follow this in particular.”

Bhimsena retorted, “I am least interested in seeing the faces of the Maharaja and Maharani who forced us into the forest, who meekly listened to the brutal humiliation of my dear Draupadi in the gambling hall with feigned helplessness, who sacrificed forty lakh soldiers in the war of Kurukshetra!”

I patted Bhimsena’s sweaty shoulder and said persuasively, “Dada has given them his word that the Pandavas will not humiliate them even the slightest! And the moment it happens Maharaja Dhritarashtra and Maharani Gandharidevi will not stay in Hastinapura. They will immediately leave for the forest – and your mother, *aatya* Kuntidevi will also go with them. That is why Bhimsena, you should make sure that you don’t go in front of them.” I tried to convince Bhimsena in my own mild manner. Notably, Bhimsena nodded in affirmation accepting my advice.

We sailed across the creek and arrived in main Dwaraka where dada faced one more new issue. Banasura, the king of Shonitpura, had captured dada’s grandson- young Aniruddha and put him in prison. Banasura was from the Rakshasa clan. His daughter Usha had fallen in love with Aniruddha, the son of Pradyumna and Rukmavati. Rukmavati was the daughter of Rukminivahini’s brother Rukmi. Aniruddha was already married to Rochana, the daughter of Rukmi’s son. They also had a son named Vajra. During the wedding ceremony of Rochana and Aniruddha, Rukmi had said something bad about the Yadavas of Dwaraka while playing a game of dice as a part of tradition. At that point Balaramadada had got furious with Rukmi and had hit Rukmi with the dice board itself, killing him on the spot. That is why Rochana had lost contact with her parental home in Bhojakatakarnagar forever.

Aniruddha’s wife Rochana was agitated as Banasura had imprisoned Aniruddha and so she had come to see dada with his great grandson Vajra. Sharing her story and her pain she put her infant son Vajra in front of dada and said, “The Lord of Dwaraka has done justice to everyone in the world. What about me? My husband is in the prison of Shonitpura. Banasura’s daughter Usha is behind all this. I am ready to accept Usha as my sister, my co-wife. But the Lord of Dwaraka should liberate my husband and bring him back to Dwaraka.”

This was a new domestic problem dada faced. Once before, Jambativahini’s son Samba also had gotten involved in a similar situation. Samba who had gone to Hastinapura for the Swayamwar ceremony of Duryodhana’s daughter Lakshmana had tried to abduct her from the

ceremony hall itself. And Duryodhana had caught up with him at the border of the city with his daughter and put him in prison in a similar manner. Balaramadada had travelled to get him liberated, brought him back to Dwaraka and got him married to Lakshmana.

Now dada was facing the same problem in case of Aniruddha. He summoned Satyaki and the new Chief Minister Sukrita and gave them detailed information about the mission of Shonitpura. They prepared the fourfold army. After seeking the blessings of Maharaja Vasudeva and both mothers, even in that old age dada sailed across the creek. This was going to be the last battle of his life. In this war, he intentionally did not take Balidada with him. But he didn't forget to take Aniruddha's father Pradyumna. Both father and son attacked Shonitpura with their army. A great battle took place between dada and Banasura. Rakshasas always considered themselves to be very powerful. As they were experts in the strategy of deceitful war they considered the Kshatriyas to be feeble. That is why Banasura vehemently opposed the idea of getting his dear daughter Usha married to a Kshatriya. The fierce battle continued till evening. Ultimately Banasura surrendered. He was compelled to surrender as valiant Satyaki along with Pradyumna had vehemently beaten up countless Rakshasas. In the evening with his commander he handed over Aniruddha and Usha to Satyaki.

Within a week's time Dwaraka received the news that the Lord of Dwaraka, Satyaki, Pradyumna and Aniruddha are bringing the Rakshasa daughter Usha with them. Dwaraka rejoiced again. The citizens of Dwaraka greeted the Rakshasa daughter amidst the cheering for dada. Aniruddha's wife Rochana also accepted Usha. In spite of being a daughter of a Rakshasa, Usha was incredibly beautiful. She was fond of arts such as dance, drawing and music.

Within a fortnight, the night of *Kojagiri Pournima* descended on Dwaraka. As per the Yadava tradition all the royal men and women gathered in a big garden at the centre of the city to welcome the newly married bride.

The platter-sized round moon dispersing moonlight started shining in the skies of Dwaraka. Cauldrons full of cow's milk put on the stone stoves located in the garden were getting drenched in the milky white moonlight. Almost the entire garden was filled with Yadava men and women.

The white horses of dada's chariot harnessed to the Garudadhwa, steered by Daruka galloped towards the garden in the milky white starlight. This was the third generation of the horses of his chariot. Their names were still the same – Meghapushpa, Balahaka, Shaibya and Sugreiva. Balidada, Satyaki



and I accompanied dada in the chariot. Behind us Aniruddha's father Pradyumna was sitting in the chariot with his brothers. This chariot was followed by the chariots of all the other brothers. Maneuvering our embellished Garudadhwaaja chariot Daruka brought it in front of the eastern gate of the garden.

Chief Minister Sukrita came forward to welcome all of us. All men and women who had gathered to play *Rasa* were waiting for dada.

Walking with me, dada entered the ring of *Rasa*. The Vaijayanti garland was resting on his chest as usual. The peacock feather tucked in his golden crown was fluttering in the western wind. But now his curly locks of hair peeking out of his golden crown had turned pure white like the shining stars. The brilliance on his face was the same though, competing with the radiance of hundreds of suns.

After entering the ring of *Rasa*, first dada picked up palms full of vermillion from the platter as it was his privilege and for which everyone was waiting. Raising his head skyward he tossed it in the air shouting, 'Hail Goddess Ida'. Then nodding his head, he gestured to me and Balaramadada to do the same.

A mixed sound of musical instruments like the kettledrums, tabor, and horns arose at once. By this time Rukminivahini and her seven sisters – all of dada's wives had entered the *Rasa* ring.

In the company of Yadava men and women dada and Balaramadada began dancing *Rasa* as swiftly as they brandished their swords in a war.

The reflection of the moon on the lake water was oscillating. The *Rasa* dance of the Yadavas' first, second and third generation got more and more engaging, teasing the starlit night.

Once, dada and I were sitting on the stone veranda of the Shiva temple located near the Bhallata gate on the north side. We had just worshiped Lord Shiva. Daruka was also with us. Nowadays wherever dada went in Dwaraka, Yadava men and women would gather around him like bees gathering around a fragrant flower. Today also they came. They were sitting on the floor. Dada listened to all their complaints. He was speaking in his melodious voice indirectly solving their various problems. All the citizens were listening to him attentively.

Dada spoke for about half a *ghatika* and then suddenly pulled me in front of everyone and said, "Our Uddhavadeva – our Avadhuta has been travelling through the Himalayas. He is thinking of raising an aashrama in future at

Shiva's feet in Badri-Kedara. All of you should listen attentively to what he says. Remember each word of his, as the essence of his experience. If possible every one of you should try to practise at least one of his thoughts in real life."

I regarded dada like my own parents. He was as venerable as Acharya Sandipani. For me he was so much more than all of them. I could not disrespect his word. So, paying obeisance to dada respectfully in my mind I said –

"My dear brothers and sisters of Dwaraka". As I was about to begin, Chief Minister Sukrita entered hastily along with Satyaki and a few Yadava soldiers. The eyes of the audience turned to him. Seeing Dhaumya rishi and his disciples with the Chief Minister I automatically stopped. As they approached him dada arose. Both of us bowed first and sought the sage's blessings. While going back to the royal palace along with him dada asked, "Oh venerable rishi, is everything fine at Hastinapura?"

"Apparently, everything is okay! I have brought an invitation and a message with me. Maharaj Dhritarashtra and Gandharidevi have left to live in the forest for *Vanaprasthashrama*." Dada surmised what the rishi was going to say further and said, "Surely, some kind of altercation must have taken place between Bhimsena and Maharaja Dhritarashtra! Bhimsena must have lost his temper and said something humiliating to him! That is why he must have gone to the forest – and following in their footsteps Kunti *aatya* must have also left for the forest!"

Dhaumya rishi who was walking stopped for a moment and looking at dada in surprise he said, "Yes, that is what exactly happened. Kuntidevi has sent a message for the Lord of Dwaraka." The sage stopped.

"What message?" dada asked. I also listened attentively.

While going to the forest Pandavamata Kuntidevi said, "Tell Krishna, you have done everything possible. I am going to the forest to serve the elders. Whether it is the royal palace of Hastinapura or the forest – both are the same for me. We are going towards the forests at the foothills of the Himalayas. Just as you had come to visit us in the Kamyakavana, come and visit us here too sometimes!"

Dada got lost in some deep thought. Then composing himself he said, "What is the invitation for, oh sage?"

"The Maharaja of Hastinapura, founder of the new Shaka era, Maharaja Yudhishtira has invited both you and Baladeva. The Pandavas are

organizing an Ashwamedha *yajna*. On the forthcoming full-moon day the auspicious horse chosen for the *Yajna* is going to be worshiped in a ceremony in front of the citizens of Hastinapura in the central square of the city. It is the wish of Pandava Maharaja and all the Pandavas that the ceremony should take place at the hands of both of you. I have come here on their behalf with a formal invitation.”

I looked at dada’s contemplative face wondering what reply he was going to give. After some time, he said, “Oh rishi, hereafter I am not going to leave Dwaraka! Take our commander Satyaki with you as a representative of Dwaraka. I will also send my blessings and gifts for the Pandavas for their Ashwamedha *yajna*. Please check with Balaramadada what he wants to do.”

The next day Dhaumya rishi formally presented the invitation of Hastinapura in front of Maharaja Vasudeva in the Sudharma royal assembly. As dada was not going Balidada also declined the invitation. As decided, commander Satyaki left for Hastinapura with the gifts and a few soldiers along with Dhaumya rishi after a week.

Planning something in his mind, one day dada summoned the chief of the smithy. The middle-aged Yadava who came was an expert in moulding the blades of swords, maces and spears. He had come wondering what kind of weapon-moulding responsibility would the Lord of Dwaraka assign him. As soon as he stood in front of dada with his palms joined, dada asked him a completely unexpected question, “Ironsmith, the tolls given on the time-indicating iron disc that you have installed in the square near the Shuddhaksha gate of Dwaraka get merged with the roaring sound of the ocean. They are not clearly audible. How big an iron disc can you create that will make the sound loud enough for everyone to hear it clearly?”

The ironsmith was confused. This order was completely different from what he had expected. He was lost in thought. Dada indeed had this naughty habit of keeping others puzzled, confused and diverting their attention from one thought to another completely different thought. He was waiting for the response of the ironsmith.

“Oh, Lord of Dwaraka, please give me two days’ time. I will give you precise information of how soon and how big and durable an iron disc that will carry the sound of the toll to the farthest can be created.”

Not just the ironsmith but all big and small artisans, soldiers, troop leaders had come to know since the Great War of *Bharata* that dada does not take a baseless statement for an answer! You have to think carefully before you

speak and keep the promise that you make.

“Okay. You may go now and think about it.” Dada dismissed the chief of the smithy.

Bhamavahini who was transformed inside out, was consistently urging dada to visit the island of Queens’ mansions. But dada was turning a deaf ear to her request. Upset Bhamavahini would then send her six sisters one after the other to convince dada.

Jambavativahini who was now residing in original Dwaraka along with four-five of her sons would plead with dada saying, “The Lord should visit the island of Queens’ mansions at least once just to check the progress all of his sons in weaponry and horse-riding.” In her talk and her behaviour, she was now so much like all the other vahinis, that it was impossible to accept that once upon a time she had been a tribal woman. She was utterly exhausted with telling her eldest son Samba to give up his naughtiness that kept backfiring on him. But he was not changing for the better at all.

As Bhadravahini and Lakshmanaavahini both were from the Panchanada region they were always together. They would even come together to make a request to dada. Whenever they came, their clamorous bunch of twenty sons and two daughters always accompanied them. While amongst them dada would spend time merrily, brushing aside the memories of Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Uttara, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, Duryodhana, and Ashwatthama and such from the Great War of *Bharata*.

Lakshmanaavahini’s son Praghosha had a rough voice just as his name indicated, and would shout shrilly. Pulling the legs of his younger brothers like Bala, Prabala, and Aparajita he would say in his shrill voice, ‘Your names are Bala and Prabala, but you have no strength at all!’ To make fun of Aparajita he would say, ‘Why do you call yourself Aparajita – an invincible conqueror? I defeat you all the time in all kinds of fights such as sword, mace and pestle!’

Satyavahini’s three older sons Vira, Chandra and Ashwasena would harshly tease their youngest brother named Kunti saying, ‘Kuntidevi – Kuntidevi why do you live here? Go to Hastinapura!’

One of the sons of Mitravindavahini had quite a long neck and was hence named Grudhra. His own brothers would tease him calling him a vulture and would incite him by shaking their necks like a vulture.

Only all the sons of Kalindeevahini always spent their time in the company of Rukminivahini’s sons. But all of them were in awe of the eldest and

valiant son Pradyumna. As soon as he came in front of them all sons of dada would automatically fall silent, nudging each other with their elbows, whispering ‘Here comes *Jyeshtha*’.

All seven vahinis pleaded with dada to come to the island of Queens’ mansions, but none succeeded. Rukminivahini had now started noticing dejection on their faces. She was innately and temperamentally very different from all other vahinis. She decided in her mind to convince dada to visit the island of Queens’ mansions at least once.

For that, first of all she approached me. One day she casually said to me, “Avadhuta *bhauji*, it’s been a while since you ate the soft rice with salt prepared by me! Why don’t you visit the island of Queens’ mansions sometime! But don’t bring your dada along. You have renounced everything and become Avadhuta. You also show it in your attire, wearing saffron clothes. But on the other hand, he too has become Avadhuta while still donning the warrior costume! He has forgotten his daughters, sons and wives!”

I conveyed Rukminivahini’s message to dada verbatim. This emotional blackmail of Rukminivahini worked perfectly! Dada said, “Udho brother, I would also like to visit the island of Queens’ mansions with you to taste the soft rice with salt. I haven’t eaten it since the Great War. But don’t tell Rukmini that I am coming with you!”

Soon the chief ironsmith who had taken the task upon himself to create a time-indicating iron disc to dada’s liking presented himself in front of dada. He had come with an iron disc six feet in diameter, made of a perfect combination of various durable metals, and was carried by eight-ten ironsmiths. Images of the full moon, Goddess Ida with her weapons, an eagle ready to take flight, a lion with his jaw wide open, a healthy cow fearlessly grazing in front of him, and weapons such as the sword, chakra, mace and pestle, which were symbolic for the Yadavas were embossed on it. As soon as dada saw the iron disc his face lit up. The ironsmiths had held the disk dangling on a thick rope passing through a big hole on the edge, without touching it. Eagerly moving forward dada took a big iron hammer handed over to him by the ironsmith, and gave a powerful strike on the iron disc in front of us all. The loud sound almost deafened our ears. Dada’s chamber reverberated with the sound of the toll. Indeed, that sound overpowered even the roar of the ocean. The sound of the toll kept echoing in our ears for quite some time.

Very impressed, dada said to the ironsmith, “Get this properly installed on a platform at the final intersection on the royal highway near the Shuddhaksha gate on the east side of Dwaraka.”

As per his instruction I got the time-indicating iron disc installed at the final intersection on the royal highway on the east side of Dwaraka. Dada had given strict instructions, ‘The old time-indicating iron discs in Dwaraka should be continued to be used as before for the citizens. The usual routine of tolls should not be disturbed. The newly installed time-indicating iron disc should be used only when a prominent guest comes to visit just me.’ As per dada’s instruction the public announcement was made all over Dwaraka.

Every morning and evening Satyaki, Daruka, Pradyumna, Balidada’s sons Nishatha and Ulmuka, and all the sons and daughters of dada came to visit dada in his chamber by climbing the Srisopana. One day when Satyaki came to visit him he told him to keep seven–eight boats ready. He sailed on the western ocean in the boats with me, Daruka, Satyaki and Chief Minister Sukrita. None of us knew where we were going. When we went further he instructed all the fishermen to turn the boats towards the Kroshtu lighthouse–the guiding post of our Dwaraka harbour. Dada was going to visit the lighthouse after many years.

After the Great War at Kurukshetra the number of boats coming to the Dwaraka harbour from the neighbouring kingdoms had considerably reduced, but not completely stopped. Now the neighbouring kingdoms were acknowledging this harbour as ‘Dwaraka harbour’. Whenever any sailor asked ‘which Dwaraka harbour?’ another would answer, ‘Srikrishna’s Dwaraka harbour – the golden Dwaraka harbour!’

That day we spent half the day at Kroshtu lighthouse and returned with the rays of the setting sun on our backs. In the boat dada said to Satyaki, “We should erect an aashrama in Dwaraka like Acharya’s Ankapada aashrama where the young Yadavas of the new generation of Dwaraka would learn in depth about the ocean. We should not forget that our kingdom Dwaraka is surrounded by the ocean on three sides.”

I always found every thought of his to be leaping in the future like a thought of a visionary, moving ahead of time, breaking through it.

One day he himself said to me, “Udho Avadhuta, tomorrow we are going to the island of Queens’ mansions to eat the soft rice with salt prepared by your eldest *vahini* – Rukmini. Tell Satyaki and Chief Minister to make preparations. Send advance notice to the island.”

I dispatched Satyaki to the island of Queens' mansions with a message that, 'the Lord of Dwaraka is coming to meet all of you'. Hearing that news, the entire island rejoiced. All the queens of Dada dispatched horse riders and summoned their sons dispersed in different places, immediately to the island.

In this visit neither the Chief Minister, nor Satyaki nor any of the members of Sudharma assembly accompanied us. Only Daruka was there with both of us. It was amusing to see Daruka in the boat with us, who usually sat in the charioteer's seat of the Garudadhvaja chariot. Dada had given clear instructions to the Chief Minister and Satyaki that he was not going to return to Dwaraka for one whole month. As he didn't want to miss the daily morning and evening worship of his parents he had also instructed me to carry Vasudevababa's royal wooden slippers with me. He was going to offer vermilion and flowers to them every morning and evening – in this way he would offer his respects to all three of them. For the same reason, he had also told me to carry Acharya Sandipani's wooden slippers. He had prostrated in front of Balaramadada before leaving and convinced him so that he wouldn't get upset.

We didn't even realize how happily one entire month that we spent on the island of Queens' mansions passed by. Dada spent four days with each of his beloved wives and inquired affectionately about all their sons and the daughters-in-law. In the end, he came to spend a few days in Rukminivahini's chamber at leisure. His favourite daughter Charu tenderly and devotedly looked after her imperial father who was worshiped all over the world. Her three half-sisters also accompanied her. Charu knew very well that every morning after washing his face he drank water from a golden pot in which the stems of lotus flowers had been kept immersed for the whole night. She would keep it ready for him without fail.

Dada, Rukminivahini and I spoke to our heart's content on various topics during this stay. In that we even remembered Bhojakatakarnagar and Rukmi who was slain by angry Balaramadada during the wedding ceremony of Aniruddha and Rochana. That time Rukminivahini unknowingly kept calling me 'Bandhu Udho' just like Dada used to call me.

Rukminivahini had still kept carefully the sword which Dada had raised on Rukmi. *Vahini* sent an attendant to present the sword in front of Dada. Dada took it in his hands and immediately handed it to me. He said to me, "Avadhuta, it is true that this sword doesn't go with your saffron clothing, but I have given it to you to guess who it belongs to." I minutely observed the

sword in my hand. Seeing the Yadava symbols engraved on it I said, “This is your Nandaka sword!”

Rukminivahini was elated to hear my answer and unwittingly exclaimed one more time, “He is bandhu Udho after all!” “No wonder he recognized it”

Hearing the expression ‘bandhu’ for the third time from her clearly, I really felt the loss of not having a real sister. I considered Rukminivahini a sister instead of *vahini*, but without saying so explicitly. It was deep-rooted in my mind.

I felt extremely happy that dada and Rukminivahini had spent time together after many years and conversed with each other to their heart’s content. After bidding farewell to all vahinis and relatives while coming back to original Dwaraka, dada pulled Jambavativahini’s son Samba aside along with me and said to him in front of me, “Dear son Samba...! Your name represents ‘Shiva’. Just as Shiva’s feet have the power of Pralaya – total annihilation – so does his speech. The one who understands the power of speech understands ‘Shiva’. Such a person is called Samba. The one who doesn’t get it is called Shumbha. The *Asura* race has Shumbha among them – not the human race. And never forget that speech can lead to destruction!”

We came back to original Dwaraka.

Now dada’s daily routine was again as it was before the Great War of *Bharata*. He would wake up at *Brahma Muhurta*, to the the bards’ playing the Rudravina and singing to its tune. Then he would take a look at the rare symbols of conch, chakra, *swastika*, pennant, fish and such on his rosy palms. He would smile to himself with thoughts which nobody else would know. He would step on the ground only after paying respect to it. He would brush his teeth with a small stick of Kikar wood and tooth powder and then gargle with fragrant water. He would do yogasanas in the early morning. Only after doing the breathing exercises of *Pranayama*, singing the praises of God, and reciting the mantras of *Purashcharana* he would drink a pot full of freshly drawn milk. He would offer *Tarpana* to the dead ancestors, seek blessings of the elders, take a look at the rising sun, and give away charities. He would go to the people’s chamber in front of the Sudharma assembly and genuinely listen to all the problems of the people of Dwaraka, and solve them promptly by giving instructions to Vipruthu’s son Sukrita, Satyaki and various troop leaders. If any issue was related to any kingdom other than Dwaraka he would hand over the responsibility of solving that to Balaramadada. He never interfered in any of Balaramadada’s decisions. He was receiving precise news



of only two kingdoms collected by his own surveillance squad. One was Hastinapura and another was Indraprastha. The Pandavas had reserved the Indraprastha kingdom for Aniruddha and Rochana's son Vajra. Vajra was still very young. Once he was mature enough, all Pandavas were officially going to offer the kingdom to him in a formal coronation ceremony. *Aatya* Kuntidevi had made all the Pandavas including Yudhishtira promise her so before going to the forest. Her intent was to have strong emotional ties of even the fourth generation of the Yadavas of Dwaraka with the Kurus of Hastinapura.

Dada had already rehabilitated thousands of women of Kamarupa in Dwaraka. He paid personal attention to the rehabilitation of the families of those Yadavas who had lost their lives in the war of Kurukshetra, and got their future settled. Now he had particularly started to stay away from the Sudharma assembly. Though no one else had realized it I had.

I started noticing strongly that nowadays dada was taking more interest in sages, hermits, yogis and ascetics than soldiers, warriors, troop leaders and fighters. Thereupon one day the first toll was struck on the newtime-indicating iron disc installed on the eastern royal highway, followed by the second and the third toll.

The moment he heard the clear tolls of the new time-indicating iron disc dada closed his fish-shaped eyes for a moment. Hearing the time toll he said to me, "Bandhu Avadhuta, who could be the special guest? Let's go and see." While leaving he also dispatched an attendant with a message to Balaramadada to come directly to the square of the time-indicating iron disc.

We arrived at the square of the new time-indicating iron disc on the royal highway. A tall bearded rishi, clad in white stood on the stone platform of the iron disc. The dark-complexioned rishi was surrounded by ten-fifteen disciples. As soon as his eyes met with those of the rishi dada instructed the soldiers accompanying us to stay back. Taking only me with him he walked forward briskly. We climbed the stairs of the platform. Dada prostrated at the feet of the Maharishi who was engrossed in watching the Yadava symbols engraved on the time-indicating iron disc, narrowing his eyes. I followed suit. He was the quite aged Maharishi Vyasa!

As Maharishi was married he was clad in white clothes. They perfectly matched his white beard. Maharishi hastily pulled up dada and taking him into his embrace, smiling like a child he said, "You are already looking like me! Where is the prince?"

Seeing Balaramadada and his brothers Gada and Sarana coming from a distance, all disciples of the Maharishi who were clad in saffron like me whispered among themselves, ‘The elder brother of the Lord of Dwaraka is also coming’.

As soon as he came, Balaramadada prostrated in front of the Maharishi along with his brothers. All of us walked to the Sudharma royal assembly. As Balaramadada had already instructed so, Chief Minister Sukrita also arrived, with preparations in place for welcoming the Maharishi. As the prince, Balaramadada honoured the Maharishi and his disciples. All this was done promptly, as it was his custom not to stay in one place for more than two days.

During those two days, he visited Vasudevababa and both the rajmatas. He went to Aacharya Sandipani’s residence and inquired about his as well as his wife’s wellbeing. When dada instructed me to send for all the royal ladies of the Queens’ mansions to visit Maharishi, Maharishi himself exclaimed, “There is no need to call them here. I will go there myself. I have heard that your queen Rukmini makes delicious soft rice. You have tasted such rice to your heart’s content back in Gokul too. I want to taste it at least once!” Such a great Maharishi who had reached the highest position of honour spoke thus and let out childlike laughter.

Even dada was always so loquacious fell silent when he heard it. He politely brought his palms together and said, “Your wish is my command Maharishi.”

Maharishi Vyasa visited the island of Queens’ mansions along with his disciples. Of course, dada and I accompanied him. There he met all the vahinis including Rukminivahini and all the sons and daughters of dada. He stayed there for one day. The next day he came back to original Dwaraka. Now he was going to leave Dwaraka and continue his regular peregrination. Only dada, Balaramadada and I– the three of us walked with the Maharishi and came near the big boat in which he was going to sail across the creek with his disciples. His disciples boarded the boat one after another. Only the four of us remained behind – Maharishi, dada, Balaramadada and me. Maharishi put his right hand on dada’s shoulder and glancing at me he said, “The three of you will have to face a testing truth way more severe than the war of Kurukshetra!” The three of us kept gazing at his ascetic, radiant face with the white beard and moustache. Maharishi said to Balaramadada, “Prince Balabhadra, my disciples have given me every detail of the

information about your kingdom that they have collected. Since your return from the Himalayas you have not left the royal palace much. Srikrishna, you are extremely disturbed ever since coming from Kurukshetra. This Avadhuta Uddhava is completely occupied in serving you day and night. Your subjects – the lakhs of Yadavas have no true ruler. They are rapidly becoming inclined towards fun and frolic. They are forgetting their daily rituals and chores. This is the biggest threat to your kingdom. The three of you should get alert well in time. You should practise strict administrative rules without fearing anybody's so-called status among your subjects. If you fail to do so, you won't have the time to even regret it.

“You are like my sons. That is why I am telling this to you in clear words. Therefore, don't feel unhappy about it. I have also come to know that your subjects are increasingly getting addicted to alcohol which is resulting in disrespect of women's due honour. Your earlier valiant pugnacious Yadava soldiers are now becoming womanizers. Look at the facts and take appropriate action. You have my blessings. Now say goodbye to me with happy faces.”

Maharishi Vyasa turned around and walking slowly he boarded the boat, and mingled with his disciples. What he left behind was an unending cycle of worries for the three of us.

The very next day Balaramadada took out strict orders for the citizens of Dwaraka. They were circulated to thousands of households in Dwaraka. Peace prevailed for a week, then two weeks and then for a month in Dwaraka. Nowadays dada was frequently visiting places like Nageshwara and Bhalakathirtha near Veravala, sailing across the creek with me. Sometimes he, Satyaki, Daruka and I used to go to Prabhasathirtha too.

The thousands of women of Kamarupa had grown old now. They had gotten married to the Yadava soldiers of their liking and were leading a family life. Dada had officially released them from the collective contract of marriage that he had offered them back in Pragjyotishapura for that purpose. Their third generation was living in their colony now.

One day dada himself told me, “Brother Udho, don't plan anything else for today. We are going to spend the whole day at the colony of the folks of Kamarupa. Inform Kasheru so.”

In the late morning dada, Balaramadada, Satyaki, Daruka, Chief Minister Sukrita, and I came to the colony of the Kamarupa folks as per dada's wish.

The entire colony rejoiced in delight. In the central square of the colony, on

an elevated platform, rugs were spread for sitting. For quite some time, all of us sat on the rugs and watched the dances of the men and women of Kamarupa, and listened to their singing. Not only that, dada himself arose from his seat towards the end of the dance. In Gokul and Mathura he had danced *Rasa* many a time in the starlit nights. Just the same way the Lord of Dwaraka danced with the old women of Kamarupa.

Now the citizens of Dwaraka were behaving in a disciplined manner as a result of Balaramadada's edict. The new generation of ministers of the Sudharma assembly and troop leaders were carrying out their duties properly. Many carnivals were being organized in Dwaraka like before. Bullock cart races, horse races and cock fights were taking place in a festive atmosphere. Mace, sword and wrestling duels were taking place without any altercations. Dada barely went to the Sudharma assembly now. Balabhadradada had to go to the assembly as he was the prince. He was handling the proceedings of the Sudharma assembly successfully, allowing Vasudevababa and both the rajmatas to take the rest that they deserved. But recently, Acharya Sandipani was frequently bringing up the topic of the Ankapada aashrama of Avanti and was talking of moving there with his son Dutta. Dada and I were trying to prevent him from doing so.

Master archer Arjuna had successfully returned to Hastinapura after taking the horse of Pandava's Ashwamedha *Yajna* around all of Aaryavarta. That was also a thing of the past now.

Draupadidevi who was distressed due to the death of her five sons in the war of Kurukshetra had now recovered considerably. Dada felt satisfied to hear that she was capably handling the responsibility of being the Pandava Maharani. Our sister Subhadra was also bringing up Parikshita, the son of Abhimanyu and Uttaraa with a great deal of care. He was also grown up now.

And one day from the platform of the new time-indicating iron disc the tolls indicating the arrival of a special guest reverberated again. Thannn.... Thannn...Thannn... they even outdid the sound of the ocean. Dada became alert when he heard the tolls. He sent me to Balabhadradada's chamber. I returned to dada's chamber bringing Balidada along with me.

Dada, Balaramadada and I reached the platform wondering who the special guest could be. On the platform, among his disciples and our Yadava soldiers, stood Acharya Ghor Angirasa of Prayaga in person!

Like Maharishi Vyasa he also embraced dada, Balabhadradada and me deeply. He had a white strip of cloth covering his mouth like before. He had

also grown very old now, and spoke much lesser than before. Whatever he spoke was barely audible due to his age and the strip of cloth on his mouth.

He told dada in a very calm and steady voice, “I have come here to see with my own eyes how well and how much you have practised and treasured the knowledge of *Brahmavidya* that I gave you in the Prayaga aashrama. The war that you started on Kurukshetra was a Great *yajna*. I know that it was required. I can also understand that if it had not taken place, this Aaryavarta would have become a very ugly place. But now I am not here to give you any advice. In fact, I have come here hoping to hear your words and understand the real meaning of life at this juncture of my life.”

“You are putting me in a great quandary aacharya.” As usual dada showed his respect to aacharya by bringing his palms together in greeting and leaning forward he said, “Please come with me, we will speak at leisure.”

Ghor Angirasa was not ready to go to the Sudharma royal assembly directly like Maharishi Vyasa. In very few words he said, “I am no longer interested in the royal duties – royal customs – felicitation ceremonies. I only wish to speak freely with you, and only with you! My disciples Uddhava and Daruka can also join just for listening. After talking to you I will visit Vasudevababa, both your mothers, and Aacharya Sandipani who moulded you, and then I will leave for Mount Raivataka.”

As per the custom of ascetics he also stayed in Dwaraka for only two days. He did not accept any kind of felicitations. He ate very limited and spoke very little. As soon as we entered dada’s chamber he made dada sit on his right, signalled us to sit down and patting on dada’s back he said, “Whatever you told Arjuna at Kurukshetra, tell me that in brief. I am only going to listen. You are going to be the only one to speak. You had the authority to make everyone listen to you then and you have it even today. Speak freely.”

Then dada kept talking, and we kept listening. He spoke about many subjects such as Vishadayoga, Karmayoga, Rajayoga, Jnanayoga and his most favourite Premayoga heartily. This speech was such that one could go on listening to it forever. After some time, he took his lean bluish fingers a couple

of times towards his lips and said, “Let’s go and have some food!”

For the first time aacharya Ghor Angirasa smiled and said, “Srikrishna your naughtiness from Gokul has not reduced a bit. You gave so much food for thought to our brains and yet you did not forget the daily karma of eating

lunch.”

As he was about to say something further, dada held his hand affectionately to take him for the meal and said, “I know that now you are a Tirthankara who eats only once a day, still please have some milk and fruits.”

We didn’t even realize how those two days passed in the company of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa. He brought up one subject or the other and kept dada talking. King Kakudmin of Mount Raivataka received the news of his arrival in Dwaraka. He promptly presented himself in the service of Aacharya Ghor Angirasa along with his chief minister and commander. He was now going to take aacharya to Mount Raivataka forever. On Mount Raivataka, he had raised an aashrama for aacharya, which had no images or statues inside.

Dada sent me to the island of Queens’ mansions to bring all his queens, sons and daughters to visit aacharya. He also sent a special message to Rukminivahini through me that ‘Aacharya and his disciples have to be served the soft rice specially prepared by you as the Prasada of the Yadavas. So, don’t forget to bring enough soft rice in clean vessels!’

So, Rukminivahini brought the rice. In dada’s chamber dada, Balabhadradada, me, Maharaja Kakudmin, Chief Minister Sukrita, Satyaki, Daruka, and all disciples of aacharya – all of us joyously feasted on the Prasada that she had prepared.

Ghor Angirasa left Dwaraka with his disciples after visiting Vasudevababa, both the rajmatas, Aacharya Sandipani, his wife and son Dutta, as he had told us. He went to Mount Raivataka with King Kakudmin, along with his disciples.

After he left us, we felt an emotional vacuum for many days. I came to know an amusing aspect about all my vahinis who had come to bid farewell to him. Each one of them loved dada very much. They were calling me in dada’s chamber under some pretext or the other. All of them were very curious about dada’s Srisopana. Each one of them wanted to know if the Srisopana had a step in their name. All of them were confident that there was one in their name. They were all quite curious to know at what number it was. An even funnier thing was that each one wanted to know whose step was above hers and whose was below. Rukminivahini was the only exception. All of them tried to dig it out of me. Occasionally they would even take me near the Srisopana and urge me to actually show the step in their name. Only Rukminivahini never asked me anything about it.

When I told her about this inquiry from the other seven vahinis she simply

smiled – exactly like dada. Baffled, I asked her, “*Vahini*, how come you are not at all curious about this?”

She casually said, “What do I need a step for? I am the dust on my Sri’s feet! I am always with his feet. Am I not?” Only she could have thought of such an answer. In fact, it was not an answer; it was just a candid expression!

Because of this episode, I clearly realized the drastic change in Bhamavahini. I asked her too, “Why are you so curious to know if there is a step in the Srisopana in your name or not?” After I questioned her she cautiously asked me, “Have you ever asked this question to Rukminitai? What did she say?” When I told her Rukminivahini’s response her eyes widened and she exclaimed, “Is that what tai said?” After that she did not say anything, and never asked the same question again.

But I never found any of dada’s many sons to be curious at all about the Srisopana. Sometimes I strongly felt that the generation of all the sons of dada, Balabhadradada, his brothers, and my brothers was a very different one. As they got to see the glistening gold of Dwaraka every single day they never felt anything special about it. For them there was no difference whatsoever between the golden steps of Srisopana and the golden fortification.

Dada’s attitude had also changed slightly since Acharya Ghor Angirasa’s visit. Every evening we went to visit Vasudevababa and both rajmatas to seek their blessings. Earlier dada would seek their blessings, discuss any important event that had taken place that day for a few minutes and quickly bid farewell to them. But now after seeking Vasudevababa’s blessings he would sit on the settee next to him. He would tell baba to lie on his back in the Shavasana position. Then he would take baba’s foot in his lap and press it for hours with his bluish lean fingers. At that time, I would also sit on the other side of the bed and putting Vasudevababa’s other foot in my lap I would keep pressing it. Dada would keep talking to Vasudevababa about various topics in his sweet voice. It was my greatest pleasure to hear him talk.

Vasudevababa would feel relaxed and fall fast asleep while dada and I continued pressing his feet. Then dada would smilingly look at me and wink, indicating ‘our job is done’. He would gently lower baba’s foot from his thigh, rest it on the bed and leave the chamber. I would follow suit.

Then we would go to the chambers of both the rajmatas. He would try the same strategy with Devakimata that he had tried with baba. He would force her also to lie on the bed. He would put her foot too on his thigh and start pressing it. I would get occupied in the same chore sitting near him.

Thorali wouldn't fall asleep easily. After some time, she herself would say, 'Enough of your service now. You are the Lord of Dwaraka – very busy. Now go to Dhakali and let her also enjoy your service. Go!' Then we would properly tuck her under a blanket and go to the chamber of the younger rajmata – Rohinimata.

While watching his supreme respect for his parents, one day I felt it very strongly that he had not one or two but eighty sons but except for the customary touch of his feet not a single one had ever pressed the feet of their father! None of them had even expressed such a desire. The only meaning of this was that each generation growing under the shining sun is different. It always has different values and different ideals. This perpetual principle was indeed true.

Dada continued to sail across the creek of Dwaraka and visit Somanatha, sometimes Nageshwara, and at times Bhalakathirtha of Veravala. Sometimes we also visited the holy place of Prabhasa. Dada's daily routine was going on smoothly now, as it used to be in Dwaraka a long time ago.

Our conversations always included the subject of the Pandavas. The Pandavas had established amicable and cordial alliances with all neighbouring kingdoms. Their administration was running smoothly under the guidance of Mahatma Vidura and experienced minister Sanjaya. Due to the successful Ashwamedha *yajna* plenty of riches were being sent to the Pandavas' royal city by all surrounding kingdoms every year. The religious Pandavas who always took care of the betterment of their subjects had raised many well-built stone ghats along the shore of Ganga. Wells and waterholes were dug in many places. The Pandavas' royal city of Hastinapura had capacious gardens, wrestling gymnasiums, and well-planned playgrounds. On hearing about the acclaim of the Pandavas, many artists and craftsmen from neighbouring kingdoms had migrated to Hastinapura. Some curious people would visit Hastinapura just to see valiant Bhima and Arjuna who had won the fierce war of Kurukshetra. The Pandavas had also erected a beautiful stone temple of Goddess Ida in the centre of the city. A well-equipped ashrama was erected on the northern border of the city for Dhaumya rishi. It was fully occupied by disciples arriving from various neighbouring kingdoms to obtain guidance.

Abhimanyu and Uttara's son Parikshita was getting moulded under the guidance of aged Dhaumya rishi and was learning weaponry, astra vidya, royal customs and formalities under expert acharyas from various kingdoms.



Many commanders, chief ministers, kings and royal priests made sure to convey one thing to us in many ways. The princes and brilliant aashrama pupils of such kingdoms would visit Hastinapura whenever they got a chance. None of them came back without meeting master archer Arjuna from among the five Pandavas. They didn't mind if they couldn't meet Maharaja Yudhishtira or any one of the other three Pandavas, but if they couldn't meet Arjuna, they would stay back in Hastinapura till they did. They would meet Arjuna and request him very politely to share the advice that dada had given him on the battlefield of Kurukshetra before the commencement of the battle. If anyone requested him in dada's name, Arjuna would also share it as he remembered, with a lot of passion. Thus, the advice that dada had given only to Arjuna had spread to countless people. While being passed from person to person, it was inadvertently being augmented. The people in the valley of Brahmavarta including the kingdoms of Kurujangala, Hastinapura, and Indraprastha were now acknowledging it as 'Srikrishnagita'.

While watching, and hearing all this sometimes I would have a strong feeling that though dada had called me his confidant and Avadhuta, Arjuna was his only favourite and beloved *Sakha*.

Once we were having a chat in dada's chamber. The Panchala commander from Kampilyanagar, Chief Minister and Panchala sages Yaaja-Upayaaja were present during the conversation. Sages Yaaja-Upayaaja and the Panchala Chief Minister were conveying to dada how his 'Srikrishnagita' had reached every household in the valley of Ganga. He was listening to it with a detached mind, smiling at times without speaking anything. Just then some commotion was heard in the direction of the Srisopana. Hearing that, our meeting immediately fell silent. The squad leader with a spear in his hand and sword tied around his waist, from the guard's post near the time-indicating iron disc platform hastily entered the chamber. In a fearful, shaky voice he said, "I tried to convince him so much by saying, 'Munibaba just wait here. Give a strike on the iron disc – if you don't want to do that I will do it for you. It will automatically intimate the Lord of Dwaraka' but that white-bearded man didn't listen to me at all. Dismissing me he said, 'Why do I need permission to meet your Lord of Dwaraka? I am directly going to see him.' Saying thus the lanky Munibaba holding a crooked staff in his hand is coming here, pounding the staff on the floor! Fearing that I would be held responsible for disobeying the Lord of Dwaraka I have come running ahead of him." The gasping troop leader barely breathed a sigh of relief when a

lanky, tall, dark complexioned, bearded rishi with matted hair holding a crooked staff in his hand entered dada's chamber climbing the Srisopana.

The moment dada saw him he stood up at once. Briskly moving forward, he directly prostrated at the feet of the rishi who was rolling his eyes with anger. Seeing him prostrate all Panchalas along with me stood up immediately. All of us prostrated at his feet. Dada lovingly held his frail hand holding the staff. Asking him politely 'When did you come to Dwaraka, oh rishi?' dada respectfully made him sit on his own seat. Humbly leaning forward, joining both his palms, dada urged him, "Oh venerable rishi, please let us know what is the purpose of your visit?"

The lanky sage who had directly come there glowered with his angry red eyes at all of us standing around. Then he raised the staff he was holding in the air once and roared, "Alas, what a sad state you and your Dwaraka is in, self-proclaimed Lord of Dwaraka! I travelled through the entire city. In every square, liquor shops have been opened. Your heroic Yadavas always keep fighting with each other arrogantly over trivial matters, getting drunk day and night and forgetting their Kshatriya lineage. They remain quiet temporarily when they see your armed squad leaders. They pretend to be innocent."

I kept staring at dada. He did not react.

The Panchala leaders who had come as guests became nervous. Raising their eyebrows, nudging each other with their elbows they were asking in subdued voices, "Who is this honourable guest? Who?"

At that the rishi roared, with his reddish eyes rolling and waved the staff in his hand, "Who wants to know who I am? And what for? If you want to know, then listen – I am Durvasa! The son of venerable Sage Atri" Immediately fixing his eyes on dada Durvasa roared again, "Lord of Dwaraka! From where and why have you collected such a bunch of idiots? Get rid of all of them. You ignited such a Great War of *Bharata*! What is the outcome of that? Instead you should have spent your life in improving the hearts of the people of your golden Dwaraka. Now you are keeping tabs on neither Indraprastha, nor Hastinapura and not even Dwaraka. Thousands of your Yadava citizens of Dwaraka have become insolent due to your victory in the war of Kurukshetra and the immense wealth coming into Dwaraka. They have become uncontrollable. They don't respect anyone. Even this body which is just thrice the length of an arm doesn't work properly if it is not disciplined, then how will a kingdom run? Even though it is made of gold how long will it take to turn it into dust? Who do you think yourself to be?"

Vaasudeva? Bhagvan? The one who does everything?”

Shocked, all of us only kept listening. Dada had also dropped his head and was only listening. He did not speak anything.

Seeing that, Durvasa got even more angry and roared, “Do you have any idea what happened to your *aatya* – Pandavas’ mother Kuntidevi who had served me and was the possessor of the Devahuti mantra?”

Now dada got startled and looked up.

“Your *aatya* Kuntidevi who had gone to the forest to serve her blind brother-in-law Dhritarashtra and his blind wife Gandhari has been consumed by a sudden wildfire in the forest! Blind Dhritarashtra who built a lacquer house in the forest of Varanavata to burn Kunti’s five sons to ashes has now turned into ashes himself along with his virtuous wife! And Hastinapura has no clue about this!”

Hearing the heart-wrenching, devastating news my stable-minded, aloof and relinquishing dada’s fish-shaped eyes brimmed with tears.

After seeing that, Sage Durvasa softened a bit. He said, “As her *bhacha* you should perform the final rites of that forbearing, pure lady. Immediately send a message to the Pandavas to perform the final rites for all three of them. I have first come to you, just to deliver this news, taking the shortest path from the Himalayas and travelling along the foothills of Mount Aravali.”

“Who is this saffron-clad man?” He pointed towards me.

Before dada could answer I leaned forward and joining my hands I answered, “I am the son of Devabhaga and Kansa, the *chulat bandhu* of the Lord of Dwaraka.”

“Good that you didn’t introduce yourself as ‘Avadhuta’ to me! But let me tell you that you have indeed achieved the status of an Avadhuta. Your eyes reflect it. I will see you later in Badri-Kedara.

“Krishna, I will visit your parents, Prince Balarama, and Acharya Sandipani and go back tomorrow. On my way back, at the holy place of Prabhasa I am going to perform the ritual of my last rites with my own hands and return to the Himalayas!”

Durvasa accepted only the milk and fruits that an attendant had brought as per dada’s instruction. After having that he calmed down quite a bit. It was now that the love for dada in his heart surfaced in few but emotional words. He put his staff aside. He looked at dada and holding both his arms lovingly in his hands he said, “Vaasudevaa...! I spoke as per my irascible nature. If I have hurt you then forgive this dispassionate, crazy man who has been

constantly peregrinating throughout his life!”

Now dada held both his feeble hands and patted them with a lot of affection. He handed Durvasa the staff that he had kept aside. With a smile, he said, “I am not hurt at all, venerable rishi. If you wouldn’t have said something like this, only then I would have been concerned. And that concern would have hurt me. You should go with Avadhuta and meet my parents. I am going to send for all my queens and sons and daughters from the island of Queens’ mansions right away. Please grant them permission to visit you and get your blessings. My brother Avadhuta will accompany you to the holy place of Prabhasa to make all the arrangements for you there. Somebody else will also be there.”

Durvasa rishi arose from dada’s seat. He put his hand on the crowned head of dada who was leaning forward humbly and blessed him, “Oh Lord of Dwaraka, may all be well!”

After giving him blessings the venerable rishi kept staring at the iridescent peacock feather in dada’s crown for a few moments. Then he casually said, “Krishna, no other Kshatriya in Aaryavarta has carried such a symbolic peacock feather in his crown for his entire life. I don’t think anyone else will ever do so in future. Even the greatest of the rishi like me haven’t understood the meaning of life the way you have understood it. To tell you frankly I am not worthy of giving you my blessings. What I have given you are only my best wishes as your senior in age!”

Durvasa rishi left dada’s chamber with me. Along with all of us he stood at the first step of the Srisopana leading down, for a few moments. Dada had stayed back in his chamber. The venerable rishi asked me, “Avadhuta, what is the purpose of erecting this grand, neatly built staircase?”

Had anybody else asked me this question, I would have given some vague answer that diverted the topic somewhere else like dada. But here I was dealing with Durvasa rishi himself. I shared whatever information I had of Srisopana with him. I said, “Dada himself has personally got this sopana built in the memory of all the extraordinary people who came into his life. Only he knows the sequence of the steps. He never shares that information with anybody. I also know very little about it.”

Hearing that, the venerable sage broadly smiled to himself. He glanced over the grand staircase from top to bottom furrowing his brow.

Dada sent a special messenger for all the vahinis and their sons from the island of Queens’ mansions to come to original Dwaraka.

I took Durvasa rishi to meet everyone. Now he was ready to go to the holy place of Prabhasa. For his journey the naval chief prepared a grand boat decorated with flower garlands and flags with the Garuda symbols. Balaramadada, Satyaki, Daruka, Chief Minister and all the troop leaders came to the coast through the Shuddhaksha gate to bid farewell to the venerable sage. All my vahinis had already visited Durvasa rishi and returned to the island of Queens' mansions.

Now dada also came near the coast to bid farewell to Durvasa. Everyone was waiting only for him. Durvasa himself was waiting for him. He was asking everyone around, 'Where is Krishna? Do you see him?' Just then dada came. With him was his son Samba and about twenty of his half-brothers. Not a single son of Rukminivahini and Kalindivahini was among them. Two-three sons each of other vahinis were there. As they were all younger than Samba they were following him. Dada and his sons came near the boat that was going to carry Durvasa rishi to the holy place of Prabhasa. In front of all, dada humbly put his head on the feet of the venerable sage and paid his respects for the last time. After him Balaramadada, Satyaki, Daruka, and I did the same. But all the sons of dada including Samba simply kept watching all this like strangers, from a distance. Venerable Durvasa rishi also gave dada blessings for the last time –

“May all be well!”

Now without looking back the venerable sage climbed the boat in a single leap. His disciples bowed down to him and quickly making way for him, took him to the centre. I also climbed into the boat as per dada's instruction. Dada put his hands on Samba's shoulder and gave him some advice. Samba also boarded the boat with his brothers and half-brothers to assist me in the proper farewell of Durvasa rishi. All of them carried weapons such as mace, chakra, spear, sword, and pestle. We waved goodbye from the boat. We could clearly see dada waving goodbye to Durvasa rishi standing in the group

of Balaramadada, Satyaki, Chief Minister, members of the assembly, and Panchalas, from the bank that was being slowly left behind.

All of us came to the holy place of Prabhasa with Durvasa rishi. The ceremony of final rites that Durvasa had planned for himself began with formal rituals. His disciples promptly started putting the things he asked for in front of him, as per his instructions. As I had seen the sage's temperament and due to dada's instructions I was taking every precaution that there is no error in arranging anything that he needed. All of dada's sons including

Samba were sitting far away under a sprawling tree. They were cracking some jokes among themselves and laughing. From a distance, we could hear their commotion indistinctly.

The ceremony got over within one *ghatika* under the guidance of a well-versed priest of Prabhasa. Durvasa offered the *Jalanjali* to the setting sun. With the satisfaction of having performed the ceremony properly, he, his disciples and I walked near the tree under which dada's sons were sitting, chatting among ourselves.

The scene under the tree had now changed. Now a woman could be seen among dada's sons. Her face was covered with her shawl. From her frame, she appeared to be with child. And Samba who was leading them so far was nowhere to be seen. As we all approached them, all the sons of dada signalled the pregnant woman to seek the blessings of venerable Durvasa rishi.

The woman who looked almost due for her delivery walked with difficulty towards the sage taking one step at a time. Acting as if finding it difficult to bend due to her bulging belly the woman said, "Oh venerable rishi, please tell me if I am going to give birth to a son or a daughter and give blessings for my safe delivery!"

The rishi narrowed his reddish eyes and staring at the pregnant woman in front of him he asked, "Who are you respected lady? How come you appeared here so suddenly?" With a coy gesture the woman said in a lady-like high-pitched voice, "You are so wise. How can I, a noble lady, utter my husband's name? My servants will tell you."

Then three-four of dada's sons said unanimously, "She is the wife of our Babhru Yadava. Oh, venerable rishi, please give your blessings to her and tell us if she will give birth to a son or a daughter."

The pregnant woman could feel that Durvasa rishi was observing her. To avoid his gaze, she coyly turned around. The sudden movement loosened her dress from the left side and a thudding sound followed. The confused woman tried to hold her lower belly together. Two more thudding sounds followed. Now the completely flustered woman tried to gather her dress and disappeared among the group of dada's sons while giggling. Despicable peals of laughter followed that. Three equal pieces of a wooden pestle were now clearly visible on the ground where the woman had been standing.

Durvasa rishi saw the wooden pieces lying in front of him and began shaking with rage. The wooden staff in his hand started shaking with his fury. His already red eyes instantly became fiery red like the fire in a *yajna* pit. The

moment I saw the pieces I felt terrified; the rishi's disciples got scared.

The woman who had approached Durvasa was not a woman at all! She was not the pregnant wife of Babhru Yadava! He was Samba, dada and Jambavativahini's son! He had got a sudden impulse to teach a lesson to the lanky and ugly-looking Durvasa rishi who had been throwing tantrums, holding a staff in his hand and was defiantly giving orders to everybody. His innate naughtiness was thus going to be a great problem for him. This was all Samba's idea - the drama of being a pregnant woman, her mock costume, pretentiously asking for Sage Durvasa's blessings, asking him about the gender of the unborn child to ridicule his wisdom, and making all his brothers participate in his scheme. Since his childhood no one had ever reprimanded him severely for his naughtiness. No one had ever tried to stop him. He had not been in dada's company much. All this was the outcome of that.

Terrified, all of us kept staring at Durvasa rishi, anxious about the consequences of all this. Shaking with rage Durvasa rishi went closer to the three pieces of pestle lying in front of him. With the staff in his hand he turned the pieces over to take a look at them. He struck a few blows of the staff on them. Then holding the staff under his left arm, he poured some water on his right palm from the *Kamandalu* he was holding in the left hand; he closed his eyes and recalled something. Then while whispering something he quickly sprinkled the water on the three pieces of the pestle and roared loudly, "You stupid Yadavas who dared to humiliate a rishi like me, this same pestle will soon become the cause of your destruction! It will lead to your annihilation! I won't stay here a moment now. Let's go."

Durvasa rishi didn't even bother to throw a glance at me or a single one of dada's sons. He turned in the direction of the north and marched on. His disciples dragged behind him. Benumbed, I ran after him to see if I could pacify him. Durvasa rishi didn't pay any attention to my pleadings and without speaking a word to me he left.

I came back to the tree under which dada's sons had gathered along with Samba. They were not there now and even the destructive pestle was not there! All of them had made one more unforgivable mistake. I was going to hand over that pestle to dada and tell him what had happened. He could have invited other rishis of Durvasa's calibre and offered it in the *Yajna* pit. He could have even invited Durvasa again to Dwaraka if needed.

Dada's son Samba who had inherited dada's incredible genius had ground the wet pestle into powder with his brothers using stones! He thought that if

he destroyed the source of the problem the problem would be solved. He and his brothers had dumped the powder in the frothing waves of the western ocean.

When I returned alone to Dwaraka from the holy place of Prabhasa my heart was utterly dejected. Not just because the Yadavas were going to be annihilated but because I couldn't do anything to stop it. And more than that, because it was me who had to break this devastating news to my dear dada!

When dada asked me 'Did Sage Durvasa return safely?' I just said 'Yes' and stopped short. He immediately noticed that my answer was not elaborate enough like usual and as per my temperament. He approached me and patting my shoulders he said, "Avadhuta, you will never be able to hide anything from me. Tell me in detail whatever happened. No matter how unpropitious it is!" I hesitated for a moment, wondering how to speak. What had he not done for the Yadavas? Leaving Gokul behind, he came to Mathura. For the sake of Mathura seventeen times he had fought wars with Jarasandha. He had spent a lot of wealth to erect the golden city of Dwaraka. He had obtained great acclaim for this newly built Yadava kingdom in Aaryavarta. How was I going to tell him the heart-breaking news of their total annihilation? I couldn't think straight.

It was also not possible for me to keep quiet when he had directly asked me the question. And it was even more impossible to astutely hide anything from him while sharing the news. Finally, I hardened my heart and told him everything that took place on the holy land of Prabhasa, as it had happened.

Hearing that, he became solemn for a long time like never before. I had never seen him this serious before – not even after the Great War of *Bharata*! For quite a long time, he didn't say anything to me. Then he just smiled and stopped. After some time, he asked me, "Uddhava – Avadhuta, what would you have done if you were in my place?" I realized his intention behind asking me that question. He was testing how connected I was with him.

I answered, "I would have spoken in the Sudharma assembly as candidly as you would have."

Now he gave me the usual smile. He told me, "That's what is going to happen. Go right away and send Chief Minister Sukrita."

Chief Minister Sukrita immediately contacted Balabhadradada and consulted with the Sudharma assembly members about organizing the assembly. As per his instruction the announcements were made throughout the entire island of Dwaraka. Both of them made sure that it also reached the



island of queens' mansion. In a nutshell, the announcement was 'The Lord of Dwaraka, Bhagvan Vaasudeva Maharaja wants to say something of crucial importance to all the citizens of Dwaraka – on the coming Wednesday. No one will ever be able to hear him talk in the Sudharma royal assembly or any other assembly after this. Anyone who is interested in listening to his speech should make sure to attend the Sudharma assembly this Wednesday!'

People of Dwaraka started walking towards Sudharma assembly in huge clamorous groups like never before. Though aged and weary, Vasudevababa was present in the Sudharma assembly along with both rajmatas. Prince Balaramadada along with Revativahini had arrived in the assembly before him and taken his seat. The ten ministers of the assembly were seated in their places. Acharya Sandipani and the Yadavas' ingenious architect Gargamuni were also present. All the new leaders of each regiment of the fourfold army and the naval chief were present. All dada's sons including Pradyumna, Bhanu, Vrika, Shruta, Sangramjita, Praghosha and Vira were sitting in the row below them along with their younger brothers. Yes, even Samba who had brought this calamity upon all due to his naughtiness was sitting along with his brothers and half-brothers. In the lowest row, Aniruddha, representing the third generation was sitting along with his blood brothers and stepbrothers.

On the left and right side of Maharaja Vasudevababa's royal throne, on an elevated level there were two capacious sectors with decorated seats. In the section on the right all of dada's wives and my vahinis – Bhama, Jambavati, Mitravinda, Lakshmanaa, Satya, Bhadra, and Kalindidevi were sitting along with their daughters-in-law. In the sector on the left Gada, Sarana, their wives – my vahinis were sitting along with their daughters and daughters-in-law. Among the royal ladies, dada's favourite daughter Charumati was sitting with her cousins near Bhamavahini.

Chief Minister Sukrita was standing next to the elevated seat for the Chief Minister holding the jewel-studded royal sceptre in his hand. The huge hall of the Sudharma royal assembly was overflowing. Not even an ant could enter in there.

Now everyone, including the Chief Minister was waiting for the Lord of Dwaraka and Rukminivahini, who was connected with him and his joys and sorrows forever.

The Sudharma royal assembly was actually quite close to dada's palace. Still as per dada's instruction Daruka had embellished his Garudadhawaja

chariot as usual and kept it ready. We boarded the chariot and moved towards the Sudharma assembly. On our way, we passed the time-indicating iron disc platform. As dada instructed Daruka to halt the chariot, he pulled the reins of his four beloved, hefty, milky white horses and controlled them. Garudadhwaja came to a halt. Dada alighted from the chariot alone. Walking slowly, one step at a time, he climbed the stairs of the time-indicating iron disc platform and went close to the broad and tall, gold-plated iron disc. He carefully watched each royal symbol of the Yadavas and smiled to himself.

He picked up the gold-plated iron hammer tucked in the leather groove next to the iron disc. He shrugged both his broad, muscular shoulders indicating ‘What do I care about all this?’

Deciding something firmly in his mind, he landed three successive powerful strikes with the heavy hammer on that huge time-indicating iron disc. The echoing sound was so piercing that even the roaring sound of the ocean that was audible so far became inaudible. After all they were the powerful strikes struck by the knee-long arms which once carried the Sudarshan chakra! With a completely serene face now he put the gold-plated hammer back in the leather groove as it was. He climbed down the platform with an utterly calm face, and began walking towards Garudadhwaja.

He knew very well that because of the powerful strikes that he had struck, the gold plating on the royal symbols of the Yadavas on the time-indicating iron disc had chipped and the symbols were exposed now. They were now in the original iron – black and lustreless. Even the gold plating on the hammer that he had put back in the groove was also cracked. Such things were going to continue now!

Following dada and *vahini* I entered the Sudharma royal assembly with Daruka. The moment they saw us the entire royal assembly gave us a standing ovation except for Vasudevababa, both the rajmatas, the prince, Revativahini, and Acharya Sandipani.

The three of us approached our seats. Leaning forward dada joined both his palms and greeted the whole assembly. Rukminivahini and I followed suit. The shower of applause still continued. As the clapping sound reached outside the

hall, the crowd of Krishna devotees gathered outside began clapping even though they couldn’t see what was happening inside and the sound of their applause also permeated the assembly hall.

Dada who was mellow with maturity and full of gratitude raised both his

arms and smiling politely signalled the crowd in the assembly hall to take their seats. All Yadava members of the Sudharma assembly took their seats. A small din arose outside the assembly hall. But finally, everyone outside the hall took seats wherever they could.

Sukrita, the newly appointed young Chief Minister of the Yadavas, raised the jewel-studded royal sceptre with the soaring Garuda symbol atop it. He spoke very little in his sharp voice, “Dear Yadava brothers, this assembly today is of crucial importance. The Lord of Dwaraka, Vaasudeva Bhagvan Srikrishna himself has called it. Never had he himself called a Sudharma assembly before. It was always done by the order of Vasudeva Maharaja and Prince Balaramadada from time to time. Whatever the Lord of Dwaraka is going to say now, each word of his will be the outcome of his genius, his contemplation and his own experience. Each one of you should listen to him attentively and remember his words sincerely. I humbly request Bhagvan Vaasudeva to take over!”

Silence prevailed inside the assembly hall as well as outside as the Chief Minister pounded the royal sceptre on the floor.

What he spoke today was the essence of his life. His voice was as sharp and as mellifluous like before. He said,

“My dear Yadava brothers—sisters, boys and girls —”

Realizing that many in the audience, inside and outside the hall, who were his devotees were not Yadavas, he said again, “All the people who love me unconditionally, I am going to speak very little. It is my first-hand experience that excess talk is always futile. This western ocean has been speaking, roaring for the past lakhs of years. Has anybody ever heard him? He is roaring and telling us that ‘deep within me there is a treasure of many jewels and pearls, but what everyone sees is only my saline water. The one with intelligence and the power of distinction can make use of even the saline water, by obtaining salt from it and making it beneficial for life.

“My speech today is not advice. It is my duty to share with you whatever my life has given me.

“I told Arjuna all kinds of Yogas of life on the land of Kurukshetra. Today I assert that the essence of life is Premayoga. Love has no limit. It is endless. The human race has been created only for spreading love. Hatred comes to an end. When one person hates another, that hatred ends with the death of the other person. The malice that one caste harbours against the other ends with the obliteration of the other caste. The contempt harboured by one group of

people towards another comes to end with the destruction of the other group. The enmity of one kingdom with another, ends with the destruction of that kingdom. In short, hatred ends at some point of time. Till it comes to an end, the individuals, castes, groups and kingdoms on both sides suffer tremendous irrecoverable loss. That is not the case with love. The more one gives love, the more it multiplies. It never gets reduced by giving.

“Wars take place due to the immeasurable greed for power, wealth and women. It leads to utter destruction. The war between the Kauravas and Pandavas has proved it. I tried my best to avoid that war. Finally, when the war became inevitable I had to turn it into a Great *yajna*.

“All of you who are listening to me now should learn a lesson from the Great War. The biggest war or the Greatest *Yajna* is actually going on in everyone’s heart. The one who understands his own spirit and its good and bad powers, understands life. The meaning of life is to live and let live. Only when one recognizes one’s own ego and the hundreds of tentacles of one’s greed, will one understand the cause and effect relationship between every small event that takes place in the surroundings.

“Each one of you carries a tiny reflection of the gigantic expanse outside. When you obtain the strength to look at it with an aloof mind, you will be able to see the grandeur within yourself.

“Due to the everlasting bond, which is present between you and me, I assert over and over again that Samba who insulted venerable Durvasa rishi was your representative. That Samba is hiding within each one of you. You better recognize him in time and obliterate him. Don’t hate each other. Don’t fight with each other falling prey to your egocentric nature. Do not fall prey to addictions like alcohol which incites the pride within. Gluttony, addiction, indulgence, inertia, apathy, dishonesty, corruption are all falsities which were present yesterday, are present today and will be present tomorrow.

“Similarly love, the lust for knowledge, the passion to live and let others live, earnestness towards one’s duty and the urge to study for that, penchant for sincerity and hatred for corruption are the truths existing in the past, present and future.

“The one who considers that he is the doer or undoer of things that are happening around, he makes the sun and the moon shine, makes the rivers, streams and wind flow, makes the ocean roar, causes lightning to flash, makes the farms grow, makes the fruits grow on the trees, makes the flowers breathe fragrance and he is the cause of every such thing, is far removed from

the truth.

“No matter how hard we try we cannot create a mere drop of blood or milk at our whim. We cannot even tell how a mother’s body produces blood from the food she eats and how a cow’s body creates milk in its udder from the fodder that she eats. Then why should we indulge in self-conceit?”

“I know all your virtues and vices quite well as I grew up among you since my young age. You should renounce your ego which is destructive, let go of your short temper, and keep addiction at bay, like venom.

“I have fulfilled my duty to tell you this assertively in front of Acharya Sandipani who is present in this assembly hall. Nowadays acharya frequently expresses his desire to leave Dwaraka and go back to his Ankapada ashrama in the forests of Avanti. I also intuitively feel that this is the right time for him to go there. I announce that Acharya Sandipani should bless all of us and happily leave for the Ankapada ashrama with his family. Prince Balaramadada should go to his residence later and felicitate him in a way that is befitting the status of the Yadavas.

“Master archer Arjuna should be invited from Hastinapura. He should be also rightfully felicitated on behalf of the Yadavas for the Ashwamedha *yajna*. Plenty of gifts such as gold, silver, pearls, food grains, domesticated animals, and male and female attendants along with my blessings should be offered to the now established kingdom of Hastinapura.

“What I am going to announce now will be the most difficult thing to digest for my beloved wife Rukminidevi and her seven sisters who are present in this assembly hall.”

A curious buzz of whispers spread through the assembly hall wondering what the Lord of Dwaraka was going to announce now. It kept increasing with every passing moment. Just as it spread inside the assembly hall it also spread outside. Dada threw a deliberate glance at the young Chief Minister. Saying ‘Silence!’ he raised the royal sceptre again and pounded it on the floor. Immediately silence prevailed in the entire assembly hall.

Dada expressed his intention in clear words – “Oh Yadava brothers, from tomorrow I will not accept any services from anyone except my confidant, best friend Avadhuta Uddhava! Not even from my beloved wife Rukmini and the other seven wives! This does not mean that they cannot come to meet me. They can come to my residential chamber any time to see me. The people of Dwaraka should not make any changes in the royal treatment towards them. They are still my wives just like before. But from tomorrow I will not visit

the island of the queens' mansion.

“Just as I won't go there I won't come to the Sudharma royal assembly of the Yadavas ever again. Prince Balaramadada will solve all your political, military, social, and individual problems. No one should present them to me anymore. As I knew beforehand that someday I was going to have to take this decision I intentionally did not accept any position in the royal assembly.

“I am saying this in front of my venerable aacharya who is soon going to leave Dwaraka, that this is the beginning of my *Vanaprasthashrama*, without going to any forest at all. This *Vanaprasthashrama* is not physical or verbal, it is mental, and spiritual.

“The most important thought that I shared with Arjuna on Kurukshetra was of a stable mind. That of keeping your heart detached while performing the duties of your life. From tomorrow, my mental and spiritual *Vanaprasthashrama* symbolizing that thought is going to commence. I reside among thousands of you Yadavas, and of course in every one of you, and yet I am not in anything!

From tomorrow, only my most beloved *Sakha* Uddhava will serve all my needs. Your Avadhuta, my dear brother Udho will be primarily the one who will converse with me.” As soon as he raised his right hand and signalled the Chief Minister he pounded the royal sceptre on the floor. The last Sudharma royal council in dada's life was over. He politely saluted everyone by joining his palms. He sat down. Benumbed members of the assembly, Yadava men and women began silently leaving the assembly hall one by one with an anxious mind. They knew very well that those were after all Krishna's words of determination. No one could ever alter them in any way.

Now my life's important Karmayoga of serving dada began. I stopped going to my residence altogether and began living in dada's chamber.

To serve dada I determinedly cast aside the ascetic within me in a day or two and replaced him with a humble servant. A guest who was an outsider would not have noticed any change in the daily routine of the Lord of Dwaraka. He would wake up at the *Brahma Muhurta* to the musical notes being played on the Vina. He would glance at both his palms and then asking for forgiveness of mother earth for stepping on her, he would step on the floor from his bed. After washing his hands and face he would pay obeisance to the sun god. He would do his recitation of mantras, breathing exercises of *Pranayama* and perform yogasanas. After bathing he would first visit elders such as Vasudevababa, both matas, Balabhadradada and Revativahini. He

would take a look at the cows and would give away charities standing on the platform reserved for that purpose, to the guests who came to visit Dwaraka. He would have discussions with many sages and ascetics and would listen to them for hours on end barely asking a question here and there. I devotedly started serving the guest sages and ascetics and arranged a snack of milk and fruits for them. When the sun reached overhead I would sit on a wooden stool in front of him and eat lunch with him in golden plates. As I knew he was fond of milk products, I would make sure that they were served to him daily. When he took the last sip of water indicating the end of his meal, I would do the same. I would pick up the beautifully designed pitcher of fragrant water and follow him to help him wash his hands. While talking to him I would pour water on his hand, holding the pitcher in my left hand. Then quickly washing my right hand I would give him a dry cloth to wipe his hands. When he sat on his bed I would sit down on the rug near his bed and place wedges of seasonal fresh fruits on his rosy palms. Sometimes I would offer him a roll of fragrant betel leaf without him asking for it. When he would lie down for a nap after lunch I would keep talking to him while pressing his legs gently.

Once his breathing got rhythmic, I would spread the blanket on his tall body. While doing that, I would unwittingly remember one of his thoughts strongly. Throughout his life, he had said ‘when all beings go to sleep a composed mind stays awake’ – not only had he said so but he had also practised it in his life. That is why I would spread the blanket on his body gently so as to not disturb his sleep. Sometimes sitting on the rug near his feet, I would fall asleep putting my head on his feet without realizing it. At such times, I would experience the deep love that he had for me. Dada would wake up before me but he would lie still without moving his feet in order to not disturb my sleep.

In the afternoon Daruka would bring dada’s Garudadhvaja chariot in front of dada’s residence. Then sometimes we would visit the Shiva temple near the Bhallata gate on the northern side or sometimes go near the Pushpadanta gate on the southern side. Both dada and I loved to sit on the stone seats near the Aindra gate on the western side and watch the dancing waves of the ocean along with the roaring sound. We were by now habituated to the loud and continuous music of the roaring ocean. In the evenings, we would sit on the stone seats and speak openly about a lot of things.

Sometimes Balaramadada, Satyaki, young Chief Minister Sukrita or a member of the ministry would accompany us.

One day I got an exceptional experience of dada's pure and unconditional love for me. That day he told Daruka to steer the Garudadhwaaja chariot directly towards my father's residence. He had never visited anyone like this before, without giving advance notice. As I realized that we were going towards my parental residence, I was lost in thought. My father Devabhagababa was about the same age as Vasudevababa. He was also very aged and weary now. My mother Kansamata was of the same age as both the rajmatas. She also looked old.

Dada directly went to the sleeping chamber. I was right behind him. Seeing him Devabhagababa tried to get up from his bed. Dada forced him to lie down. Father didn't even realize when dada put father's feet in his lap and started pressing them gently! When he came to realize it considerable time had passed by.

He also approached my mother Kansamata's bed and sitting on it he said, "My Vasudevababa and Devakimata endured Kansa's prison together. The Yadavas have a tradition that a husband and wife should share their joys and sorrows together. I have already pressed Devabhagababa's feet with love. Now you have no option but to prove that you are his wife and accept my services like he did." Without giving my mother any chance to speak, he pressed her feet too. Witnessing his humility and deep love for me I was simply stunned. That was because while leaving their room he had said to my parents, "Just as this Avadhuta Uddhava is your son, I, Srikrishna of Vasudevababa am also your son!"

One day while we were chatting in dada's chamber a guard at the gate brought news that "A guard of the holy land of Prabhasa has come to see the Lord of Dwaraka. He is carrying a bunch of grass blades under his arms and wants to show it to the Lord of Dwaraka in person. He is asking for a meeting with you. He is not listening to us even when we told him that the Lord will not visit anyone. He insists on meeting you." Hearing that news, a web of wrinkles covered dada's smooth, wide, blue-complexioned forehead.

After hearing the news dada looked at me intentionally. That look was like an order given with faith and love. I was now used to it. I got up and went outside to meet the guard of Prabhasa. He greeted and implored me – "Oh Avadhuta, do anything, but let me meet the Lord of Dwaraka for a few moments. Take a look at this."

He pulled some blades of grass out of the bunch he was holding under his arm and handed them to me. They were of an arm's length just like the ones



used for regular religious rituals. But they were not green. They were black, like burnt iron! Their tips were not like those of regular grass blades. They were sharp and triangular like the tip of an arrow!

His eyes dilated, the guard said, “Uddhavadeva, these grass blades are not like the regular ones. See if you can break them. They don’t break, only bend like an iron wire and straighten back to their original shape!”

He bent one of the iron blades and released it. I also tried to break it into two, but couldn’t succeed. Now I too began carefully observing that iron grass blade.

Terrified, the guard continued in broken sentences – “In my entire life – I – I haven’t seen such a terrifying iron glass blade. These are signs of some kind of doom. In the holy land of Prabhasa, near the ocean shore dark black meadows of such iron grass blades have grown. As soon as my servants showed these to me, without a moment’s delay I pulled out a couple of grass blades from each of the meadows as a sample and brought a bunch of them to show the Lord of Dwaraka. Please let me visit him once Avadhuta.”

I realized the gravity of his speech. Holding the bunch of grass blades that he had handed to me I said to him, “Come with me. It is true that dada doesn’t speak much with anybody except for me. Still, seeing this bizarre thing he will speak to you for sure.” I entered dada’s chamber with the guard of Prabhasa and approached dada.

I gave dada all the details, handing a couple of black iron grass blades to him. The moment the blades touched his hands, his wide forehead got creased with a web of wrinkles just like before.

The guard then kept talking. To show the Lord of Dwaraka that the tip of the iron grass blade didn’t break, he forcefully pierced it in the palm of his left hand. Instantly, a drop of blood appeared where the tip had pierced his hand. He anxiously pulled the tip out. Dada moved forward and first he wiped the drop of blood with his orange shawl. Then he pressed the guard’s wound under his lean, blue thumb. The blood stopped in a short time. Dada took an iron grass blade from my hands in his hand. He tried to cut the black roots. They were bending but were inseparable from the grass blade. The web of wrinkles on dada’s forehead had become denser now. He also tried over and over again to see if he could break the iron grass blade. It was not breaking. As soon as the pressure was released it would straighten up. Dada held its triangular sharp tip closer and observed it thoroughly. As if he was talking to himself he spoke loudly so we could hear –

“No...! This is not an iron grass blade! This is an arrow blade! An iron arrow blade! Even more powerful than our regular Suchi arrow – a destructive iron arrow blade!”

He handed the iron grass arrow to me. As dada had described it as destructive, I carefully put all the iron arrows that I had pulled out, back in the bunch and handed over the bunch to the guard. Telling him ‘you may leave now’ I bade farewell to him. He left. Dada who was restlessly moving around in his chamber was chanting only one thing today – ‘Oh Idamata save us, Oh Lord Shambho save us!’

Our daily routine continued as usual. Many sages, wise ascetics and masters of various arts continued visiting Dwaraka. As per tradition they would first meet Prince Balaramadada and express their desire to meet dada. Balaramadada would send them back giving whatever excuses that he could think of. Still a few tenacious people would come to visit dada. They would come to me and implore me to grant them dada’s visit. I also tried to explain to them and convince them to the best of my abilities and send them back. And still there would be a Krishna devotee who would not listen to anything. He would cleverly visit the island of queens’ mansions and declare his intention of holding a fasting protest through days and nights in front of Rukminivahini’s residence. That trick would work on both of us. I would helplessly convey his determination to dada. Dada would then cave in and visit such a determined devotee. He would speak to him openly.

Eventually some other devotees came to know about this trick and they began using the same trick. Dada himself found out a solution for this problem. Nowadays he had stopped giving commands like he used to. He would simply talk to himself and say, ‘What if RukmiNni is told to come and stay here in original Dwaraka-’

I was so attuned to him that I would instantly recognize the intention of such monologues and promptly implement them.

As per my instruction now Rukminivahini had moved from the island of queens’ mansions and was living in the original Dwaraka in the palace built for her as the Maharani. She was no less astute. She gradually brought all her co-wives in her palace one after the other so that her sisters would also be able to have a glimpse of the Lord of Dwaraka at least from a distance every day. Rukminivahini’s palace here had eight–ten windows. From those windows, they could clearly see dada with me from

a distance walking behind Daruka towards Garudadhwa.

All dada's wives loved him so much that they would take turns standing near the window and whenever one of them got a fleeting glimpse of dada, within moments all the others would get the signal. Then all of them would get a glimpse of dada making sure that they didn't show up near the window together.

Dada had given full permission to all vahinis to come and visit him any time, but Rukminivahini had conveyed to the others what he meant by *Vanaprasthashrama*. She had convinced them in various ways how all of them should behave thereafter, without disturbing dada's daily routine. Bhamavahini, who had transformed her attitude in all other respects, was still not ready to change her attitude regarding proving that she was the one who loved dada the most.

Whenever she had an uncontrollable urge to meet dada she would play a clever trick. First, she would summon me and say, 'Avadhuta *bhauji*, I heard that Sri is unwell. How is he doing?'

I would get confused hearing that and promptly say, 'When I am there to take good care of him what could go wrong with his health? And how come I didn't notice it? I will go and ask him directly what happened to him.' Saying thus I would leave Bhamavahini's chamber in worry.

I would get baffled seeing Rukminivahini and Bhamavahini standing in front of dada's chamber within a short time and would promptly take them to meet dada. In such a meeting Rukminivahini would keep asking repeatedly in a worried tone, 'How's Sri's health now?' Dada would smile as usual and say, 'Nothing has happened to me. I am doing just fine.' Bhamavahini would barely speak a word and would keep looking at dada, to her heart's content. Both of them would leave contentedly. Then I would realize exactly what must have happened. Bhamavahini must have been at the root of all this. After meeting me she would go to Rukminivahini and tell her something like, 'Avadhuta *bhauji* just told me that Sri is feeling under the weather and we should go see him.'

Hearing that, Rukminivahini would get restless and say, 'We must go immediately. Bhome, you also come with me!' Thus, she herself would cause all this, and twisting my words she would come with Rukminivahini to see dada.

Days were passing by leisurely. More than thirty-six years had passed since the Great *Yajna* of Kurukshetra. Many memories of the Great War were now forgotten. I had also forgotten the meeting with the guard of Prabhasa. One

day dada told Daruk to take the Garudadhwaaja chariot towards Balaramadada's palace. We arrived in front of Balabhadradada's residence. Dada and I waited in the chariot. Daruka went inside to inform the prince of our arrival. He returned after some time with his head hanging low. I asked him, "What is it Daruka? You came back so soon. Is Balidada not at home?"

His head hanging low he answered, "He is there, but the guards didn't let even me inside. He is castigating someone severely in his chamber. The guards said that I should not approach him at such a time. So, I waited for some time and came back."

Hearing that dada alighted from the chariot in a single leap. I followed him. When Balabhadradada's armed guards saw us, they greeted us with respect and made way for us. We went directly in the chamber.

Balidada was standing with his back to us. Still we could feel that he was trembling with rage. In front of him stood Kritavarma who looked much more aged than him!

Since the end of the Great War of *Bharata*, Kritavarma had stopped attending the Sudharma assembly. He also avoided dada, and saw me very rarely. Though he was a member of the Yadava ministry he remained intoxicated day and night. That was the reason why the Yadava soldier guards around his residence had also become alcoholic. Gradually, this addiction had spread among all Yadava soldiers in the whole of Dwaraka. Many liquor shops had been opened again in every square of this grand royal city. Intoxicated Yadava soldiers were insanely fighting there with each other.

Since the time dada had announced that mentally he would take to *Vanaprasthashrama*, he had stopped attending the Sudharma assembly. He was not taking any interest in the administration. Prince Balabhadradada was fed up of drawing decrees and making announcements. The Yadavas refused to conform to any kind of rules.

Balabhadradada who spoke very less otherwise was saying, "You, vile traitor! You are cunningly trying to do what you couldn't do at Kurukshetra. We should have recognized it that very night when Ashwatthama slew all the sons of Draupadi. That night, you were the one holding your bare sword and keeping a watch outside the pavilion along with Kripa. After that you spoiled all the combative Yadava soldiers left in Dwaraka. You turned them into addicts, alcoholics. You are a traitor. You better leave Dwaraka today, or else I will behead you in front of the crowd with my own hands."

At that point dada came forward. He stood between them and quietly said, “*Jyeshtha*, I can understand your rage. You need to control it. It is too late for your severe actions now. In my opinion you yourself should go to the holy land of Prabhasa and pray to the Almighty for the betterment of the Yadavas. You decide and do whatever seems right to you!” Without uttering a single extra word, he left Balaramadada’s chamber. That day for a long time we sat on the stone veranda of the temple of Goddess Ida near the Aindra gate. Only the two of us, sitting in silence. We kept watching the continuous dance of the ocean waves; listening to the unfathomable sound of Time.

The full-moon day of *Kojagiri* arrived. The Yadavas had a tradition of visiting the holy land of Prabhasa on this day. Accordingly, all the major Yadavas left for Prabhasa in boats. Only the elderly Yadavas and children were left behind. In the end Balaramadada also left along with his brothers Gada and Sarana, and all his sons including Nishatha and Ulmuka. A special caravan of about one hundred boats carrying pitchers full of Maireyaka wine and jars full of Somarasa for the entertainment of thousands of Yadavas also left. Dada had long back given up attending such public festivities.

As it was the night of *Kojagiri Purnima* only both of us along with Daruka sat on the stone seats near the Aindra gate in the clear, beautiful starlit night. The waves of the western ocean were dancing in front of us. I had seen dada dance the *Rasa* with Yadava men and women on countless such nights of *Kojagiri Purnima*, on the occasions of weddings and naming ceremonies. Therefore, I opened the topic of *Rasa*, while watching the foamy, roaring waves. I said to dada, “When you play *Rasa* it seems like you have become one with everyone. It feels as if it’s you who is dancing with each man and woman. What is the secret behind this?”

For quite some time, he kept looking alternately at me and the roaring western ocean bathing in the starlit night. Then he gave a smile and said in very few words, “Avadhuta, the *Rasa* dance is symbolic! The Almighty creator of the universe plays *Rasa* every moment of time. Even at this moment he is playing some kind of *Rasa* far away!” Then he fell silent. Even I didn’t say anything. In that bright starlit night of *Kojagiri* we sat on the stone seats near the ocean shore for a long time. In silence! When we came back it was past midnight.

Two days went by. On the third day, early in the morning we heard three sharp tolls on the time-indicating iron disc after a long time, asking for a special meeting with the Lord of Dwaraka. ‘Who could it be?’ Dada and I

looked at each other questioningly.

After some time, first came the guard of the time-indicating iron disc platform. Following him was the same guard of the holy land of Prabhasa who didn't care for the practice of giving advance notice of coming. Shaking with fear he directly prostrated at dada's feet and began sobbing.

Both of us kept wondering what had happened. I sat down and tried to console the guard lying at dada's feet.

But dada stood still instead of pulling him up quickly as he usually did when anyone prostrated at his feet. I consoled the guard and made him stand up. I patted on his shoulders and said to him, "Don't be afraid, and don't cry. You are standing in front of a great man known for his kindness. What happened? Speak up."

Wiping the tears continuously streaming down his eyes he uttered barely one word at a time after gathering all his courage, "Oh Lord of Dwaraka – Avadhuta – a devastating thing has happened. The night – night before last, in the starlit – starlit night of *Kojagiri* – in the holy land – land of Prabhasa – a disaster took place. All major Yadavas of the eighteen royal families got drunk and under the influence of alcohol fought with each other and destroyed themselves!"

"What...?" I almost screamed.

But dada was still calm. He spoke firmly as if he was talking to himself, "Oh guard, calm down and tell us everything that has happened and how it happened, in detail."

Now the guard who had composed himself began speaking clearly and continuously–

"As the full moon of *Kojagiri Pournima* arose in the sky thousands of Yadavas began drinking together from the cauldrons full of Maireyaka wine and Somarasa. By the time the moon reached overhead at midnight all of them were uncontrollably drunk.

"First, Kritavarma provoked commander Satyaki by bringing up the subject of the Syamantaka jewel. He literally called the Lord of Dwaraka a 'thief'. Hearing that, Satyaki got infuriated and began hurling the iron grass arrows from the nearby meadows of iron grass continuously at Kritavarma, with his bare hands. Then for quite some time both of them fought using the iron grass arrows. It was hard to figure out how quickly and how many grass arrows Satyaki was uprooting and shooting them, much more speedily than he did in the Great War of *Bharata*. Samba got enraged to see his alcohol-guru

Kritavarma wounded with grass arrows. He attacked Satyaki, and shot countless grass arrows at Satyaki. Pradyumna couldn't

tolerate this attack on the commander. He killed Samba first. Bhadradevi's eldest son Sangramjita was killed by his own

brother Subhadra with the grass arrows shouting 'You always insult me...'

"Then for a long time all intoxicated Yadavas fell upon each other noisily, forgetting their age, relations, and morals.

"Prince Balaramadada got exhausted running around, raising both his hands while shouting and pleading 'Wait! Stop it in the name of Goddess Ida.' No one bothered to pay any attention to him. The yelling and hurling of arrows by the drunk Yadavas continued till late night. The benumbed prince sat on a boulder holding his head in his hands.

"All the Yadavas killed their own brethren ruthlessly with the grass arrows which had never happened even in any war!

"By sunrise the holy land of Prabhasa had turned into Kurukshetra. The dead bodies of the Yadavas had scattered all over the place like the fruits of a mango tree falling down due to the heavy rains of Mriga and scattering around the tree trunk. All the meadows of the grass arrows were completely wiped out. There was not even a tiny place left on the ocean shore near the meadows where a corpse of a Yadava did not lay.

"Dejected Prince Balarama took the support of a young Yadava who had escaped and came near the shore of the western ocean. In the ocean sand, he sat in padmasana and went into a meditative trance. Just then the high tide came in. The young Yadava who was with him told me later that a white flame came out of dada's closed eyes and disappeared far away among the ocean waves.

"Seeing the roaring high tide of the ocean the young Yadava accompanying him ran away in fear. Later we went there. We couldn't find the prince's body.

"Oh, Lord of Dwaraka – our prince Balabhadradada has left us, he was swept away by the ocean!"

The guard hid his face in his shawl and trembled.

Benumbed, I held my head with my hands and slipped to the floor.

Dada spoke only one sentence and went inside – "Thoralya, once you got angry with me and left me. So, I sent my peacock feather and brought you back. But now this younger brother of yours has nothing to bring you back!"

As soon as dada got the news he told Daruka to get the Garudadhwa

chariot ready. He took me and Revativahini with him and left for the holy land of Prabhasa. He had left only after instructing the Chief Minister to bring Vasudevababa and Rohinimata along with Thorali to the holy land of Prabhasa. He had also instructed to send informers with the news to places such as Hastinapura, Kampilyanagar, Indraprastha, Viratanagar and Raivataknagar.

Now all of us were going to stay at Prabhasa till all the final rites of Balabhadradada were performed. Dada got eighteen huge funeral pyres arranged for all Yadava warriors who had lost their lives in the fight. He had brought one elderly person from each royal family of the Yadavas. Those senior people performed the final rites of all the dead ones together, with chanting of mantras. He was steady and calm even while igniting the sandalwood funeral pyre of Balabhadradada.

To offer *Tilanjali* to all of them Yudhishtira and Draupadi had come from Hastinapura along with the other Pandavas. Mahatma Vidura and Sanjaya also accompanied them.

After the ritual of *Tilanjali* was completed dada took aside only master archer Arjuna from among the Pandavas. I accompanied both of them. Very calmly he asked Arjuna – “Did you perform the final rites of Kunti *aatya* properly in the forest of the Himalayas?”

That question was quite unexpected to Arjuna who was teary eyed in memory of Balabhadradada. With moist eyes, he simply kept staring at dada. Even he looked much older now. He just nodded in affirmation indicating that they had performed all the final rites of Kunti *aatya*. He didn't know what to say.

Dada put his right arm on Arjuna's broad shoulders and patting him gently he said, “My elder brother is gone. Everyone has to go. I will also have to go tomorrow. In memory of Kunti *aatya* and Balabhadradada promise me something at this moment.”

Dada had never asked for anything from anyone – not even a promise! As Arjuna perceived it he felt even more overwhelmed with tears and gently putting his blue hand on dada's bluish rosy palm he silently nodded in affirmation to give him the promise.

He said to Arjuna slowly, “*Partha*, you are to protect all the Yadava women after I am gone!”

I shivered hearing those words. I didn't at all expect that he would say something like this. Arjuna was utterly stunned. Soon it was time for the



Pandavas to return to Hastinapura. While bidding farewell to them today dada knelt down on the ground and prostrated at the feet of eldest Pandava Yudhishtira and Bhimsena like he did at the feet of Acharya Sandipani and sage Ghor Angirasa. But both of them were so shaken by the news of the destruction of the Yadavas and by the bad news about Balaramadada that both of them didn't even realize it.

Both younger Pandavas, Nakula and Sahadeva, along with Arjuna prostrated at dada's feet. At this time, he held only his *Sakha* Arjuna, the most ideal among men, in a deep embrace. Both of them stood silently in each other's embrace for a while. I don't know if anyone else saw it, but I saw tears rolling down Arjuna's eyes and streaming down dada's bluish back.

Draupadi who always spoke openly with him without any reservation was speechless now. As dada approached her to bid farewell she leaned forward to touch his feet. With utmost affection dada held both her hands and stopped her.

She thought dada was going to give her some advice if not as much as he had given Arjuna. But dada spoke only one sentence, "*Sakhi...* you want my words right now. I am giving you my love – in the form of a garment! Take good care of it." And he handed over his orange shawl wrapped around his throat to her.

The Pandavas left for Hastinapura with Draupadi. We came back to Dwaraka with Vasudevababa and both the matas. Now I could clearly see the disorder in dada's daily routine. He had stopped going to the ocean shore to offer evening *Arghya* – oblations to the Sun god. He had particularly stopped meeting any sages, ascetics, or hermits visiting Dwaraka. But he still visited Vasudevababa and both rajmatas twice a day without fail. He was spending most of his time on the charity-offering platform now. He wasn't speaking much even with me. The only times he spoke was when Sage Ghor Angirasa came to visit from Mount Raivataka after hearing the news of Balabhadradada and when Acharya Sandipani came with his son Dutta from the Ankapada ashrama in the forest of Avanti.

Just as I could feel his reticence Rukminivahini felt it too. Whenever both of us met we spoke only on this subject for a long time. While concluding such discussions, she would

say, "Don't worry Avadhuta *bhauji*. I am sure that Sri will talk with only you and when he does, he will talk to his heart's content!"

I kept waiting for that day. My heart was getting numb inside. Meanwhile

the naval chief brought news which made everyone solemn. An earthquake-like movement had taken place underwater in the western ocean. Due to that the Kroshtu lighthouse guiding the harbour of Dwaraka had sunk at the base. Dada did not open his mind even about this to me. And finally, the day dawned – the day of dada’s speaking – the day of the end of an era!

That day very early in the morning at the *Brahma Muhurta*, I woke up to melodious tunes of the flute, one after the other. I was seeing him play the flute in Dwaraka for the first time. Even the bards had not yet arrived. Before they could wake dada up with their regular singing he woke me up to the unforgettable unknown tunes on his flute.

As he saw me awake he stopped and smiled at me. I asked him curiously, “How come today you are awake even before the arrival of the bards?”

He said, “Wash your face first, then I will tell you.” He had already finished all his morning rituals.

I washed my face and came back, and sat in front of him as usual on the rug and repeated my question, “Dada, how come you are awake even before the arrival of the bards today?”

He smiled and said, “I have stopped my flute so that you can hear it clearly. Listen carefully. What do you hear?” He began testing me right from the morning today. Closing my eyes, I listened attentively – ‘curr...dhupp... curr...dhupp!’ the continuous sound of western ocean was clearly audible. I said, “The western ocean is playing the flute of his usual sound! I can hear it.”

“No, my dear friend Avadhuta! Listen more carefully and pay attention.” I could feel a considerable difference in the very first sentence that he spoke today. Since the day, he had begun his spiritual *Vanaprasthashrama* he had never given me an order as such. Whenever he wanted to get something done by me he spoke aloud to himself. But today he had commanded me after a long time. Hearing his order, I felt ecstatic from within. It felt like I had found something invaluable that I had lost. But I couldn’t pinpoint what exactly it was.

I closed my eyes again and listened carefully. After some time. I said, “I can hear some kind of tiny sound like the tearing of a cloth.”

He smiled again. I had seen this smile of his many years ago, when I was in the Ankapada aashrama with him – very innocent, and playful.

He said, “Oh Udho, bandhu, it’s not a cloth! It is the morning cawing of the wild crow that we heard at the *Brahma Muhurta* on the very first day in the

Ankapada aashrama of Avanti. Today this old friend of mine woke me up by playing the flute of his cawing even before the bards! Our friendship is very old!”

I simply kept staring at dada with my eyes wide. What he was saying was true. This was the second shock that he had given me today.

We performed the morning chores such as bathing, *Pranayama*, recitation of mantras, worshiping the cows, drinking their milk, etc. Dada sent a Yadava servant to summon Daruka. Within a short time Daruka presented himself in dada’s service. He had brought the Garudadhwaaja chariot in the front yard. Today he had decorated the already embellished Garudadhwaaja chariot with the garlands of dada’s favourite *Kadamba* flowers. I boarded the chariot after dada. We left for the morning visit to Vasudevababa and both the mothers. Daruka brought the chariot in front of the palace of Maharaja Vasudeva.

Daruka had not called the names of the four beloved horses harnessed with golden-bordered fabric on their backs as usual. Dada had unmistakably noticed it. Before climbing down, he said to Daruka, “*Sakha* Daruka, looks like you haven’t groomed my beloved horses for two days! They are not wagging their tails or neighing like usual. They are not raising concentric circles on their bodies with the wind!”

“Yes, my Lord. I didn’t get a chance to collect the thorny wild creepers to groom them. That is why I didn’t groom them. And so, they look a bit fatigued today. Or else they would have neighed in ecstasy as soon as they saw you.” Daruka gave a detailed explanation abashedly.

“That’s okay. You don’t go now; I will go myself in the afternoon and bring the thorny wild creepers for their grooming.” Dada said to him smilingly and descended from Garudadhwaaja. The three of us entered the grand and puissant royal palace of Vasudevababa and went to see Vasudevababa and Thorali and Dhakali mata in their chamber. Dada prostrated in front of the three of them. Daruka and I followed suit. Today dada didn’t leave their chamber in a hurry as usual. He sat on Thorali’s bed. A few moments passed by. No one spoke anything. This was the usual scene since the destruction of the Yadavas and Balabhadradada’s passing away. Breaking the emotional barrier for all, dada said to Thorali, “It’s been such a long time since I drank milk from your hands! Will you give me some today?” He gave her such a charming smile that she couldn’t say anything. ‘Yes, I will’ she said and she herself went into the inner chambers rather than

ordering the maid to bring it. Dada came and stood in front of Dhakali, who was sitting next to Vasudevababa. With the memories of Balabhadradada both their minds which could read each other well were overwhelmed by emotions. Dhakali put the edge of her *Padar* in her mouth and began sobbing. Moving forward dada held her wrinkled hands in his palms. His voice had never changed so far, but at that moment it became heavy. Patting Dhakali's hands he said, "Calm down Dhakali mata! In fact, I should be grieving more than you. Oh, how much I troubled my elder brother – your son!" Dada lovingly patted Dhakali's weary, old shoulders.

Dada savoured the sweet taste of the milk that Devakimata had brought for him and finished it with closed eyes.

The three of us left the residence of his parents. As per the instruction given by dada yesterday the Chief Minister had arranged golden salvers with various gifts on the charity platform at the centre of the city. I didn't realize that those were considerably higher in number today.

Without being instructed, Daruka habitually brought Garudadhwaaja near the charity-offering platform. Both of us climbed up the platform. Dada respectfully offered vermillion and flowers on all the salvers of charity gifts as usual. I began handing over to him whatever thing he pointed at, one by one. Amidst the chanting of mantras, smilingly he began offering charities to the men and women of Dwaraka. People, who felt satisfied simply by seeing him in person, were raising their hands and offering their blessings to him – "Long live Lord of Dwaraka! May all be well!"

The Sun god that illuminated the original island of Dwaraka began ascending in the sky, witnessing another one like him, illuminating the life of human beings. Today dada kept distributing charities for a long time.

We came back to his residential chamber. It was about lunchtime now. Usually, Daruka would go to his residence at this time. Today as dada put his hand on his shoulder and said 'come with us' he accompanied dada like a puppet without uttering a word.

Somehow Rukminivahini happened to see the three of us coming together. Dada washed his hands and made Daruka and me do the same. The three of us sat on three wooden seats arranged for lunch. In front of us were three small wooden tables for the lunch plates. Two maid servants brought three plates from Rukminivahini's chamber and stood at the entrance of our chamber. I moved forward briskly, took the plates from them and placed one on each of the wooden tables. Dada was sitting on the middle seat and I on

dada's right and Daruka on the left. I carefully observed the plate. Today, all of dada's favourite dishes were served in small golden bowls. For sure Rukminivahini had prepared these with her own hands.

We began chatting while having our lunch. I asked dada, "How did you come to know that Daruka had not groomed your dear horses for two days without him telling you so?" He swallowed the mouthful of soft rice and smilingly said, "Just like I woke up today at *Brahma Muhurta* hearing the cawing of the wild crows! I have always been telling Daruka that these four horses of Garudadhwaaja are like parts of my own body. Just as I told the Gita of life to Arjuna at Kurukshetra, in the same way many times I have told Daruka the Ashwagita. Right Daruka?"

"Yes, my Lord. I have also memorized it all." Daruka responded politely.

Then we finished our meal while chatting about various subjects for a long time. Dada got up first. While getting up, with his left hand he picked up the golden jar of water that was usually kept in front of him.

We came out for washing our hands, while chatting. Then I realized that for the last forty years and more, I had been pouring water on his hands after the meal. So, I quickly moved forward and tried to get the jar from dada's left hand. He promptly pulled his hand back and giving a charming smile he said, "No... Avadhuta, today is your day! Till today you have been pouring water on my hands. Today I am going to pour water on yours as well as Daruka's hands. Both of you have served me till today. Let me serve you at least today!"

As usual he left me speechless. I held both my hands forward. Looking at me affectionately he kept pouring water on my hands while smiling. After I washed my hands he did the same for Daruka. In the end, he washed his hands while I poured water on them.

While wiping his hands with the dry cloth that I handed him he asked Daruka, "Daruka, from which forest do you collect the thorny wild creepers that you need for grooming the horses?"

"From the forest of Bhalaka Tirtha near Veravala!" Daruka answered with respect.

"Do one thing Daruka. You take rest today. After taking my afternoon nap Uddhava and I will go there and bring the wild creepers. We will leave after my nap. Don't release the horses from the chariot. You have decorated the chariot very well today. Leave it as is in the stable."

Daruka said, 'As you wish Lord of Dwaraka'. He touched dada's feet and

was about to leave. Dada gently pulled him up and held him in a deep embrace. Daruka left wondering why the Lord had given him the honour of having lunch with him and held him in a deep embrace.

Dada lay down on his longish wooden bed. I sat down at his feet and began pressing them. After some time with his eyes still closed he said, “That is enough Uddhava, you can go now. But come back towards the end of afternoon. We will be going to Bhalaka tirtha. Get the boat ready for the travel.”

“Okay dada.” I also touched his feet and left his chamber. While leaving, I pulled the big doors close, from outside. Wondering about everything that had happened since morning I left towards the creek near the Shuddhaksha gate to get the boat ready.

Bhalaka tirtha that dada and Daruka talked about was in the forest near Somnatha–Veravala. This forest was about a twenty *yojanas* away after crossing the creek. We would have to go there in Garudadhwaaja. Garudadhwaaja needed to be carried in a boat to go across the creek.

As it was afternoon many fishermen owners of big boats in the harbour of Dwaraka had gone home for lunch. I had to spend almost half an hour to find them and select a skilled fisherman. The afternoon had progressed now. It was necessary to be present in dada’s service as soon as possible. He must have been awake by now. I should give him water to wash his face. He always speaks mysteriously and with foresight. Why did he pour water on my hands today? Lost in my thoughts I came close to the first step of the Srisopana going upwards.

Feasting my eyes on the Srisopana I gradually looked up. At the topmost step dada himself was standing with a smile on his face. He asked me from there, “Uddhava, is everything ready? Can I come down now?”

“Yes dada, everything is ready. But you don’t come down, I will come up myself. I responded promptly and briskly climbing the stairs I caught up with him.

I was stunned to look at him. He had donned the attire of an unarmed charioteer for the first time after returning from Kurukshetra, which he had packed away ever since. It had never been worn in the last thirty-six years. He had worn the peacock-feathered, decorative golden crown on his thick white hair. It was not the crown that he used to wear daily. It was the crown from thirty-six years back. His most favourite iridescent peacock feather was still tucked in that dazzling golden crown. Even at this moment his face had

lit up with the dazzling brilliance of a hundred suns. A white Vaijayanti garland that looked as fresh as if he had just worn it, was resting on his chest, reaching below his knees. Its fragrance permeated everywhere. Underneath it there were pearl necklaces with a shining pendant of the Kaustubh jewel. Underneath both these on his broad chest he was wearing his usual gold-plated iron armour. His favourite orange shawl with a gold border was hanging down his broad shoulders. On both his upper arms and wrists were intricately designed golden armlets. He wore a shining golden dhoti. A sky-blue shawl

was tied over it. His auspicious white Panchjanya conch was tied in the shawl. In his left hand, he was holding a fresh, long-stemmed orange lotus. He had now added only two more new things to this attire of thirty-six years before. He had tucked into his dhoti the colourful bamboo flute that he had played heartily in the morning today. On his right wrist, he was wearing the silver bracelet – the symbol of the Abhirbhanu dynasty – that his grandfather Chitrasena had gifted him when he had left Gokul.

Even today his handsomeness was indeed eye-catching. Even today he was the Krishna who attracted others – Srikrishna who possessed the qualities of Sri – befitting his name!

As he realized that I was staring at him he said, “Shall we leave? Come on then. This is your day. I am going to give you detailed information of this Srisopana about which you have been always asking me.” He walked towards the first step of the Srisopana along with me. He stopped for a moment and closed his fish-shaped eyes. He respectfully remembered something in his mind. Then he said, “This first step of the Srisopana is in the name of my biological mother Devakimata – Thorali who endured the excruciating pain of seeing her six new-born sons killed in the prison of Kansa.” He lingered on the step for a moment.

“The second one is in the name of my beloved wife Rukmini – the Lakshmi of Dwaraka. The third is in the name of my biological father Maharaja Vasudevababa – the emperor of Dwaraka.” He climbed down the first two steps, one at a time. He lingered on the third step for a moment. I also stopped with him. Looking at the fourth step he said, “I am not going to tell you in whose name this fourth step is. You have to find it out yourself.” We lingered for a moment then climbed down the step. Standing on the fifth step he said, “This one is in the name of my guru – Ghor Angirasa who conferred the knowledge of *Brahmavidya* upon me.” Looking at the sixth and seventh

step he said, “These are in the names of my two Jala brothers – the first one is for grandsire Gangeya Bhishma and the next is for the first *Kaunteya* – Radheya – the munificent.” We climbed down those three steps. Now we were on the eighth step. He stopped on the step and said, “As you already know, eight is my favourite number since my birth. This one is in the name of my beloved *sakha* Arjuna.” Both of us lingered on the eighth step for quite some time. The following steps were serially in the names of Balabhadradada, all the remaining Pandavas, our favourite *bhacha* Abhimanyu, Yashodamata, Nandababa, Rohinimata, Kunti *aatya*, *sakhi* Radhika, Draupadi, Subhadra, and Revativahini.

After them were all the queens of dada – my other vahinis in the following sequence– Jambavati, Satyabhama, Kalindi, Lakshmana, Bhadra, Mitravinda and Satya *vahini*.

Then Kauravas’ mother Gandharidevi, and then daughter Charumati.

The steps following those were in the name of dada’s *sakhas* – Mahatma Vidura, dear friend Sudama, Daruka, Sanjaya and Satyaki.

By this time, we had climbed down more than half the Srisopana. I was wondering right after the first two steps whether dada had forgotten Acharya Sandipani.

Now he began uttering the names of each of his closest relatives stepping down the stairs. I also climbed down with him. Among the closest relatives, the first name he took was that of my father – Devabhagababa. Then grandfather Chitrasena of Gokul. Then came Vikarna from Kauravas. Then my mother Kansamata. Then quickly mentioning names such as Virata, Drupada, Dhrishtadyumna, Drona, Kripa, Dhaumya rishi, Gargamuni, Vishwakarma, and Maya he went down the stairs briskly. Among the close relatives, he mentioned the name of Kubja at the very end.

He didn’t forget to mention the names of seven firstborn sons of his seven wives, but before them he mentioned the name of his grandson Aniruddha. Then he mentioned the names of Pradyumna, Bhanu, Sangramjita, Vrika, Veer, Shruta, Praghosha and great grandson Vajra.

Jambativahini’s son Samba – who became the cause of the destruction of the Yadavas, was not among them. His name was among the people who became a hurdle for dada throughout his life.

Yes! He did not forget to remember even the arrogant, insolent, and tyrannical people.

Among those the first number was of Kansa. Then came Shrugala,



Narakasura, Kalayavana, Jarasandha, Shishupala, Dantavakra, Viduratha, Paundraka Vaasudeva, Shalva, Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra and dada's son – my *putanya* Samba, Kritavarma and Shakuni.

Now only the last step of the Srisopana was remaining. I couldn't resist and asked, "Dada, how come you forgot our venerable Aacharya Sandipani and guru Drona's son Ashwatthama?" He looked at me and said with a smile, "Udho, Avadhuta, is it ever possible for me to forget him? The one that we are standing on – this last step is in the name of my venerable Aacharya Sandipani who moulded my personality and made me the man that I am today. Brother, a man is born not once but twice. First, he takes physical birth from the womb of his mother and he is born again when his guru transforms him into a complete man through virtues and sanskaras. The staircase of everybody's life is contained within these two stages of life. Isn't it?"

His explanation made me think. He didn't allow me to ponder over that for a long time and asked me promptly, "My beloved *Sakha* Avadhuta, brother Uddhava – Udho, now you tell me, in whose name is the fourth step for which I didn't mention anybody's name?"

"In my name!" I responded promptly. Then we laughed heartily just like we used to laugh many times in the Ankapada aashrama. I asked him the last question – "And what about Ashwatthama?" He gave me a pure smile as usual and said, "He is immortal! In the form of human pain!" He lingered for a moment, then turned around and stood still in front of the Srisopana silently. He brought his palms together and offered obeisance to the Srisopana which was venerable to all the men, women and children who felt blessed just by taking a look at it.

Now we started walking towards the well-maintained stable of Dwaraka – to get ready for our travel to Bhalakatirtha! I casually glanced towards the palace of Rukminivahini on my right. I clearly saw Rukminivahini standing alone in the first window of her gallery. She was also looking at us. I greeted her with my eyes and gave her a smile. Her face reflected a fleeting smile in response to mine. Surely, she must be thinking what she always expressed verbally, 'Whenever Sri walks with his hand on your shoulder, how nice his blue arm looks on your ruddy fair-complexioned shoulder! It makes me keep looking at it, but I can't explain exactly how it looks!'

Usually, I wouldn't give dada any hint about Rukminivahini standing in the gallery. But today I stopped and said, "It would have been just fine if you hadn't taken a look at the Srisopana today, but I feel that you should take a

look at the gallery of Rukminivahini's palace on the right." Coming out of his reverie he stopped and glanced at the gallery. The moment Rukminivahini and dada's eyes met she got flustered. She had experienced such a thing for the first time ever. She immediately hid herself behind the window. Dada gently patted his rosy palm on my shoulder and said, "You are such a mind-reader!"

We entered the stable. As Daruka was not with us I moved forward to take the charioteer's seat of the embellished Garudadhwaaja chariot which looked distinct among other chariots. Realizing that, dada pressed my shoulder hard and made me stop. He said with a smile, "Um...hmm...this is your day! I am going to drive the chariot. I am going to drive the chariot for you while talking to my horse friends. I am going to serve you today – just like I served Arjuna! You are more fortunate than him. I harnessed only my beloved horses to his Nandighosha chariot on Kurukshetra as a military strategy. My chariot embellished with *Kadamba* flowers, carrying the pennant of the golden Garuda is present in your service today. Look at me carefully. I have donned this charioteer's costume only to serve you."

I got lost in thought. Just then walking briskly he took the charioteer's seat in one leap. All the four horses who had looked so dejected since morning neighed ecstatically and lifting their front hooves greeted him heartily in their own style. While smiling, he held the eight golden-bordered reins tightly in his hands and affectionately called out the names of the third generation of his horse friends – 'Megha, Bala, Shaibya, Sugriva'. The wise animals turned the chariot around and took it out of the stable.

On the royal highway of Dwaraka the Garudadhwaaja chariot sprinted towards the Shuddhaksha gate with the grace of Garuda, the king of birds. As it was still afternoon the highway was not very crowded. Looking at Garudadhwaaja, servants from various places and a few stray senior Yadava soldiers stopped respectfully in the streets. Not many of them realized that dada himself was driving the chariot in the charioteer's war costume! If somebody realized it, he would keep staring with surprise in the direction of the chariot till it disappeared. We passed through the Shuddhaksha gate on the east side of Dwaraka and embarked on a huge boat along with the chariot, riding it over wooden planks. The boat started to cross the creek of Bhrigukachchha in the western ocean. The Jalapurusha was sailing on the vast expanse of water, going towards the 'Other end'. The great Yadava kept feasting his eyes on the view of the golden Dwaraka that was moving farther

and farther away. As the other end of the shore approached, dada held both his palms together and offered his obeisance to his beloved royal city Dwaraka along with its golden reflection swaying on the waves. I also offered my obeisance to Dwaraka like him. Dada had skilfully brought the Garudadhwaja chariot into the boat riding it over the wooden planks bridging the land and the boat. Now he disembarked the chariot on the opposite shore which was in Saurashtra. He removed one pearl necklace from among the many resting on his chest and handing it over to the fishermen chief he said to him, "Hail Goddess Ida." The fishermen chief and his assistants prostrated at dada's feet hailing the name of Goddess Ida. Dada pulled out the long-stemmed orange lotus tucked near his waist and handed it to me. Raising his right hand, he blessed the fishermen silently and bade farewell to them.

Our dear Garudadhwaja chariot began speeding in the direction of Somanatha. Putting *yojanas* of distance behind us first we arrived at the small stone temple of Shiva at Somanatha. As soon as the temple priest who was a Shiva devotee saw us he made preparations for Shiva *Abhishek* without waiting for our instructions. Dada sat on a short decorative wooden stool placed near the neat stone *Shivapindi* located in the shrine of the temple. I sat on another stool on his left hand. Before offering the first *Bela leaf* on the *Shivapindi* in front of us dada said to me, "Avadhuta, this is your day. I would like to hear Shiva's hymn from your mouth. Shiva also wishes the same. Go ahead and sing it."

I joined my hands in prayer and closed my eyes. The hymn of Shiva began flowing out of my mouth like the stream of *Abhishek*.

We left the Shiva temple of Somanatha. Dada took the charioteer's seat again. I climbed into the back of the chariot without his instruction. We reached a very small village called Veravala. Dada kept driving the chariot, holding the eight reins in his hands, talking to his horse friends in their own language, without touching the whip to their back, just striking it in the air.

We reached the thick forest near Bhalakatirtha. Dada halted the chariot, put the reins down. In a single leap, he jumped onto the land of Aanarta near Bhalakatirtha. I also climbed down from the back of the chariot. He had handed me an orange lotus that matched the colour of my saffron clothing. I tucked it in his yellow dhoti.

I got to witness a very rare scene. First, he lovingly patted on the back of the two horses on the left. He stroked their backs affectionately with his blue hand. Both the horses responded to his touch with neighing and shaking their

bodies. Dada stood in front of them. He ruffled their thick manes. Just like he used to embrace Arjuna he put his blue hand around the neck of Sugriva – the horse at the extreme left and whispered as if he was talking either to the horse or to himself – “Yes... yes... you have served for a long time.” Then he moved to the next horse. He ruffled the mane of the second horse too and putting his arm around his neck he said, “Shaibya, friend, I know that you remember Panchanada and Chandrabhaga. Calm down.” He took one more step forward and came in front of the horse ‘Bala’. Touching his own circular, white-bearded face to the elongated jaw of the horse he said, “Bala, I agree that your colour is whiter than my beard.” That horse also responded as if he understood what dada said to him and licked under dada’s eyes and his sharp blue nose with his tongue. Finally, dada came in front of the first horse on the right side. Ruffling his mane too he patted lovingly on his back and said to him, “Megha, even the white clouds stop after colliding with the snow-clad summits of the Himalaya, but you never stopped once you were harnessed to the chariot.” Meghapushpa snorted in response. Now dada walked around the Garudadhwaya chariot slowly, watching it carefully. He stood in front of the horses again. I handed him his mace from the back of the chariot and he held it on his shoulder. He looked at the flagpole of his dear chariot, and stared at the symbol of the Yadavas – Garuda, in a pose ready to soar, on the fluttering saffron pennant. The pennant fluttered continuously in the winds coming from the western ocean of Anarta.

“Come, let’s collect the thorny wild creepers for their grooming,” he said and holding the Vijayanti garland around his neck gently in his right hand he entered the thick forest in front of us. I followed him. We stopped under the cooling shade of a sprawling banyan tree nearby. This tree was just as huge and had many branches, shoots and leaves as the *Bhandirvriksha* in Gokul that dada had told me about many times. Even our chariot was clearly visible from here. Deeply, from the deepest recesses of my heart I strongly felt that this was the time when I must ask him the important question that had been nagging me constantly for the last thirty-six years.

Moving forward with a sudden urge, I held his hand and stopping him I said, “Dada, whatever you say, it is certain that Arjuna is your much more beloved *sakha* than me. If that was not the case, you accepted all kinds of services from me for the last thirty-six years – but – but -” I hesitated not knowing how to speak my mind.

“But what? Say it brother Udho, speak freely.” Dada said.

“If that wasn’t the case then you would have given me some kind of advice like you gave to Arjuna before the war at Kurukshetra which people know as the ‘Gita’ now. You would have considered me suitable for such advice. Arjuna is indeed your best *sakha*! Not I. I am simply your best servant!” Abashed, I stood in front of him with my head lowered. I had never spoken so openly in front of him.

He removed his hand from mine and patted on my shoulders with utmost love. I clearly felt the genuine love in that touch. He smiled and said, “That’s not true Uddhava. You are silly. Arjuna is my *sakha* after all – my *aate bandhu* – my *aatya*’s son. In the war of Kurukshetra, he was my confidant of my worldly life. You are my *chulat bandhu* – my *kaka*’s son – my Paramsakha – the only confidant of my emotional world in my spiritual life. You insist on hearing so let me tell you. Listen...” He looked around and chose a lead-coloured boulder to sit on it. He rested his mace against it. He dusted the boulder with his orange shawl and then sat on it. I was well aware of the fact that he never sat on any royal throne in his entire life. Today the lead-coloured boulder that he sat on seemed to me like a golden throne even more golden than the royal thrones of Indraprastha, Hastinapura and Dwaraka or any other royal throne. I sat on the ground near his feet.

He began speaking, I started listening. He asked, “What is your name?”

“Uddhava” I got flustered. After answering the question, I began listening to him attentively. He asked again, “What does Uddhava mean?”

“Uddhava means the being that longs to ascend.” I answered. He smiled and asked me again, “What is a being?”

“Being means the consciousness of one’s existence.” I answered.

Staring at me he said, “Now do one thing, imagine that you are not named ‘Uddhava’.”

“Okay, done” I got curious.

He said again, “Does your being without the name still exist or not?”

“Yes, it does.” I cautiously listened to each and every word of his.

Gazing at me he asked, “Where is that being right now? On top of what? Under what?”

“In front of you. On the land of Aanarta Saurashtra. Under a sprawling tree below the azure sky.”

“Okay. The land of Saurashtra, the sky, the tree and I – what is all this called?”

“The universe” I responded.

“Do you know from what the universe comes into existence?”

“From the five basic elements and such basic principles of life that are constantly manifesting in various forms.”

“You are doing fine. The universe born out of the five basic elements comes into existence from the *Tamas* Ahankara of the Paramatma, the Universal soul.”

“What exactly is the Paramatma?” I asked him very curiously.

He said, “You’ve asked a precise and nice question. Me, you, the insects that you see on my yellow dhoti – all of us live in our own dimensions. Three such dimensions exist for a being – weight, distance and time. Time is also known as ‘Kala’. All animate and inanimate creation that you talked about exists in those three dimensions.”

“The subject of the ‘Ahankara of Paramatma’ that you were talking about earlier was left half way. Does the Paramatma have only Tamasa Ahankara?” I needed to interrupt him and get clarified any point that I had not understood, in order to follow what he was going to speak further.

“No. ‘Tamasa’ is not the only kind of Ahankara. There are two more kinds – ‘Rajasa’ and ‘Sattvika’. Before you try to understand those, understand clearly what exactly ‘Ahankara’ is. You said earlier, I am alive – that means life is the consciousness of one’s existence. Similarly, the Paramatma’s consciousness of its existence is Ahankara. Ahankara does not mean pride or ego. Ahankara means the mature awareness of one’s existence! Just as you have that awareness so does the Paramatma. You, I and everyone is a part of the Paramatma. That is why it is crucial and necessary to comprehend what the Paramatma is. If the Paramatma doesn’t comprehend who you are it hardly matters to him. But if you don’t comprehend what the Paramatma is, everything goes wrong with you.”

I was getting convinced that he was taking me deeper in his emotional world. He had only mentioned the Rajasa and Sattvika Ahankara of the Paramatma. So, I asked him, “Just as the universe made of five basic elements is created from the Tamasa Ahankara of the Paramatma, what was created from its Rajasa Ahankara?”

“All senses came into existence from the Rajasa Ahankara. The senses are connected to the organs. Human beings have ten such organs – ears, skin, nose, eyes, hands, legs, mouth, tongue, anus and genitals.”

“What came into existence from Sattvika Ahankara?”

“The mind came into existence from Sattvika! The human mind has many

facets just like the tree above has countless branches, aerial roots and leaves. The moon is the god of the mind!”

He was getting completely engrossed now. All the people who had heard him speak in the Sudharma assembly wouldn't have been convinced that this was the same Srikrishna – Krishna. Only Arjuna would have been convinced, the same Arjuna who, at the beginning of the war, had abandoned his bow and arrow and had become dejected, clueless, and lacklustre on Kurukshetra. To make him speak freely I asked him, “Desires spring from splendour and strength or potency. Which god is the master of these?”

“The sun god is their master. That is why when the sky is cloudy and the sun is overcast with clouds the human body feels sluggish first, then unenthusiastic and spiritless. And then even the mind feels lethargic and lacklustre. Now understand it carefully, ignorance comes into existence from Tamasa, the senses come from Rajasa and the mind comes from Sattvika. Men and women strive throughout their lives only to fathom this mind. Beyond that mind is the intellect. And even beyond the intellect is Prana or Atma – the Soul.”

I wanted to get some more things clarified, so I said, “I understood the three dimensions that you mentioned – weight, distance and time. I grasped the three qualities that you told – Tamasa, Rajasa, and *Sattva*. Now I comprehend the three principles that you just told – the Mind, the intellect and Prana. But I still don't understand the concept of the Paramatma that you talked about.”

He gave me a very sweet smile and said, “Okay. Let me explain it to you in simple words, because this is your day and you are my Paramsakha, closest confidant, and my *chulat bandhu*, Avadhuta. Listen carefully. Paramatma is not merely a concept. It is as true as the sun that you see rising every single day. Paramatma is the weightless unhindered energy that continuously flows through the universe around us, the vast skies and the space beyond it. It is eternal, perpetual and unending. With the help of time that energy always keeps creating or destroying things! It keeps control over everything.”

Now I realized why I found him so different from all other people. To make him clarify I asked him, “Then does this mean that human beings should just rely on this Paramatma and do nothing?”

Holding his head high like the hood of a serpent, as sometimes he did while speaking in the Sudharma assembly he said, “Not at all. For generations, this is where people have been going wrong. You are looking at only half of the complete truth that I told you. You are making it one-sided and convenient to

suit your purpose. A part of that great Paramatma resides in every being. And you yourself said that life means the consciousness of one's existence. To explore that consciousness day and night from every angle is life!"

I kept staring at him. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't fathom the depth of his eyes. Therefore, to make him continue talking I asked, "So what exactly happens when one explores it?"

He said, "Once you discover the connection between you and the Paramatma, then the revelation of what life is, comes to you like unrolling a bundle of a fine soft cloth. You gain the unending knowledge of not just your own self but of all animate, inanimate beings around you, the visible as well as the invisible world around you, the vast expanse of the sky, the space beyond it and the unhindered, weightless brilliance that flows through all these."

"What is this knowledge called?"

"Prajnana. It is beyond the realm of Jnana and Vijnana."

"What is the best way to comprehend this realm of Prajnana?" I questioned with utmost curiosity now.

"Complete surrender with utmost devotion and loving all beings without any expectations is the only way!" A few moments ago, I had seen him embrace the horses of his chariot. Now I began to understand the meaning of that action of his – his Ashwagita.

"People call you 'Narayana' because you imparted the knowledge of the Gita and they call Arjuna 'Nara' because he was fortunate to get the opportunity to listen to your advice. Can you please elucidate more about Nara and Narayana?"

"Nara means Jala – water. Ayana means abode. Throughout my life, I lived near water. You might remember the meaning of Jala that Acharya Sandipani had told us – the life of any animate being or vegetation relies on water. Just as water keeps flowing continuously, life also has the same innate quality. To understand that means life!"

"Now I come to realize why in Srisopana the steps in the name of Ganga's son Bhishma and the firstborn *Kaunteya*, the munificent Karna are at such a higher level. They always strived to reach your level throughout their lives. You knew it very well. You were always a level higher than both of them. That is why the grandsire first addressed you as 'Vaasudeva' and considered you as Narayana. Even Karna said so when he met you and regarded you in the same way. So, now please explain what exactly it means when you call



Arjuna the ‘Nara’.”

“All male and female animals have nipples. It is only among the horses that just the female horse has them. That is why a male horse is considered as the pinnacle of manliness. He possesses more running power than any other animal. It also lasts longer. That is why any kind of power is always measured in units of horsepower. A horse never lies on the ground to take a nap. He sleeps in the standing position whenever his body needs sleep. Arjuna’s best quality is that he has complete control over his sleep. That is why he is called ‘*Gudakesha*’.

“I have told you earlier that part of the Paramatma resides in every individual soul. Arjuna is the one whom I have chosen as the representative of all such beings. Nara means a being in the primitive state that has the capability to achieve sainthood.

“Arjuna is the complete Nara among human beings, like the horse is among the animals. He doesn’t have nipples. He has complete control over sleep. He handles many weapons swiftly with the swiftness of a horse. That is the reason why I chose only Arjuna as the suitable Nara to offer the advice on Kurukshetra, from among the five Pandavas, all of whom possess various rare qualities.”

“Then why did you choose me to offer this advice now?” I promptly repeated my original question.

He gave me such a sweet smile that he had given me only in the Ankapada aashrama before and said, “Udho, brother, you are very clever! Yet you are as pure as a lotus blooming in a lake. Because Arjuna is a complete Nara he got attracted to more women than his other brothers did. In spite of being a Yadava you kept yourself detached from such kind of attachments like guru Ghor Angirasa. That is why I addressed you as ‘Avadhuta’ in the Sudharma assembly full of people. All Yadavas accepted the epithet that I gave you. Even guru Ghor Angirasa approved it in his last visit even though I didn’t ask him. You know very well that he is my guru of *Brahmavidya*.”

Now most of my doubts were cleared by him. I still had a couple more. It was necessary to get even those cleared at this time, so I asked him, “You said that seeking the energy that resides within oneself is life and the best way to seek it is through complete surrender with utmost devotion and pure love without any expectation. I want to ask you what exactly is devotion and love.”

“Devotion is selfless faith, service and worship. Love is respectful

attraction without any kind of expectation!”

Now touching the most important topic that he had mentioned while describing the difference between both his confidants, Arjuna and me, I asked him, “You mentioned Nari – the woman along with Nara earlier. So how do you define the Nari that you have understood?”

Now his eyes lit up and dazzled. Gazing at the cerulean sky through the thick foliage of the tree above he said, “Understand that Woman is not a birth-giving machine that breeds daughters and sons! Woman is an embodiment of affection.

“Woman is that part of Paramatma, the universal brilliance, that pervades through each household, which is the unending source of affection with the capacity of creation. This affection is beyond the dimensions of weight, distance and time. It is beyond the realms of Jnana, Vijnana, and Prajnana. It is even beyond the three qualities of Tamasa, Rajasa and *Sattva*.

“A woman is always venerable not only as a mother, grandmother, friend, wife, sister, daughter, aunt, assistant and as a servant but also just as a woman.

“To make all the people who look at me understand the feminine aspect of the Paramatma clearly, I bore this peacock feather in my crown with honour throughout my life. It is the matchless symbol of the fertile female Yoni – the essence of womanhood. Today, more than the Sudarshan chakra that I have renounced completely, this peacock feather on my head is my message to the world.” He had left me spellbound and speechless. I had obtained a complete blessing from him, whom I had served wholeheartedly for the last thirty-six years. Exactly at that moment he spread the rosy palm of his right hand in front of me just like he had spread it in front of Arjuna. I clearly saw the brilliant rare symbols of a pennant, chakra, conch, *swastika*, triangle, and square on his hand which I had never seen on anybody else’s. Looking deep into my eyes he said, “Avadhuta, do you understand now how you are the confidant of my spiritual life? Promise me that whatever I have told you just now, you will pass it on to the generations to come, by raising an aashrama in Badri-Kedara and teaching it to them yourself.”

I put my palm on his. He smiled and said, “Uddhava, people will like even this Avadhutagita of yours from the bottom of their hearts. Come now, let’s go. Let us finish the work that we came here for – to collect the thorny wild creepers for grooming the horses.”

I moved forward with respect and handed his Kaumodaki mace to him. He

put it on his shoulder and casually said, “You go back to the royal city with the Garudadhwaja chariot. Think carefully about everything that I told you now. Go ahead. I will return soon after you with the bunch of thorny wild creepers, and enjoying the western wind of Aanarta on my body! What do you say?”

“Your wish is my command, Narayana.” I touched his feet. He put his left arm around me and took me in a deep embrace. Both of us waited in that position for a moment. Then I left the forest. He entered the forest in the direction of Bhalakatirtha to collect the thorny wild creepers.

I was completely lost in the many thoughts that he had shared with me, every thought more amazing than the other. I didn’t even realize when the chariot passed Veravala. To comprehend the depth and height of the thoughts that he shared with me it was necessary to find a tranquil place and contemplate. What better place there could be than the Shiva temple of Somanatha to do that?

I brought the chariot in front of the Shiva temple of Somanatha, went into the inner shrine to get a darshan of the *Shivapindi* of Somanatha getting drenched under the streaming water of the *Abhishek*. I ate the Prasada and drank the Tirtha, came out of the shrine and sat on the stone veranda. A long time passed by while contemplating and trying to understand each and every word that I had heard from dada. Now the evening had progressed. It was essential to return to the royal city. I had still not come out of the web of thoughts that dada had spun. Engrossed in those thoughts I drove the chariot speedily and came on the Dwaraka side of the creek in front of the Shuddhaksha gate. The fisherman that I had chosen while going was already waiting there. I brought the Garudadhwaja into the boat taking it over the wooden planks connecting the land and the boat. The boat sailed on the waters towards the original Dwaraka. From a distance, fleets of boats were clearly visible sailing in the creek towards the shore from where we had left Dwaraka.

The Garudadhwaja chariot entered the royal city of Dwaraka from the Shuddhaksha gate. Now my mind was getting cleared like the cloudy sky gets cleared after the wind blows the clouds away. I brought Garudadhwaja into the stable. I had witnessed how much dada loved the four white horses of the chariot. They had been yoked to the chariot for quite a long time now. It was essential to release them. But there was not a single servant in sight in the stable. Even the horses looked quite exhausted.

While still in the trance of the thoughts shared by dada I released the horses and tied them in their usual places. I spread some hay in front of them. Pondering over the thoughts that dada had shared I came near the Srisopana. With my right hand, I touched the step in the name of Aacharya Sandipani that he had showed me earlier and then touching my hand to my forehead respectfully I began climbing the tall staircase in front of me. I was lost in myself. Many of dada's thoughts had become quite clear to me now. I was planning in my mind when and how to go to Badri-Kedaraas per his wish. Just then –

Just then Chief Minister Sukrita climbing down the stairs stood in front of me saying, “Uddhavadeva, I have been looking for you. Where were you for such a long time? Do you know what has happened?” He was holding the jewel-studded royal sceptre in his right hand. Startled, I asked him, “What happened? Far away in the creek I saw a fleet of boats sailing in one direction. I didn't see a single man or woman on the royal highway.”

“Avadhuta – Avadhuta – there is bad news. The lifeless body of the Lord of Dwaraka is lying under an *Ashwattha* tree in the forest of Bhalakatirtha! A hunter named Jara whose fatal Suchi arrow pierced the sole of his left foot, came here some time back along with couple of his young friends. He himself brought the news to the city. The whole of Dwaraka along with Rukminidevi has gone there. There is no one in the city. I – I was waiting only for you. Avadhuta, our Lord of Dwaraka has left us...!” The Chief Minister wiped his eyes with the edge of his shawl with his left hand and gave out an uncontrollable sob. Then he kept weeping; his entire body trembled with sorrow. The jewel-studded royal Yadava sceptre that he was holding had already slipped from his hand when he tried to hold back his sobs while breaking the heart-wrenching news to me. Clanging on each step of the staircase it tumbled down to the last step, lingered there for a moment and fell down further.

My mind which had just about cleared, was again overcast with black clouds. I was stunned, dumbfounded, benumbed as if lightning had struck me. I couldn't understand where I was standing, what was the meaning of me being the closest confidant.... Nothing, nothing made any sense.

It was just a few moments ago, that he had shared so many wonderful thoughts about life. My senses were benumbed.

The Chief Minister had already left. I was even unable to cry. My eyes were completely dry. I turned around and climbed down the stairs leaping

over three-four steps at a time. I didn't even realize when I reached the end of the staircase. Stunned and benumbed I darted towards the Shuddhaksha gate like an arrow shot from a bow. I couldn't even think of going to the stable first. The creek shore was overcrowded with the people of Dwaraka. Seeing me run bare-feet, the crowd automatically made way for me. I pushed aside those whose backs were towards me and somehow reached the creek shore. I boarded whichever boat that came in front of me. I ordered the fisherman to

'hurry up'. He also tried his best to row the boat fast. The vast creek around me had so much water but there was not a single drop of tear in my eyes. I was still benumbed – without sensation.

The moment we approached the other shore I leapt out of the boat. Climbing in the chariot that came in front of me I commanded the charioteer impatiently, "Quick – hurry up – don't stop anywhere. Go to Bhalakatirtha directly." Earlier I had come in the Garudadhwaja chariot. Now I didn't know in whose chariot I was going. The charioteer did his best, even more than the fisherman who had tried to row the boat fast. Passing by Veravala when he brought the chariot near the forest of Bhalakatirtha the horses were frothing at the mouth. But still there was not a drop of tears in my eyes. I didn't know who I was – and what was happening. I leapt out of the chariot and rushed into the forest. I didn't even realize that the shawl on my chest had flown away.

I reached the *Ashwattha* tree on Bhalakatirtha leaving behind tree after tree. It was surrounded by Yadava men and women.

When they all saw me approaching, they made way for me moving aside and whispering 'Uddhavadeva is here – Avadhuta is here'.

I came near dada's lifeless body where all seven vahinis along with Rukminivahini were lamenting uncontrollably, with unbearable grief. I looked in front – a Suchi arrow had penetrated the sole of his left foot which he had rested on his right knee. The blood streaming from it had doused his yellow dhoti and spread in a pool at his feet. That pool of blood had now congealed and turned black.

Seeing that I was not lamenting, that there was not a single drop of tears in my eyes, the already numb Yadavas became totally bereft of speech. I was feeling very suffocated. I myself couldn't understand why I was unable to cry! Why was there not a single drop of tears in my eyes? Why had my senses become so numb as if struck by lightning? Looking at the lean toes of his blue foot that was stuck to the pool of blood I intensely felt that – that the

vast expanse of the celestial sky above was contained in his tall body.

His friend Sudama had implored him in another similar forest of Aanarta while bidding farewell to him, saying, “Give me something as your gift”. While requesting, Sudama had moved his glance from the peacock feather in the golden crown on his head to his feet. In the end, he had embraced his sandalwood slippers and asked for those as a gift. When he had removed his feet from the slippers, he had taken those as a gift to cherish.

Today my eyes moved over his body from his toes sequentially moving up to his rosy lips. My heart said agonizingly, “Let me hear a word of yours. Call me ‘Udho-Avadhuta’ once. Give me a teardrop!”

He was not saying anything! He was not going to say anything ever! Just a few moments ago, he had shared a lot with me. And he still had so much more with him worth sharing, but – but now no one was ever going to be able to hear it. That very thought made my heart distraught.

‘Dada...!’ I gave out a cry and collapsed. The cocoon of tears in my eyes broke open. I was crying with my whole body shaking and with uncontrollable sobs. I calmed down only when Rukminivahini patted on my back.

I determinedly composed myself. Taking into account what he would have liked me to do, I calmly consoled all seven vahinis along with Rukminivahini. I sent them to Dwaraka with Daruka to wear white clothes and come back. With the assistance of a few Yadavas the Chief Minister erected a funeral pyre of sandalwood. Sunset was approaching now. A few senior Yadavas came forward to assist me, Daruka and Chief Minister. His blue-complexioned, imperial body was put on the sandalwood funeral pyre along with the things that he had carried with him throughout his life – the Panchjanya conch, his mace, a lotus, the Vaijayanti garland, Kaustubh jewel, his crown with the peacock feather tucked in it, and the Nandaka sword. I could clearly see two more things from Gokul added to them – the flute tucked in his yellow dhoti and the silver bracelet on his wrist. Along with the Chief Minister a few aged Yadavas sitting under a tree at a distance brought Vasudevababa, Thorali and Dhakali mata who were composed by now, to the sandalwood funeral pyre. The three of them took a look at him for the last time with tearful eyes and each one of them placed a sandalwood log on his blue body. The most senior Yadavas of the eighteen royal families also did the same. Then Yadava priest Gargamuni and his disciples followed after them. Daruka and the Chief Minister also did it. Now his blue body was fully

covered with sandalwood logs. I put the very last sandalwood log on his body. Somebody handed me an ignited sandalwood torch.

Then, amidst the incantation of mantras, I ignited the funeral pyre in front of me as the *chulat bandhu* of the Lord of Dwaraka, as his close relative 'Avadhuta'. The birds of fiery flames soared above to touch the sky. The Chief Minister made arrangements for Vasudevababa, both mothers and all other seniors to go back to the royal city. In the end, I tossed the sandalwood torch I was holding into the funeral pyre, left an armed Yadava troop near the pyre, and left for Dwaraka along with a few selected Yadavas. It was necessary for me to console his horse friends in the stable.

Everyone was speechless. After walking a considerable distance, we approached a blue lake. When I was walking while looking at it, I saw a few peacock feathers lying on the thick green meadows. Their sight produced goose bumps on my whole body. A few peacocks had shed these feathers sometime in the morning while dancing to their heart's content after drinking the water of the lake.

I just couldn't walk ahead. Bending down I picked up one peacock feather. I simply kept staring at the iridescent peacock feather reflecting dark green, dark purple and rich golden shades of colour. The cocoon of my mind was flooded with many

of his colourful reminiscences. The tears streaming down my eyes tried to brighten the bluish shade of the peacock feather, in vain.

Overwhelmed by emotions my heart was constantly wondering only one thing – 'Dada, who were you really? Did your mother – Devakimata who gave you birth ever understand it? Did Chhotimata – Rohinimata ever understand it? Did even Vasudevababa ever realize it? Did Balabhadradada who accompanied you throughout your entire life ever realize it? Guru Sandipani and Acharya Ghor Angirasa who gave you the second birth as you said – did they at least get some idea? Grandsire Bhishma and munificent *Kaunteya*, Karna whom you considered as Jalapurusha – could they ever trace who you were? Grandfather Chitrasena, Yashodamata and Nandababa who nurtured you and inculcated sanskaras in you – did they ever understand you completely? Did *aatya* Kuntidevi, who sought grief to keep you always in her memory, at least understand you completely? Will the terrible curse of Kauravas' mother Gandharidevi have the power to bring an end to you?

'Did Gargamuni, Dhaumya rishi, Devabhagababa, Virata, Drupada, and Dhrishtadyumna whom you considered as your intimate associates ever reach

the depths of your heart? Weren't the lives of vicious men blessed because they got the honour of being finished by you? Daruka, Sanjaya, Mahatma Vidura, Sudama, and Satyaki whom you considered to be your sakhas and Radha, Draupadi whom you considered as your sakhis,

sister Subhadra, Ekananga, *bhacha* Abhimanyu and his wife Uttaraa – did a single one of them understand precisely who you were?

'Could even a single one of all your sons including Pradyumna try to learn who you were? Your beloved daughter Charumati and all her sisters – could they pursue that search?

'Except for Rukminivahini did the other seven vahinis ever realize how fortunate they were to be your wives?

'All the Pandavas including Yudhishtira whom you mentored, were they ever able to assess who you were?

'Leave aside the others, could even master archer Arjuna whom you bestowed with the invaluable knowledge of Gita and whom you considered as your best *sakha*, comprehend all the facets of your life?

'Forget everyone else, have I, who have been continuously serving you in every way for the last thirty-six years – understood you completely at all?

'I think it was only Rukminivahini who probably understood you somewhat. Oh, my dada 'Yugandhara' the day on which, whenever, whoever understands you completely from every angle and every perspective, will be a golden day not only for the Aaryavarta but for the entire world!'

My heart was still wailing – 'My brother – Srikrishna, Yugandhara – who were you really?'

The boundless, endless blue colour of the peacock feather I had held was shining brightly due to the continuous flow of tears streaming down my eyes onto it.

On the western horizon of Bhalakatirtha in Aanarta–Saurashtra, the sun had now set. An era had come to an end!!!



# Glossary (in alphabetical order)

ॐ – the sacred sound composed of 3 sounds ‘A-U-M’. It spoken at the beginning and end of each mantra

Aachamana – the act of swallowing water 3 times while chanting mantras in praise of God.

Aamra – Mango tree.

Aate bandhu – father’s sister’s son

Aatnavidya – Knowledge of the Self and the Soul

Aatya – paternal aunt, father’s sister

Aatyapatya – A game played between two teams of 9 players each where players from one team try to cross over 9 trenches and the opposing team tries to block their progress from one trench to the next.

Abhishek – A ceremonious holy bath offered to a deity or person of royalty

Agrapooja – The guest of honor at a yajna is given the highest mark of reverence or respect by performing the Pooja at the very beginning of the yajna.

Akshauhini – a mammoth army containing approximately 22,000 elephants, 22,000 chariots, 66,000 horses, 110,00 foot soldiers

Ananta flower – a white coloured flower, also known as gardenia

Arghya – offering water to God, oblations

Asharan – one who does not seek protection, one who does not surrender

Ashwattha – Pipal tree

Asura – a demon

Audumbara – Indian fig tree

Aukshan – A religious ritual where lighted lamps are put in a plate and circled around a person on auspicious occasions.

Barabandi dress – A traditional dress for men with 12 small strips of cloth to tie it at 12 places and therefore called bara (12) bandee (knots)

Bela leaf – A sacred leaf that has 3 leaflets, offered to Lord Shiva

Bhacha – a man’s sister’s son or a woman’s brother’s son

Bhache – Plural of Bhacha

Bhandirvriksha – Banyan tree

Bharadwaja – The greater coucal or crow pheasant with a long tail and coppery brown wings.

Bharata – descendant of king Bharata

Bharatashreshtha – best among the descendants of king Bharata  
Bhauji – husband’s brother, brother-in-law  
Bibhatsu – one who craves terror among the enemy during a war  
Brahmakamala– White lotus flower  
Brahma Muhurta – The early part of the day, dawn  
Brahmavidya – Knowledge of the Brahman  
Chakravarti – an ideal ruler who rules over the entire world ethically and benevolently  
Champak flower – a yellow coloured flower known for its fragrance, also known as magnolia  
Chandola – Wood lark, a singing bird, coloured brown above and pale below.  
Chandravansha – Lunar dynasty, a dynasty descended from the Moon or Chandra  
Chataka – Pied crested cuckoo also known as Jacobin cuckoo.  
Chitrahuti – Food offered to deities before starting the meal.  
Chulat bandhu – father’s brother’s son  
Damaru – a small drum shaped like an hour glass; an instrument of Lord Shiva  
Dhairiyashil – courageous  
Dhananjaya – another name of Arjuna, meaning one who can conquer over riches  
Dhanurdhara – expert archer  
Dhanurveda – the knowledge of archery  
Dharma – In Hinduism Dharma signifies the ‘right way of living’. The term includes behaviours that are in accord with the cosmic law and order such as duties, conducts, virtues and rights that one is supposed to follow through out life.  
Dhirodatta – courageous, brave and noble minded  
Digvijayi – world conqueror  
Falguni – another name of Arjuna, born in the Uttara Falguni nakshatra  
Ghatika – a measure of time, period of twenty-four minutes  
Gopalakala / gopabhoga – The feast of Krishna’s gopa friends, prepared by mixing everyone’s food together and distributed equally among themselves  
Gudakesha – An epithet of Arjuna, one who has conquered sleep  
Gurudakshina – A tradition in Hinduism where a student repays a guru after the completion of his formal education.

Himalinga – Shivlingam made with snow

Hututu – A game played between two teams where a single player from one team seeks the players of opposing team while holding his/her breath and saying 'Hu tu tu'. The players of other team try to catch the seeker and confine him/her to their play area till the seeker runs out of breath.

Ingudi oil – oil made from the seeds of Desert date tree

Jalanjali – an offering of water offered to the deceased ancestors

Jamun tree – Indian black plum

Jaswanda flower – hibiscus flower

Jayishnu – one who conquers

Jishnu – victorious, triumphant

Jnanlobhi – knowledge hungry

Jyeshtha – eldest brother

Kadamba tree – Common Bur flower tree. It is a fast growing, large, ever green tree.

Kajal – dark eyeliner, collyrium

Kaka – paternal uncle, father's brother

Kaku – father's brother's wife

Kamandalu – An oblong water pot used by Hindu ascetics for storing drinking water

Karanjel oil – oil made from seeds of Indian beech tree

Karmabhumi – the place where one builds one's life by performing one's duty, the sphere of one's duty

Kaunteya – son of Kunti

Khaira tree – Cutch tree, black cutch

Kharja – Bass, lowest tone

Kho-kho – A tag game played between two teams where runners from one team avoid getting caught by the tagger of opposing team by giving each other 'kho' (tapping on the back of one's player and saying 'kho')

Kiritin – wearing a celestial crown given by Lord Indra

Kirtivan – renowned, celebrated

Kojagiri purnima – The full moon night of the month of Ashwin when people spend the night in a variety of festivities and drink warm milk

Kokila – A species of the cuckoo class.

Kokum – the fruit of mangosteen tree

Kosa – ancient Indian unit of length; 1 Kosa is about 3.2 kilometers or 2 miles

Kotwala bird – Black drongo, also known as the King crow.

Lagori – A game played between two teams where a seeker from one team knocks out a small tower of stones with a ball. The seeker's team then tries to restore the tower of stones while the opposing team tries to hit the seekers with the ball and get them out.

Lezim – A musical instrument with jingling cymbals chained together and attached at both ends of a small wooden stick used in folk dance.

Mahabaho – mighty armed

Maharathi – great warrior, a war hero

Mahaskandha – broad-shouldered

Mallakhamba – A traditional sport where a gymnast performs feats on a vertical wooden pole.

Mame babdhu – mother's brother's son

Mavas bandhu – mother's sister's son

Mavashi – maternal aunt, mother's sister

Mayura – Indian peacock

Muhurta – an auspicious time to begin a ceremony or an enterprise

Nadi – A vein

Namana – singing a psalm in praise of God

Nandi – The sacred bull, the carrier of Lord Shiva

Nidrajayi – one who has conquered sleep

Nishpaap - sinless

Niyoga – This was a practice prevalent in ancient times that permitted a childless woman to bear a child by having intercourse with any kinsman of her husband to continue the family line.

Padar – the end or border of a saree

Palash – a tree with red/orange flowers, also known as the Flame of the forest

Parakrami – valiant

Parantapa – subduer of enemies

Paras stone – A stone that has the quality of turning metal into gold by its touch.

Parijata flower – White flower with an orange coloured center.

Partha – name of Arjuna, the son of Pritha

Pindadana – The offering of rice ball at funeral, the funeral oblation made to dead ancestors on the evening of new-moon

Prahar – eighth part of the day, the period of three hours

Pranayama – Prana meaning life force or breath and Yama meaning to control or restrain one’s breath to produce a particular result.

Purashcharana – repeating a mantra for a particular number of times and for a certain period of time

Purusha – a linear measure used in ancient India to measure length; person-height. It literally means ‘the measure of man’ with both arms stretched upwards.

Purushottama – Supreme man or Supreme being.

Putanya – a man’s brother’s son or the son of a woman’s brother-in-law

Putane – Plural of Putanya

Rasa dance – Lord Krishna’s divine dance with Radha and other gopikas in Gokul. This practice was also prevalent in the Yadava dynasty.

Rudraksha – The seed of a particular tree found in the Himalayan region and is considered significant in a spiritual seeker’s life.

Saga – Teak tree

Sakha – a best friend, confidant

Sakhi – a best friend, confidante

Salunki - mynah

Samaasa – Composition of words; compound words.

Sandhya prayer – The morning, noon and evening prayers a Brahmana is supposed to do every day.

Sanyami – one who keeps his passions in control

Sanyasi – a person who has renounced the material desires and detached himself/herself from the material world

Saptak – the octave

Satshil – truthful, virtuous, honest person

Sattva, Rajas and Tamas Gunas - Sattva (good, constructive, harmonious), Rajas (passionate, active, confused), and Tamas (dark, destructive, chaotic) – According to Hinduism these are three basic qualities of Nature. They exist forever in all beings.

Savitru mantra – a mantra from the Rigveda dedicated to the Sun god. It is composed in the Gayatri meter, hence also known as Gayatri mantra

Savyasachi – another epithet of Arjuna, meaning ambidexterous, a person who is able to use both right and left hands equally well

Shaligrama – A fossilized shell used as a symbol of Lord Vishnu in Hinduism.

Shalunka – the base or part of Shivapindi that bears the Lingam

Shisam – Rosewood or blackwood tree

Shivapindi – symbol of Lord Shiva

Suryavansha – Solar dynasty, a dynasty descended from the Sun or Surya.

Swastika – an ancient symbol of auspiciousness and good luck

Tandava dance – A vigorous divine dance performed by Lord Shiva which is the source of creation, preservation and dissolution of life.

Tarpana – Offering water to deceased ancestors to satisfy them

Tilanjali – A handful of sesame seeds with water offered daily to the manes until the tenth day of their death.

Tīprya – playing sticks used in traditional Indian dances

Tirtha-Prasada – holy water and food offered to devotees in the temple after performing worship of God.

Upanayana ceremony – A traditional ceremony of initiation marking the acceptance of a student by a teacher and the student's entrance to a school.

Upanishadas – collections of texts containing central philosophical concepts of Hinduism such as Karma (action), Moksha (salvation), Brahman (ultimate reality), Atman (soul).

Vahini – brother's wife

Vandana – a Namaskar, bow down to God by bringing both palms together

Vanaprasthashrama – In the Vanaprasthashrama or hermit stage a man's duties as a family man come to an end and he retires from his social and professional life.

Veera - brave

Vijayadashami –The tenth day of the month of Ashwin celebrated in India as the day of Rama's victory over Ravana

Vijigishu – desirous of victory

Vikrami – heroic, valiant

Yajna – A ritual in Hindu Dharma to propitiate deities where sacrificial offerings are made in a pit of fire.

Yajnavetta – a person who is well-versed in the matters of a yajna

Yogi – an ascetic, a monk, a person who follows the Yoga system of philosophy, a practitioner of yoga

Yoganidra – Deepest state of relaxation while sleeping but still maintaining full consciousness.

Yogayogeshwara – the greatest Yogi of all who has complete control over all senses and is not attached to any of the worldly karmas.

Yojana – unit of measuring distance in ancient India; 1 yojana is about 9

mile



## Introduction of Late Shri. Shivaji Sawant

Shivaji Sawant was born in a small farmer family in Ajara, Kolhapur on 31st August 1940. He passed high school from Vyankatrao High School, Ajara. He was a teacher in Rajaram High School, Kolhapur, and also worked as the editor with Maharashtra education department's monthly magazine Lokashishan for six years.

He has received many literary awards including Poonamchand Bhutodiya Puraskar (1986), Moortidevi Puraskar (1995) of Bhartiya Jnanpeeth, Delhi at the hands of the then Vice President of India, Dr. K. R. Narayanan. Mrityunjaya, Chhava and Yugandhar, all 3 novels penned by Shri. Sawant have received the Maharashtra Shasan Puraskar.

His first novel "Mrityunjaya" has been translated in six Indian languages, Hindi, Gujarathi, Kannad, Malyalam, Rajasthani and Bengali. In 1989 Mrityunjaya was translated in English by the Writers Workshop of Calcutta.

In 1979 Shri. Sawant composed "Chhava", another novel written on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. It was translated in Hindi by Bharatiya Jnanpeeth.

Shri Sawant has also written biographies of Padmashree Dr. Vitthalrao Vikhe Patil (Ladhat) and veteran Trade Union Leader, Bhai Manohar Kotwal (Sangharsh) and honorable Anna Saheb P. K. Patil (Purushottamnama)

Yugandhar was first published on 29th July 2000 at the auspicious hands of Swami Akamananda of Ramkrishna Mission, Haridwar. Shri. Sawant's wife, Mrinalini Sawant translated Yugandhar in Hindi. The Hindi translation was published by Bharatiya Jnanpeeth in 2002.

Shri Sawant passed away on 18th September 2002, due to cardiac arrest in Goa, while campaigning for the post of President of 76th Akhil Bharatiya Sahitya Sammelan.



Srikrishna!

A monumental epoch-maker that has reigned the hearts of Indian men and women, young and old alike for more than five thousand years!

Official references to Srikrishna's life can be found primarily in the Srimadbhagavatam, Mahabharata, Harivansha and a few other Puranas. Over the last thousands of years, biased, fanciful depictions of his life story have enshrouded his character.

The reason being the unintended, credulous augmentation of irrational miracles in his life story.

Today, Srikrishna is far removed from reality.

Is it possible then to perceive Srikrishna's life de facto without deviating from the facts of his existence?

Did he only preach what he expounded in the Gita?

Or did he actually practice it in his own life?

If the imaginary layers enshrouding his life story are peeled off delicately with careful reasoning it is possible to view his epoch-making, versatile character as is.

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