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Pearls

Short Essays From Mahabharata

by

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MYTHOLOGY AND ITS PLACE IN HINDUISM

The definition of the word "myth" according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary is "a traditional narrative usually involving supernatural persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena."

At the beginning, it must be strongly emphasized that in basic Vedantic Hinduism, the Supreme Reality is single and formless (*nirguna and niraakara*). However, our wise and ancient teacher sages, the *rishis*, knew that for the vast majority of human beings, it would be extremely difficult to conceive a formless entity to meditate upon. For such persons, they offered a God with *form* and *attributes* (*saguna and sakaara*). This was meant only as a preliminary step for the realization of the absolute single formless God.

The basis of the vast literature of *Hindu mythology* is couched mostly, but not entirely, in our beautiful language *Sanskrit*. It consists of the eighteen *Puranas*, the most important of which is the *Srimad Bhagvatam* of *Sage Vyasa*, and two great epics or *Itihaasaas*, the *Ramayana* of *Sage Valmiki*, and the *Mahabharata* of *Sage Vyasa*. The *Ramayana* has twenty four thousand verses, and the *Mahabharata*, the longest epic poem in the world, has one hundred thousand verses. It is said that all the qualities that can be found in the world, whether good or bad, are depicted in the *Mahaabhaaraataa*. The depiction is so inclusive and complete that if any characteristics are not described in this epic, they cannot be found in any other source.

Many of the characters in these books have supernatural powers and demonstrate supreme virtues such as courage, heroism, loyalty and sacrifice. Hence they are given superhuman status as gods or part manifestations of the *Supreme*. They serve as role models for the worshipper to admire and emulate. Two familiar examples are *Hanuman*, the monkey god, and *Ganesha* who has the head of an elephant. Most people fail to perceive the deeper *symbolic* significance. It is the same reverence that Christians display for the cross and why Muslims face Mecca during their prayers. The material with which the images are made, whether it is

wood, clay, stone, or metal, makes no difference to the worshipper, as he is contemplating on what the image represents. For example, when a devotee stands before the image of Hanumaan, he is not thinking of the monkey form but recalling the events in the *Ramaayana* and the glorious achievements of this character illustrating intelligence, loyalty, devotion, courage and heroism. This explains why Hindus worship a multiplicity of gods, and removes the misconception that Hindus are "idol worshippers."

A true incident from the life of *Swami Vivekananda* illustrates this concept very well. In the course of his extensive walking tour of India, he was the guest of a rajah. The rajah was an advocate of formless worship and decried that his subjects were ignorant as they were worshippers of idols. Swamiji, noticing some paintings of the rajah's ancestors hanging on the walls, expressed a desire to have a closer look at the portrait of the rajah's father. His wish was complied with and the painting was placed on a table. Thereupon Swamiji asked one of the courtiers to spit on the portrait. Everyone was shocked and the courtier said, "How can I do that? It is the former rajah!" Swamiji remarked, "It is not the former rajah but only a piece of cloth on which the artist has dabbed some colored paint." The rajah and his courtiers understood how strong mental association could evoke deep emotions such as respect.

It has been rightly said that the worshipper devotee when immersed in intensely deep contemplation is no longer aware of his surroundings and loses body consciousness. He realizes that he is only the inner core, the Spirit or Atman, and merges with the object of his concentration. This is true *Spiritual Yoga*, the same as *Mukti* or *Liberation*. It is freedom from the recurrent cycles of birth and death. What one devotee attempts to achieve through the difficult path of self-denial, austerity, and ascetism, another achieves by the easier path through worship of GOD with FORM.

BHISHMA

Chapter III, Verse 21 of the Bhagavad Gita states:

*Yad yad acarati sreshta tad tad evo itara janah Sa yat
pramanamkurute lokas tad anuvartate*

Whatever example leaders in society set up, the common folk will follow.

In the earlier article, the role of many of the characters in Hindu mythology was considered and the valuable moral and ethical values which can be learned from them were stressed.

The epic *Mahabharata* of Sage *Vyasa* is a veritable treasure house of different types of characters, some with many fine virtues, some downright wicked and others of a mixed nature. Studying these, there must be a sincere and determined effort on our part to pursue the path of virtue and avoid the path of evil so that we can evolve towards our ultimate goal of God Realization.

Consider *Bhishma*, the oldest of the *Kuru* clan. He had divinity built in him. He was the youngest among the eight *Vasus*, a group of demigods who had incurred a curse to be born as mortals on earth. He was born of the sacred *Ganga* through the *Kuru* emperor *Santanu*. His name at birth was *Devarata*. His mother took him away from the royal palace and had him educated and trained in the martial arts by sage *Parashurama*. As a teenager, he was returned to his father who named him as the crown prince to succeed him. However, emperor *Santanu* fell deeply in love with *Satyavati*, the daughter of the chief of fishermen. Her father consented to the marriage only on condition that her son would be the future emperor. *Santanu* thought that this would be grossly unfair to his oldest son *Devarata* and could not agree to this proposal. His love for *Satyavati* was so intense that he went into a state of severe depression. Coming to know of this, the intelligent *Devarata* called on the fisherman chief and assured him that he would not claim the throne. The fisherman chief raised a further objection that though *Devarata* forsook his claim, the children born to him could still aspire for the throne. The noble *Devarata*, who had his father's happiness at heart, was prepared for any sacrifice on his part. Calling upon God as his witness, he swore that not only was he giving up his right to the throne but that he would remain celibate, a *brahmachari*

throughout his life. Even the heavens applauded this most wonderful action. He was also given a boon that he could choose the time of his death. From that day he was called *Bhishma* which means "The Terrible." This pledge has been much praised and is called the *Bhishma Pratigjna*. *Bhishma* also declared that he would remain loyal to the *Kuru* Empire and its capital city *Hastinapura* at any cost. That is the reason he fought against the *Pandavas* during the *Kurukshetra* war.

Many years later, *Bhishma* attended the *swayamvara* arranged for the three daughters of the King of *Kasi*. He fought against the many warrior kings assembled for the occasion and defeated all of them in order to get worthy wives for his stepbrothers, *Chitrangada* and *Vichitravirya*. Both princes died relatively young without begetting any children. This created a crisis as the *Kuru* throne was left vacant as *Santanu* had died earlier. *Satyavati* tried her best to persuade *Bhishma* to assume rulership but he would not rescind from the holy vow he had taken.

Bhishma was one of the few people who recognized that *Sri Krishna* was a *Divine Incarnation*. *Sri Krishna* knew that *Bhishma* could not be killed by anyone directly face to face in the battle. *Bhishma* however had publicly declared that he would not fight against a woman. King *Drupada's* eldest offspring was a girl who met a *gandharva* and got transformed into a man. She underwent training for warfare, and as *Shikandi* fought on the side of the *Pandavas*. It was then contrived that *Shikandi* would stand in front of *Arjuna's* chariot when he confronted *Bhishma*, who could not retaliate true to his public declaration. *Bhishma* was mortally wounded and lay on a bed of arrows in the battlefield waiting for the favorable time of *Uttarayana* to reach heaven. After the *Pandavas* won the war, due to their great affection and admiration for *Bhishma*, they visited him. He blessed them and on this occasion recited the very holy *Vishnu Sahasranama* giving the thousand names of Lord *Vishnu*. He also gave extremely valuable advice to *Yudhishtira*, who would become emperor. This is the famous *Bhishma Neeti* which gives details of state craft and is recorded in the *Shanti Parva* of the *Mahabharata*.

KARNA, A TRAGIC HERO

"There is a Destiny that shapes our ends, rough hew them, how we will." - *Shakespeare in Hamlet*

"It is all a checker board of nights and days
Where Destiny with men for pieces plays
Hither and tither moves, mates and slays
And one by one back in the closet lays."

- *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, Persian Sufi poet*

These verses aptly apply to Karna, a victim of circumstances and the tragic hero of the Mahabharata. Many of the events in his life, including his birth and death, illustrate this point.

Kunti, his mother, pleased Sage Durvasa very much by rendering meticulous service when he was an honored guest of her father. As a parting gift, the sage taught her a mantra by which she could invoke any of the Gods in heaven up to five times, each of whom would bear her a son with superhuman qualities. Kunti, in her immaturity, wanted to test the efficacy of the mantra and invoked the Sun God, Surya. The son conceived was Karna. Since she was unmarried, Kunti felt ashamed. She put the well-covered newborn baby in a wooden cradle and floated it down the river. The baby had at birth a natural mail and armor as well as resplendent earrings from the Sun God. After floating down the river for a fairly long distance, it was found by a childless couple, who belonged to the social order of sutas and were employed as chariot drivers for royalty. Karna's father Radha was employed in the service of the Kuru emperor. Hence Karna is sometimes referred to as Radheya or Sutaputra.

When he was growing up, he had his initial training in the martial arts and archery from Dronacharya but later went to Sage Parashurama, who had the knowledge of many infallible secret weapons. Sage Parashurama was a sworn enemy of the social order of Kshatriyas and would impart wisdom only to Brahmins. Karna misrepresented himself as a Brahmin. During the course of his training, Karna inadvertently killed a cow belonging to a Brahmin who cursed him saying that during a crucial battle his chariot would be rendered immobile by the wheels getting stuck in mud. Later, due to a strange incident involving a large boring beetle, Parashurama discovered that the disciple who had learned the art from him was not a Brahmin. He cursed Karna that at a vital moment he would not be able to remember the instruction he had received.

King Drupada had a beautiful daughter, Draupadi. He arranged a Swayamvara, a marriage by choice for her. He set a test of archery, the target being an artificial fish

revolving at a height. The contestant could only aim by looking only at its reflection in water placed below. Several princes and kings attending the occasion failed in their attempts. However, when it was Karna's turn, Draupadi stated that she would not marry anyone not of royal descent. Karna could not participate.

On another occasion, a tournament was arranged in which all the Kuru princes showed their skill. Arjuna, being an outstanding archer, excelled them all. At that time Karna approached and was able to perform equally well and demanded a further contest between them. When he was asked for his lineage, he could not claim royal descent. King Duryodhana came to his rescue conferring on him the large territory of Anghadesa. From then on, a close bond was established, and Karna remained ever grateful and loyal to Duryodhana.

Later, just before the great war, Kunti approached him and revealed to him for the first time that he was her first born. She requested him not to fight against his brothers. Karna stated that his loyalty to Duryodhana was firm and that he would not desert him. Sri Krishna also tried to wean him away but Karna was adamant and would not change his decision.

Karna, after his morning bath and prayers, would not refuse anyone a request made at that time. God Indra being Arjuna's father knew that Karna was invincible as long as he had his natural armor and ear rings. So he approached Karna at the appropriate time in the disguise of a Brahmin and made a request for them. Karna recognized him as God Indra but without any hesitation gave them away as a gift. Indra, however in return gave Karna a dart which would certainly kill any enemy but could only be used once. Karna very carefully preserved it to be used against Arjuna. However in the course of the war, Bhima's rakshasa son, Ghatatogaja, was decimating the Kaurava army. At the request of his friend Duryodhana, Karna used the dart against this terrible enemy, killing him. The weapon was no longer available to be used against Arjuna.

In the final encounter against Arjuna, the two curses he incurred earlier came into effect. His chariot wheel got stuck in the mud and he could not recall the instruction he had learnt from Parashurama. He died gloriously on the battle field like a true Kshatriya. He has rightfully earned the name given to him as "Dhanaveerasoora Karna" which means magnanimous, brave and noble.

ACHARYA DRONA

In trying to analyze the character of Acharya Drona, we find it inextricably intertwined with that of King Drupada. It is a classic example of friendship turned into enmity with persistence of animosity and nursing of revenge over a long period of time. This leads to disastrous consequences. A valuable lesson to be learned is that we should try hard to avoid such conduct and behavior.

Drupada, when still a prince, was sent to the same teacher sage where Drona of poor parentage was receiving all-round education. In the course of their training, when they had common tasks assigned to them, they became very close friends. One day, Drupada told Drona that when he became king, he would share his wealth with him. After their long period of training was over, their paths separated. Drupada became ruler of the vast Panchala kingdom while Drona remained a poor Brahmin who could not even afford milk for his only son, Aswatthaman. He went to Drupada expecting financial assistance, but Drupada had changed completely upon acquiring wealth. When Drona reminded him of their former friendship and his oral promise, Drupada arrogantly said that friendship was only possible between equals and not between a rich ruler and a poor beggar. Drona returned empty-handed but mentally resolved that he would teach Drupada a fitting lesson sometime.

Later, Drona was appointed as teacher of the Kuru princes. He trained both the Pandavas and Kauravas to be skilled archers. When their training was concluded, Drona as their guru, asked for the due customary fee as dakshina. He asked that Drupada be brought to him as a prisoner bound with ropes. The Kauravas went first, but Drupada who was a great chariot warrior was able to defeat them. The Pandavas, however, with Arjuna as their leader, vanquished him and brought him to Drona as

a bound captive. Drona compelled him to part with half of his kingdom as a condition for his release.

Drupada returned in disgrace but swore revenge. He performed a difficult ritual sacrifice desiring progeny to kill Drona. As a result, Dhrstadyumna was born. When Drona laid down his weapons desisting from participating in the war and assumed a yoga pose, Dhrstadyumna beheaded him in a disgraceful and cowardly manner.

A study of Drona is not complete without reference to his conduct towards Ekalavya, a young lad who belonged to the tribal community of Nishadas, the lowest social order of Sudras. Ekalavya had an intense desire to learn archery. Having heard of Drona as an expert teacher, he approached him with a request to accept him as a pupil. Drona point blank refused because he belonged to an inferior social order. Ekalavya was sorely disappointed but his desire to master archery was so great that he made a clay image of Drona. Keeping this as a guide for concentration, he practiced intensely and successfully mastered the art. One day, when the Kuru princes were out, their dog began to bark furiously. Ekalavya silenced the animal effectively by skillfully shooting arrows to pin its jaws together. The princes were amazed and complained to Drona that Ekalavya was superior to them in archery. When Drona came, Ekalavya greeted him with great respect as his teacher. Thereupon, Drona demanded his customary fee asking that Ekalavya cut off his right thumb so that he could no longer be a rival to any of his own disciples. Ekalavya, without the slightest hesitation, cut off his right thumb and offered it to Drona.

Even though Ekalavya belonged to a low social order, his supreme sacrifice showed courage and honor. On the other hand, Drona, although well versed in the scriptures, was unable to subdue his ego and vengeful spirit.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

It is usually not emphasized in our scriptures that Yama, the god of death, is also Dharma, the god of justice and righteousness. He is impartial and makes no distinction between high and low, rich and poor. The Mahabharata is a vast epic in which characters appear at different times and under different circumstances. There are two characters who are intimately related to Lord Yama.

The first character is Vidura. Due to the request of his mother, Satyawathi, and a strange course of events, Vidura was born to sage Vyasa and a chambermaid at the palace. Hence, he was a stepbrother to the emperors, Pandu and Dhritarashtra. However, he had no claim to the throne because his mother was a sudra (low-caste) woman. Vidura's birth occurred because Yama incurred a curse from a sage for unfair treatment. It is believed that Vidura was actually Yama born as a human for one lifetime.

Vidura is by far the most saintly character in the whole epic. At one stage, the evil-minded Duryodhana had a beautiful mansion built of combustible material with the intent of setting it on fire while the Pandavas slept in it. When Vidura came to know of this plot, he sent a coded message to Yudhishthira and the Pandavas escaped through an underground passage.

Vidura was an ardent devotee of Krishna. When Krishna went as a messenger of peace on behalf of the Pandavas, he refused to stay in a palace arranged by Duryodhana and instead chose to stay in Vidura's humble abode. Vidura was totally against war and fearlessly advocated justice for the Pandavas for the return of their kingdom. His sage advice to Dhritarashtra is recorded as the Vidura Neethi. It is a beautiful exposition of ethical behavior and a moral code of conduct.

The other character connected to Yama is Yudhishthira, the oldest of the Pandavas. He was born to Kunti when she invoked Yama for progeny per the boon granted to her by the sage Durvasa. The word Yudhishthira means firm or steadfast in battle (Yudhi means battle, sthira means firm). The other names by which he is known are indicators of his character. One is Dharmaraja, which means a ruler who follows dharma, or virtuous conduct. Another is Ajatasatru, which means peaceful by nature and not easily drawn to fighting. No one could bear enmity towards him.

Three interesting episodes in the Mahabharata are indicative of Yudhishthira's true nature.

Duryodhana was intent on killing his cousins living in exile in the forest and pursued them with a large army. Some gandharvas (semi-celestials) sporting in a lake objected to the invasion of their territory whereupon Duryodhana declared he

was the ruler and could not be prevented from proceeding. Chitraratha, the chief of the gandharvas, was an excellent warrior and he captured Duryodhana. When the news was conveyed to the Pandavas, Bhima was overjoyed. However, Yudhishthira felt that family honor demanded that his cousin be helped. He sent Arjuna who fought Chitraratha and freed Duryodhana. Chitraratha was brought in submission to Yudhishthira. After an exchange of views, Chitraratha and the Pandavas became lifelong friends. This is clear proof of Yudhishthira's magnanimity.

Once, Yudhishthira sent his youngest brother Sahadeva to spot a source of water. An unseen voice at a lake cautioned Sahadeva that he could not drink until he had answered some questions. Sahadeva did not heed the voice of the Yaksha (forest-dwelling semi-celestial) and was rendered lifeless. The other Pandava brothers, when sent to find Sahadeva, met with the same fate. Eventually, Yudhishthira went and was delivered the same warning. He, however, heeded the voice and was able to satisfy the Yaksha with answers that reflected his keen intelligence, philosophical insight, and depth of knowledge. This constitutes the Yaksha Prasna episode. The Yaksha offered to revive one of the brothers. Yudhishthira selected Sahadeva because his mother Kunti would have one living son, and with Sahadeva's revival, Madri would also have one. The Yaksha was so pleased with Yudhishthira's consideration and compassion that he revived all the brothers. Then he revealed himself as Yama, blessed them, and disappeared.

At the epic's end, when the Pandavas began the trek to heaven, each one dropped along the ascent. Yudhishthira plodded on, followed by a dog, which had joined him along the way. At the top, the dog was not granted entry. Yudhishthira refused to enter if the dog could not accompany him. At that moment, the dog revealed itself as Yama, and pleased by Yudhishthira's steadfast loyalty and sense of justice, granted entry to all the Pandavas.

The Mahabharata leaves us no doubt about the sterling character of Yudhishthira. However, he showed he was human on two occasions, once when he lied during the battle to accomplish the difficult task of killing Drona, and again when he engaged in a game of dice with high stakes. The sixtieth verse in the second chapter of the Gita warns even wise men to be ever vigilant. Sri Krishna's advice is clear. He says:

Yatato hy api kaunteya purusasya vipascitah
Indriyani pramathini haranti prasabham manah

O, son of Kunti, the turbulent senses carry away forcibly the mind even of a wise man though he is striving to control them.

A STUDY OF CONTRASTS

It is interesting to review the character of Dhrtarastra and Sanjaya, two persons in the Mahabharata who were closely associated, but who exhibited markedly contrasting qualities.

In the sixteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna enumerates two types of qualities present in human beings – the divine (*daivi*) which lead to self (God) realization, and the demoniacal (*asuric*) which lead to a lower scale of evolution. His advice is to foster the former and shun the latter.

Dhrtarastra, the blind emperor, wielded enormous power, and if he wished, could have prevented the catastrophic war. In spite of wise advice from his old uncle, Bhishma, and his virtuous stepbrother, Vidura, he could not bring himself to avert the battle, which had disastrous consequences. It has been aptly said that his blindness was not only physical, but also mental and spiritual. His extreme fondness for his son, Duryodhana, and his inability to guide and control him, proved calamitous.

In the opening verse of the Gita, he asks, "What did my people and the Pandavas do on the field of battle?", a question which clearly reveals his partiality to his sons by using the word "*mamakah*" (mine) and refers to the Pandavas as "*chaiva*" (others). Actually, Yudhisthira had earlier been declared as crown prince and entitled to the kingdom. "I" or egoism (*ahamkara*), and "mine" or sense of possession (*mamakara*) are two obstacles in the path of spirituality, which should be avoided by all. This would be expected more so in an emperor who sets an example for others.

After the war was over, Yudhisthira, a personification of nobility and righteousness, told his brothers to call upon Dhrtarastra. He wanted them to individually seek the elder's blessings and also assure him that he would enjoy all the comforts and privileges he had before. However, Dhrtarastra had great animosity, particularly towards Bhima, and had mentally resolved to crush him if he could lay his hands on him. Sri Krishna sensed this hatred, and when it was Bhima's turn, he had a metal image put in his place. Dhrtarastra, who was known for

his muscular strength, embraced the metal image and reduced it to pieces.

Sanjaya was Dhrtarastra's charioteer and minister, a man totally loyal to the emperor. Sage Vyasa conferred on him the power to visualize all the events of the battle, which he narrated to the emperor in his palace. On several occasions, Sanjaya had advised the king to seek peace with the Pandavas and not to resort to war. When Sri Krishna went to the assembly of Kauravas to represent the Pandavas as the supreme ambassador of peace, he offered one concession after another to avoid war. When Duryodhana, on the advice of Karna and others, attempted to hold Sri Krishna prisoner, the Lord revealed his cosmic form, which made them give up their evil design. Dhrtarastra also was given the ability to have the divine vision. Instead of exercising his power as ruler to call off hostilities, he merely thanked Lord Krishna for the vision.

In the eleventh chapter of the Gita, there is a description of Viswarupadarsan, the revelation of the cosmic form of Lord Krishna to Arjuna. This is well depicted in detail by Sanjaya. There is a marked contrast in his reaction. In the last five verses of the Gita, Sanjaya recalls the vision. Unlike Dhrtarastra, he is transported into an ecstatic state. He repeatedly thanks Sage Vyasa for having graced him with the ability to have this enthralling divine vision. The final verse is often repeated at the conclusion of auspicious events and also as a prayer for success in endeavors. It states:

*yatra yogeswaro krsno, yatra partho dhanur darah,
tatra srir vijayo bhutih dhruva nitir matir mama*

Wherever Sri Krishna is present as Lord (teacher) of yoga,
Where Arjuna stands with upraised bow in hand, the perfect man of action,
There will be prosperity, victory, welfare, and correct policy.
That is my firm conviction.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MAHABHARATA

The role of women in the Mahabharata makes an interesting study providing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their character. In this epic, four women play crucial parts in the course of events.

The first is Satyawati who was the daughter of the chieftain of fishermen. As a young maiden, while ferrying sage Parasara across a river, he fell in love with her. She bore him a son, Vyasa. He was brought up as an ascetic sage, but before he returned to forest life, he promised his mother he would come and help her whenever she faced difficulty.

Later, the emperor Santanu fell in love with her. Her father consented to the marriage only on condition that her children would inherit the throne. Santanu's older son, the crown prince Bhishma, not only voluntarily relinquished his right but also took the vow that he would remain celibate so that he could not have any children who might lay claim to the throne in the future.

After Santanu passed away, Satyawati's two sons died young. The older one was unmarried, and the younger had two wives, Ambika and Ambalika, who were childless. This created a crisis for there was no legal heir to the Kuru throne. Bhishma did not relent from his vow because he considered it sacred.

At this juncture, Satyawati sent for her son Vyasa, who promptly responded per his earlier promise. Satyawati said the problem could be solved by his fathering a child through each of the two young widows. The son borne by Ambalika was Pandu who became the future emperor. The son through Ambika was Dhritarashtra who was born blind. As time passed, Satyawati sensed the animosity between the sons of Pandu and the sons of Dhritarashtra, and she foresaw a struggle for power with tragic consequences. She voluntarily retired to the forest.

After the Kurukshetra war was over, the Pandavas ruled for a short time and then handed over the kingdom to the only survivor, Parikshit, who was the grandson of Arjuna and the son of Abhimanyu. Parikshit ruled wisely and well until he was bitten by a poisonous snake and had eight days to live. During this time, it was to Parikshit that Suka, Vyasa's ascetic son, narrated the Srimad Bhagavatam, the great book on bhakti, the path of devotion.

Hence, it can be seen that Satyawati kept the Kuru lineage intact and unbroken, and also that she was responsible, though indirectly, for the Srimad Bhagavatam, a great scripture available for posterity.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MAHABHARATA

Gandhari

Gandhari was the wife of King Dhritarashtra and mother of the Kauravas. She was the daughter of King Subala, ruler of a vast area west of the river Sindhu (now called the Indus) extending to Kabul, Afghanistan. The main city was Gandhar (modern Kandahar).

Grandsire Bhishma sent a proposal seeking her hand in marriage for Dhritarashtra. Subala knew that Dhritarashtra was blind, but thinking that an alliance with the powerful Kuru clan would be in the larger interest, agreed to the proposal. Gandhari accepted her father's decision as a dutiful daughter. She wanted to experience blindness and share it with her husband. Showing great strength of mind and in a spirit of personal sacrifice, she voluntarily forewent her sense of sight after marriage by tying a scarf over both her eyes.

Gandhari was a votary of Lord Siva. Pleased with her devotion, he granted her a boon that she would be the mother of a hundred sons. Gandhari had been jealous of her sister-in-law, Kunti, who had given birth to two sons. The boon caused her to conceive, but strangely, the pregnancy lasted two years. Out of frustration, she struck her abdomen with an iron rod and surprisingly delivered a congealed mass. Sage Vyasa called for one hundred and one clay jars, carefully divided the flesh into the jars, filled them with ghee, and had them closed. In time, the jars broke, and Gandhari became the mother of one hundred sons and one daughter.

The boys grew up and had their training in the martial arts under Dronacharya. Gandhari, however, noticed that her husband did not restrain the arrogant behavior of his oldest son, Duryodhana, and brought it to his attention on appropriate occasions.

On the eve of the great war, when Duryodhana came to seek her blessings, she said, "Let victory accrue to the righteous." After the war, she was sorely aggrieved that all her sons had been killed, and she wanted to pronounce a curse on the Pandavas. Sage Vyasa, sensing her intention, reminded her of her words. He said that victory had indeed accrued to the righteous as the Pandavas had fought for a righteous cause. Gandhari, however, could not forgive Lord Krishna whom she held responsible for all the tragic events. She cursed him saying that the whole of his clan of Yadavas would die fighting one another. Her words came to be true.

After the war, she retired to the forest with her husband and sister-in-law, Kunti, where they perished in a forest fire.

Kunti

Kunti was the wife of Emperor Pandu and mother of the Pandavas. She was the daughter of King Surasena, father of Vasudeva, Krishna's father. Her father gave her in adoption to his brother-in-law, King Kuntibhoja, and hence she was called Kunti. Her name at birth was Pritha, and therefore, one of the names of her son, Arjuna, is Partha.

A large part of Kunti's character has already been considered earlier when studying Karna in the Mahabharata: how she invoked the Sun God, abandoned the newborn out of a sense of shame because she was not married, how she met Karna again on the eve of the battle and revealed to him for the first time his divine birth.

Kunti accompanied her sons during their first period of exile, having escaped from the arson of the house of combustible material (lac), a dastardly attempt by the evil-minded Duryodhana.

When roaming through the forest, Bhima killed a rakshasa, Hidamba. Hidamba's sister, Hidambi, fell in love with Bhima and wanted to marry him. Kunti gave her consent, and a child, Ghatotgacha, was born. As this boy grew up, Kunti repeatedly told him, "You are the first-born grandchild in the family. It is your duty to come to our help whenever the occasion demands." Ghatotgacha was gigantic in stature, strong, and powerful. He kept his word and fought valiantly in the Kurukshetra war. He paid the ultimate price by sacrificing his life while causing tremendous havoc in the Kaurava army.

During the period of exile, the Pandavas were sheltered by a hospitable Brahmin family in a small town, Ekachakra. Bakasura, an evil giant, was tormenting the people of the town by making demands for cartloads of food and human flesh to be supplied to him every day. Kunti came to know of this when she overheard a conversation between her host and his wife. She showed her gratitude to them and her compassion for the defenseless townspeople by persuading her son Bhima to challenge and fight the rakshasa. Bhima succeeded in killing him.

One of the great qualities of Kunti was her impartiality. The youngest two Pandavas, Nakula and Sahadeva, were her stepchildren, having been born to Pandu's other wife, Madri. They were entrusted to her care when Madri died along with Pandu. She treated her two stepsons as she did her own children.

This led to a rather strange incident. When Arjuna won the hand of Draupadi by his skill in archery at her swayamvara (marriage by choice), the Pandavas brought her to their house in Ekachakra. Approaching the house, they shouted with joy, "Mother, see what we have brought for you today!" Kunti was busy, and thinking it was food, replied, "Share it equally among you." A mother's word is in the nature of an order to be strictly obeyed. This is how Draupadi became the wife of all the Pandavas.

DRAUPADI

Draupadi was the daughter of King Drupada, ruler of Panchala. She was born along with her brother, Drstadyumna, from the great sacrifice their father performed for progeny to kill Acharya Drona who had insulted him. She was also known as Panchali, or sometimes Krishna because she had a dark complexion.

Draupadi is the most notable among the women in the Mahabharata, and has a stellar role in the second half of the epic. She was considered the most beautiful among women in her time. How Arjuna won her at the svayamvara and how she became the wife of all the Pandavas have been described in an earlier column.

Draupadi's beauty, however, did cause problems, as she became the cynosure of many evil-minded people. One such was Kichaka, the brother-in-law of King Virata. Kichaka was physically strong and politically powerful, being commander of the army. The Pandavas had to spend the thirteenth year of their exile incognito, without being discovered. They had assumed different roles in the household of King Virata under false identities. Draupadi became chief attendant to the queen, and Bhima a cook in the royal kitchen. Kichaka began to make improper advances towards her. She complained to Bhima, and together, they hatched a plan. Kichaka was persuaded to meet her secretly at night in the dance hall where Bhima was lying in wait dressed as a woman. They fought each other, and Kichaka was killed. To keep Bhima from being recognized as the killer, it was given out that Draupadi was protected by gandharvas, semi-celestial beings who were responsible for the killing.

Draupadi's implicit trust and deep devotion to Sri Krishna are revealed on many occasions, two of which are described here. During a shameful episode where she was disrobed in public in the assembly of Kurus, when no one could come to her rescue, she mentally petitioned Lord Krishna to save her from disgrace. Sri Krishna responded promptly by sending her an inexhaustible supply of saris.

On another occasion, Duryodhana, who was hosting Sage Durvasa and his many disciples, requested the sage to visit the Pandavas during their forest exile. Duryodhana's intent was evil and malicious. He thought that Yudhisthira would not be able to satisfy them, and Durvasa, who was known for his quick, fiery temper, would pronounce a curse on the Pandavas. Early during the exile, Surya, the Sun God, pleased with Yudhisthira's worship and devotion, had gifted a magical vessel to the Pandavas. It could provide an inexhaustible supply of food, but would not provide any more for the day after Draupadi, who was the last to eat, had eaten her meal and put it away. Yudhisthira, as a dutiful host, invited Durvasa and his disciples for a meal. Draupadi was caught in a dire predicament as she had already eaten and put away the vessel. She thought intensely of Lord Krishna who appeared and asked Draupadi to fetch the vessel. A grain of rice and a piece of spinach were found sticking to the bottom. Krishna ate the tiny remnants with great relish and declared he was full and could eat no more. Meanwhile, Durvasa and his disciples had gone to the river for their customary bath. All of them suddenly experienced extreme fullness. Thinking that Yudhisthira would be insulted if they did not eat, they left in haste.

Draupadi's full acceptance and kind behavior to the two wives Arjuna had acquired during a period of voluntary separation from his family, show her magnanimity. One was Ulupi, a princess of the Nagas, and the other was Subadhra, sister of Krishna. In another episode, when she meets Krishna's wife, Satyabhama, Draupadi shows her intelligence by giving wise advice on how to keep husbands happy. After the war was over, Drona's son, Aswatthaman, commits a heinous act by killing all of Draupadi's sons when they were asleep by setting their tents on fire. Arjuna was able to capture him and was intent on killing him. Draupadi shows her capacity for forgiveness by reminding Arjuna that he was his teacher's son, and pleads that his life be spared.

