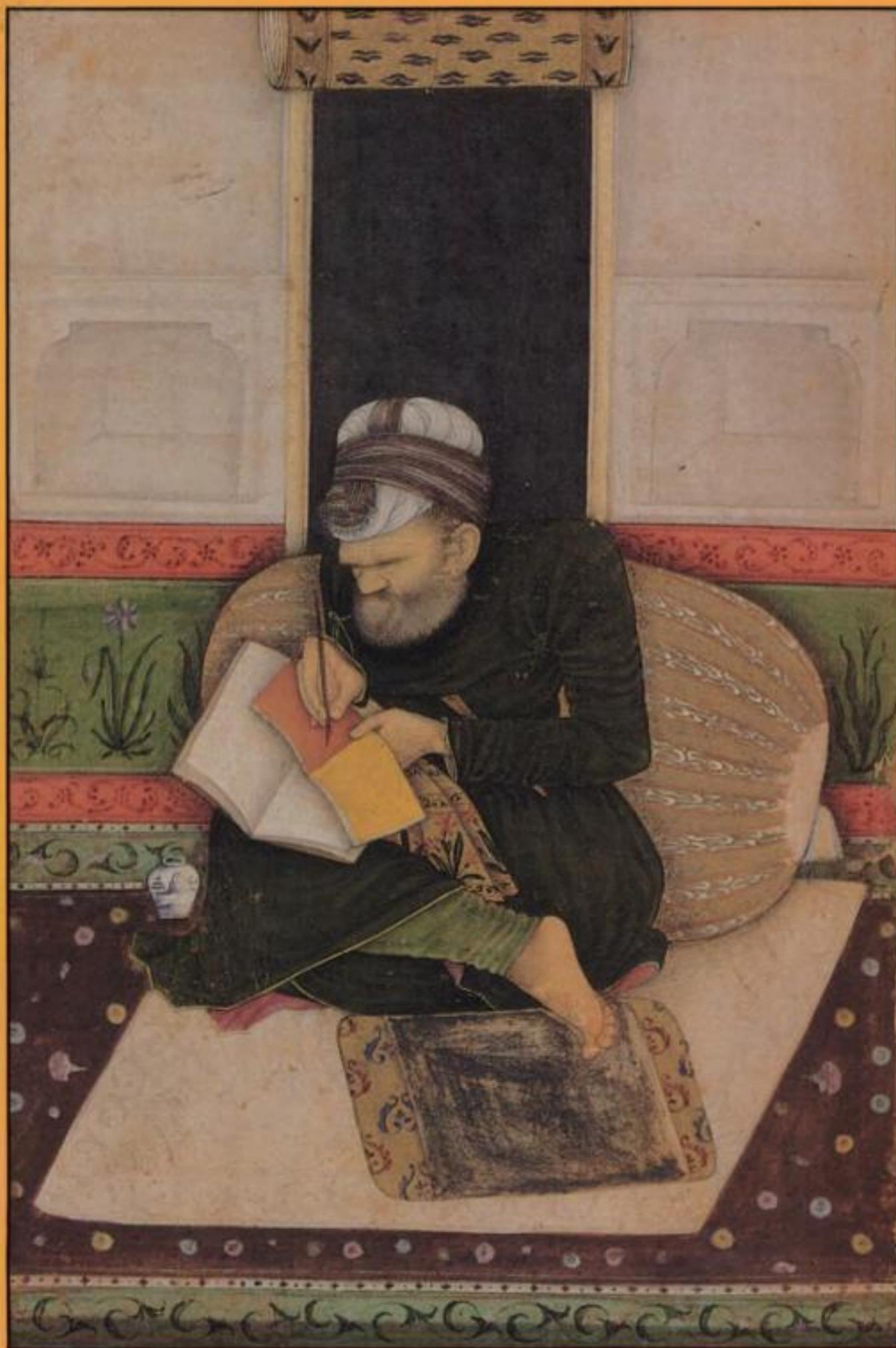


"A richly complex work of imaginative flight and scholarly depth, The Great Indian Novel combines historical fact with daily marvels."

—Louise Erdrich

The Great Indian Novel



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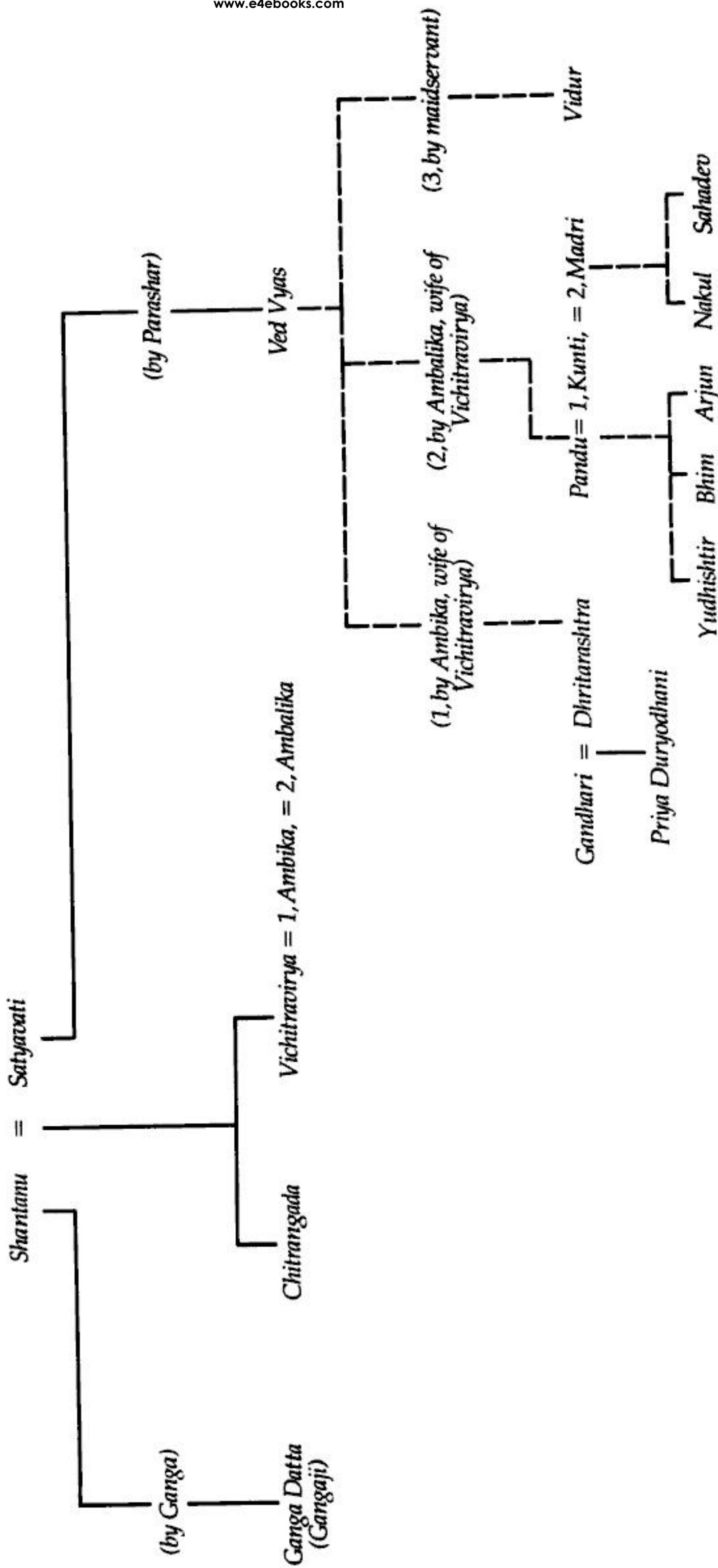
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The Great Indian Family



ॐ

What follows is the tale of Vyasa,
great Vyasa, deserver of respect;
a tale told and retold,
that people will never cease telling;
a source of wisdom
in the sky, the earth, and the lower world;
a tale the twice-born know;
a tale for the learned,
skilful in style, varied in metres,
devoted to dialogue human and divine.

P. Lal

The Mahabharata of Vyasa



THE FIRST BOOK:
THE TWICE-BORN TALE





They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me, creasing their eight-hundred-rupee suits and clutching their moulded plastic briefcases, to announce in tones of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop. Stuff and nonsense, of course. These are the kind of fellows who couldn't tell their *kundalini* from a decomposing earthworm, and I don't hesitate to tell them so. I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. They laugh at me pityingly and shift from one foot to the other, unable to conceal their impatience, and I tell them that, in fact, everything in India is over-developed, particularly the social structure, the bureaucracy, the political process, the financial system, the university network and, for that matter, the women. Cantankerous old man, I hear them thinking, as they make their several exits. And, of course, there is no party-ticket for me any more, no place for me in their legislative confabulations. Not even a ceremonial governorship. I am finished, a man who lives in the past, a dog who has had his day. I shall not enter the twenty-first century with them.

But I do not finish so easily. Indeed, I have scarcely begun. 'I have a great deal to say,' I told my old friend Brahm, 'and if these fellows won't hear it, well, I intend to find myself a larger audience. The only thing is that the old hand doesn't quite behave itself any more, tends to shake a bit, like a ballot-paper in a defecting MP's grasp, so could you get me someone I could dictate it to, an amanuensis?'

Brahm looked a little doubtful at first, and said, 'You know, V.V., you have a bit of a reputation for being difficult to work with. You remember what happened to the last poor girl I sent you? Came back in tears and handed in her resignation, saying she didn't want to hear of the Apsara Agency again. I can't afford another one of those incidents, and what's all this about a book,

anyway? You ought to be leaning back on those bolsters and enjoying a quiet retirement, letting these other fellows run about for you, reaping the adulation of a good life well spent. After all, what are laurels for but to rest on?

I fairly bit his head off, I can tell you. 'So, you think I'm not up to this, do you?' I demanded. 'Dammit, what I am about to dictate is the definitive memoir of my life and times, and you know what a life and times mine have been. Brahm, in my epic I shall tell of past, present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth; of what is, of what was, of what should have been. Don't talk to me of some weepy woman whose shorthand trips over her fingernails; give me a man, one of your best, somebody with the constitution and the brains to cope with what I have to offer.'

And Brahm said, 'Hmm, well, if you insist, I have a chap in mind who's almost as demanding as you, but who can handle the most complex assignments. Humour him and you won't be disappointed.'

So, the next day the chap appeared, the amanuensis. Name of Ganapathi, South Indian, I suppose, with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes. Through which he is staring owlishly at me as I dictate these words. Brahm was right about his being demanding. He listened to me quietly when I told him that his task would be no less than transcribing the Song of Modern India in my prose, then proceeded to lay down an outrageous condition. 'I'll do it,' he said, without batting an eyelid, 'provided you work to my pace. I shall reside with you, and as long as I'm ready, you must not pause in your dictation.'

Something about him, elephantine tread, broad forehead and all, impressed me. I agreed. And he was back in the afternoon, dragging his enormous trunk behind him, laden with enough to last him a year with me, I have no doubt. But I hadn't given in without a thought. I made my own condition: that he had to understand every word of what I said before he took it down. And I was not relying merely on my ability to articulate my memories and thoughts at a length and with a complexity which would give him pause. I knew that whenever he took a break to fill that substantial belly, or even went around the corner for a leak, I could gain time by speaking into my little Japanese tape-recorder. So you see, Ganapathi, young man, it's not just insults and personal remarks you'll have to cope with. It's modern technology as well.

Yes, yes, put it all down. Every word I say. We're not writing a piddling Western thriller here. This is my story, the story of Ved Vyas, eighty-eight years old and full of irrelevancies, but it could become nothing less than the Great Indian Novel.

2

I suppose I must begin with myself. I was born with the century, a bastard, but a bastard in a fine tradition, the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a travelling sage. Primitive transport system or not, our Brahmins got about a lot in those days, and they didn't need any hotel bookings then. Any householder was honoured by a visit from a holy man with a sacred thread and no luggage but his learning. He would be offered his host's hospitality, his food, his bed and often, because they were a lot more understanding then, his daughter as well. And the Brahmin would partake of the offerings, the shelter, the rice, the couch, the girl, and move on, sometimes leaving more than his slippers behind. India is littered with the progeny of these twice-born travelling salesmen of salvation, and I am proud to be one of them.

But fisherfolk weren't often their style, so the fact of her seduction says something for my mother Satyavati. She was on the river that day, the wet fold of her thin cotton sari flung over one shoulder, its hem riding up her thigh, the odour of perspiration mixing with that of the fish she was heaving into her boat, when a passing sage, Parashar, caught a glimpse of her. He was transfixed, he later told me, by the boldness of her beauty, which transcended any considerations of olfactory inconvenience. 'Lovely lady,' he said in his best manner, 'take my love', and coming from a Brahmin, especially one as distinguished as he was, that was an offer no woman could refuse.

But my mother wasn't wanton or foolish, and she had no desire to become known as either. 'There are people watching from both sides of the river,' she replied, 'so how can I give myself to you?'

The Brahmin was no novice in the art of seduction, though; he had spotted a little deserted island some way up the river, whose interior was screened by a thick copse of trees. He motioned her to paddle towards it, and swam to it himself in a few swift, strong strokes.

Satyavati followed, blushing. She had no intention of resisting the sage: a mist around the island, already curtained by the trees, dispelled her modest hesitation. (When she told me the story she claimed Parashar had caused a magic cloud to settle on the island to keep off prying eyes, which I took as evidence of understandable female hyperbole.) Obedience was, of course, a duty, and no maiden wished to invite a saintly curse upon her head. But Satyavati was no fool, and she understood that for an unmarried virgin, there was still a difference between bedding a persuasive Brahmin on her own and being offered to one by her father – which was hardly likely to happen, since sages did not stop at fisherfolk's huts and Parashar could not be expected,

with one of her caste, to go through a form of marriage that would sanctify their coupling. 'I've never done this before,' she breathed. 'I'm still a virgin and my father will be furious if I cease to be one. If you take me, what will become of me? How can I show my face amongst my people again? Who will marry me? Please help me,' she added, fluttering her eyelashes to convey that though her flesh was willing, her spirit was not weak enough.

Parashar smiled in both desire and reassurance. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'virginity isn't irretrievable. I'll make sure that no one will doubt your virginity even after you yield to me. That's nothing to be afraid of.'

And his ardour stifled further conversation.

Even men of the world – and few in this category can equal one who is above this world – feel tenderly for those they have loved. So, afterwards, lying by her side, Parashar asked Satyavati when she had had her time of month. And when he had heard her answer, he did not attempt to evade his responsibility. 'There will be a child born of our union,' he said simply, 'but I will keep my word and ensure that your normal life as a daughter of your people will not be disturbed.'

Refusing to let her panic, Parashar led Satyavati to her father's hut, where he was received with due deference. 'Your daughter, whom I have met by the river today, has a spark of grace in her,' he intoned sententiously. 'With your permission, I wish her to accompany me for a short period as my maid, so that I may instruct her in higher learning. I shall, of course, return her to you when she is of marriageable age.'

'How can I be sure that no harm will come to her?' asked the startled father, who was no village innocent either.

'You know of me in these parts,' Parashar responded haughtily. 'Your daughter will return to you within one year, and she will return a virgin. You have my word.'

It was not often that a fisherman, even a head fisherman, which is what Satyavati's father was, challenged the word of a Brahmin. He bowed his head and bade his daughter farewell.

Satyavati fared well. Parashar took her far away from the region before her pregnancy began to show. I was born in an old midwife's home in the forest.

'We must name the child Dvaipayana, one created on an island,' said Satyavati rather sentimentally to my father. He nodded, but it wasn't a name that ever seemed likely to stick. 'Women,' he said to me once, years later, shaking his head in amused tolerance. 'Imagine, a name like that for the son of a wandering Brahmin in British India. No, Ved Vyas is much easier. I've always wanted a son named Ved Vyas.' And so Ved Vyas it was and, since I was a somewhat diminutive fellow, V.V. I became.

THE TWICE-BORN TALE

21

After less than a month's suckling, I was taken away from my mother, who had to begin her journey home. My father had taught her several lessons from the ancient texts, including one or two related to the inscrutabilities of virginity. Upon her return, to quell the rumours in the village, her father had Satyavati examined by the senior midwife. Her hymen was pronounced intact.

Brahmins knew a great deal in those days.



It was just as well, for Satyavati the fish-odorous was destined to become the wife of a king. Yes, we had kings in those days, four hundred and thirty-five of them, luxuriating in titles such as Maharaja and Nawab that only airline ads and cricket captains sport any more. The British propped them up and told them what to do, or more often what not to do, but they were real kings for all that, with palaces and principalities and twenty-one-gun salutes; well, at least some of them had twenty-one guns, but the number of cannonballs wasted on you descended in order of importance and the man who was entranced by my mother was, I think, only a fourteen- or even an eleven-gunner. His name was Shantanu and he had had a rather unfortunate marriage in the past to an exquisite Maharani who suffered seven successive miscarriages and disappeared when her eighth pregnancy produced a son.

There were all sorts of stories circulating about the ex-queen, one saying that she was in fact enamoured of Shantanu's father, the old King Pritapa, and had married the son instead, as a sort of substitute; others casting doubt on her pedigree and claiming that Shantanu had picked her up on the banks of the Ganga; another suggesting that they had what would today be called an 'open marriage' which left her free to lead her own life; still others, whispered, that the seven children had died not entirely natural deaths and that the Maharani was not altogether normal. Whatever the truth of the rumours – and there was always enough evidence to suggest that none of them was wholly unfounded – there was no doubting that Shantanu had seemed very happy with his wife until she abruptly left him.

Years later, inexplicably, the now middle-aged king returned from a trip to the river bank with a handsome lad named Ganga Datta, announced that he was his lost son, and made him heir-apparent; and though this was a position which normally required the approval of the British Resident, it was clear that the young man possessed in abundant measure the qualities and the breeding

required for the office of crown prince, and the Maharaja's apparently eccentric nomination was never challenged. Not, that is, until my mother entered the scene.

She was in the woods on the river bank when Shantanu came across her. He was struck first by the unique fragrance that wafted from her, a Brahmin-taught concoction of wood herbs and attars that had superseded the fishy emanations of pre-Parashar days, and he was smitten as my father had been. Kings have fewer social inhibitions than Brahmins, and Shantanu did not hesitate to walk into the head fisherman's hut and demand his daughter's hand in marriage.

'Certainly, Your Majesty, it would be an honour,' my maternal grandfather replied, 'but I am afraid I must pose one condition. Tell me you agree and I will be happy to give you my daughter.'

'I don't make promises in advance,' the Maharaja replied, somewhat put out. 'What exactly do you want?'

The fisherman's tone stiffened. 'I may not be able to find my Satyavati a better husband than you, but at least there would be no doubt that her children would inherit whatever her husband had to offer. Can you promise her the same, Your Majesty — that her son, and no one else, will be your heir?'

Of course, Shantanu, with the illustrious Ganga Datta sitting in his capital, could do nothing of the kind, and he returned to his palace a despondent man. Either because he couldn't conceal his emotions or (more probably) because he didn't want to, it became evident to everyone in or around the royal court that the Maharaja was quite colossally lovesick. He shunned company, snubbed the bewhiskered British Resident on two separate occasions, and once failed to show up at his morning *darshan*. It was all getting to be too much for the young Crown Prince, who finally decided to get the full story out of his father.

'Love? Don't be silly, lad,' Shantanu responded to his son's typically direct query. 'I'll tell you what the matter is. I'm worried about the future. You're my only son. Don't get me wrong, you mean more to me than a hundred sons, but the fact remains that you're the only one. What if something should happen to you? Of course we take all due precautions, but you know what an uncertain business life is these days. I mean, it's not even as if one has to be struck by lightning or something. The damned Resident has already run over three people in that infernal new wheeled contraption of his. Now, I'm not saying that that could happen to you, but one never knows, does one? I certainly hope you'll live long and add several branches to the family tree, but you know, they used to say when I was a child that having one son was like having no son. Something happens and sut! the British swoop in and take



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horror-struck faces of those present. 'I know what you're thinking – you're wondering how I can hope to get to Heaven without producing sons on this earth. Well, you needn't worry. That's one renunciation I don't intend to make. I intend to get to Heaven all right – *without* any sons to lift me there.'

The head fisherman could scarcely believe how the discussion had gone. 'Satyavati,' he called out in joy. 'The king can have her,' he added superfluously. 'And I shall be grandfather to a maharaja,' he was heard mumbling under his breath.

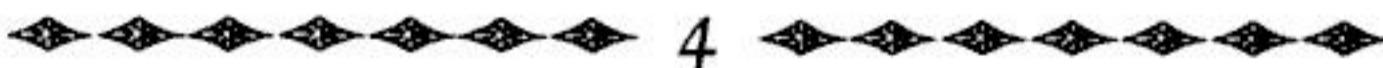
The wind soughed in the trees, signalling the approach of the monsoon rains, rustling the garments of the consternated courtiers. A stray gust showered petals on to Ganga Datta's proud head. He shook them off. 'We'd better be going,' he announced.

One of the courtiers stooped to pick up the fallen flowers. 'It's an omen,' he said. 'The heavens admire your courage, Ganga Datta! From now on you should be known as Bhishma, the One Who has Taken a Terrible Vow.'

'Ganga is much easier to pronounce,' the ex-Crown Prince said. 'And I'm sure you know much more about omens than I do, but I think this one means we shall get very wet if we don't start our return journey immediately.'

Back at the palace, where the news had preceded him, Ganga was greeted with relief and admiration by his father and king. 'That was a fine thing to do, my son,' Shantanu said, unable to conceal his pleasure. 'A far, far better thing than I could ever have done. I don't know about this celibacy stuff, but I'm sure it'll do you a lot of good in the long run. I'll tell you something, my son: I've simply no doubt at all that it'll give you longevity. You will not die unless and until you really want to die.'

'Thanks awfully, father,' said Ganga Datta. 'But right now I think we'd better start trying to get this arrangement past the Resident-Sahib.'



4

'Wholly unsuitable,' the British Resident said, when he heard of Satyavati. 'A fisherman's daughter for a maharaja's wife! It would bring the entire British Empire into disrepute.'

'Not really, sir, just the Indian part of it,' replied Ganga Datta calmly. 'And I cannot help wondering if the alternatives might not be worse.'

'Alternatives? Worse? Don't be absurd, young man. You're the alternative, and I don't see what's wrong with you, except for some missing details in your . . . ahem . . . past.'

'Then perhaps I should start filling in some of those missing details,' Ganga replied, lowering his voice.

There is no record of the resulting conversation, but courtiers at the door swore they heard the words 'South Africa', 'defiance of British laws', 'arrest', 'jail' and 'expulsion' rising in startled sibilance at various times. At the end of the discussion, Ganga Datta stood disinherited as crown prince, and Shantanu's strange alliance with Satyavati received the official approval of His (till lately Her) Majesty's Government.

That was not, of course, the end of the strange game of consequences set in train by the wooded wanderings of my malodorous mother. The name 'G. Datta' was struck off imperial invitation lists, and a shiny soup-and-fish was shortly placed on a nationalist bonfire. One day Ganga Datta would abandon his robes for a loincloth, and acquire fame, quite simply, as 'Gangaji'.

But that is another story, eh, Ganapathi? And one we shall come to in due course. Never fear, you can dip your twitching nose into that slice of our history too. But let us tidy up some genealogy first.

5

Satyavati gave Shantanu what he wanted – a good time and two more sons. With our national taste for names of staggering simplicity, they were called Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, but my dismayed readers need not set about learning these by heart because my two better-born brothers do not figure largely in the story that follows. Chitrangada was clever and courageous but had all too brief a stint on his father's throne before succumbing to the ills of this world. The younger Vichitravirya succeeded him, with Gangaji as his regent and my now-widowed mother offering advice from behind the brocade curtain.

When the time came for Vichitravirya to be married, Gangaji, with the enthusiasm of the abstinent, decided to arrange the banns with not one but three ladies of rank, the daughters of a distant princeling. The sisters were known to be sufficiently well-endowed, in every sense of the term, for their father to be able to stay in his palace and entertain aspirants for their hands. None the less, it came as a surprise when Ganga announced his intention of visiting the Raja on his half-brother's behalf.

He had been immersing himself increasingly in the great works of the past and the present, reading the *vedas* and Tolstoy with equal involvement, studying the immutable laws of Manu and the eccentric philosophy of Ruskin,

and yet contriving to attend, as he had to, to the affairs of state. His manner had grown increasingly other-worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane, and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment. But one subject about which there was no dispute was his celibacy, which he was widely acknowledged to have maintained. His increasing absorption with religious philosophy and his continuing sexual forbearance led a local wit to compose a briefly popular ditty:

‘Old Gangaji too
is a good Hindu
for to violate a cow
would negate his vow.’

So Ganga's unexpected interest in the marital fortunes of his ward stimulated some curiosity, and his decision to embark on a trigamous mission of bride-procurement aroused intense speculation at court. Hindus were not wedded to monogamy in those days, indeed that barbarism would come only after Independence, so the idea of nuptial variety was not in itself outrageous; but when Gangaji, with his balding pate and oval glasses, entered the hall where the Raja had arranged to receive eligible suitors for each of his daughters and indicated he had come for all three, there was some unpleasant ribaldry.

‘So much for Bhishma, the terrible-vowed,’ said a loud voice, to a chorus of mocking laughter. ‘It turns out to have been a really terrible vow, after all.’

‘Perhaps someone slipped a copy of the *Kama Sutra* into a volume of the *vedas*,’ suggested another, amidst general tittering.

‘O Gangaji, have you come for bedding well or wedding bell?’ demanded an anonymous English-educated humorist in the crowd.

Ganga, who had approached the girls' father, blinked, hitched his dhoti up his thinning legs and spoke in a voice that was meant to carry as much to the derisive blue-blooded throng as to the Raja.

‘We are a land of traditions,’ he declared, ‘traditions with which even the British have not dared to tamper. In our heritage there are many ways in which a girl can be given away. Our ancient texts tell us that a daughter may be presented, finely adorned and laden with dowry, to an invited guest; or exchanged for an appropriate number of cows; or allowed to choose her own mate in a *swayamvara* ceremony. In practice, there are people who use money, those who demand clothes, or houses or land; men who seek the girl's preference, others who drag or drug her into compliance, yet others who seek the approbation of her parents. In olden times girls were given to Brahmins as

THE TWICE-BORN TALE

27

gifts, to assist them in the performance of their rites and rituals. But in all our sacred books the greatest praise attaches to the marriage of a girl seized by force from a royal assembly. I lay claim to this praise. I am taking these girls with me whether you like it or not. Just try and stop me.'

He looked from the Raja to the throng through his thin-rimmed glasses, and the famous gaze that would one day disarm the British, disarmed them – literally, for the girls emerged from behind the lattice-work screens, where they had been examining the contenders unseen, and trooped silently behind him, as if hypnotized. The protests of the assembled princes choked back in their throats; hands raised in anger dropped uselessly to their sides; and the royal doorkeepers moved soundlessly aside for the strange procession to pass.

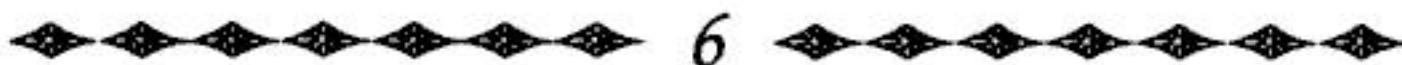
It seemed a deceptively simple victory for Ganga, and indeed it marked the beginning of his reputation for triumph without violence. But it did not pass entirely smoothly. One man, the Raja Salva of Saubal, a Cambridge blue at fencing and among the more modern of this feudal aristocracy, somehow found the power to give chase. As Ganga's stately Rolls receded into the distance, Salva charged out of the palace, bellowing for his car, and was soon at the wheel of an angrily revved up customized Hispano-Suiza.

If Ganga saw his pursuer, it seemed to make little difference, for his immense car rolled comfortably on, undisturbed by any sudden acceleration. Salva's modern charger, the Saubal crest emblazoned proudly on the sleek panel of its doors, roared after its quarry, quickly narrowing the distance.

Before long they drew abreast on the country road. 'Stop!' screamed Salva. 'Stop, you damned kidnapper, you!' Sharply twisting his steering-wheel, he forced the other vehicle to brake sharply. As the cars shuddered to a halt Salva flung open his door to leap out.

Then it all happened very suddenly. No one heard anything above the screeching of tyres, but Ganga's hand appeared briefly through a half-open window and Salva staggered back, his Hispano-Suiza collapsing beneath him as the air whooshed out of its tyres. The Rolls drove quietly off, engine purring complacently as the Raja of Saubal shook an impotent fist at its retreating end.

'So tiresome, these hotheads,' was all Ganga said, as he sank back in his seat and wiped his brow.



Vichitravirya took one look at the women his regent had brought back for him and slobbered his gratitude over his half-brother. But one day, when all

the arrangements had been made in consultation with his – my – mother Satyavati, the invitations printed and a date chosen that accorded with the preferences of the astrologers and (just as important) of the British Resident, the eldest of the three girls, Amba, entered Ganga's study and closed the door.

'What do you think you are doing, girl?' the saintly Regent asked, snapping shut a treatise on the importance of enemas in attaining spiritual purity. ('The way to a man's soul is through his bowels,' he would later intone to the mystification of all who heard him.) 'Don't you know that I have taken a vow to abjure women? And that besides, you are pledged to another man?'

'I haven't come . . . for that,' Amba said in some confusion. (Ever since his vow Ganga had developed something of an obsession with his celibacy, even if he was the only one who feared it to be constantly under threat.) 'But about the other thing.'

'What other thing?' asked Ganga in some alarm, his wide reading and complete inexperience combining vividly in his imagination.

'About being promised to another man,' Amba said, retreating towards the door.

'Ah,' said Gangaji, reassured. 'Well, have no fear, my dear, you can come closer and confide all your anxieties to your uncle Ganga. What seems to be the problem?'

The little princess twisted one hand nervously in the other, looking at her bangled wrists rather than at the kindly elder across the room. 'I . . . I had already given myself, in my heart, to Raja Salva, and he was going to marry me. We had even told Daddy, and he was going to . . . to . . . announce it on that day, when . . . when . . .' She stopped, in confusion and distress.

'So that's why he followed us,' said the other-worldly sage with dawning comprehension. 'Well, you must stop worrying, my dear. Go back to your room and pack. You shall go to your Raja on the next train.'

For Gangaji's sake I wish that were the end of this particular story, but it isn't. And don't look at me like that, young Ganapathi. I know this is a digression – but my life, indeed this world, is nothing more than a series of digressions. So you can cut out the disapproving looks and take this down. That's what you're here for. Right, now, where were we? That's right, in a special royal compartment on the rail track to Saubal, with the lovely Amba heading back to her lover on the next train, as Ganga had promised.

If Gangaji had thought that all that was required now was to reprint the wedding invitations with one less name on the cast of characters, he was sadly mistaken. For when Amba arrived at Saubal she found that her Romeo had stepped off the balcony.

'That decrepit eccentric has beaten, humiliated, disgraced me in public. He

carried you away as I lay sprawling on the wreck of my car. You've spent God knows how many nights in his damned palace. And now you expect me to forget all that and take you back as my wife?' Salva's Cambridge-stiffened upper lip trembled as he turned away from her. 'I'm having your carriage put back on the return train. Go to Ganga and do what he wishes. We're through.'

And so, a tear-stained face gazed out through the bars of the small-windowed carriage at the light cast by the full moon on the barren countryside, as the train trundled imperviously back to Ganga's capital of Hastinapur.

'You must be joking, *Ganga-bhai*, I can't marry her now,' expostulated Vichitravirya, ripping the flesh off a breast of quail with his wine-stained teeth. 'The girl's given herself to another man. It was hardly my idea to have her shuttling to and from Saibal by public transport, in full view of the whole world. But it's done: everyone knows about her disgrace by now.' He took a quick swallow. 'You can't expect me, Vichitravirya of Hastinapur, son of Maharaja Shantanu and Maharani Satyavati, soon to be king in my own right and member of the Chamber of Princes, to accept the return of soiled goods like some Porbandar *baniya* merchant. You can't be serious, *Ganga-bhai*.' He rolled his eyes in horror at his half-brother and clapped loudly for an attendant. 'Bring on the nautch-girls,' he called out.

'Then you must marry me yourself,' said the despairing Amba when Ganga had confessed the failure of his intercession with the headstrong princeling. 'You're the one who's responsible for all this. You've ruined my life, now the least you can do is to save me from eternal disgrace and spinsterhood.'

Gangaji blinked in disbelief. 'That's one thing I cannot do,' he replied firmly. 'I cannot break my vow, however sorry I may feel for you, my dear.'

'Damn your vow,' she cried in distress. 'What about me? No one will marry me now, you know that. My life's finished – all because of you.'

'You know, I wouldn't be so upset if I were you,' replied Gangaji calmly. 'A life of celibacy is a life of great richness. You ought to try it, my dear. It will make you very happy. I am sure you will find it deeply spiritually uplifting.'

'You smug, narcissistic bastard, you!' Amba screamed, hot tears running down her face. 'Be like you, with your enemas and your loincloths? Never!' And she ran out of the room, slamming the door shut on the startled sage.

She tried herself after that, imploring first Vichitravirya, then Salva again, equally in vain. When six years of persistence failed to bring any nuptial rewards, she forgot all but her searing hatred for her well-intentioned abductor, and began to look in earnest for someone who would kill him. By then, however, Gangaji's fame had spread beyond the boundaries of Hastinapur, and no assassin in the whole of India was willing to accept her contract. It was then that she would resolve to do it herself . . .



But I am, as Ganapathi indicates by the furrow on his ponderous brow, getting ahead of my story. Amba's revenge on Gangaji, the extraordinary lengths to which she went to obtain it, and the violence she was prepared to inflict upon herself, are still many years away. We had paused with Vichitravirya committing bigamy, bigamy inspired by Gangaji and sanctioned by religion, tradition, law and the British authorities. Another instance of Ganga's failure to judge the real world of flawed men, for his debauched half-brother needed no greater incentive to indulgence than this temple-throbbing choice of nocturnal companions. Ambika and Ambalika were each enough for any king, with ripe rounded breasts to weigh upon a man and skins of burnished gold to set him alight, bodies long enough to envelop a monarch and full hips to invite him into them; together, they drove Vichitravirya into a fatally priapic state. Yes, it was terminal concupiscence he died of, though some called it consumption and a variety of quick and quack remedies were proposed in vain around his sickbed. He turned in his sceptre just seven years into his reign, in what the British Resident, in his letter of condolence, was to describe as the 'prime of life', and he died childless, thus giving me a chance to re-enter the story.

When kings died without heirs in the days of the Raj, the consequences could be calamitous. Whereas in the past the royal house could simply have adopted a male child to continue the family's hold on the throne, this was not quite as easy under the British, who had a tendency to declare the throne vacant and annex the territory for themselves. (We even fought a little war over the principle in 1857 – but the British won, and annexed a few more kingdoms.) Satyavati, whose desire to see her offspring on the throne had deprived Gangaji of more than a crown, turned to him anxiously.

'It's entirely in your hands,' she pointed out. 'If the British want, they can take over Hastinapur. But one thing can stop them – if we tell them one of the queens was pregnant at the time of Vichitravirya's death, and that his legitimate heir is on his way into this world. Oh, Ganga, my son's wives are still lovely and young; they can produce the heirs we need. Do your duty as a brother, as the son of my husband, and take Ambika and Ambalika to bed.' She saw his expression. 'Oh God, you're going to tell me about your vow, aren't you, Ganga? You took it, after all, for me. Now I'm asking you to ignore it, for the sake of the family – for your father's dynasty.'

'But I can't, Mother,' said Ganga piously. 'A vow is a vow. I'd rather give up my position, this kingdom, the world itself, than break my promise.'

'But no one need know,' Satyavati remonstrated, adding, after a moment's hesitation, 'except the girls themselves.'

'That's bad enough,' Ganga replied, 'and it doesn't matter whether someone knows or not. What's essential is to remain true to one's principles. My vow has never been so sorely tested, but I'm sorry, Mother, I won't give in to untruth for any reason.' (He tried not to sound pompous while saying this, and nearly succeeded.) 'But don't despair, the idea's still a good one, and I'm not the only person who can fulfil it. Don't forget that we have a long tradition of Brahmins coming to the rescue of barren Kshatriyas. It may have fallen somewhat into disuse in recent years, but it could be useful again today.'

'Dvaipayana!' she exclaimed. 'Of course — my son Ved Vyas! I hadn't thought about him. If he's anything like his father, he can certainly do the job.'

And indeed I could. We Brahmin sons never deny our mothers, and we never fail to rise to these occasions. I rose. I came.

Permit an old man a moment's indulgence in nostalgia. The palace at Hastinapur was a great edifice in those days, a cream-and-pink tribute to the marriage of Western architecture and Eastern tastes. High-ceilinged rooms and airy passages supported by enormous rounded columns stretched ever onwards across a vast expanse of mosaic and marble. In the dusty courtyard beyond the front portico stood a solitary sedan, ready for any royal whim, its moustachioed chauffeur dozing at the wheel. The other vehicles lay in garages beyond, below the servants' quarters where the washing hung gaily out to dry against walls of red brick — saris, dhotis, and, above all, the tell-tale uniforms of the numerous liveried attendants, brass buttons gleaming in the sunlight. The estate was all that was visible, lush lawns and flowered footpaths; the visitor was made conscious of a sense of spaciousness, that evidence of privilege in an overcrowded land. Inside, the cool marble, the sweeping stairways, the large halls, the furniture that seemed to have been bought to become antique, imposed rather than captivated. But one could walk through the mansion at peace with oneself, hearing only the soft padding of the servants' bare feet, the tinkle of feminine laughter from the zenana, and the chirping melodies of the birds in the garden, being wafted indoors by the gentle afternoon breeze. And sometimes, when my ageing but still exquisite mother forgot herself, another noise could be heard, the high, tinny sound of a gramophone, Hastinapur's only one, scratching out an incongruous waltz as a lonely head swayed silently in tune with the music.

At night there was stillness where once there was sound, and new sounds emerged where silence had reigned during the day. Raucous laughter from behind closed doors broadcast the young king's pleasure: a fat madam musician played the harmonium while singing of romance through

betel-stained lips, and lissom nautch-girls clashed their jingling *payals* with each assertive stamp of their hennaed heels. And Vichitravirya threw his head back in delight, flinging gold and silver coins, sometimes a jewel or a necklace, at the hired houri's feet, or after a particularly heady mixture of music and ambrosia, tucking his reward into her low-bent cleavage as she pouted her gratitude. Then there followed all the frolic, and all the futility, of intoxication, which ended, eventually, in my princely half-brother's death.

It was to this place that I went, and it was here that my mother told me anxiously why she had sent for me. 'Of course I'll help, Mother,' I assured her, 'provided my royal sisters-in-law are willing. For they have never seen me, and after a lifetime, even a short one, spent as a wandering Brahmin sage and preacher of sedition, I am not a pretty sight.'

My mother took in my sweat-stained *kurta*, my face burned black with constant exposure to the sun, the cracked heels of my much-walked feet, and the livid scar from a recent political encounter with the lathi-wielders of the Raj. 'I see what you mean,' she said. 'But Ganga will take care of them.'

Between them, my mother and Ganga obtained the widows' acquiescence – the issue of dynastic succession is, as every television viewer today knows, a powerful aphrodisiac. A few discreet inquiries and my father's training enabled me to calculate the exact day required for the production of offspring. At the appointed moment Ambika, freshly bathed and richly adorned, was laid out on a canopied bed, and I duly entered the room, and her. But she was so appalled by the sight of her ravisher that she closed her eyes tightly throughout what one might have called, until the Americans confused the issue, the act of congress. Ambalika was more willing, but as afraid, and turned white with fear at my approach. The result, I warned my mother as I went to her to take my leave, was that the products of our union might be born blind and pale, respectively. So, on my last night Satyavati sent Ambika to me again, in the hope of doing better. But Ambika had had enough, and sent me a substitute, a maid-servant of hers, bedecked in her mistress' finery. By the time I discovered the deception it was too late, and a most agreeable deception it had proven, too. But I had made my plans to leave the next morning, and I slipped out as quietly and unobtrusively as I had come, leaving the secret of my visit locked in three wombs.

From Ambika emerged Dhritarashtra, blind, heir to the Hastinapur throne; from Ambalika, Pandu the pale, his brother; from the servant girl, Vidur the wise, one day counsellor to kings. Of all these I remained the unacknowledged father. Yes, Ganapathi, this is confession time.



THE SECOND BOOK:
THE DUEL WITH THE CROWN





Are you with me so far, Ganapathi? Got everything? I suppose you must have, or you couldn't have taken it down, could you? Under our agreement, I mean.

But you must keep me in check, Ganapathi. I must learn to control my own excesses of phrase. It is all very well, at this stage of my life and career, to let myself go and unleash a few choice and pithy epithets I have been storing up for the purpose. But that would fly in the face of what has now become the Indian autobiographical tradition, laid down by a succession of eminent bald-heads from Rajaji to Chagla. The principle is simple: the more cantankerous the old man and the more controversial his memoirs, the more rigidly conventional is his writing. Look at Nirad Chaudhuri, who wrote his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* on that basis and promptly ceased to live up to its title. It is not a principle that these memoirs of a forgotten Indian can afford to abandon.

Right, Ganapathi? So, we've got the genealogies out of the way, my progeny are littering the palace at Hastinapur, and good old Ganga Datta is still safely ensconced as regent. No, on second thoughts, you'd better cut out that adverb, Ganapathi. 'Safely' wouldn't be entirely accurate. A new British Resident, successor of the bewhiskered automobilist, is in place and is far from sure he likes what is going on.

Picture the situation for yourself. Gangaji, the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already balder than I am today, peering at you through round-rimmed glasses that gave him the look of a startled owl. And the rest of his appearance was hardly what you would call prepossessing. He had by then burned his soup-and-fish and given away the elegant suits copied for him from the best British magazines by the court master-tailor; but to make matters worse, he was now beginning to shed part or most of even his traditional robes on all but state occasions. People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loincloth. 'Excuse me, I was just preparing myself an enema,' he would say, with a feeble smile, as if that explained everything. In fact, as you can well imagine, it only added to the confusion.

But it was not just the Regent's personal eccentricities that were causing alarm at the Resident's residence across the hill from the palace. Word was beginning to get around of Gangaji's radical, indeed one might say, dangerous, ideas about the world around him.

'He's renounced sex, of course, but we knew that already,' the new representative of the King-Emperor said to his equerry one evening on his verandah, as one of my men hung from a branch above and listened. (We 'itinerant seditious fakirs,' as that ignorant windbag Winston Churchill once called us, had to have our sources, you understand. Not all of them were happy with the ash-smearing requirement, but they and I learned more wandering about with a staff and a bowl under the British than I did after becoming a minister in independent India.) 'Problem is, he's now going further. Preaching a lot of damn nonsense about equality and justice and what have you. And you tell me he cleans his own toilet, instead of letting his damn *bhisti* do it.'

'*Jamadar*, Sir Richard,' the aide, a thin young man with a white pinched face, said, coughing politely. 'A *bhisti* is only a water-carrier.'

'Really?' The Resident seemed surprised. 'Thought those were called *lotas*.'

'They are, sir.' The equerry coughed even more loudly this time. '*Lotas* are those little pots you carry water in, I mean *they* carry water in, Sir Richard, whereas . . .'

'A *bhisti* is the kind they have to balance on their heads, I suppose,' Sir Richard said. 'Damn complicated language, this Hindustani. Different words for everything.'

'Yes, sir . . . I mean, no, sir,' began the equerry, doubly unhappy about his own choice of words. He wanted to explain that a *bhisti* was a person, not a container. 'What I mean is . . .'

'And different genders, too,' Sir Richard went on. 'I mean, is there any good reason why a table should be feminine and a bed masculine? D'you think it has to do with what you do on them?'

'Well, no, sir, not exactly.' The young man began his reply cautiously, unsure whether the question required one. 'It's really a matter of word-endings, you see, sir, and . . .'

'Ah, boy,' said the Resident, cutting him in full flow, as a white-haired and white-shirted bearer padded in on bare feet, tray in hand. 'About time, eh?'

It was the convivial hour. The sun had begun its precipitous descent into the unknown, and the distant sky was flaming orange, like saffron scattered on a heaving sea. In the gathering gloom the insects came into their own, buzzing, chirping, biting at the blotchy paleness of colonial flesh. This was when English minds turned to thoughts of drink. Twilight never lasts long in

India, but its advent was like opening time at the pubs our rulers had left behind. The shadows fell and spirits rose; the sharp odour of quinine tonic, invented by lonely planters to drown and justify their solitary gins, mingled with the scent of frangipani from their leafy, insect-ridden gardens, and the soothing clink of ice against glass was only disturbed by the occasional slap of a frustrated palm against a reddening spot just vacated by an anglovorous mosquito.

'Boy, whisky *lao*. *Chhota* whisky, *burra* water, understand? What will you have, Heaslop?'

'A weak whisky will suit me very well, too, Sir Richard.'

'Right. Two whiskies, *do* whisky, boy. And a big jug of water, understand. Not a little *lota*, eh? Bring it in a *bhisti*. *Bhisti men lao*.' He smiled in satisfaction at the bearer, who gave him an astonished look before bowing and salaaming his way backwards out of the room.

'Er . . . if I might point out, sir —'

'Nothing to it, really,' Sir Richard continued. 'These native languages don't really have much to them, you know. And it's not as if you have to write poetry in them. A few crucial words, sufficient English for ballast, and you're sailing smoothly. In fact,' his voice became confidential, 'I even have a couple of tricks up my sleeve.' He leaned towards the young man, his eyes, mouth and face all round in concentration. '"There was a banned crow,"' he intoned sonorously. '"There was a cold day." Not bad, eh? I learned those on the boat. Sounds like perfect Urdu, I'm told.' He paused and frowned. 'The devil of it is remembering which one means, "close the door," and which one will get someone to open it. Well, never mind,' he said, as his companion opened his mouth in diffident helpfulness. 'We're not here for a language lesson. I was speaking about this damn regent we have here. What d'you make of him, eh?'

'Well, sir, he's very able, there's no question about that,' Heaslop responded slowly. 'And the people seem to hold him in some regard.'

'They would, wouldn't they, with all the ideas he puts into their head. All this nonsense about equality, and toilet-cleaning. I understand he's suggesting that caste distinctions ought to be done away with. We've always believed they were the foundation of Indian society, haven't we? And now a chap comes along out of nowhere, scion of the ruling caste, and says Untouchables are just as good as he is. How does he propose to put that little idea into practice, d'you know?'

'He seems to believe in the force of moral authority, sir. He cleans his own toilet to show that there is nothing inherently shameful about the task, which, as you know, is normally performed by Untouchables.' Sir Richard produced a sound which might have been prompted by a winged assault on his ear, or

then again by Heaslop's implied enthusiasm for Ganga's stand. The young man continued, carefully moderating his tone. 'He seems to think that by getting down to their level, he will make them more acceptable to the people at large. Untouchability is no longer legal in Hastinapur, but he knows it's still impossible for a cobbler to get into the main temple. So he makes it a point of inviting an Untouchable, or a "Child of God", as he calls them, to his room for a meal every week. As you can imagine, sir, this gets talked about.'

'Favourably?'

'I'd say public opinion is divided in about equal parts of admiration and resentment, sir. The latter mainly from the upper castes, of course.'

'Of course. And how do they take all this at the palace? Regent or no Regent, there must be many who don't agree with his ideas. Cleaning his own toilet, indeed.'

'Absolutely, sir. We have heard that he tried to get the royal widows to clean their own bathrooms, sir, and they burst into tears. Or threw him out of the zenana. Or both.' The equerry cleared his throat. 'Old inhibitions die hard, sir. Our information is that the reason he entertains the Untouchables in his own room is that there were too many objections to their eating in any of the palace dining-rooms. And the attendant who serves them has strict instructions to destroy the plates afterwards, so that no one else need risk eating off them.'

'Hmm. What about us?'

'Er . . . us?'

'Yes, Heaslop, us.'

The equerry looked nonplussed. 'No, sir, I don't think they destroy the plates we're served on. But I haven't really checked. Would you like me to?'

'No, Heaslop.' The Resident's asperity was sharpened by the buzzing around his ears and his increasing desire for a drink. 'I meant, what does he think about us? The British Raj; the King-Emperor. Is he loyal, or a damn traitor, or what?'

'I don't know, sir.' The equerry shifted his weight in the cane chair. 'He's not an easy man to place, really. As you know, Sir Richard, there was a time when he was rather well regarded by us. Among the king's most loyal subjects, in fact. He was a regular at receptions here. Even arranged a major contribution to the Ambulance Association, sir, during the last war. But of late, he has been known to say things about *swaraj*, you know, sir, self-rule. And about pan-Indian nationalism. No one seems to know what started him off on that track. They say he reads widely.'

'Basic truth about the colonies, Heaslop. Any time there's trouble, you can put it down to books. Too many of the wrong ideas getting into the heads of the wrong sorts of people. If ever the Empire comes to ruin, Heaslop, mark my words, the British publisher will be to blame.'

Heaslop seemed about to comment on this insight, then thought better of it. The Resident reached for his glass and realized he still didn't have one. 'Boy!' he called out.

There was no answer. Sir Richard furrowed his florid brow. 'And this Ganga Din, or whatever they call him,' he snapped. 'How does he comport himself? Has he been giving us any trouble? That's a rather important position to leave someone of his stripe in, isn't it? Perhaps I should be doing something about it.'

'The Regent has always behaved very correctly, Sir Richard. In fact,' Heaslop licked a nervous lip, 'I believe he was our candidate for the throne once. Your predecessor was rather sorry when things took a different turn, at the time of the late Maharaja's second marriage. But it would seem it was Ganga Datta who wanted it that way.'

'I've seen the files,' the Resident nodded. 'What on earth has happened to our drinks? Boy! Boy!'

The elderly bearer, dusty and panting, responded at last to the summons. 'Sahib, I coming, sahib,' he stated, somewhat unnecessarily.

'What the devil's taking you so long? Where's our whisky?'

'I bring instantly, sahib,' the bearer assured him. 'I am looking for *bhisti* all this time, as sahib wanted. I now found, sahib. With great difficulty. I bring him in, sahib?'

'Of course you can bring the water in,' Sir Richard said crossly. A choking sound emanated from the equerry beside him.

The bearer clapped his hands. A grimy figure in a dirty undershirt and dirtier loincloth entered the verandah, carrying a black oilskin bag from one end of which water dripped relentlessly on to the tiled floor.

'*Bhisti*, sahib,' the bearer proudly announced, like a conjuror pointing to a rabbit he has just produced out of an improbably small hat.

'What the devil . . . ?' The Resident seemed apoplectic.

Heaslop groaned.



Back to my offspring, eh, Ganapathi? Can't neglect the little blighters, because this is really their story, you know. Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidur: ah, how their names still conjure up all the memories of the glory of Hastinapur at that time. Their births seemed a signal for the state's resurgence. Prosperity bloomed around the palace, Ganapathi: the harvests produced nothing short

of bumper crops, the wheat gave off the scent of jasmine, and the women laughed as they worked in the fields. There were no droughts, Ganapathi, no floods either; the rains came, at just the right times, when the farmers had sowed their seeds and said their prayers, and never for longer than they were welcome. Fruit ripened in the sunshine, flowers blossomed in the gentle breeze; the birds chirped gaily as they built their nests in the shade, and aimed their droppings only at passing Englishwomen. The very cows produced a milk no *doodhwala* could bear to water. The towns and the city of Hastinapur overflowed with businessmen and shopkeepers, coolies and workmen, travelling seers and travelling salesmen. Yes, Ganapathi, the glory of those days drives me to verse:

With the birth of the boys
Flowed all the joys
Of the kingdom of Hastinapur;
The flags were unfurled
All was well with the world
From the richest right down to the poor.

(Not too good, hanh, Ganapathi? If you'd grimace a little less, though, it might get better.)

The harvests were good
There was plenty of food
The land gave a bountiful yield;
The rains came in time
To wash off the grime
And to ripen the wheat in the field.

The man at the plough
And the bird on the bough
Both sang of their peace and content;
The fruit in the trees
Flowers, sunshine and breeze
Were all on happiness intent.

(Well, you try and do better, Ganapathi. On second thoughts, don't – you might succeed, and this is *my* memoir.)

THE DUEL WITH THE CROWN

41

The city was crowded
 All fears were unfounded
 There were money and goods in the shops;
 And although the Taj
 Was still ruled by the Raj
 The glory of Ind came out tops.

The citizens worked hard
 (And won the praise of this bard)
 There was never, at all, any crime;
 The piping hot curries
 Removed all our worries
 And prosperity reigned all the time.

Yes, the birth of the boys
 Was the best of God's ploys
 To fulfil our great people's karma;
 Under their regent (a sage)
 There reigned a Golden Age –
 The turn of the Wheel of Dharma.

It was, indeed, Gangaji who brought up my sons – as if, I must admit, they were his own children. Though the Regent was getting more and more ascetic in his ways, he spared no extravagance in giving the boys the best education, material comforts and personal opportunities. Each developed, in his own way, into an outstanding prospect, a princely asset to Hastinapur.

Dhritarashtra was a fine-looking young fellow, slim, of aquiline nose and aristocratic bearing. His blindness was, of course, a severe handicap, but he learned early to act as if it did not matter. As a child he found education in India a harrowing experience, which was, no doubt, why he was in due course sent to Eton. The British public school system fitted the young man to a T (the finest Darjeeling, which he obtained every month from Fortnum and Mason and brewed several times a day in a silver pot engraved with the Hastinapur crest). He quickly acquired two dozen suits, a different pair of shoes for each day of the week, a formidable vocabulary and the vaguely abstracted manner of the over-educated. With these assets he was admitted to King's College, Cambridge (there being no Prince's); unable to join in the punting and the carousing, he devoted himself to developing another kind of vision and became, successively, a formidable debater, a Bachelor of Arts and a Fabian Socialist. I have often wondered what might have happened had he been able to see the world around him as the rest of us can. Might India's history have been different today?

Pandu – ah, Pandu the pale, whose mother had turned white upon seeing me – Pandu never lacked in strength or courage. (Nor, unlike his half-brother, in eyesight, though he did take to wearing curious little roundish glasses that gave him the appearance of a Bengali teacher or a Japanese admiral.) What Pandu never had much of was judgement – or, as some of his admirers prefer to see it, luck. He too could have enjoyed the English education Dhritarashtra revelled in, but he did not even complete the Indian version of it. After insisting, with more pride than judgement, on pursuing his studies in India rather than in England, he was expelled from one of the country's best colleges for striking a teacher, an Englishman, who had called Indians 'dogs'. Yes, we Indians do have a number of dog-like characteristics, such as wagging our tails at white men carrying sticks, and our bark is usually worse than our bite. But Pandu could not resist showing his Professor Kipling one attribute of the species that most of us, including the distinguished academic, had overlooked – teeth. It was a pattern of conduct that was to last all his life.

Finally, for ever bringing up the rear (for reasons of ancestry and nothing else), came my son Vidur Dharmaputra. In intellectual gifts and administrative ability he outshone his two brothers, but knowing from the very beginning that unlike them he had no claim on a kingly throne, he developed a sense of modesty and self-effacement that would enhance his effectiveness in his chosen profession. For Vidur became that most valuable and underrated of creatures, the bureaucrat. He did brilliantly in his examination, stood First Class First throughout and, along with many of the country's finest minds, applied for entry into the Indian Civil Service.

Queen Victoria had thrown the doors of the ICS open to 'natives' immediately after the 1857 revolt (which the British preferred to call a 'mutiny'). No one was quite sure how far Britannia meant to waive the rules, but two Indians, both Bengalis, did achieve the miraculous distinction of entry – Satyendra Nath Tagore and Surendra Nath Banerjee. Indian exhilaration soon turned to resignation, however, when Banerjee was drummed out of the service a few years later, on a series of trumped-up charges. From the early years of our century, though, things began to change. When Vidur applied, there were more Indians being admitted to the civil service, adding their supposedly baser mettle to the 'steel frame' of the Raj. Vidur topped the written examinations to the ICS, in which one's name did not figure on the test paper; in the interview, regrettably, the same degree of anonymity did not prevail, and he found himself rapidly downgraded, but not so far as to miss selection altogether. So he joined the ICS's emerging administrative alloy, and before long was a rising star in the States Department, which looked after the princely states – among them Hastinapur.

You see, Ganapathi, this old man's seed was not wasted, after all, eh? Whatever people might think. Pass me that handkerchief, will you? My eyes are misting on me.

But we must get back to our story. Where were we, Ganapathi? Ah, yes – my sons. When the three young men reached marriageable age, Gangaji summoned them to his study.

'You are the hope of Hastinapur,' he said sagely. 'I have brought you up to carry on our noble line, and when you assume the responsibilities of rulers, I wish to be free to pursue other interests. But I cannot give up the regency and retreat to an ashram without first assuring not just your accession but the succession to yourselves as well. (One can never be too sure.) I have been making discreet inquiries, and I have identified three suitable ladies, of impeccable descent and highly praised beauty, with whom I intend to arrange your marriages. What do you have to say to this?'

It was Vidur who spoke first; Vidur could always be relied upon to take his cue and to say the right thing at the right time. 'You have been both a father and a mother to us, Gangaji,' he said dutifully. 'You have brought us up to follow your instructions in all matters. The *shastras* say that the word of a guru is law to his disciples. Why should it be any different now? If you want us to marry these ladies of your choice, it would be an honour as well as a duty to obey you.'

Pandu gave his low-born brother an expressive look, as indeed Dhritarashtra might have, had he been able. But both remained silent, particularly since Gangaji had seized upon Vidur's answer with barely concealed satisfaction and was already detailing his plans.

'For you, Dhritarashtra, the eldest, I have found a girl from a very good family of Allahabad. She is called Gandhari, and I am told she has lustrous black eyes. Not,' he added hastily, 'that that matters, of course. No, the main attraction of this lovely lady, from our point of view, is that she hails from a most productive line. Her mother had nine children, and her grandmother seventeen. There is a story in the family that Gandhari has obtained the boon of Lord Shiva to have no less than a hundred sons.' Seeing that Dhritarashtra appeared somewhat underwhelmed by the prospect, Gangaji spoke in a sterner tone of voice. 'You can never be too careful with these British, my son. They have had their designs on Hastinapur for years.'

'Whatever you say, Bhishma,' Dhritarashtra replied, deliberately using the name that recalled Gangaji's terrible vow of celibacy. The older man looked at him sharply, but Dhritarashtra remained expressionless behind his dark glasses.

'For you, Pandu, I propose Kunti Yadav,' Gangaji went on, noting with pleasure the young man's sharp intake of breath, for the beauty of Miss Yadav was widely known across the country. And though she was a princess only by adoption, many a more important raja might not have been averse to grafting her branch on to their family tree, were it not for the faint whiff of scandal that clung to her name.

'I'm delighted, of course,' Pandu said, looking even paler than usual. 'But, Gangaji—'

'Say no more.' The saintly loincloth-clad figure raised his hand. 'I know what you are about to ask. And I have, of course, made inquiries.' He settled his rimless glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose and opened a red-ribboned folder. 'Miss Kunti Yadav has, despite her unquestioned beauty and the good name of her adoptive family, received no, repeat no, offers of marriage to date. The reason: it appears that there may have been, ah . . . a certain indiscretion in her past.'

Gangaji looked up at the perspiring Pandu, who was visibly hanging on his every word, his eyes roving restlessly from his uncle to the open dossier before him. 'It seems,' he went on, 'that Miss Yadav might have conducted a brief and entirely unwise liaison with a certain Hyperion Helios, a foreign visitor at her father's palace. From what I have been able to ascertain and divine, it would seem that Mr Helios was a very charming and wealthy man of the world, who radiated an immense presence and warmth, and it is easy to imagine how an impressionable and inexperienced young maiden could be taken in by the blandishments of this plausible stranger. No one knows what exactly transpired between them, but it does appear that Mr Helios was ordered summarily out of the palace by his host, and,' Gangaji looked up at the anxious Pandu, 'that Miss Yadav went into near-total seclusion for several months. Some people draw conclusions from all this that are not flattering to the young lady. For myself, having reviewed all the elements of the case, I cannot see that much blame attaches to the Princess Kunti. If we were all to be punished for ever for the errors of our youth, the world would be a particularly gloomy place. Certainly, there has been no suggestion of the slightest misconduct since by the lady, but our princely marriage-makers have unforgiving hearts. I believe we in Hastinapur have a somewhat more generous spirit. Will you accept her, Pandu?'

'If you, sire, are willing to admit her into our home, I shall be only too happy to follow suit,' Pandu replied, somewhat formally.

'Then it is settled,' Gangaji said, closing his file. 'But I do not wish your reputation to suffer as a result of my, ah . . . progressive ideas. Lest it be said that you are in any way inferior to those who have so far disdained the hand of Kunti Yadav, I have resolved upon a second marriage for you as well, of a princess not as glamorous, perhaps, but completely irreproachable.' Seeing Pandu's raised eyebrow and flushed face, the old celibate allowed himself a chuckle. 'The British have put an end to our practice of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, but they have not interfered very much with our other customs. Whom you marry, how old you are, how much you pay, or how many you wed, are issues they have sensibly refused to touch upon. So I have found a very good second wife for you, Pandu. She is Madri, sister of the Maharaja of Shalya. The Shalya royal house has a rather peculiar tradition of requiring a dowry from the prospective bridegroom rather than the other way around, and their womenfolk have the reputation of being somewhat self-willed, but I am willing to overlook both these factors if you are, Pandu.'

'Oh, I am, Gangaji, I am,' Pandu responded fervently.

'Good,' said the Regent. 'I shall visit Shalya myself to arrange it.' He turned at last to the youngest (youngest, that is, by a few days, but in royal households every minute counts. It is one of the miracles of monarchy that no king has ever started parenthood with twins, but you can take my word for it, Ganapathi, that if he had, the second one out of the womb would never have been allowed to forget his place for an instant. And Vidur, don't forget, was not in contention for a princess's hand: Ambika's deception and my indiscriminate concupiscence had ensured that.) 'As for you, Vidur, I have identified a young lady whose circumstances perfectly match yours. The Raja Devaka, no mean prince, had a low-caste wife, who gave him a most elegant and lissom daughter, Devaki. She may not be of the highest rank, but she was educated at the Loreto Convent and is fluent in English, which can only be an asset in your work.'

'I am satisfied,' said Vidur humbly.

The sage heaved a deep sigh.

'Well, there it is then, at last,' he said. 'Once these marriages are all arranged, I shall turn over the kingdom to Dhritarashtra and Pandu, knowing too that Vidur is at the States Department, keeping an eye on Hastinapur. And I shall be able to devote myself to broader pursuits.'

'What will you do, sire?' asked Vidur politely.

'Many things, my son,' replied the terrible-vowed elder. 'I shall pursue the Truth, in all its manifestations, including the political and, indeed, the sexual. I shall seek to perfect myself, a process I began many years ago, in this very palace. And I shall seek freedom.'

How shall I tell it, Ganapathi? It is such a long story, an epic in itself, and we have so much else to describe. Shall I tell of the strange weapon of disobedience, which Ganga, with all his experience of insisting upon obedience and obtaining it toward himself, developed into an arm of moral war against the foreigner? Shall I sing the praises of the mysterious ammunition of truth-force; the strength of unarmed slogan-chanting demonstrators falling defenceless under the hail of police lathis; the power of wave after wave of *khadi*-clad men and women, arms and voices raised, marching handcuffed to their imprisonment? Shall I speak, Ganapathi, and shall you write, of the victory of non-violence over the organized violence of the state; the triumph of bare feet over hobnailed boots; the defeat of legislation by the awesome strength of silence?

I see, Ganapathi, that you have no advice to offer me. You wish, as usual, to sit back, with your ponderous brow glowering in concentration, that long nose of yours coiling itself around my ideas, and to let me choose my own thoughts, my own words. Well, I suppose you are right. It is, after all, my story, the story of Ved Vyas, doddering and decrepit though you may think I am, and yet it is also the story of India, your country and mine. Go ahead, Ganapathi, sit back. I shall tell you all.

What a life Gangaji led, and how much we know of it, for in the end he spared us no detail of it, did he, not a single thought or fear or dream went unrecorded, not one hope or lie or enema. It was all there in his writings; in the impossibly small print of his autobiography; in the inky mess of his weekly rag; in those countless letters I wonder how he found the time to write, to disciples, critics, government officials; in those conversations he conducted (sometimes, on his days of silence, by writing with a pencil-stub on the backs of envelopes) with every prospective biographer or journalist. Yes, he told us everything, Gangaji, from those gaps in his early years that the British had been so worried about, to the celibate experiments of his later life, when he got all those young women to take off their clothes and lie beside him to test the strength of his adherence to that terrible vow. He told us everything, Ganapathi, yet how little we remember, how little we understand, how little we care.

Do you remember the centenary of his birth, Ganapathi? The nation paid obeisance to his memory; speeches were delivered with tireless verbosity, exhibitions organized, seminars held, all on the subject of his eventful life. They discussed the meaning of his vegetarianism, its profound philosophical

implications, though I know that it was simply that he didn't want to sink his teeth into any corpse, and you can't make that into much of a philosophy, can you? They talked about his views on subjects he knew nothing about, from solar energy to foreign relations, though I know he thought foreign relations were what you acquired if you married abroad. They even pulled out the rusting wood-and-iron spinning wheels he wanted everyone to use to spin *khadi* instead of having to buy British textiles, and they all weaved symbolic centimetres of homespun. Yet I know the entire purpose of the wheel was not symbolic, but down-to-earth and practical: it was meant to make what you South Indians call *mundus*, not metaphors. And so they celebrated a hundredth birthday he might have lived to see, had not husbandless Amba, after so many austerities, exacted her grotesque revenge.

We Indians cannot resist obliging the young to carry our burdens for us, as you well know, Ganapathi, shouldering mine. So they asked the educational institutions, the schools and colleges, to mark the centenary as well, with more speeches, more scholarly forums, but also parades and marches and essay contests for the little scrubbed children who had inherited the freedom Gangaji had fought so hard to achieve.

And what did they find, Ganapathi? They found that the legatees knew little of their spiritual and political benefactor; that despite lessons in school textbooks, despite all the ritual hypocrisies of politicians and leader-writers, the message had not sunk into the little brains of the lucubrating brats. 'Gangaji is important because he was the father of our Prime Minister,' wrote one ten-year-old with a greater sense of relevance than accuracy. 'Gangaji was an old saint who lived many years ago and looked after cows,' suggested another. 'Gangaji was a character in the *Mahabharata*,' noted a third. 'He was so poor he did not have enough clothes to wear.'

Of course, it is easy, Ganapathi, to get schoolchildren to come up with howlers, especially those whose minds are being filled in the bastard educational institutions the British sired on us, but the innocent ignorance of those Indian schoolboys pointed to a larger truth. It was only two decades after Gangaji's death, but they were already unable to relate him to their lives. He might as well have been a character from the *Mahabharata*, Ganapathi, so completely had they consigned him to the mists and myths of historical legend.

Let us be honest: Gangaji was the kind of person it is more convenient to forget. The principles he stood for and the way in which he asserted them were always easier to admire than to follow. While he was alive, he was impossible to ignore; once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate.

When he spoke of his intentions to his three young wards, trembling

tensely before him at the brink of adulthood, he was not lying or posturing. It was, indeed, Truth that he was after – spell that with a capital T, Ganapathi, Truth. Truth was his cardinal principle, the standard by which he tested every action and utterance. No dictionary imbues the word with the depth of meaning Gangaji gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate, but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by ‘untruthful’, or unjust, or violent means. You can well understand why Dhritarashtra and Pandu, in their different ways, found themselves unable to live up to his precepts even in his own lifetime.

But his was not just an idealistic denial of reality either. Some of the English have a nasty habit of describing his philosophy as one of ‘passive resistance’. Nonsense: there was nothing passive about his resistance. Gangaji’s truth required activism, not passivity. If you believed in truth and cared enough to obtain it, Ganga affirmed, you had to be prepared actively to suffer for it. It was essential to accept punishment willingly in order to demonstrate the strength of one’s convictions.

That is where Ganga spoke for the genius of a nation; we Indians have a great talent for deriving positives from negatives. Non-violence, non-cooperation, non-alignment, all mean more, much more, than the concepts they negate. ‘V.V.,’ he said to me once, as I sat on the floor by his side and watched him assiduously spin what he would wear around his waist the next day, ‘one must vindicate the Truth not by the infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself.’ In fact he said not ‘oneself’ but ‘one’s self’, which tells you how carefully he weighed his concepts, and his words.

I still remember the first of the great incidents associated, if now so forgettably, with Gangaji. He had ceased to be Regent and was living in a simple house built on a river bank, which he called an ashram and the British Resident – who now refused to use ‘native’ words where perfectly adequate English substitutes were available – referred to as ‘that commune’. He lived there with a small number of followers of all castes, even his Children of God whom he discovered to be as distressingly human as their touchable counterparts, and he lived the simple life he had always sought but failed to attain at the palace – which is to say that he wrote and spun and read and received visitors who had heard of his radical ideas and of his willingness to live up to them. One day, just after the midday meal, a simple vegetarian offering concluding with the sole luxury that he permitted himself – a bunch of dates procured for him at the town market many miles away – a man came to the ashram and fell at his feet.

We were all sitting on the verandah – yes, Ganapathi, I was there on one of my visits – and it was a scorching day, with the heat rising off the dry earth

and shimmering against the sky, the kind of day when one is grateful to be in an ashram rather than on the road. It was then that a peasant, his slippers and clothes stained with the dust of his journey, his lips cracking with dryness, entered, called Gangaji's name, staggered towards him and fell prostrate.

At first we thought it might simply be a rather dramatic gesture of obeisance – you know how we Indians can be – but when Ganga tried to lift the man up by his shoulders it was clear his collapse had to do with more than courtesy. He had lost consciousness. After he had been revived with a splash of water he told us, in a hoarse whisper, of the heat and the exhaustion of his long walk. He had come over a hundred miles on foot, and he had not eaten for three days.

We gave him something to chew and swallow, and the peasant, Rajkumar, told us his story. He was from a remote district on Hastinapur's border with British India, but on the British side of the frontier. He wanted Gangaji to come with him to see the terrible condition of his fellow peasants and do something to convince the British to change things.

'Why me?' Ganga asked, not unreasonably. 'I have no official position any more in Hastinapur. I can pull no strings for you.'

'We have heard you believe in justice for rich and poor, twice-born and low-caste alike,' the peasant said simply. 'Help us.'

He was reluctant, but the peasant's persistence moved him and in the end Ganga went to Rajkumar's impoverished district. And what he saw there changed him, and the country, beyond measure.

I was there, Ganapathi. I was there, crowding with him into the third-class railway carriage which was all he would agree to travel in, jostling past the sweat-stained workers with their pathetic yet precious bundles containing all they possessed in the world, the flat-nosed, wide-breasted women with rings through their nostrils, the red-shirted porters with their numbered brass armbands bearing steel trunks on their cloth-swathed heads, the water-vendors shouting '*Hindu pani! Mussulman pani!*' into our ears, for in those days even water had a religion, indeed probably had a caste too, braving the ear-splitting shrieks of the hawkers, of the passengers, of the relatives who had come to bid them goodbye, of the beggars who were cashing in on the travellers' last-minute anxiety to appease the gods with charity, and finally of the guards' whistles. Yes, Ganapathi, I was there, propelling the half-naked

crusader into the compartment as our iron-wheeled, rust-headed, steam-spouting *vahana* clanged and wheezed into life and heaved us noisily forward into history.

Motihari was like so many other districts in India – large, dry, full of ragged humans eking out a living from land which had seen too many pitiful scratchings on its unyielding surface. There was starvation in Motihari, not just because the land did not produce enough for its tillers to eat, but because it could not, under the colonialists' laws, be entirely devoted to keeping them alive. Three tenths of every man's land had to be consecrated to indigo, since the British needed cash-crops more than they needed wheat. This might not have been so bad had there been some profit to be had from it, but there was none. For the indigo had to be sold to British planters at a fixed price – fixed, that is, by the buyer.

Ganga saw the situation with eyes that, for all his idealism, had too long been accustomed to the palace of Hastinapur. He saw men whose fatigue burrowed into their eyes and made hollows of their cheeks. He saw women dressed day after day in the same dirty sari because they did not possess a second one to change into while they washed the first. He saw children without food, books or toys, snot-nosed little creatures whose distended bellies mocked the emptiness within. And he went to the Planters' Club and saw the English and Scots in their dinner-jackets and ballroom gowns, their laughter tinkling through the notes of the club piano as waiters bearing overladen trays circled their flower-decked tables.

He saw all this from outside, for the dark Christian hall-porter who guarded the club's racial character denied him entry. He stood on the steps of the clubhouse for a long while, his eyes burning through the plate-glass windows of the dining-room, until a uniformed watchman came out, took him by the arm and asked him brusquely to move on. I expected Ganga to react sharply, to push the man away or at least to remove the other's grip on his arm, but I had again underestimated him. He simply looked at the offender: one look was enough; the watchman dropped his hand, instantly ashamed, eyes downcast, and Ganga walked quietly down the steps. The next morning he announced his protest campaign.

And what a campaign it was, Ganapathi. It is in the history books now, and today's equivalents of the snot-nosed brats of Motihari have to study it for their examinations on the nationalist movement. But what can the dull black-on-white of their textbooks tell them of the heady excitement of those days? Of walking through the parched fields to the huts of the poorest men, to listen to their sufferings and tell them of their hopes; of holding public hearings in the villages, where peasants could come forth and speak for the

first time of the iniquity of their lives, to people who would do something about it; of openly defying the indigo laws, as Ganga himself wrenched free the first indigo plant and sowed a symbolic fistful of grain in its stead.

Even we who were with him then were conscious of the dawn of a new epoch. Students left their classes in the city colleges to flock to Gangaji's side; small-town lawyers abandoned the security of their regular fees at the assizes to volunteer for the cause; journalists left the empty debating halls of the nominated council chambers to discover the real heart of the new politics. A nation was rising, with a small, balding, semi-clad saint at its head.

Imagine it for yourself, Ganapathi. Frail, bespectacled Gangaji defying the might of the British Empire, going from village to village proclaiming the right of people to live rather than grow dye. I can see him in my mind's eye even now, setting out on a rutted rural road on the back of a gently swaying elephant – for elephants were as common a means of transport in Motihari as bullock-carts elsewhere – looking for all the world as comfortable as he would in the back of the Hastinapur Rolls, as he leads our motley procession in our quest for justice. It is hot, but there is a spasmodic warm breeze, touching the brow like a puff of breath from a dying dragon. From his makeshift howdah Ganga smiles at passing peasants, at the farmers bent over their ploughs, even at the horse-carriage that trundles up to overtake him, with its frantically waving figure in the back flagging him down. Ganga's elephant rumbles to a halt; the man in the carriage alights and thrusts a piece of paper at the ex-Regent, who bends myopically to look at it before sliding awkwardly down the side of his mount. For it is a message from the district police, banning him from proceeding further on his journey and directing him to report to the police station.

Panic? Fear? There is none of it; Ganga smiles even more broadly from the back of the returning carriage and we follow him cheerfully, bolstered by the courage of his convictions.

Gangaji enters the police *thana* with us milling behind him. The man in uniform does not seem pleased, either with us or with the piece of paper in front of him.

'It is my duty,' he says, taking in the appearance and attire of the former Regent of Hastinapur with scarcely concealed disbelief, 'to serve notice on you to desist from any further activities in this area and to leave Motihari by the next train.'

'And it is my duty,' responds Ganga equably, 'to tell you that I do not propose to comply with your notice. I have no intention of leaving the district until my inquiry is finished.'

'Inquiry?' asks the astonished policeman. 'What inquiry?'

'My inquiry into the social and economic conditions of the people of Motihari,' replies Ganga, 'which you have so inconveniently interrupted this morning.'

Ah, Ganapathi, the glorious cheek of it! Ganga is committed to trial, and you cannot imagine the crowds outside the courthouse as he appears, bowing and smiling and waving folded hands at his public. He is a star – hairless, bony, enema-taking, toilet-cleaning Ganga, with his terrible vow of celibacy and his habit of arranging other people's marriages, is a star!

The trial opens, the crowd shouting slogans outside, the heat even more oppressive inside the courtroom than under the midday sun. The police, standing restlessly to attention outside the courthouse gate, some helmeted in the heat and mounted on riot-control horses, cannot take it any longer. Their commander, a red-faced young officer from the Cotswolds, orders them to charge the peaceful but noisy protestors. They wade in, iron-shod hooves and steel-tipped staves flailing. The crowd does not resist, does not stampede, does not flee. Ganga has told us how to behave, and there are volunteers amidst the crowd to ensure we maintain the discipline that he has taught us. So we stand, and the blows rain down upon us, on our shoulders, our bodies, our heads, but we take them unflinchingly; blood flows but we stand there; bones break but we stand there; lathis make the dull sound of wood pulping flesh and still we stand there, till the policemen and their young red-faced officer, red now on his hands and in his eyes as well, red flowing in his heart and down his conscience, realize that something is happening they have never faced before . . .

You think I'm simply exaggerating, don't you, Ganapathi? The hyperbole of the old, the heroism of the nostalgic, that's what you think it is. You can't know, you with your ration-cards and your black markets and the cynical materialism of your generation, what it was like in those days, what it felt like to discover a cause, to belong to a crusade, to *believe*. But I can, don't you see. I can lean here on these damned lumpy bolsters and look at your disbelieving porcine eyes and *be* there, outside the courtroom at Motihari as the lathis fall and the men stand proud and upright for their dignity, while inside – surprise, surprise – the prosecution asks for an adjournment. Yes, the prosecution, Ganapathi, it is the government pleader, sweating all over his brief, who stumbles towards the bench and asks for the trial to be postponed . . .

But, hello – what's this? The accused will have none of it! The magistrate is on the verge of acquiescing in the request when Gangaji calls out from the dock: 'There is no need to postpone the hearing, my Lord. I wish to plead guilty.'

Consternation in the court! There is a hubbub of voices, the magistrate

bangs his ineffectual gavel. Gangaji is speaking again; a silence descends as people strain to hear his reedy voice. 'My Lord, I have, indeed, disobeyed the order to leave Motihari. I wish simply to read a brief statement on my own behalf, and then I am willing to accept whatever sentence you may wish to impose on me.'

The magistrate looks wildly around him for a minute, as if hoping for guidance, either divine or official; but none is forthcoming. 'You may proceed,' he says at last to the defendant, for he does not know what else to say.

Gangaji smiles beatifically, pushes his glasses further back up his nose, and withdraws from the folds of his loincloth a crumpled piece of paper covered in spiky cramped writing, which he proceeds to smooth out against the railing of the dock. 'My statement,' he says simply to the magistrate, then holds it closely up to his face and proceeds to read aloud.

'I have entered the district,' he says, and the silence is absolute as every ear strains to catch his words, 'in order to perform a humanitarian service in response to a request from the peasants of Motihari, who feel they are not being treated fairly by the administration, which defends the interests of the indigo planters. I could not render any useful service to the community without first studying the problem, which is precisely what I have been attempting to do. I should, in the circumstances, have expected the help of the local administration and the planters in my endeavours for the common good, but regrettably this has not been forthcoming.' The magistrate's eyes are practically popping out at this piece of mild-mannered effrontery, but Ganga goes oblivious on. 'I am here in the public interest, and do not believe that my presence can pose any danger to the peace of the district. I can claim, indeed, to have considerable experience in matters of governance, albeit in another capacity.' Ganga's tone is modest, but his reference is clear. The judge shifts uncomfortably in his seat. The air inside the courtroom is as still as in a cave, and the punkah-wallah squatting on the floor with his hand on the rope of the fan is too absorbed to remember to pull it.

'As a law-abiding citizen' – and here Gangaji looks innocently up at the near-apoplectic judge – 'my first instinct, upon receiving an instruction from the authorities to cease my activities, would normally have been to obey. However, this instinct clashed with a higher instinct, to respect my obligation to the people of Motihari whom I am here to serve. Between obedience to the law and obedience to my conscience I can only choose the latter. I am perfectly prepared, however, to face the consequences of my choice and to submit without protest to any punishment you may impose.'

This time it is our turn, the turn of his supporters and followers, to gaze at him in dismayed concern. The prospect of glorious defiance was one thing, the

thought of our Gangaji submitting to the full rigours of the law quite another. Unlike its post-Independence variant, with its bribable wardens and clubbable guards, the British prison in India was not a place anyone would have liked to know from the inside.

'In the interests of justice and of the cause I am here to serve,' Gangaji continues, 'I refuse to obey the order to leave Motihari' – a pause, while he looks directly at the magistrate – 'and willingly accept the penalty for my act. I wish, however, through this statement, to reiterate that my disobedience emerges not from any lack of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to a higher law, the law of duty.'

There is silence, Ganapathi, pin-drop silence. Gangaji folds his sheet of paper and puts it away amidst the folds of his scanty garment. He speaks again to the magistrate. 'I have made my statement. You no longer need to postpone the hearing.'

The magistrate opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. He looks helplessly at the government pleader, who is by now completely soaked in his own sweat, and in a kind of despair at his complacent defendant. At last the judge clears his throat; his voice emerges, a strained croak: 'I shall postpone judgment,' he announces, with a bang of his gavel. 'The court is adjourned.'

There are cheers from the assembled throng as the meaning of that decision becomes clear: the magistrate does not know what to do!

We carry Ganga out on our bloodied shoulders. The horses draw back, neighing; the soldiers withdraw, shamed by the savagery of their success; the fallen stagger to their feet; and our hero, hearing the adulation of the crowd, borne aloft on a crescendo of hope, our hero weeps as he sees how his principles have been upheld by the defenceless.

Ah, Ganapathi, what we could not have achieved in those days! The magistrate was right not to want to proceed, for when reports of what had happened reached the provincial capital, immediate instructions came from the Lieutenant-Governor to drop all the charges. Not only that: the local administration was ordered to assist Gangaji fully with his inquiry. Can you imagine that? The *satyagrahi* comes to a district, clamours for justice, refuses an order to leave, makes his defiance public, and so shames the oppressors that they actually cooperate with him in exposing their own misdeeds. What a technique it was, Ganapathi!

For it worked – that was the beauty of it – it worked to redress the basic problem. After the interviews with the peasants, the hearing conducted with the actual participation of district officialdom, and the submission of sworn statements, the Lieutenant-Governor appointed Gangaji to an official inquiry

committee which unanimously – unanimously, can you imagine? – recommended the abolition of the system which lay at the root of the injustice. The planters were ordered to pay compensation to the poor peasants they had exploited; the rule requiring indigo to be planted was rescinded: Gangaji's disobedience had won. Yes, Ganapathi, the tale of the Motihari peasants had a happy ending.

That was the wonder of Gangaji. What he did in Motihari he and his followers reproduced in a hundred little towns and villages across India. Naturally, he did not always receive the same degree of cooperation from the authorities. As his methods became better known Ganga encountered more resistance; he found magistrates less easily intimidated and provincial Governors less compliant. On such occasions he went unprotestingly to jail, invariably shaming his captors into an early release.

All this was not just morally right, Ganapathi; as I cannot stress enough, it worked. Where sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism had both proved ineffective, Ganga took the issue of freedom to the people as one of simple right and wrong – law versus conscience – and gave them a method to which the British had no response. By abstaining from violence he wrested the moral advantage. By breaking the law non-violently he showed up the injustice of the law. By accepting the punishments the law imposed on him he confronted the colonialists with their own brutalization. And when faced with some transcendent injustice, whether in jail or outside, some wrong that his normal methods could not right, he did not abandon non-violence but directed it against himself.

Yes, against himself, Ganapathi. Gangaji would startle us all with his demonstration of the lengths to which he was prepared to go in defence of what he considered to be right. How, you may well ask, and I shall tell you. But not just yet, my impatient amanuensis. As the Bengalis say when offered cod, we still have other fish to fry.



THE THIRD BOOK:
THE RAINS CAME





'That's the last bloody straw,' the British Resident said. He was pacing up and down his verandah, a nervous Heaslop flapping at his heels. 'Indigo inquiry, indeed. I'll crucify the bastard for this.'

'Yes, sir,' the equerry said unhappily. 'Er . . . if I may . . . *how*, sir?'

'How?' Sir Richard half-turned in his stride, as if unable to comprehend the question. 'What do you mean, *how*?'

'Er . . . I mean, *how*, sir? How will you, er, crucify him?'

'Well, I don't intend to nail him to a cross in the middle of the village bazaar, if that's what you're asking,' the Resident snapped. 'Don't be daft, Heaslop.'

'Yes, sir, I mean, no, sir,' the aide stuttered. 'I mean, I didn't mean that, sir.'

'Well, what did you mean?'

Sir Richard's asperity invariably made the young man more nervous. 'I mean that when I asked you *how*, I didn't really mean *how*, you know, physically, sir. When I said *how* I meant sort of *what*, you know, *what* exactly you meant when you meant to, er, crucify him . . . sir,' Heaslop ended a little lamely.

The Resident stopped, turned around, and stared at him incredulously. 'What on earth are you going on about, Heaslop?'

'Nothing, sir,' replied the hapless Heaslop, backing away. He was beginning to wish himself back on the North-West Frontier, being shot at by the Waziris. At least there he knew when to duck.

'Well, then don't,' Sir Richard advised him firmly. 'There's nothing as irritating when I'm trying to think as hearing you go on about nothing. Sit down, will you, and pour yourself a stiff drink.' He gestured at a trolley laden with bottles and siphons which now stood permanently on the verandah.

Heaslop sat gingerly on a lumpy cushioned cane-chair and busied himself with a bottle. Sir Richard continued to pace, his white sideburns, in need of a trim, quivering with the strength of his emotion. 'This man has publicly confronted, indeed humiliated, the Raj. Which means for all practical purposes the King-Emperor. Whom I represent. Which means he has humiliated *me*.'

'Er . . . I wouldn't take it so personally, sir,' Heaslop began.

'Shut up, Heaslop, will you, there's a good fellow,' came the reply from the Resident, whose round red cheeks gave him the appearance of a superannuated cherub, albeit one whose wings have been trod upon by a careless Jehovah. 'When I want your opinion I'll ask for it.'

The equerry subsided into a sulky silence.

'He has humiliated me,' his superior went on. 'And he has made matters worse by drawing attention to his former position here, which means I shall be unwelcome in every planters' club from here to Bettiah.' He glowered pinkly at the enormity of the privation. 'Never in the entire history of my family in India has such a thing happened to any of us. Not even to my brother David, who spends his time drawing pictures of animals.'

He stopped in front of the young man, who was drinking deeply from a tall glass. 'I must do something about this rabble-rouser,' he muttered. Presuming to usurp the legitimate functions of the district administration! Standing half-naked before a representative of His Majesty and inviting him, daring him, to pronounce sentence on his open defiance of the law! Serving on so-called "inquiry committees" and depriving honest planters of their livelihood! There has to be an end to this nonsense.'

Heaslop opened his mouth in habitual response, then thought better of it.

'Things are bad enough already,' Sir Richard went on. 'We have native lawyers declaiming against our rule in every legislative forum, even when they have been nominated to their seats for the most part as presumed Empire loyalists. We have had a nasty little boycott of British goods, with fine Lancashire cotton being thrown on to bonfires. We have even had bombs being flung by that Bengali terrorist, Aurobindo, and his ilk. But all these were, in the end, limited actions of limited impact. Ganga Datta shows every sign of being different.'

'In what way, sir?' Despite himself, Heaslop was intrigued.

'The man challenges the very rules of the game,' the Resident barked. 'Paradoxically, by using them for his own purposes. He knows the law well, and invites, even seeks, its sanction by deliberately – deliberately, mind you – violating it in the name of a higher truth. Twaddle, of course. But dangerous twaddle, Heaslop. He appeals to ordinary people in a way the chaps in the pin-stripe suits in the Viceroy's Council simply can't. In Motihari they flocked to him, irrespective of caste or religion. Untouchables, Muslims, Banias all rubbing shoulders in his campaign, Heaslop! And he stands before them in his bed-sheet, revelling in their adulation.'

Heaslop remained studiously mute. You know what the fellow dared to say when the President of the Planters' Club commented on the inap-

propriateness of his attire?' Sir Richard rummaged in his pockets and pulled out a newspaper clipping. "'Mine is a dress,'" he quoted in mounting indignation, "'which is best suited to the Indian climate and which, for its simplicity, art and cheapness, is not to be beaten on the face of the earth. Above all, it meets hygienic requirements far better than European attire. Had it not been for a false pride and equally false notions of prestige, Englishmen here would long ago have adopted the Indian costume.' I ask you! Your precious Mr Ganga Datta would have the Viceroy in a loincloth, Heaslop. What on earth is that sound you are making?'

For Heaslop, overcome by the image of Lord Chelmsford's sturdy calves bared in Delhi's Durbar Hall, was spluttering helplessly into his glass.

'Drastic measures are called for, Heaslop,' Sir Richard continued, unamused. 'I'm convinced of that. This fellow must be taught a lesson.'

'How, sir?' Heaslop asked, in spite of himself.

The Resident looked at him sharply. 'That's precisely what I'm trying to give some thought to, Heaslop.' He lowered his tone. 'We've capitulated too often already. Think of that terrible mistake over the partition of Bengal. We carve up the state for our administrative convenience, these so-called nationalists yell and scream blue murder, and what do we do? We give in, and erase the lines we've drawn as if that were all there was to it. That could be fatal, Heaslop, fatal. Once you start taking orders back you stop being able to issue them. Mark my words.' He stopped pacing, and turned directly to his aide. 'What action can we take? It must be something I can do, or recommend to the States Department, something in keeping with the gravity of his conduct. If he were still Regent I'd have his hide for a carpet. But I suppose it's too late for that now.'

'Yes, sir,' Heaslop agreed reflectively. 'Unless . . .'

'Yes?' Sir Richard pounced eagerly.

'Unless it isn't really too late,' Heaslop said slowly. 'I have an idea that, if it's a question of our competence to act against him, we might be able to, er, catch him on a technicality.'

'Go on,' the Resident breathed.

'You see, when Ganga Datta handed over the reign, I mean the reins, of Hastinapur to the princes Dhritarashtra and Pandu and retired to his ashram, he was obliged under the law to notify us formally that he had ceased to be Regent,' Heaslop explained carefully. 'But he was probably so busy organizing the marriages of his young charges as soon as they'd come of age, that he quite simply forgot.'

'Forgot?'

'Well, it happens, sir. In the ordinary course we'd hardly pay much

attention to it. Many of the princely states are less than conscientious about observing the fine print of their relations with us. Indians simply haven't developed, ah . . . our sense of ritual.'

Sir Richard looked at him suspiciously. Heaslop did not blink. 'But doesn't the court at Hastinapur employ an Englishman as a sort of secretary, to attend to this sort of thing?'

'Well, yes, there is Forster, sir, Maurice Forster, just down from Cambridge, I believe. But he seems to, ah, prefer tutoring young boys to performing his more routine secretarial duties. I have the impression he doesn't take many initiatives, sir. Never quite managed to get the hang of what India's all about. Considers it all a mystery and a muddle, or so he keeps saying. He waits to do what he is told, and I suspect that if the business of the notification didn't occur to the Regent, it wouldn't have occurred to poor Forster, either.'

'Hmm.' The Resident's round features softened with hope. 'And what exactly does this permit me to do, Heaslop?'

'Well, sir.' Heaslop sat up, choosing his words carefully. 'If we haven't been notified that Ganga Datta has ceased to be Regent, then technically, as far as we're concerned, he still is. I mean, despite any other evidence to the contrary, we're entitled to consider him to be in full exercise of the powers of Regent until we have been formally notified otherwise. Do you see, sir?'

'Yes, yes, man, go on.'

'Well, sir, if he's still Regent —'

'He has no business going about preaching sedition outside the borders of the state.' Sir Richard finished the sentence gleefully. 'Conduct unbecoming of a native ruler. I like it, Heaslop, I like it.'

'There's only one thing, sir,' the equerry added in a slightly less confident tone of voice.

'Yes?' The fear of bathos added octaves to the Resident's timbre. 'Don't tell me you've overlooked something, Heaslop.'

'No, sir. It's just that what he did, sir, in Motihari, wasn't exactly criminal, sir. The case was withdrawn. On the direct orders of the Lieutenant-Governor of the state. And then he was invited to join the official inquiry committee. It might be going too far, sir, for us to proceed against him for something Delhi doesn't consider seditious.'

'Piffle, Heaslop, piffle.' Sir Richard's tone was firm. 'That case wouldn't have been withdrawn if the indigo market weren't already in the doldrums. Your nationalist hero simply provided a good excuse to withdraw a regulation that wasn't needed any more, and earn the goodwill of some of these babus.' Sir Richard glowered at the thought. 'And don't make the mistake of assuming that Delhi thinks with one mind on a question like this. Not a bit of it. For

every Lieutenant-Governor Scott with a soft spot for the uppity natives, there are ten on the Viceroy's staff who believe in putting them in their place. Besides, Paul Scott and his ilk can't tie our hands on a matter concerning the princely states. It's simply none of their damn business.'

'If you say so, sir.' Heaslop tried to keep the anxiety he felt out of his voice. He was beginning to feel like Pandora after casually opening the box. 'What exactly do you propose to do, sir? I mean, there isn't much point in demanding his ouster as Regent, is there, when we know perfectly well he isn't Regent any more?'

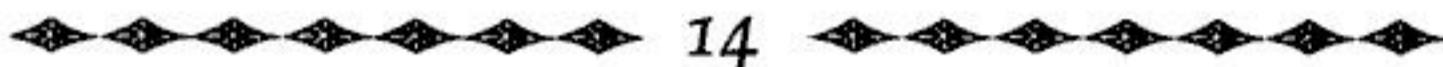
'Ouster? Who in damnation spoke about demanding his ouster, Heaslop?'

'Well, you said, sir, I mean no one, sir, but you did say that if he were still Regent you would -'

'Have his hide for a carpet.' Sir Richard recalled his metaphor. 'I'm not foolish enough to ask for his dismissal from functions he no longer exercises, Heaslop. It's not a symbolic victory I'm looking for. I want to teach Mr Datta, and any others like him, a lesson they'll never forget.'

'May I ask how, sir?' Heaslop's voice was faint.

'You may indeed, Heaslop, and I will answer you in one word,' Sir Richard replied, rubbing his hands in anticipatory satisfaction. 'Annexation.'



'I'm not sure I want a *hundred* sons,' Dhritarashtra said to his bride. 'But I'd be happy to have half a dozen or so.'

They were reclining on an enormous swing, the size of a sofa, which hung from the ceiling of their royal bedroom. The unseeing prince lay on his side, propped up against a bolster, his head supported partly by an elbow and partly by Gandhari's sari-draped lap. His new princess, playing idly with strands of his already thinning hair, did not smile at his words, nor did she look at him. Gandhari the Grim, as this frail, dark beauty was already being called in the servants' quarters, could not, for her eyes were completely covered by a blindfold of the purest silk.

'You shall have a son,' she said softly, 'who shall be strong and brave, a leader of men. And he shall see well enough and far enough for both of us.'

Her husband sighed. 'Dearest Gandhari,' he whispered, his free hand reaching for her face and feeling the satin bandage around it. 'Why must you do this to yourself?'

'I have already told you,' she replied, decisively moving his hand away. 'Your world is mine, and I do not wish to see more of it than you do. It is not fitting that a wife should possess anything more than her husband does.'

A fragrance of the attar of roses wafted slowly down to him as she spoke. It was one of the signs by which he could tell her from any other presence in a room, that and the silvery tinkle of the *payals* at her ankle. 'How often must I tell you that you would be more useful to me the way you are?' Dhritarashtra asked sadly.

He never ceased to marvel at the strength of this woman's resolve. For a young girl, embarking on adulthood and marriage, to vow never to see the world again! What it must have meant to her to make this sacrifice, to blot out the world to conform to an idea of matrimony even fiercer and more intense than that handed down over the generations. What was it that drove her to this extreme act of self-denial? Not just tradition, for even the tradition of the dutiful wife, the Sati Savitri of myth and legend, did not demand so much. Not love, for she had never set eyes on Dhritarashtra before; nor admiration, for the days of his greatness still lay ahead. No, it was some mysterious inner force that led this young girl to will herself into blindness, to give up the glory of the sunlight and the flowers, to renounce the blazing splendour of the *gulmohars* or the gathering thunderclouds of the monsoons, to have to judge a sari by its feel rather than its colour, a space by its sound rather than its size, a man by his words rather than his looks. It was a sacrifice few, let alone this delicate wisp of a woman, would be thought capable of making.

'Useful? It is not a wife's role to be *useful*.' Gandhari tossed her determined head. 'If that is all you want, you can hire any number of assistants, secretaries, readers and scribes, cooks and servants and even women of pleasure. As I am sure you have done whenever you have felt the need.' She ran her fingers through his hair to remove any hint of offence. 'No, my lord, a *dharampatni* is not expected to be useful. Her duty is to share the life of her husband, its joys and triumphs and sorrows, to be by his side at all times, and to give him sons.' A note of steely wistfulness crept into her voice. 'A hundred sons.'

Dhritarashtra had never known a woman like this in England. He tried to inject a note of playfulness into the conversation. 'Not a hundred. That would be exhausting.'

His quiet wife did not laugh. This was not a subject on which she entertained levity. 'Who knows? That is what the astrologer has foretold. It would take a long time, to produce a hundred sons.'

'And so it would.' Dhritarashtra the sceptic, with his Cambridge-taught disbelief that the stars could be read any more accurately than the tea leaves he constantly brewed, chuckled, and reached for his wife. This time his hands touched a different fabric, and felt a responsive warmth beneath. 'So what are we waiting for?'

His fingers tickled her and at last she laughed too. The swing rocked with their love, at first slowly, then with accelerating rhythm, casting moving shadows on the walls that neither could see.

Behave yourself, Ganapathi. What do you mean, how could I know? You don't expect me to spell out everything, do you? I just know, that's all. I know a great many things that people don't know I know, and that should be good enough for you, young man.

Meanwhile, as they say in those illustrated rags which I suppose are all your generation reads these days, Pandu was having the time of his life with his two wives. The scandal-burdened Kunti was every bit as delectable as her reputation suggested, and the steatomammate Madri, if less symmetrically proportioned, more than made up for this with the inventiveness of her love-making. Pandu was always something of a physical soul, if you get my meaning, and he revelled in the delights of bigamy, taking due care to ensure that his pleasures were not prematurely interrupted by pregnancy.

It was, of course, too good to last. That, Ganapathi, is one of the unwritten laws of life that I have observed in the course of a long innings at the karmic crease. It is just when you are seeing the ball well and timing the fours off the sweet of the bat that the unplayable shooter comes along and bowls you. And it is because we instinctively understand this that we Hindus take defeat so well. We appreciate philosophically that the chap up there, the Great Cosmic Umpire, has a highly developed sense of the perverse.

Didn't think I knew much about cricket, did you? As I told you, Ganapathi, I know a great deal about a great deal. Like India herself, I am at home in hovels and palaces, Ganapathi, I trundle in bullock-carts and propel myself into space, I read the *vedas* and quote the laws of cricket. I move, my large young man, to the strains of a morning raga in perfect evening dress.

But we were talking about something else – you mustn't let me get distracted, Ganapathi, or you will be here for ever. Was it not the profound

inscrutability of Providence I was on about? It was? More or less? Well, in Pandu's case it manifested itself quite early. He was in bed one day with both his consorts, attempting something quite unspeakably imaginative, when an indescribable pain shot through his chest and upper arm and held his very being in its grip. He fell back, unable to mouth the words to convey his torture, and for a brief moment his companions thought their ministrations had brought him to a height of ecstasy they had never seen before. But a quick look lower down convinced them something quite different was the matter. They frantically screamed for help.

'Massive coronary thrombosis,' said Dr Kimindama, as Pandu lay paler than ever under the oxygen tent. 'Or in plain Hindustani, a whopping great heart attack. He's lucky to be alive. If it weren't for the prompt call,' he added, looking with appreciation at the two not-quite-shevelled ladies beside the bed, 'I'm not sure we could have saved him.'

Pandu recovered; his big heart rode the blow and knit itself together. But when he was ready to resume a normal life the doctor took him aside and gave him the terrible news.

'I'm afraid,' Dr Kimindama said, 'that in your case there is one prohibition I must absolutely enjoin upon you. The circumstances of your attack and the present condition of your heart make it imperative that you completely, and I mean completely, give up the pleasures of the flesh.'

'You mean I have to stop eating meat?' Pandu asked.

The doctor sighed at the failure of his euphemism. 'I mean you have to stop having sex,' he translated bluntly. 'Your heart is simply no longer able to withstand the strain of sexual intercourse. If you want to live, Your Highness, you must abstain from any kind of erotic activity.'

Pandu sat heavily back on his bed. 'That's how bad it is, doctor?' he asked hollowly.

'That's how bad it is,' the doctor confirmed. 'Your next orgasm will be your last.'

Think of it, Ganapathi! To be married to two of the most delightful companions that could have been conjured from Adam's rib, and yet to be denied, like an over-cautious chess-player, the pleasures of mating! Such was the lot of my pale son Pandu, and it could have been the ruin of a lesser man. But the blood of Ved Vyas ran in his veins, don't you forget that, Ganapathi, and he resolutely turned his back on his misfortune, and his wives. His putative father had died of his lust, and Pandu had no desire to conform to the pattern.

'This is a signal,' he explained to his grief-stricken spouses. 'I must pull up my socks, turn over a new leaf and make something of my life, if I am ever to

acquire salvation. Sex and worldly desires only tie a man down. I am determined to roll up my sleeves and put my nose to the grindstone, not forgetting to gird my loins while I am about it. I shall practise self-restraint and yoga, and devote myself to good causes. Oh, yes, and I shall be sleeping alone from now on.'

16

It was a time of great grief and much sorrow
 When Pandu rose up from the dead;
 For starting today (not tomorrow)
 He must renounce the joys of the bed.

The medic didn't give him an option
 Except 'tween this world and the next;
 To live (and avoid any ruption)
 He just had to give up sex.

To young Pandu, as you can imagine
 It came as a painful wrench;
 He could enjoy life's great pageant
 But he couldn't lay hands on a wench.

To his wives, two lovely ladies,
 He could offer no more than a kiss;
 They might as well have lived in Hades
 For all the hope they could have of bliss.

Yes, after those nights full of pleasure –
 Full of baiting and biting and laughter –
 They would now have only the leisure
 To contemplate the hereafter.

Good deeds! was now the motto
 Of the rest of their lives on this earth;
 No frolic, no getting blotto,
 No foreplay, no unseemly mirth;

No, nothing but an ascetic's toga
 And the quest of the good and the right:
 A regular session of yoga
 And a guru to show him the light.

Thus Pandu abandoned the pastime
 Of expending in women his lust;
 He shrugged passion off for the last time
 And set off to strive for the just.

And where else could he go, Ganapathi, but to his uncle Ganga, now ensconced in his ashram on the river bank? Of course, Pandu the so-recent sybarite was not about to enrol straight away in the commune and take cheerfully to his share of dish-washing and toilet-cleaning; he remained initially an occasional day-scholar, coming to listen to Gangaji's discourses when he could, then returning to the comforts and – for he was still the younger brother of a blind maharaja – the responsibilities of the palace.

This was about the time of Motihari, just after, in fact, and the ashram was already beginning to attract its fair share of hangers-on. You know the song, Ganapathi:

groupies with rupees and large solar topis,
 bakers and fakers and enema-takers,
 journalists who promoted his cause with their pen,
 these were among his favourite men!

Pandu joined this motley crowd at Gangaji's feet, listening to his ideas and marvelling at the disciples' devotion to him. He learned of politics and Gangan philosophy:

of opposing caste
 unto the last
 (for Sudras are human, too)
 of meditation
 and sanitation
 (and cleaning out the loo).

He learned to pray
 the simple way
 (for Ganga taught him how)
 to help the weak
 turn the other cheek
 (and always protect the cow).

Soon he sounded more
like his mentor
(than any other *chela*)
Spoke Ganga's words
ate Ganga's curds
and became even paler.

He brooked no debate
on being celibate
(a trait that's Sagittarian).
His passionate defence
of abstinence
turned others vegetarian.

Poetry, Ganapathi, but it's not enough to sing of the transformation of Pandu under Ganga's tutelage. No, one must turn to prose, the prose of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan biographies and the school textbooks. How about this, O long-nosed one? In discourse his speech became erudite, his tone measured. In debate he thought high and aimed low. He became adept at religion, generous in philanthropy and calm in continence. No? You don't like it? Well, take it down anyway. We must move on: Pandu has begun quoting the *shastras* at unlikely moments, applying the most arcane of our ancient concepts to the circumstances of everyday life, and we must not leave these unrecorded.

Where shall we rejoin Pandu? He began, you see, to enliven his conversation with legend and fable – a myth, he thought, was as good as a smile – and his moral tales would curl the pages of the *Kama Sutra*. Shall we intrude upon him as he tells his red-eared Madri of lustful Vrihaspati, who forced his attentions upon his pregnant sister-in-law Mamta, and found his ejaculation blocked by the embryonic feet of his yet-to-be-born nephew? Or of the Brahmin youth who turned himself into a deer to enjoy the freedom to fornicate in the forest, until he was felled by a sharp-shooting prince on a solitary hunt? Or should we, instead, eavesdrop on our pale protagonist as he pontificates on the virtues of celibacy to his ever-sighing mate Kunti?

'But sons I must have,' said Pandu one day, after a close reading of the holy books. In addition to Gangaji he had been spending some time with his



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it is far more important to have a son, indeed to have a few sons, than to put a chastity belt on his wife.'

Kunti, still shocked – for you know the conservatism of our Indian women, Ganapathi, they are for ever clinging to the traditions of the last century and ignoring those of the last millennium – waited for the inevitable exegesis from the *shastras*. It was not long in coming. Pandu readjusted his lotus position, tucking his feet more comfortably under his haunches, and went on in high-sounding tones. 'You know, if you read our scriptures you will realize that there was a time when Indian women were free to make love with whomever they wished, without being considered immoral. There were even rules about it: the sages decreed that a married woman must sleep with her husband during her fertile period, but was free to take her pleasure elsewhere the rest of the time. In Kerala, the men of the Nair community only learn that their wives are free to receive them by seeing if another man's slippers aren't outside her door. Our present concept of morality isn't really Hindu at all; it is a legacy both of the Muslim invasion and of the superimposition of Victorian prudery on a people already puritanized by purdah. One man married to one woman, both remaining faithful to each other, is a relatively new idea, which does not enjoy the traditional sanction of custom. (Which is why I myself have had no qualms about taking two wives.) So I really don't mind you sleeping with another man to give me a son. It may seem funny to you, but the deeper I steep myself in our traditions, the more liberal I become.'

He could see she was not yet convinced. 'Look, I'll tell you something that might even shock you, but which, in fact, is in full accordance with our divine scriptures and ancient traditions. It's a closely guarded family secret that even I learned only when I became a man. Vichitravirya, my mother's husband, isn't really my father. Nor Dhritarashtra's, for that matter. Our mothers slept with their husband's half-brother, Ved Vyas, when their husband died, to ensure he would be graced with heirs.' Pandu saw that this story, at last, had sunk in. 'So you see? You'd just be following a family tradition. You've always done as I asked you to – so go and find yourself a good Brahmin and give me a son.'

Kunti's resistance melted at last. 'The truth is,' she began, 'I don't really know how to tell you this, but I already *have* a son.'

'What?' It was Pandu's turn to register offended astonishment. 'You? Have a son? By whom? When? And how could you talk so glibly of having been faithful to me?'

'Please don't be angry, my dear husband,' Kunti implored. 'I only mentioned it because you brought up the subject this way. And I *have* been faithful to you. My son was born before we even met, before your family asked for my hand for you.'

Comprehension dawned on a paling Pandu. 'Hyperion Helios,' he said through gritted teeth. 'The travelling magnate. So the scandal-mongers were right after all.'

Kunti hung her beautiful head in acknowledgement.

'And where is your son today?'

'I don't know,' Kunti admitted miserably. 'I was so ashamed when he was born – though I shouldn't have been, for he was a lovely little boy, his golden skin glowing like the sun – that I put him in a small reed basket and floated him down the river.'

'Down the river?'

'Down the river.'

'Then there isn't much point in talking about him, is there?' Pandu asked a little cruelly.

'Someone must have found him,' Kunti said defiantly. 'I'm sure he is still alive. And I know I'll recognize him the moment I see him again. His colour – it's so extraordinary I'm sure no one else in these parts would have anything like it. And then there's his birthmark – a bright little half-moon right in the centre of his forehead. There's no way he could have got rid of that.' She turned to Pandu. 'If you want a son, I know we can find him,' she pleaded. 'Let us have inquiries made in the area.'

A wind blew, Ganapathi, at those words, stirring up leaves, dust, shadows, clothing; eyelashes flickered in disturbed hope; an age sighed. 'I'm sorry,' Pandu replied. 'It's no use. A son born to you before we were even married, even if he were found, how can he be an heir of mine? No, you will simply have to find someone else, Kunti.' A hard edge entered his voice. 'And it shouldn't be all that difficult for you. After all, you do have the experience.'

Kunti seemed about to say something; then her face assumed a set expression. 'As you wish, my husband,' she said. 'You shall have your son.'

I remember, Ganapathi, I still remember the night our late Leader was born. It was a monsoon night, and the rain lashed down upon us, while a howling wind tore branches off trees and ripped roofs off shacks, turned our pathetic parasols inside out and drove the water into our homes. I entered the palace dripping, handed the shambles of my umbrella to the bowing servitor and mounted the stairs towards the women's quarters. A female attendant came out of Gandhari's room just as I reached the landing. Something about her expression led me to fear the worst. I asked her quietly, 'How is she?'

'Still in labour, sir.'

I nodded, both troubled and relieved. Still in labour: but it had been twenty-four hours already, time enough for me to receive the news and make my way through the mounting rage of the storm to the palace. And still she lay there; Gandhari the Grim lay there and sweated and suffered. I had a vision of that small, frail, delicately proportioned body stretched out and arched in the most grotesque of contortions, as a hundred lustily bawling sons fought their way out of her half-open womb . . .

And then, from behind Gandhari's closed door just down the corridor, there emerged a single, long, wailing sound. We both stood transfixed. It was a baby's cry and yet it was more than that; it was a rare, sharp, high-pitched cry like that of a donkey in heat, and as it echoed around the house a sound started up outside as if in response, a weird, animal moan, and then the sounds grew, as donkeys brayed in the distance, mares neighed in their pens, jackals howled in the forests, and through the cacophony we heard the beating of wings at the windows, the caw-caw-cawing of a cackle of crows, and penetrating through the shadows, the piercing shriek of the hooded vultures circling above the palace of Hastinapur.

'What was that, sire?' the woman servant asked, fear writ large on her face.
'Dhritarashtra's heir has been born,' I said.

I was right. For when the doctor emerged from Gandhari's room he was ashen with the strain. It had been the most difficult delivery of his life, he said, and it had taken a terrible toll on the brave young mother. She had survived, but she could never have children again. This one child would be her only offspring.

'A boy, of course?' Dhritarashtra, anxiously leaning on a cane, his dapper features strained with anticipation, asked the doctor. For weeks the midwives had said that all the signs pointed to a male heir: the shape of Gandhari's breasts in the eighth month, the sling of her uterus in the ninth. 'How is he?'

'A girl,' the doctor said shortly. 'And she's very well.'

The cane slipped with a clatter from Dhritarashtra's hand. A servant bent to pick it up and the new father leaned against the wall, breathing heavily.

I slipped quietly into the room and shut the door behind me. 'It is I, my child,' I said. 'I have come a long way to congratulate you.'

'A girl!' Gandhari's head was sunk into her pillow and the beads of perspiration had yet to dry on her face. She had refused to take off her blindfold even to see her own infant, and it clung wetly to her closed eyelids. Her customary grimness was accentuated by a startling pallor, as if all the blood had been drained out of her in the delivery. 'Is that all I shall have to show, Uncle, for the hundred sons you once promised me?'



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children aren't going to school nor their parents to work, and the atmosphere in the city centre and the *maidan* is, to say the least, disturbing.'

Sir Richard sipped elegantly, but two of his chins were quivering. 'Any violence?'

'A little. Some window-panes of English businesses smashed, stones thrown, that sort of thing. Not many targets hereabouts to aim at, of course, in a princely state. It's not as if this were British India, with assorted symbols of the Raj to set fire to. A crowd did try to march toward the residency, but the police stopped them at the bottom of the road.' Heaslop hesitated. 'My own car took a couple of knocks, sir, as I tried to get through. Stone smashed the windscreen.'

'Good Lord, man! Are you hurt?'

'Not a scratch, sir.' Heaslop seemed not to know whether to look relieved or disappointed. 'But the driver's cut up rather badly. He says he's all right, but I think we need to get him to the hospital.'

'Well, go ahead, Heaslop. What are you waiting for?'

'There's one more thing, sir. Word is going round that Ganga Datta will address a mass rally on the annexation this afternoon, sir. At the Bibigarh Gardens. People are flocking to the spot from all over the state, sir, hours before the Regent, that is, the ex-Regent, is supposed to arrive.'

'Ganga Datta? At the Bibigarh Gardens? Are you sure?'

'As sure as we can be of anything in these circumstances, sir.'

Sir Richard harrumphed. 'We've got to stop them, Heaslop.'

'Yes, sir, I thought you might want to consider that, sir, that's why I'm here. I'm afraid we might not be able to block off the roads to the gardens, though. The police are quite ineffectual, and I wouldn't be too sure of their loyalties either, in the circumstances.'

'What would you advise, Heaslop?'

'Well, sir, I wonder if we don't stand to lose more by trying to stop a rally we can't effectively prevent from taking place.'

'Yes?'

'So my idea would be a sort of strategic retreat, sir. Let them go ahead with their rally, let off steam.'

'You mean, do nothing?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes, sir. But then passions would subside. Once they've had their chance to listen to a few speeches and shout a few slogans, they'll go back to their normal lives soon enough.'

'Stuff and nonsense, Heaslop. Once they've listened to a few speeches from the likes of Ganga Datta and his treacherous ilk, there's no telling what they might do. Burn down the residency, like as not. No, this rally of theirs has to be stopped. But you're right about the police. They won't be able to do it.'

'That's what I thought, sir,' Heaslop said unhappily. 'Not much we can do, then.'

'Oh yes, there is,' Sir Richard retorted decisively. 'There's only one thing for it, Heaslop. Get me Colonel Rudyard at the cantonment. This situation calls for the army.'

20

The Bibigarh Gardens were no great masterpiece of landscaping, Ganapathi, but they were the only thing in Hastinapur that could pass for a public park. The plural came from the fact that Bibigarh was not so much one garden as a succession of them, separated by high walls and hedges into little plots of varying sizes. The enclosures permitted the municipal authorities the mild conceit of creating differing effects in each garden: a little rectangular pool surrounded by a paved walkway in one, fountains and rose-beds in another, a small open park for children in a third. There was even a ladies' park in which women in and out of purdah could ride or take the air, free from the prying eyes of male intruders; here the hedge was particularly high and thick. The gardens were connected to each other and to the main road only by narrow gates, which normally were quite wide enough for the decorous entrances and exits of pram-pushing ayahs and strolling wooers. On this day, however, they were to prove hopelessly inadequate.

One of the gardens, a moderately large open space entirely surrounded by a high brick wall, was used – when it was not taken over by the local teenagers for impromptu games of cricket – as a sort of traditional open-air theatre-cum-Speakers' Corner. It was the customary venue (since the *maidan* was too big) for the few public meetings anyone in Hastinapur bothered to hold. These were usually *mushairas* featuring local poetic talent or folk-theatre on a rudimentary stage, neither of which ever attracted more than a few hundred people. It was the mere fact of having staged such functions that gave the Bibigarh Gardens their credentials for this more momentous occasion.

When news spread of a possible address by Gangaji on the day of the state's annexation, Bibigarh seemed the logical place to drift towards. Soon the garden was full, Ganapathi; not of a few hundred, not of a thousand, but of ten thousand people, men, women, even some children, squeezed uncomplainingly against each other, waiting with the patience instilled in them over timeless centuries.



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trampling feet as panic-stricken villagers sought to get away from the sudden hail of death raining remorselessly down upon them. Did they hear the cries of the babies being crushed underfoot as dying men beat their mangled limbs against each other to get through those tragically narrow gateways? I cannot believe they did, Ganapathi, I prefer not to believe it, and so I think of the Bibigarh Gardens Massacre as a frozen tableau from a silent film, black and white and mute, an Indian *Guernica*.

The soldiers fired just 1600 bullets that day, Ganapathi. It was so mechanical, so precise; they used up only the rounds they were allocated, nothing was thrown away, no additional supplies sent for. Just 1600 bullets into the unarmed throng, and when they had finished, oh, perhaps ten minutes later, 379 people lay dead, Ganapathi, and 1,137 lay injured, many grotesquely maimed. When Rudyard was given the figures later he expressed satisfaction with his men. 'Only 84 bullets wasted,' he said. 'Not bad.'

Even those figures were, of course, British ones; in the eyes of many of us the real toll could never be known, for in the telling many more bled their lives into the ground than the British and the press and the official Commission of Inquiry ever acknowledged. Who knows, Ganapathi, perhaps each of Rudyard's bullets sent more than one soul to another world, just as they did the Raj's claims to justice and decency.

Gangaji came later, at the appointed hour of his address, and when he saw what had happened he doubled over in pain and was sick into an ornamental fountain. He stumbled among the bodies, hearing the cries of the injured and the moans of the dying, and he kept croaking to himself in Sanskrit. I was there, Ganapathi, and I caught the words, '*Vinasha kale, vitarita buddhi*' – our equivalent of the Greek proverb: 'Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad'.

It was Gangaji's strength to see meaning in the most mindless and perverse of human actions, and this time he was both wrong and right. He was wrong because the Massacre was no act of insane frenzy but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will; yet he was right, because it was sheer folly on the part of the British to have allowed it to happen. It was not, Ganapathi, don't get me wrong, it was not as if the British were going around every day of the week shooting Indians in enclosed gardens. Nor was Rudyard particularly evil in himself; his was merely the evil of the unimaginative, the cruelty of the

literal-minded, the brutality of the direct. And because he was not evil in himself he came to symbolize the evil of the system on whose behalf, and in whose defence, he was acting. It was not Rudyard who had to be condemned, not even his actions, but the system that permitted his actions to occur. In allowing Indians to realize this lay the true madness of the Hastinapur Massacre. It became a symbol of the worst of what colonialism could come to mean. And by letting it happen, the British crossed that point of no return that exists only in the minds of men, that point which, in any unequal relationship, a master and a subject learn equally to respect.

At the time this was perhaps not so evident. The incident left the population in a state of shock; if you think it provoked a further violent reaction, you would be wrong, Ganapathi, for no father of a family willingly puts himself in the firing-line if he knows what bullets can do to him. After Bibigarh everyone knew, and the people subsided into subordination.

Gangaji told me later that the Massacre confirmed for him the wisdom of the principles of non-violence he had preached and made us practise at Motihari. 'There is no point,' he said candidly, 'in choosing a method at which your opponent is bound to be superior. We must fight with those weapons that are stronger than theirs – the weapons of morality and Truth.' Put like that it might sound a little woolly-headed, I know, Ganapathi, but don't forget it had worked at Motihari. The hope that it might work again elsewhere, and the knowledge that nothing else could defeat the might of the Empire on which the sun never set, were what made us flock to Gangaji. In a very real sense Hastinapur gave him the leadership of the national movement.

And what of Colonel Rudyard, the great British hero of Bibigarh? His superiors in Whitehall were embarrassed by his effectiveness: there is such a thing, after all, as being too efficient. Rudyard was prematurely retired, though on a full pension. Not that he needed it; for across the length and breadth of the Raj, in planters' clubs and Empire associations, at ladies' tea parties and cantonment socials, funds were raised in tribute by patriotic pink-skins outraged by the slight to a man who had so magnificently done his duty and put the insolent natives in their place. The collections, put together and presented to the departing Colonel at a moving ceremony attended by the best and the whitest, amounted to a quarter of a million pounds, yes, Ganapathi, 250,000, two and a half lakhs of pounds sterling, which even at today's depreciated exchange rate is forty lakhs of rupees, an amount it would take the President of India thirty-five years to earn. It took Rudyard less than thirty-five minutes, much less. The gift, which his government did not tax, brought him more than £160 per Indian dead or wounded; as one pillar of the Establishment was heard to murmur when the figures were announced, 'I didn't think a native was worth as much as that.'

In some ways this gesture did even more than the Massacre itself to make any prospect of Indian reconciliation to British rule impossible. It convinced Gangaji, who derived his morals as much from the teachings of Christianity as from any other source, that the Raj was not just evil, but satanic. The Massacre and its reward made Indians of us all, Ganapathi. It turned loyalists into nationalists and constitutionalists into revolutionaries, led a Nobel Prize-winning poet to return his knighthood – and achieved Gangaji's absolute conversion to the cause of freedom. He now saw freedom as indivisible from Truth, and he never wavered again in his commitment to ridding India of the evil Empire. There was to be no compromise, no pussyfooting, no sellout on the way. He would think of the phrase only years later, but his message to the British from then on was clear: Quit India.

Rudyard retired to a country home in England. I wonder whether he was ever troubled by the knowledge of how much he was reviled and hated in the country he had just left. Or by the fact that so many hotheaded young men had sworn, at public meetings, in innumerable temples and mosques and *gurudwaras*, to exact revenge for his deed in blood. I like to think that Rudyard spent many a sleepless night agonizing if a stray shadow on the blind was of an assassin, starting at each unexpected sound in fear that it might be his personal messenger from Yama. But I am not sure he did, Ganapathi, because he knew, just as Ganga did, the limitations of our people in the domain of violence. The young men who swore undying revenge did not know how to go about exacting it, or even where. Only two of them finally had the intelligence and the resources to cross the seas in quest of their quarry. And when they got to Blighty, and made inquiries about an old India hand with an unsavoury Hastinapur connection, they found their man and, with great éclat and much gore, blew him to pieces.

Do not rejoice, Ganapathi, for it was not Rudyard whose brains they spattered over High Street, Kensington. No, not Rudyard, but a simple case of mistaken identity; to a sturdy Punjabi one British name is much like another, the people they questioned were themselves easily confused, and it was not Rudyard, but Kipling they killed. Yes, Kipling, the same Professor Kipling who had been careless enough to allude to the canine qualities of the Indian people, and who, for that indiscretion, had already been struck by my pale, my rash son Pandu. It makes you wonder, does it not, Ganapathi, about the inscrutability of Providence, the sense of justice of our Divinity. Our two young men went proudly to the gallows, a nationalist slogan choking on their lips as the noose tightened, blissfully unaware that they had won their martyrdom for killing the wrong man. Or perhaps he was not the wrong man: perhaps Fate had intended all along that Kipling be punished for his contempt;



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we're going to fight the Raj effectively we shall need our own friends and allies within the structure. And if we win,' he added, his voice acquiring that dreamy quality that women in Bloomsbury had found irresistible during his student days, 'we shall still need able and experienced Indians to run India for us.'

And so Vidur reluctantly stayed on in the ICS and, because he had many of his father's good qualities, rose with remarkable rapidity up the rungs of the States Department. His princely upbringing at Hastinapur had given him the knack of dealing with Indian royalty. He understood their whims and wants, indulged their eccentricities and interpreted them sympathetically to the British. In time he became a trusted intermediary between the pink masters and their increasingly assertive brown subjects.

But we must put Vidur aside for a moment, Ganapathi, to look more carefully at Gangaji and his two princely disciples as they, in turn, rose to the peak of the nationalist movement.

Dhritarashtra's disappointment with fatherhood and the failing health of his grim wife drove him wholeheartedly into politics. Here he surprised everyone with his flair for the task. He had the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was, but as he wanted it to be. Even better, he was able to convince everyone around him that his vision was superior to theirs. In a short while he was, despite his handicap, a leading light of the Kaurava Party, drafting its press releases and official communications to the government, formulating its positions on foreign affairs, and establishing himself as the party's most articulate and attractive spokesman on just about anything on which Cantabrigian Fabianism had given him an opinion.

Gangaji, the party's political and spiritual mentor, made no secret of his preference for the slim and confident young man. Pandu, in the circumstances, took it all rather well. He saw the world very differently from his blind half-brother. His recent brush with the angels of death and his subsequent immersion in the scriptures had made him more of a traditionalist than the idealistic Dhritarashtra, and the solidity of his appearance testified to one whose feet were staunchly planted on terra firma. Not for Pandu the flights of fancy of his sightless sibling, nor, for that matter, the ideological flirtations, the passionate convictions, the grand sweeping gestures of principle that became the hallmarks of Dhritarashtra's political style. Pandu believed in taking stock of reality, preferably with a clenched fist and eyes in the back of one's head. He balanced an hour of meditation with an hour of martial arts. 'Of course I believe in non-violence,' he would explain. 'But I want to be prepared just in case non-violence doesn't believe in me.'

His duties as the party's chief organizer were indirectly responsible for his

political differences with Dhritarashtra. The process of building up a party-structure and a cadre committed to run it in the teeth of colonial hostility convinced him that discipline and organization were far greater virtues than ideals and doctrines. It was the classic distortion, Ganapathi, to which our late Leader would herself one day fall prey, the elevation of means over ends, of methods over aspirations. As long as Gangaji was there he shrewdly harnessed the divergent skills of my two sons to the common cause. But when his grip began to slip . . .

But you see, I am getting ahead of my story again, Ganapathi. You mustn't let me. I haven't yet told you about Kunti, Pandu's faithfully infidelious wife, and how she fulfilled her husband's extraordinary request for progeny. For it was not only Gandhari the Grim who assured India's next generation of leadership by her exertions in labour. After all, Ganapathi, as you well know, we were to develop a pluralist system, so a plurality of leaders had to be born to run it.

Stop looking so lascivious, young man. I have no intention of offering you a ringside seat by Kunti's bed. Facts, that is all I intend to record, facts and names. This is history, do not forget, not pornography.

In fact, if you must know, Pandu helped choose the genetic mix his sons would inherit. Kunti's first post-marital lover (yes, first, there were others, but I shall come to that in a moment) was the youngest Indian judge of the High Court; let us refer to him only as Dharma, so as not to wound certain sensibilities, though those who know who I am speaking about will be left in no doubt as to his real identity. Dharma was learned, distinguished, good-looking in the way that only men become when they start greying at the temples, and of a highly respectable family. A man of principle, he agonized over his adultery, but found himself agonizing even more when Kunti abandoned him abruptly – as soon, in fact (though he was not to know this) as her pregnancy was confirmed.

A son was born of their union, a weak-chinned, gentle boy with a broad forehead, whom they decided to name Yudhishtir. Pandu swears that, meditating while Kunti was in the final stages of labour, he heard a voice from the heavens proclaiming that the lad would grow up to be renowned for his truthfulness and virtue. But I have always suspected that Pandu had simply been reading a biography of George Washington too late into the night and dreamt the whole thing.

When Yudhishtir was born Hastinapur was still in the family's hands and Pandu was persuaded of the need for more – what shall I call it? – 'offspring insurance' to make the succession secure. But he did not want Kunti striking up too long an association with Dharma, and the lady herself was attracted by the idea of variety. (Few women, Ganapathi, fail to be excited by the thought

of producing children from different men; it is the ultimate assertion of their creative power. Fortunately for mankind, however, or perhaps unfortunately, fewer still have the courage to put their fantasy into practice.) This time her privileged nocturnal companion was a military man, Major Vayu, of the soon-to-be-disbanded Hastinapur Palace Guard.

Vayu was a large, strong, blustery character, full of drive and energy but mercurial in temperament. He breezed into Kunti's life and out of it, his ardour more gusty than gutsy, leaving in her the seed of Pandu's second son, Bhim. Bhim the Brave, he came to be called in the servants' quarters, but also, among the exhausted ayahs, Bhim the Heavy, for his was a muscular babyhood. His narrow forehead, close-set eyes and joined eyebrows made it clear that he would never share his older brother's intellectual attainments nor inherit any part of his mother's looks; but it was also clear that in strength he would have few equals. The doctor delivering him fractured a wrist before deciding upon a Caesarian; Kunti gave up nursing him when she found herself unable to rise after a minute's suckling; a cot of iron had to be manufactured for him after he had demolished two wooden cribs with a lusty kick of his foot; and a succession of bruised ayahs had finally to be replaced by a male attendant, a former Hastinapur all-in wrestling champion. The last of the ayahs resigned after an incident she never ceased talking about: apparently she had accidentally dropped the unbearably heavy infant on to a rock in the garden and had watched in horror as the stone crumbled into dust. This time the voice from the heavens only said one word, Ganapathi: 'Ouch.'

But Pandu, absentee landlord of his wife's womb, was still not content; he wanted a son who would combine the brain of Yudhishtir with the brawn of Bhim. He went deeper and deeper into yoga and meditation, mastered the heaven-pleasing *asana* of standing motionless on one leg from dawn till dusk, asked Kunti to conserve her energies for an entire year (which, with Bhim on the premises, she was only too happy to do) and prayed for such a son. Finally, when he judged the moment to be right, he invited the revered Brahmin divine, Devendra Yogi, to partake of the pleasures of his wife's bed. The godlike yogi's expertise made the experience rewarding for Kunti in more ways than one. And thus, Ganapathi, was born Arjun, Arjun of lissom figure and sinewy muscle, Arjun of sharp mind and keen eye, Arjun of fine face and fleet foot. Oh, all right, I know I'm getting carried away again, but the boy deserves it, Ganapathi. The voice from the heavens proclaimed that Pandu's third son would be beloved of both Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer. And this time Kunti heard the voice too, as she lay drained upon the delivery bed; the rishis on the Himalayan mountain-slopes heard it; the workers in the factories looked up from the clanging wheels of their



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Madri did indeed confine herself to just one affair, as promised. But she was nothing if not imaginative: she seduced a pair of identical, and inseparable, twins. Since Ashvin and Ashwin did everything together, Madri had the double satisfaction of adhering to her promise and enjoying its violation. The result of her efforts was also doubly gratifying: not one, but two sons. Pandu, rejecting Lav and Kush, the names of the legendary Ramayana twins, as too predictable, called Madri's boys Nakul and Sahadev.

'Oh, aren't you pleased, Pandu dear?' Madri beamed over the twins' cradle. 'Twinth! Now the nasty Bwitish can't do *anything* to the succession. Or do you think, Pandu, do you think,' – and here her little round eyes gleamed at the pwospect – 'that just to be safe, I should try once more? Just once?'

'Don't you dare let her,' warned Kunti when she heard of the request. 'She'll produce triplets next, and then where will I be? Don't forget that I *am* your first wife, after all. Ever since she came into the house this Madri has been trying to steal a march on me. Scheming woman.'

And there, Ganapathi, as you can well imagine, we had the makings of a first-rate family drama, with steamy romance and hot flushing jealousy. But it was all cut short by the one event that made the entire issue of heir-conditioning redundant: the annexation of Hastinapur.



THE FIFTH BOOK:
THE POWERS OF SILENCE





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trenches and barricade their streets; and since it was quicker, and cheaper, and safer to process the jute near where it was grown, Bengal acquired a jute industry. The factories were built at last on Indian soil, and the area round Dundee finally began giving way to the environs of Dum Dum.

But if geography ensured an Indian triumph, history and economics kept the spoils in British hands. The factories were owned and managed by the sons of Scotland rather than the brethren of Bengal. And as Gangaji found, the indigenes who pulled the levers and moved the mechanical looms were paid the proverbial pittance (*their* proverb, Ganapathi, *our* pittance) which barely permitted them to eke out a living amidst the filth and stench of their slum dwellings.

It is a long story, Ganapathi, and I do not intend to recount it all here, so you can stop yawning that cavernous yawn of yours and concentrate on what I am telling you. Briefly, then, simplifying the issues at the risk of offending the historians and the jute-wallahs and the processional trade unionists and the professional apologists, what happened was this. Somebody else – an enlightened woman, an Englishwoman, in fact, indeed the sister of one of the jute-mill owners – had won a remarkable benefit for the workers during an epidemic that had swept through the slums after a particularly heavy monsoon. Sarah Moore, for this was her name, had persuaded her brother and his fellow employers to offer the workers a bonus for coming to work during the epidemic; and the bonus was a significant one, amounting to nearly 80 per cent of their normal salaries. It took the plague to earn them a decent wage, but when they got it the workers braved death and disease to work for it.

When the epidemic passed, the mill owners decided to withdraw the bonus, arguing that it had served its purpose. But the workers, led by their widowed English spokeswoman, claimed they could not continue to live without the bonus, and asked for a wage rise, if not of 80 per cent, then of 50 per cent. The employers refused, and declared a lock-out.

When Gangaji arrived in Budge Budge he found a situation verging on the desperate. The locked-out workers were, of course, being paid nothing at all. Their families were starving. I need not describe to you, Ganapathi, child of an Indian city as you undoubtedly are, the sights which met Ganga's eyes: the foetid slums; the dirt and the despair and the disrepair; the children playing in rancid drains; the little hovels without electricity or water in which human beings lived several to a square yard. This is now the classic picture of India, is it not, and French cinematographers take time off from filming the unclad forms of their women in order to focus with loving pity on the unclad forms of our children. They could have done this earlier too, they and their pen-wielding equivalents of an earlier day, but somehow all the foreign



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cause that need not have been either's. It was a pairing that would raise eyebrows and hackles for years to come.

'I don't see what you have to do with the problem, Mr Datta,' Montague Rowlatt said heavily when they accosted him in his cool, high-ceilinged office. 'It involves a dispute between my employees and myself in which I have no need for a third party, not even one who may happen to be related to me.' He cast a meaningful look at his sister, who remained determinedly unperturbed. 'However, since you ask, I don't mind telling you that my partner, Morley, and I have been discussing the matter. We have jointly decided, together with our fellow mill owners, to make a fair offer to the workers. Not their ridiculous 80 per cent, of course, and certainly not 50 per cent, but the considerably generous figure of 20 per cent.'

'Twenty per cent!' It was Sarah Moore who had risen to her feet, eyes blazing. 'That's no sort of offer, Montague, and you know it. Come, Mr Datta. It seems we shall have to take this matter further.'

Ganga, bemused, gathered up the folds of his loincloth and walked out behind the Englishwoman. And he resolved to take up the workers' cause.

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But first, Gangaji had to make the cause his own. He called a meeting of the workers under a peepul tree on the banks of the Hooghly, where the river wends its brackish way past Budge Budge to the bay. And when he asked them whether they would be willing to follow his guidance in their struggle, to seek justice through his methods and never to deviate from the path of Truth, they responded with a full-throated 'yes'.

'Very well,' Gangaji said in that bookish way of his. 'The first thing we shall do is to reformulate our demands. You, through Sarah-behn here' – yes, Ganapathi, *behn*, for Ganga had already made her, in cheerful disregard of ethnicity, appearance and colonial history, his sister – 'have asked for a 50 per cent increase in wages. Your employers offer 20 per cent. Since in pursuit of Truth we must seek no unfair advantage over our adversary, I have decided we shall now ask for 35 per cent. It is a just figure, the mill owners can afford to pay it, it is better than what you have – and it splits the difference.'

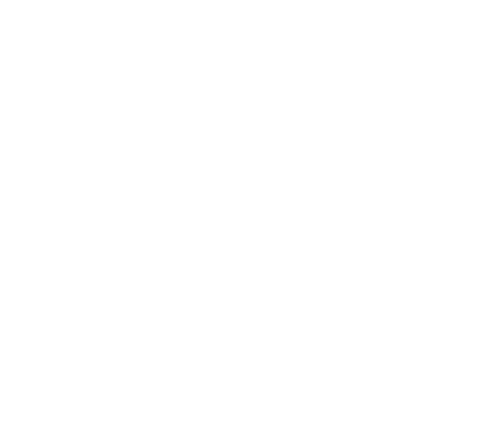
This time the roar of approval from the crowd was somewhat more muted. But the workers, having accepted Gangaji's leadership, accepted his reformulation of their demand. The struggle was on.

And Ganga waged it in his own peculiar way. This time there were no



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Ganapathi, we might simply have ignored it, or sought, perhaps, to explain ourselves to the workers, and either course would have led ultimately to the loss of credibility that costs so many leaders their authority. A modern politician might have sought to address the source of the workers' discontent and tried to find food for their families from wealthy donors; but Gangaji had already refused many offers of help from rich Indians, on the grounds that the workers had to fight their own battles. ('If they win despite starving, it will be a far truer triumph than a victory built on the charity of strangers,' he declared to me. Yes, Ganapathi, Gangaji could be tough, tough to the point of callousness.) And finally, there was, of course, the possibility – though from what I knew of Gangaji it was the slenderest of possibilities – that he might just abandon his entire crusade on the grounds that his followers were not worthy of him.

Any of these responses would have been possible for another man. But Gangaji reacted in a way that reflected and defined his uniqueness.

'From this moment onwards,' he announced in a tone that reminded me of that other terrible vow he had taken, 'I shall not eat or drink, or travel by any vehicle, until the workers' just demands have been met.'

Neither eat nor drink! We were thunderstruck. 'Ganga,' I protested, 'you cannot do this to yourself. We all need you – the workers need you.'

But Ganga refused to be moved by any entreaties. Sarah-behn, myself, other volunteers, all offered to substitute themselves for him; but not only did he turn us down, he refused even to let us join him in his fast. 'This is my decision, taken by myself alone and for myself alone,' he declared. 'The workers have looked to me so far as their leader, and now that they are wavering it is I as their leader who must stand firm.' And then, in that mild tone of voice by which he instantly disarmed his listeners, he added the famous words, the immortal words that now etch his place in every book of quotations: 'Fasting,' he said, 'is my business.'

Fasting is my business. How many ways those words can be read, Ganapathi. *Fasting is my business; fasting is my business; fasting is my business;* even (why not?) *fasting is my business.* And even those who actually heard him utter the words cannot agree on where the Great Man had placed his emphasis. It does not matter. Perhaps, in some mysterious way, he conveyed all four meanings, and many nuances beyond, in his delivery of that classic phrase. Today it has passed into history, a slogan, a caption, worn by over-use, cheapened by imitation. Yet, once the words were out of his mouth, Gangaji himself never used them again.

The next morning he arose before dawn to walk the eight miles from Sarah-behn's comfortable residence to the peepul tree by the factory. He

needed a stick now, but it was a prop more in the theatrical sense than in the physical. Of course, we all accompanied him, and as the strange procession headed past the workers' hutments, children ran out to find out what was happening and conveyed the news to their fathers. 'Gangaji has taken a vow,' the word passed from lip to sibilant lip, 'Bhishma has taken a vow.' By 7.25, when he reached the tree, a crowd had assembled around it larger than any that had greeted him so far in his daily meetings.

'Brothers and sisters,' Ganga said, joining his palms in a respectful *namaste*, 'I know I have demanded great sacrifices from you. Some of you may have begun to feel that you cannot continue, that the battle is too unequal. Yet I have asked you to be strong, for he who gives in now not only admits his weakness but weakens the strength of the others. Some of you may ask why you should heed my advice when all I am offering is my words. To them, and to all of you, I swear this solemn oath: not to eat or drink again, or travel by any means other than my own feet, until you have returned to work with a 35 per cent increase in wages.'

A great collective sigh escaped the lips of the crowd, like the first puff of a restive volcano; then a silence descended upon the throng as every man and woman near enough strained to catch Gangaji's next words.

I have told you often in the past that our cause was worth dying for. Those were not just words, my friends; I believe in them. Today I declare to you all that if the Truth does not prevail, if justice is denied, I am prepared to die.'

The volcano rumbled, Ganapathi. It burst forth in a warm, molten gush of human lava, as man after man rose to his feet to shout his gratitude and his reverence for the Great Teacher. Praise mingled with prayers, shouts with slogans, until Ganga, seated in his usual mild-mannered and bespectacled way under the tree, seemed borne aloft on a cloud of adulation. In the confusion a brocaded Muslim weaver in a brilliant red fez leapt up and pulled out a knife. It appeared that what he was saying was that he was prepared to die immediately for the cause, if need be; but some undoubtedly thought he was threatening to finish off the English exploiters, and a great clamour rose up in support of his gesture. Clearly, Ganga's philosophy had not been fully understood, but he had achieved his objective.

At last the rest of India began to sit up and take notice of what Ganga was doing in the obscure Bengal town of Budge Budge. Indian nationalism had generated its share of agitators, boycotters and bonfire-stokers; its leaders had resorted to legal texts, holy sacraments and bombs; but no one had ever before tried to starve himself to death. Curiosity was aroused on a national scale, and opinion was inevitably divided. Radical students signalled their

support by setting fire to university mess-halls, though some may merely have taken this as a reflection on the cooking. The eminent Scotswoman who headed the Indo-Irish Home Rule League cabled Ganga urging him not to waste his life on so trivial a cause as low wages. The leading English newspaper of the Bengal Presidency devoted three inches to the affair on an inside page, just beneath its Nature Notebook. A pleasant American professor came by the peepul tree to ask Ganga whether he had always resented his father.

The Scottish mill owners were apoplectic. 'For God's sake tell him not to be silly, Sarah,' Montague pleaded with his estranged sister. 'This is childish. Like a little girl denied a lollipop, threatening to hold her breath until she turns blue. And it's not even any of his damn business! This is between us and our workers. What's *his* bloody life got to do with it, anyway?'

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'Blackmail,' Sarah-behn said to Gangaji, stooped low over his books under the peepul tree. 'That's what they're calling it at the Mill Owners' Association. Blackmail.'

'They are wrong, my sister.' Ganga's voice was hoarse with thirst, enfeebled by hunger, but it emerged, Ganapathi, with spirit. 'My fast has nothing to do with their decision. I am not fasting to make them change their mind. *That* would be blackmail, and that would be wrong. Of what use would it be if the mill owners agreed to pay 35 per cent merely to save my life? They would not be acting in accordance with the Truth, or because they believe the workers' cause is just. That would be a hollow victory. No, Sarah-behn, I am fasting to strengthen the workers' resolve, to show them how firmly they must hold their beliefs if they expect them to triumph. My fast demonstrates my conviction, that is all. It is not meant to be a threat to anyone, certainly not to your brothers, the mill owners. Tell them so, Sarah-behn.'

She tried to tell them so. Sarah understood Ganga intuitively. It was one of the odder mysteries of Indian history that the person who most quickly got on to Ganga's instinctive wavelength was not one of us from Hastinapur, who had all found his eccentricities so difficult, but this English bourgeoisie with the complexion of an under-ripe beetroot.

She understood him partially because she had come to understand something of the Indian tradition as it was lived in the hovels and shacks of the Indian poor and the lower-middle class, that section of the people whom Indian nationalism had so completely ignored until Ganga came and gave

them their place in the sun. In the homes of the lowly factory clerks, whose wives she had taken the trouble to visit at times of distress or celebration, Sarah had come to admire the Indian capacity for altruistic self-denial. You know, Ganapathi, how Indians starve on certain days of the week, deny themselves their favourite foods, eliminate essentials from their diets, all to accumulate moral rather than physical credit. Where a Western woman misses a meal in the interest of her figure, her Indian sister dedicates her starvation to a cause, usually a male one. (Her husband or son, of course, never responds in kind: he manifests his appreciation of her sacrifice by enjoying a larger helping of her cooking.)

Sarah saw Ganga's act in this context, and understood it as an act of affirmation rather than of blackmail. But her brother and his friends in the Mill Owners' Association were no more capable of thinking in those terms than of converting to Hinduism. And they did not want to listen to her.

With each passing day Ganga weakened. His thinness, remarkable even in his later Hastinapur days, verged painfully on the ridiculous; his features sagged, until all that could be discerned under the stubble was the existence of skin beneath the staring, listless eyes. The visitors came in larger numbers, their concern for his health meriting larger and larger headlines in the papers. The crowds swelling outside his makeshift shelter were increasingly more angry than curious. The nervous jute-mill owners sent for a doctor, who took Gangaji's feeble pulse and declared that his condition was seriously deteriorating. If something was not done soon, he would be beyond recall, and Indian nationalism would have its first non-violent martyr.

We who maintained the unceasing vigil of those days and nights can never forget them, Ganapathi. We begged and pleaded with him to listen to us, to call off his suicidal action, to drink something, to accept a compromise. He was adamant: his fast would continue until the workers had their 35 per cent. After a while he simply stopped responding to our requests, turning his face away in silence if any of us ever raised the issue. I will admit, Ganapathi, that on the tenth day we had almost given up. I shall not forget an accidental glimpse of Sarah-behn leaving his side that evening, her strong face swollen, awash with tears.

At last the British authorities decided to take matters into their own hands. The consequences of inaction were too awful to contemplate. A terse message went to the Mill Owners' Association of Budge Budge from the Governor of Bengal: 'Give in.'

'Thirty-five per cent!' Sarah-behn yelled, her pale cheeks reddening in excitement as she brandished a piece of paper, a paper of peace, in Ganga's face. 'You've won!'

'No, my dear sister,' the weak voice croaked in response, as a faint smile battled through his exhaustion. Gangaji's hands spread out in a gesture that took in the delirious, screaming throng which had held out with him. '*They have won.*'

A glass of orange juice was brought to him, and he bowed his head while Sarah-behn held it out for him to sip. As the lukewarm droplets soaked into his parched gullet, the crowd burst into an ecstatic roar, as if the bobbing of his Adam's apple was the first sight of a lifebuoy to a dangerously listing raft. The oranges that season were sour, Ganapathi, but the taste of victory, and survival, was deliciously sweet.

You can imagine the relief we all felt that day, Ganapathi, and the sense of triumph. Years later, in that candid autobiography of his, Ganga wrote that the moment of his sudden decision to embark on a fast was a 'holy' one for him. The inspiration, he says, came in a blinding flash; he just knew that this was what he had to do to pass his personal ordeal by fire. The workers had sworn to follow and be guided by him; he had to fast to prevent them from breaking their promise. And when he announced it, Ganga writes, it changed the course of his struggle immediately and for ever. 'The meeting, which had been hitherto unresponsive, came to life as if by a miracle,' was, I think, the way he put it. It was he who brought it to life, of course, and he who brought life to it. *His life.*

And yet, Ganapathi, what a small triumph this momentous first fast achieved. Thirty-five per cent? Yes, but 35 per cent for just *one day*. For that was the formula the wily British government had worked out for the mill owners. Ganga had said he would fast until the workers could go back to work with a 35 per cent increase; ergo, under the settlement, the workers could go back to work with a 35 per cent increase – but they could not keep that increase beyond the first day. For Day Two, it was 20 per cent, and for every subsequent day until the government's arbitrator announced his verdict: 27.5 per cent. You have to admire the ingenuity of that formula, Ganapathi. The 35 per cent ended Ganga's fast and the workers' strike; the 20 per cent ensured that the mill owners did not have to concede defeat, which might have encouraged other workers to contemplate strikes; and the 27.5 per cent appeared to be fair to both sides while giving the arbitrator the most obvious figure for his solution. The workers of Budge Budge, who had started off



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To leave Gangaji aside for a moment – though that, as you can see, Ganapathi, is never easy; you see how he keeps taking over our story – let us return to his wards, the newly political, newly parental princelings of Hastinapur. They have not featured in the episodes I have recounted so far from Gangaji's career, for the simple reason that they were not there at the time, though to say so would probably be considered heretical by the numerous devotees of each today. Our contemporary hagiographers would have us believe that Dhritarashtra, with his dark glasses and his white stick, was everywhere by Gangaji's side in the struggle for Independence, and that – until he disagreed with his mentor – so was Pandu. Well, Ganapathi, you can take it from me that they were not, for most of the crucial events in Gangaji's life and career were those in which he acted alone, resolving the dictates of his hyperactive conscience within, and by, himself.

Not that his followers, our later leaders, were entirely idle at the time. After all, Independence was not won by a series of isolated incidents but by the constant, unremitting actions of thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, of men and women across the land. We tend, Ganapathi, to look back on history as if it were a stage play, with scene building upon scene, our hero moving from one action to the next in his remorseless stride to the climax. Yet life is never like that. If life were a play the noises offstage, and for that matter the sounds of the audience, would drown out the lines of the principal actors. That, of course, would make for a rather poor tale; and so the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood.

So it is, Ganapathi, that in this memoir we light up one corner of our collective past at a time, focus on one man's actions, one village's passion, one colonel's duty, but all the while life is going on elsewhere, Ganapathi: as the shots ring out in the Bibighar Gardens babies are being born, nationalists are being thrown into prison, husbands are quarrelling with wives, petitions are being filed in courtrooms, stones are being flung at policemen, and diligent young Indian students are sailing to London to sit for the examinations that



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attach any importance to the priorities of those who do, but they resent them deeply.) If Gangaji saw any of this, he showed little sign. He carried on as oblivious as always to the dilemmas of others, doing nothing to heal the growing rift.

That there was a rift became impossible to conceal. Pandu began to take positions at variance with Dhritarashtra's. He constantly urged the adoption of a harder line against the British than the party – its strategy guided by Gangaji's wisdom and Dhritarashtra's cunning – was willing to adopt. When the Prince of Wales, an empty-headed lad with a winsome smile, paid a royal visit to examine the most prized jewel in the crown he was briefly to inherit, Pandu urged that he be boycotted. But Dhritarashtra instead persuaded the party to permit him to present the Prince a petition (don't frown, Ganapathi, alliteration is my only vice – and after all, it is one thing you *can* do in Sanskrit). When the government in London then sent a commission of seven white men to determine whether the derisory 'reforms' of a few years earlier were helping Indians to progress to self-government (or whether, as Whitehall thought and wished to hear, the reforms had already 'gone too far' and needed reformulating), Pandu proposed a non-violent stir at the docks to prevent the unwelcome seven from alighting on to Indian soil. But this time Dhritarashtra wanted the party to content itself with – yes, Ganapathi, you've guessed it – a boycott; and once again, with Gangaji's toothless smile of benediction behind him, Dhritarashtra had his way. It became apparent to Pandu that Dhritarashtra's triumphs were basically of Gangaji's making, and that a large number, perhaps a majority, of the Kaurava Party were backing his half-brother not because of any intrinsic faith in his ideas but because they came with the blessing of the man Sir Richard had taken unpleasantly to describing as Public Enema Number One.

I myself caught a whiff of Pandu's bitterness at a Working Committee meeting of the party which I happened to attend. At one point I was talking to Dhritarashtra and the skeletal Gangaji when Pandu walked palely past. 'The Kaurava Trinity,' he muttered audibly for my benefit – 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost'.

Of course he was exaggerating my own importance, for I sought no active role in the Kaurava leadership. The mantle of elder statesman had fallen on me when I was scarcely old enough to merit the adjective, and I was content with



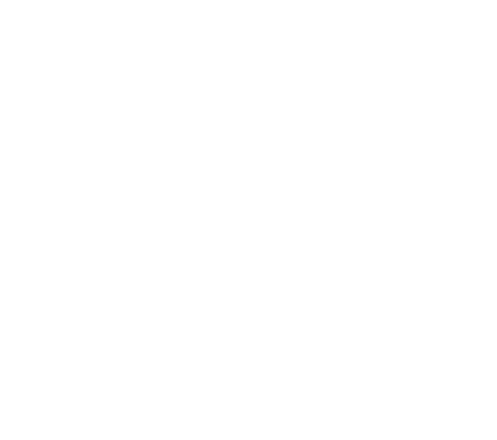
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the expenditure on foreign wars mounted they taxed our rice, our cloth and our salt. We had thought they simply couldn't go any further. Till the day they announced a tax on the one luxury still available to the Indian masses – the mango.

The mango is, of course, the king of fruits, though in recent years our export policies have made it more the fruit of kings – or of Middle Eastern sheikhs, to be precise. And the wonder of it is that – again before foreign markets became more important to our rulers than domestic bazaars – the mango was available to the common man in abundance. It was as if the good Lord, having given the Indian peasant droughts, and floods, and floods after droughts, and heat, and dust, and low wages, and British rule, said to him, all right, your cup of woe runneth over, drink instead from the juice of a ripe Chausa, and it will make up for all the misery I have inflicted upon you. The best mangoes in the world grew wild across the Indian countryside, dropping off the branches of trees so hardy they did not need looking after. And we took them for granted, consuming them raw, or pickled, or ripe, as our fancy seized us, content in the knowledge that there would always be more mangoes on those branches, waiting to be picked.

Then came the stunning announcement: the colonial regime had decided that the mango too had to earn its keep. Mangoes were a cash crop; accordingly, a tax was to be levied on the fruit, calculated on the basis of each tree's approximate annual yield. Trees in the vicinity of private property were to be attached to the nearest landlord's holdings for tax purposes; trees growing wild would be treated as common property and the tax levied on the village as a whole. District officials were instructed to conduct a mango-tree-registration campaign to ensure that the tax records were brought up to date. Poor village panchayats and panicky landlords chopped down their suddenly expensive foliage or fenced it. The days of the free munch were over.

At first the people reacted in stunned disbelief. Then, as the implications of the decision sank in, they gave vent – for they were simple people, used to calling a spade a white man's garden tool – to collective howls of outrage.

Gangaji heard the echoes and sensed a cause. He was at the ashram one day when a Kaurava Party member from Palghat, Mahadeva Menon, raised the matter over the Great Teacher's habitual lunch of nuts and fruit.

'Mahaguru,' he said in his high-pitched voice, lips rounding the flattest of English syllables – for English was the only language he had in common with Gangaji, as indeed it is my own sole means of dictating this memoir to you – 'there is something really terrible going on in our country these days.' (He actually said 'cundry', but you can spell that as you have been taught to, young man.) 'The peeble' – spell that 'people', Ganapathi, you really are



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to you, my brothers and sisters. This may well be my last speech to you all, standing on the sacred soil of my beloved Hastinapur.'

(He was actually standing not on soil at all, whether sacred or profane, but on planks of wood erected to elevate him to the view of his audience. But the lumps were already forming in every throat in the audience, Ganapathi, and Ganga was poised to milk every tear-drop. I marvelled once more at how wrong Pandu could be. Trivialize the cause? Gangaji could dramatize and ennable the most insignificant of causes when he chose to.)

'I shall personally break the law by violating the terms of the Mango Act. My companions will do the same. We will undoubtedly be arrested. Despite our arrests, I expect and trust that the stream of our volunteer civil resisters will flow unbroken.

'But whatever happens, let there not be the slightest breach of the peace, even if we are all arrested, even if we are all assaulted. We have resolved to utilize our resources in a purely non-violent struggle. Let no one raise his fist in anger. This is my hope and prayer, and I wish these words of mine to reach every corner of our country.

'From this moment, let the call go forth, from this ashram where I have lived for Truth, to all our people across the length and breadth of India, to launch civil disobedience of the mango laws. These laws can be violated in many ways. It is an offence to pluck mangoes from any tree which has not been marked as having been duly registered and taxed. The possession, consumption or sale of contraband mangoes (which means any mango from any such tree) is also, in the eyes of our British rulers, an offence. The purchasers of such mangoes are equally guilty. I call on you all, then, to choose any or all of these methods to break the mango monopoly of the British government.'

A cheer rose up at these words, Ganapathi, but Ganga was still drawing tears:

'Act, then, and act not for me but for yourselves and for India. I myself am of little importance, a humble servant of the people among whom I have been privileged to live. I am certain to be arrested, and I do not know when I shall return to you, my dear brothers and sisters. But do not assume that after I am gone there will be no one left to guide you. It is not I, but Dhritarashtra who is your guide. He is blind, but he sees far. He has the capacity to lead.'

And so Ganga soaked his listeners in their own emotions and anointed Dhritarashtra as his successor with their tears. It was at this point that Pandu, who had disdained the cause but come to the ashram out of loyalty to the Mahaguru, walked out, never to return to his teacher's side.

The Great Mango March began the next morning. We all slept the night in the open air, in the grounds of the ashram, the reporters from the international press camping on the grass alongside sweepers and bazaar merchants and college students. Ganga awoke the next morning faintly surprised not to have been roused in his sleep by the clink of handcuffs. 'The government is puzzled and perplexed,' he triumphantly explained to the journalists, whom he had assured the previous day of his certain arrest. 'But have no fear – the police will come.'

We set out, then, Ganapathi, seventy-eight of us, volunteers culled from all over the country, on the Great Mango March. What a brilliant sense of the theatrical Ganga had. Mangoes could be found anywhere, but it was not enough for Ganga to march to the nearest tree and pluck its fruit: he knew that would not make good copy. He wanted to give the reporters with him something to report, and he wanted to inflate the issue to one of national importance by keeping it in the news for as long as possible. What better way to do that than by a 288-mile march from the ashram to the grove of a landlord with Kaurava Party sympathies who had refrained so far from registering his trees? Would not the impact of this *padayatra* exceed even that of his actual violation of the mango laws? And if the British arrested him *en route*, wouldn't that be even better?

It was brilliant, Ganapathi, what your generation would call a low-risk strategy. Don't ever forget, young man, that we were not led by a saint with his head in the clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground.

Look at the newsreels of that time, Ganapathi. The black-and-white film is grainy, even scratched, the people in it move with unnaturally rapid jerkiness, and the commentator sounds like an announcer at a school sports meet, but despite it all you can capture some of the magic of the march. There is Gangaji himself at the head of the procession, bald, more or less toothless, holding a stave taller than himself, his bony legs and shoulders barely covered by his habitual undress, looking far too old and frail for this kind of thing, yet marching with a firm and confident stride accentuated by the erratic speed of the celluloid. There is Sarah-behn by his side in her white, thin-bordered sari, looking prim and determined, and Mahadeva Menon, for all the world like a Kerala *karanavar* on an inspection-tour of his paddy-fields; and behind them the rest of us, in homespun *khadi* and cheap leather chappals, showing no sign of fear or fatigue. Indeed, there is nothing grim about our procession, none of the earnest tragedy that marks the efforts of doomed idealists. Instead,

Gangaji's grinning waves of benediction, the banners of welcome strung across the roads at every village through which we pass, the scenes of smiling women in gaily coloured saris emerging in the blazing heat to sprinkle water on our dusty paths, the cameos of little children shyly thrusting bunches of marigolds into our hands, the waves of fresh volunteers joining us at every stop to swell our tide of marchers into a flood, all this speaks of the joyousness of our spirit as we march on.

Twelve miles a day, Ganapathi, for twenty-four days, and yet there was no sign of weariness, neither in Ganga, nor in the women, nor in my own ageless legs. Nor was there any sign of the police, though Gangaji confidently asserted to the journalists at each halt for refreshment that he expected to be arrested any day. It was, of course, another clever ploy from the master tactician. The very prediction of imminent arrest kept the police away and simultaneously encouraged, indeed obliged, the journalists to stay on. But Gangaji knew perfectly well that he would not be arrested, indeed could not be arrested, for he had as yet broken no law.

At last we arrived at the mango grove, still unescorted by police, but with notebooks and cameras much in evidence. The landlord came forth to greet us; ladies of his household stepped forward with little brass pitchers to wash our feet. Gangaji walked on, towards the oldest and biggest tree in the grove. For a moment I feared that we would lose him in the crush of humanity, that the sheer numbers around him would swallow up the dramatic impact of what he was about to do.

But once again artifice came to the aid of Truth. The landlord's workers had erected a little platform for Gangaji, to be ascended by seven simple wooden steps. As silence settled expectantly around him, the Mahaguru, his little rimless spectacles firmly on his nose, his staff in his right hand, slowly, deliberately, mounted each step. At the top of the rough-hewn ladder, standing squarely on the little platform, he paused. Then, with a decisive gesture, he reached out a bony hand toward a ripe, luscious Langda mango dangling from the branch nearest him and wrenched it from its stalk. As the crowd erupted in a crescendo of cheering, he turned to them, his hand upraised, the golden-red symbol of his defiance blazing its message of triumph.

What poetry there was in that moment, Ganapathi! In that fruit, Ganga seemed to be holding the forces of nature in his hands, recalling the fertile strength of the Indian soil from which had sprung the Indian soul, reaffirming the fullness of the nation's past and the seed of the people's future. The cameras clicked, and whirred, and flashed, and Ganga stood alone, the sun glinting off his glasses, his hand raised for freedom.



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imperialists up to ridicule. And colonialism, as the poet said, cannot bear very much hilarity.

Even Pandu, who had held himself conspicuously aloof from the agitation, was placed on the defensive: for once it seemed that he had been indisputably wrong in gauging the potential of one of Ganga's ideas. But then suddenly everything came unstuck.

Gangaji was still in prison when reports came in of what had happened in Chaurasta. In this small provincial town the mango agitation had, quite simply, got out of hand. The business of plucking and consuming forbidden fruit undoubtedly contains elements that appeal to the hooligan fringe that lurks at the edge of any mass movement. In Chaurasta the local Kaurava organizers had chosen their volunteers carelessly, or allowed too many outsiders to join them; whatever the reason, their civil disobedience became very uncivil indeed. Stones were being flung at fruit on the highest branches when the police arrived on the spot to make their routine arrests. The protestors, instead of submitting quietly to the guardians of the law, aimed their stones at the uniformed targets instead. The police – all Indians, mind you – turned their lathis on the *satyagrahis*; in the ensuing unequal battle a number of ribs and skulls were cracked and several bones and noses broken before the demonstrators were hauled off to prison. Word of the 'outrage' spread quickly, and by nightfall a howling mob had gathered outside the police *thana*, shouting, '*Khoon ka badla khoon*' – blood for blood, a slogan we were to hear later, in your own days, Ganapathi, from much the same sort of people and with equally tragic results.

It was late, and the *thana* was occupied by just two young policemen – Indians, Hindi-speakers. One of them, foolishly enough, stepped out to ask the crowd to disperse. Those were his last words; he was dragged into the mob and beaten and kicked to death. His terrified colleague inside was desperately trying to summon reinforcements when the screaming horde burst in and tore him literally to pieces. As they left, their bloodlust slaked, the mob set fire to the *thana*, with the dead or dying policemen still inside it.

The next day the Deputy Governor of Ganga's prison came into his cell with a newspaper: the headlines were bigger than any other so far devoted to the mango agitation. The official, a pugnacious Ulsterman, threw the paper on to a table in front of his prisoner. 'Is this the non-violent lesson you are trying to teach the British, Mr Datta?' he asked heavily.

Ganga read the article without a word, passing over a photograph of himself with the caption: "'Mahaguru' Ganga Datta: instigator?' At the end, he let the paper drop from his hand, and the prison official was surprised to see that the Great Teacher's eyes were brimming with sorrow.



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'Indeed.' Sir Richard's tone was distant. He could not bring himself to feign interest in the dietary predilections of this oddly matched pair.

'Oh, yes.' Gangaji warmed to his theme. 'You see, I had this terrible dream one night.'

'A dream,' Sir Richard echoed dully.

'That's right. I dreamt a cow spoke to me.'

'A cow?'

'A large, sad-eyed white cow, with a long downturned mouth. "Don't let them do this to me, Mahaguru!" she was crying. And then I saw she was standing and swaying terribly, and there were all sorts of people crouching on the floor beneath her, boys and girls and children and adults and peasants and clerks, all tugging and pulling at her udders, milking her as she cried piteously to me.'

A choking sound emerged from Sir Richard.

'But it was not milk, Sir Richard, that was coming out. It was blood! And in my dream, I could do nothing. I woke shivering, with that cow's cries ringing in my ears. From that moment I resolved never to drink milk again. The cow is our mother, Sir Richard.' Gangaji suddenly and earnestly turned to him. 'Yours and mine. It is written in our scriptures. She provides nourishment and sustenance for us all. Is it right that we should cause her pain?'

Sir Richard remained speechless.

'Of course it is not. There and then I decided I could not cause her any more suffering. I was determined not to drink milk ever again.'

He stopped. Sir Richard slowly exhaled. 'I see,' he said, not knowing what he saw but relieved he would no longer have to hear.

'But then I fell ill,' Gangaji added abruptly. 'The doctors came. They said I needed minerals and protein in an easily accessible form.' He smiled. 'Another fine British phrase. I asked them what that meant, and they said I should drink milk. But I told them I could not drink milk. I had taken a vow in my heart never to drink milk again.'

Sir Richard looked toward the entrance of the room as if for deliverance. Gangaji went on.

'I asked the doctors what would happen if I did not drink the milk they wanted me to.'

"Why, then," they said, "you will die."

"But we will all die one day," I replied. "What is wrong with that?"

"It is just that you will die much sooner than if you did drink the milk," they said to me. "Next week, perhaps."

Sir Richard looked wistfully gratified at the prospect.

'It was then that Sarah-behn came to my rescue,' the Mahaguru said. 'I was



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THE SEVENTH BOOK:
THE SON ALSO RISES





Just look at that, Ganapathi. I begin a section vowing to stay clear of Gangaji, and what does the man do? He takes over the section. As long as he is around it will be impossible for us to concentrate on other people, to dwell on Pandu's famous five or to pursue the darker destinies of Gandhari the Grim and the steatopygous Madri. In the olden days our epic narrators thought nothing of leaving a legendary hero stranded in mid-conquest while digressing into sub-plots, with stories, fables and anecdotes within each. But these, Ganapathi, are more demanding times. Leave Ganga to his devices and start telling fables about Devayani and Kacha, and your audience will walk away in droves. The only interruptions they will stand for these days are catchy numbers sung by gyrating starlets, and Kacha isn't catchy enough, more's the pity.

So I suppose we may as well continue our tale, Ganapathi: give Gangaji a good run. But in order to do that we have to acknowledge that the Mahaguru was no longer the only runner.

Yes, Ganapathi, as the story of our impending nationalist victory gathers momentum, so too does a cause which Gangaji had barely begun to take seriously. A cause led by a young man whose golden skin glowed like the sun and on whose forehead shone the bright little half-moon that became his party's symbol. The cause of the Muslim Group.

The Muslims of India were no more cohesive and monolithic a group than any other in the country. Until politics intervened Indians simply accepted that people were all sorts of different things – Brahmins and Thakurs and Marwaris and Nairs and Lingayats and Pariahs and countless other varieties of Hindu, as well as Roman Catholics and Syrian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Indian Anglicans, Jains and Jews, Keshadhari Sikhs and Mazhabi Sikhs, tribal animists and neo-Buddhists, all of whom flourished on Indian soil along with hundreds and thousands of other castes and sub-castes. Indian Muslims themselves were not just Sunnis and Shias, but Moplahs and Bohras and Khojas, Ismailis and Qadianis and Ahmediyas and Kutchi Memons and Allah alone knew what else. These differences were simply a fact of Indian life, as

incontestable and as innocuous as the different species of vegetation that sprout and flower across our land.

We tend to label people easily, and in a country the size of ours that is perhaps inevitable, for labels are the only way out of the confusion of sheer numbers. To categorize people is to help identify them, and what could be more natural in a country as diverse and over-peopled as India than the desire to 'place' each Indian? There is nothing demeaning about that, Ganapathi, whatever our modern secular Westernized Indian gentlemen may say. On the contrary, the application of such labels uplifts each individual, for he knows that there is no danger of him being lost in the national morass, that there are distinctive aspects to his personal identity which he shares only with a small group, and that this specialness is advertised by the label others apply to him.

So we Indians are open about our differences; we do not attempt to subsume ourselves in a homogeneous mass, we do not resort to the identity-disguising tricks of standardized names or uniform costumes or even of a common national language. We are all different; as the French, that most Indian of European peoples, like to put it, albeit in another context, *vive la différence!*

And, yes, when there are such differences, we do discriminate. Each group discriminates against the others. Your lot were free to be themselves so long as this did not encroach on my lot's right to do the same.

Mutual exclusion did not necessarily mean hostility. This was the prevailing social credo of the time, but there was a high degree of constructive interaction among India's various communities under these rules. It was, of course, Gangaji who taught us that the very rules were offensive. As with much else that he tried to teach the nation, we did not entirely learn to change our prejudices. But we became most adept at concealing them.

At any rate – and this is the point of my little sociological lecture, so you can wipe that the-old-man's-digressing-again look off your face, Ganapathi – we had never taken our social differences into the political arena. Maharajas and sultans had engaged their ministers and generals with scant regard for religion, creed or, for that matter, national origin. Aurangzeb, the most Islamic of the Mughals, relied on his Rajput military commanders to put down rival Muslim satraps; the Maratha Peshwas, the original Hindu chauvinists, employed Turkish captains of artillery. No, Ganapathi, religion had never had much to do with our national politics. It was the British civil serpent who made our people collectively bite the apple of discord.

Divide et impera, they called it in the language of their own Roman conquerors – divide and rule. Stress, elevate, sanctify and exploit the differences amongst your subjects, and you can reign over them for ever – or for as near to ever as makes no difference. Imagine the horror of the British in 1857



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its way to dominance of the organization (these were the days, Ganapathi, when Dhritarashtra and Pandu were still comrades-in-arms), was being prevented from carrying the day only by the defiance of Karna, whose scathing sarcasm about the other side was proving, as always, effective. 'This party is not going to overthrow the British by leading rabble through the streets,' he was saying. 'The mightiest Empire in the world, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers under arms, is not going to be brought down by the great unwashed. There is no Bastille to break open, no feeble king to overrun, but a sophisticated, highly trained, deeply entrenched system of government which we must deal with on its own terms. Those terms, gentlemen' – and here Karna fixed his audience with that steely gaze above which the half-moon on his forehead seemed to throb with a light all its own – 'are the terms of the law, of familiarity with British constitutional jurisprudence, of parliamentary practice. We must develop and use these skills to wrest power from rulers who cannot deny it to us under their own rules.'

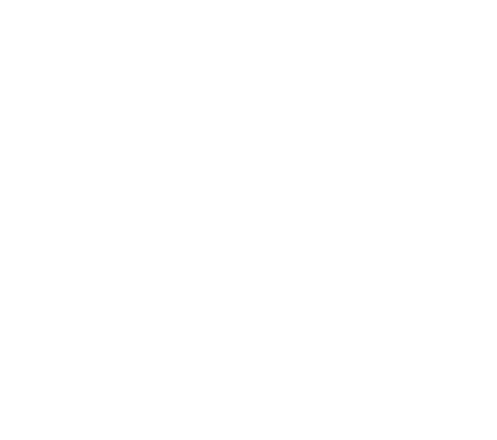
Karna looked around the table, confirming that every pair of eyes, even the tilt of Dhritarashtra's unseeing profile, was turned toward him. 'We cannot hope to rule ourselves by leading mobs of people who are ignorant of the desideratum of self-rule. Populism and demagoguery do not move parliaments, my friends. Breaking the law will not help us to make the law one day. I do not subscribe to the current fashion for the masses so opportunistically advanced by a family of disinherited princes. In no country in the world do the 'masses' rule: every nation is run by its leaders, whose learning and intelligence are the best guarantee of its success. I say to my distinguished friends: leave the masses to themselves. Let us not abdicate our responsibility to the party and the cause by placing at our head those unfit to lead us.'

Of course it was arrogant stuff, Ganapathi, but Karna's was the kind of arrogance that inspires respect rather than resentment. God knows how far he might have gone, and which direction the Kauravas might have taken, were it not for the knock on the door that interrupted him in full flow.

'Excuse me, Mr Karna, sir,' coughed an embarrassed *durwan*, 'but there is a man in a driver's uniform outside who says he must see you. I explained to him that you were busy and could not be interrupted, but he insisted it was very important. I . . . I . . . er . . . asked him who he was, sir, and he said . . . he said . . . he was your father.'

Karna's burnished skin paled during this lengthy explanation, and then a voice sounded outside: 'Let me in, I say. My son will see me. I must . . .' And then the door was flung open, and a dishevelled figure appeared in a sweat-stained white uniform, peaked driver's cap in hand, anxiety distorting his face.

'Karna,' he cried in anguish. 'It is your mother . . .'



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one thing, that his position was undermined by the demonstrable effectiveness of Gangaji's methods; he could at best have slowed the capture of the party by the Hastinapuris, but he could not have prevented it. There was, for another, his own ego, which could not have abided the subordinate or at least co-equal role that Dhritarashtra and Pandu, let alone Gangaji himself, would have imposed upon him. Karna was one of those who would rather be king of an island than courtier, or even minister, in a great empire.

And then there was the altogether more complicated matter of religion. Don't get me wrong – Mohammed Ali, for all that he had earned his 'Karna', bore no resemblance to the robed-and-bearded ayatollahs of current Islamic iconography. He despised the mullahs and disregarded their prohibitions. Where Dhritarashtra learned to brew his own tea in England, Karna acquired a taste for Scotch and cocktail sausages. Far from praying five times a day, he prided himself on his scientific, and therefore agnostic, cast of mind. His outlook was that of an Englishman of his age and profession: 'modern' (to use an adjective that has outlived more changes of connotation than any other in the language), formalist, rational, secular. It was not Islam that separated him from Gangaji, but Hinduism.

I see from the look of astonishment on your face that I shall have to explain myself. It is really very simple, Ganapathi. Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of a Hindu. The Mahaguru's traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient texts, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealized pre-British past that Karna did not believe in (and was impatient with) – all this made the young man mistrustful of the Great Teacher. The very title in which Gangaji had acquiesced made Karna uncomfortable: in his world there were no Mahagurus, only Great Learners. And Gangaji's mass politics were, to Karna, based on an appeal to the wrong instincts; they embodied an atavism that in his view would never take the country forward. A Kaurava Party of prayer-meetings and unselective eclecticism was not a party he would have cared to lead, let alone to remain a member of.

In other words, Karna found the Kauravas under Gangaji insufficiently secular, and this made him, paradoxically, more consciously Muslim. Gangaji's efforts to transcend his Hindu image by stressing the liberalism of his interpretation of it only made matters worse. When the Mahaguru, in one of his more celebrated pronouncements, declared his faith in all religions with the words, 'I am a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Zoroastrian, a Jew,' Karna responded darkly: 'Only a Hindu could say that.'

This doesn't mean, Ganapathi, that Karna slammed the door on the Kauravas and went off straight away to join the Gaga's discredited Group.



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'I shall make myself perfectly clear. I have no desire to offer advice, as you put it, or counsel, to an ineffective covey of irrelevant old men. If you'll pardon my language, sir. And now I shall take my leave. I have other pressing matters to attend to.'

The *Gaga*, to Karna's surprise, chuckled, restraining the young man with a pudgy hand. 'Come, come,' he said, pushing the lawyer with surprising strength back towards the chair. 'Pardon your language!' he gave vent to a throaty chortle. 'I shall do nothing of the kind. That is precisely the kind of language we need to hear more of in the Muslim Group. Sit down, dear chap, and tell me what *you* think you could do for us. Apart from giving us advice, that is.' He laughed heartily and clapped his hands for more pastries. Karna, mollified, his half-moon fading to blend with the golden skin around it, allowed himself to be steered to a seat.

'Good,' said the *Gaga*, subsiding once again into the upholstery. 'Now, tell me.'

'I have given the matter some thought,' the lawyer said. 'At first I hesitated even to come here; I have never had a very high opinion of the political achievements of your Group, despite my personal regard for many of its members.' The *Gaga* acknowledged the courtesy, and the criticism it modified, with a gracious nod. 'In the ordinary course I would have been reluctant to identify myself solely with one community. But I do not like the direction that the Kaurava movement is taking, and I am forced to acknowledge that of the available political alternatives, the Muslim Group, which at least enjoys a certain prestige in the eyes of the Raj, has the best potential.'

He paused here to look meaningfully at the *Gaga*, who nodded, a lemon tart between his cheeks making other communication difficult.

'I say potential, Your Highness, and I use the word advisedly,' Karna continued. 'Because I do not believe the Group as it is at present constituted has any prospect worth the name, except to serve as a forum for the landed Muslim interest and to speak for the secular concerns of the community from time to time – without, that is, wielding any real political power. The only positions the Group has gained are those to which the British have chosen to appoint its members. We must be grateful for that, but we cannot afford to be content with it.'

'Quite so,' the *Gaga* concurred, hastily swallowing a morsel. 'Quite so.'

'We are reasonably secure under the British, but we must think of the future,' Karna went on. 'A future under Ganga Datta's Kauravas does not bear thinking about. Neither you nor I would have any place in the kind of India they are likely to construct.'

'I quite agree,' the *Gaga* intoned. 'Go on.'



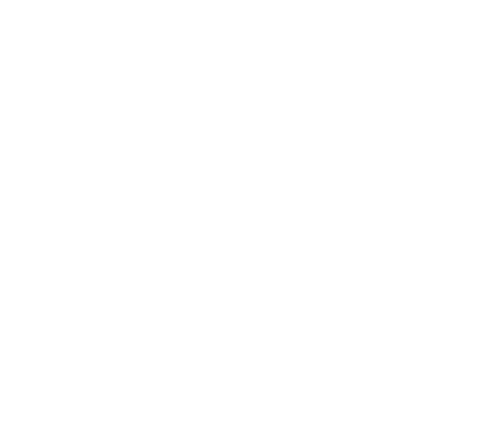
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Let us leave them there for a minute, Ganapathi, and take a quick look at the others. The wives and children of politicians may not lead such momentous lives, but that is no reason for us to ignore them. Pandu's extended family, for instance, flourished in his absence. Though Madri did tend once in a while to look long and wistfully at herself in the mirror, she and Kunti ran a remarkable household for their five sons.

And what sons they were, Ganapathi! Yudhishtir showed every sign of rapidly vindicating his father's astral prophecies by excelling at his studies, making a habit of standing first in his class at every examination he took. And if he was overly fond of starched shirts and encyclopaedias, neither was likely to do him much harm in the courtroom career for which everyone believed he was destined. Bhim developed stature and musculature with each successive meal, and from the first became the strong-armed protector of his brothers. He was too heavy to swagger, but his lumbering tread was held in dread – no, no, Ganapathi, I am not returning to verse, keep your pen on the same line there – by every would-be juvenile bully. Arjun, of course, was perfection with pimples. Fleet of foot and keen of mind, supple and sensitive, lean and strong, a sportsman and a scholar, Arjun united all the opposite virtues of human nature: he was prince and commoner, brain and brawn, yin and yang. As for the twins, Nakul and Sahadev, they were the right foils for their exceptionally endowed brothers, for each was pleasant, simple, decent and honest, exemplifying all the merits of the amiable mediocrity they shared with millions of their less illustrious countrymen.

And so grew the five brothers, known variously as the Famous Five, the Hastinapur Horde or quite simply as the Pandavas. While all by herself, in Dhritarashtra's wing of their palatial home, Priya Duryodhani, away from her cousinly brood, cozenly brooded.

She was a slight, frail girl, Ganapathi, with a long thin tapering face like the kernel of a mango and dark eyebrows that nearly joined together over her high-ridged nose, giving her the look of a desiccated schoolteacher at an age when she was barely old enough to enrol at school. She might have even



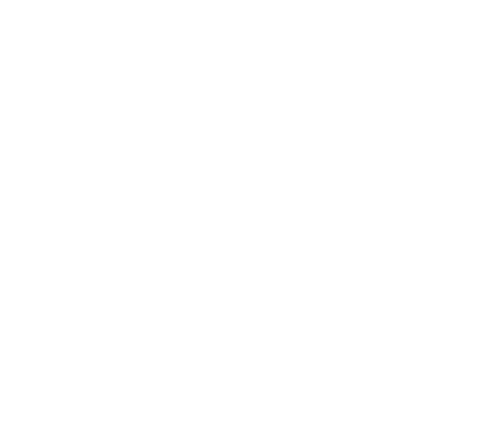
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You can invent the caption to that shot, young Ganapathi. Bhim has sunk like a boulder; with the poison also working its way inside him, it is a reasonably safe bet that he will not resurface alive. 'A job well done!' the titles would say on the screen. Fade and dissolve, to Duryodhani returning to join the others, her expression giving nothing away. Years later an American Secretary of State would sigh with regret at the loss that Priya Duryodhani's political success had meant to the world of poker.

But no, Ganapathi, do not fear the worst. A reasonably safe bet, it certainly was; but she was quickly to learn that with the Pandavas there are no reasonably safe bets.

Pan our film back to the shot of the riverside. As Bhim rolls into the water – slowly here, it is over in an instant – he is bitten by a venomous snake. Thus does Fate protect her favourites, Ganapathi, for the scheming Priya Duryodhani had poured the contents of a poisonous snake-bite antidote into her victim's lunch. The sharp fangs wake Bhim from his drugged stupor just as the serpent's venom encounters its antidote in his bloodstream – and neutralizes it. Bhim, instantly awake and cured, takes a deep breath as he goes under, comes back to the surface and swims back to the shore in a few strong strokes. Applause, Ganapathi, from the cinema floor, from the youths in the 25-paise seats. Cat calls and cheers as Bhim hauls his bulk out of the water and wrings his singlet dry.

Cut! Turn to Priya Duryodhani, twelve years old, and cheated of her best birthday present. As the screen fills with her sallow face Duryodhani does not betray the slightest hint of astonishment when Bhim rejoins her group, soaking and as large – quite literally – as life. 'Been taking a swim, brother?' she asks casually, her heart pounding for fear that he had seen her.

Bhim laughs, his customary reaction to most questions. 'Must have dozed off and rolled into the river in my sleep,' he says, tossing water off his forelocks. 'Unless one of you . . .' but he dismisses the unspoken thought with another laugh, and any fears of discovery that Duryodhani may have are soon drowned in the squeals of the others as Bhim proceeds to chase them towards the river for a fraternal dunking.

There I must end our little film sequence. But you see what I mean, Ganapathi. Priya Duryodhani acted only according to the dictates of her own conscienceless mind. Even at the age of twelve, overkill was already her problem.

Perhaps things might have been different had Dhritarashtra taken her in hand, rather than his pen. But he did not, and there is no point in speculating about what might have happened if he had. History, after all, is full of ifs and buts. I prefer, Ganapathi, to seek other conjunctions with destiny.



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have left us?) Anyway, this Englishman clearly found his stay onerous and had little to do in his spare time in that place, until he chanced upon me. He spoke our language, after a fashion, and we talked. He professed interest in our ancient practices and customs, our traditional knowledge and skills. I answered his questions, and he seemed greatly interested in what I had to tell him. During the time that he remained in that district I saw him for at least an hour every day. When he left he said that he owed all that he knew of India to me, and that he would never forget it. He gave me his personal card and said that if ever I needed assistance I should not hesitate to call on him.

'It was not long after that I found a good woman to bear me a son. I called him Ashwathaman, and his birth obliged me, if not to settle down, at least to acquire a dwelling where I could leave him as I set forth each day. The responsibilities of parenthood are not meant for us who have taken saffron; and yet I must confess that my son became the be-all of my life, much as I imagine these fine young boys are to you, sister.

'At first I never doubted that I could provide all that Ashwathaman might need. I could offer him learning, and for food he shared what I was given each day; as for clothing, its lack never bothered me, for what does a Brahmin need but his sacred thread? Or so I thought; but sages, alas, sister, do not know everything.

'The needs of the son are sometimes the making of the father. I did not want, and so assumed I had brought my son up not to want. But one day Ashwathaman asked me – sister, you will understand this – he asked me for a glass of milk. He had seen rich children drinking this thick white liquid, and he too wanted to have some.

'Well, sister, I had none to give him. Who in my position would have? You know the price of milk, you know the purposes for which it is used, for tea and sweets and cheese, all luxuries beyond the means of a humble man of learning. But I could not bring myself to tell my son this.

'I promised him I would get him some, and set out the next morning with but that one purpose in mind. But you know, sister, how people are these days. They will gladly give a sadhu some of the rice and dal they cook in abundance each day, but milk is too valuable a commodity to be wasted on such as me. In the old days a holy man could have knocked on the first sizeable door and be given a cow if such was his need, but I could not get so much as a glassful. Household after household turned me away. "Milk, indeed!" some said. "What do you need milk for?" Or "Hai ya, what will these sadhus expect next? Rice-bowls made of gold or what? Really, there's a limit, I tell you." When at last, weary and disheartened, I came home, I found Ashwathaman with a glass in his hand, his eyes shining with excitement.



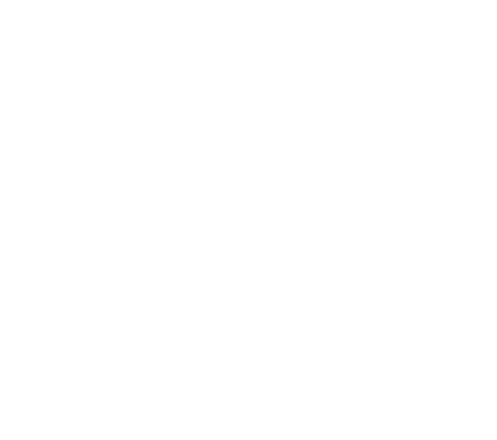
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against the wall; there will be the banalities of breakfast and laundry and house-cleaning, the thoughts of which have never crossed the starry-eyed heroine's mind; there will be babies to bear and burp and birch, with flus and flatulence and phlebitis to follow; there are the thousand mundanities and trivialities that are sought to be concealed by the great lie, 'they lived happily ever after'. No, Ganapathi, the story does not *end* when the screenwriter pretends it does.

It does not even end with the great symbol of finality, death. For when the protagonist dies the story continues: his widow suffers bitterly or celebrates madly or throws herself on his pyre or knits herself into extinction; his son turns to drugs or becomes a man or seeks revenge or carries on as before; the world goes on. And – who knows? – perhaps our hero goes on too, in some other world, finer than the one Hollywood could create for him.

There is, in short, Ganapathi, no *end* to the story of life. There are merely pauses. The end is the arbitrary invention of the teller, but there can be no finality about his choice. Today's end is, after all, only tomorrow's beginning.

I was struggling inarticulately with these thoughts when the boy's mother returned to drag him off to bed. Saved by the bed! 'I shall tell you tomorrow,' I promised the impatient child. But of course I never did, and I fear the boy thought me a very poor story-teller indeed.

Or perhaps he grew to understand. Perhaps, Ganapathi, he came to manhood with the instinctive Indian sense that nothing begins and nothing ends. That we are all living in an eternal present in which what was and what will be is contained in what is. Or, to put it in a more contemporary idiom, that life is a series of sequels to history. All our books and stories and television shows should end not with the words 'The End' but with the more accurate 'To Be Continued'. To be continued, but not necessarily here . . .

Ah, Ganapathi, I see I disappoint you once more. The old man going off the point again, I see you think; how tiresome he can be when he gets philosophical. Do you know what 'philosophical' means, Ganapathi? It comes from the Greek words *philein*, to love, and *sophia*, wisdom. A philosopher is a lover of wisdom, Ganapathi. Not of knowledge, which for all its great uses ultimately suffers from the crippling defect of ephemerality. All knowledge is transient, linked to the world around it and subject to change as the world changes. Whereas wisdom, true wisdom, is eternal, immutable. To be philosophical one must love wisdom for its own sake, accept its permanent validity and yet its perpetual irrelevance. It is the fate of the wise to understand the process of history and yet never to shape it.

I do not pretend to such wisdom, Ganapathi. I am no philosopher. I am a chronicler and a participant in the events I describe, but I cannot accord equal



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Gangaji ignored the remark. 'There will, of course, be another candidate. Not you. Not, in fact, anyone particularly well-known in the country. Perhaps an Untouchable – I mean a Child of God. He will be a more appropriate symbol for the party than another former princeling. And I shall let it be known that that is my view.'

A glimmer of understanding lightened my sightless son's features. 'So you're not going to let Pandu get away with this.'

'I think this would be the most judicious way of meeting this challenge to the authority of the party leadership,' Gangaji said. 'I do not know whether my discreet support for the other candidate will prevent an undesirable result. But should it fail, it will not be my closest follower and – what is the word they use? – *protégé* who will have been defeated.'

'And should it succeed?' I asked.

'Why, we shall have just the sort of president we need,' Gangaji said. 'A symbol. What, after all, is the presidency? It is a title that confers a degree of presumed authority on the holder. The British King, too, has such a title. But he is not the most powerful man in England.'

'Of course,' said Dhritarashtra. The colour was returning to his cheek.

'Whoever wins the presidency, the party must prepare itself for the future,' the Mahaguru went on. 'There are changes in the offing, constitutional changes, for which the party must be ready. My last talk with the Viceroy has paved the way for the establishment of a new political system. Partial democracy, it is true. But our friends in the civil service have helped advocate our cause. Vidur has done his work well. Indians will hold elected office in the provinces, even if with limited powers. All our efforts have come to some good. The British know they cannot continue to arrest us, to lathi-charge us. They have to give us a share in their system. The passage of the Government of India Act by the British Parliament now seems assured.'

We knew all this already, but Gangaji undoubtedly had a good reason for reminding us of what we knew. 'Our sights must now be set on the governments to be formed in the provinces. They are a stepping stone to a central government one day, a dominion government for all of India, a government of Indians. The Indians who will make up that national government of the future are the ones the British will want to talk to. It will not matter what title they hold – certainly not that of a rotational party presidency. The British, my dear Dhritarashtra, will be less interested in who is president today than in who might be prime minister tomorrow.'

'Of course, Gangaji,' my blind son replied humbly.

Of course. For the Mahaguru was right, as always. Dhritarashtra could afford to step aside from the presidential fray, and aim higher.



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"I do not reject you; rather,
I measure the years I have grown;
I worship your grey hairs, Father,
But – I must comb my own."

Fallen pawns littered the edges of the board.

'The Indian literary tradition places little value on satirical verse,' Sarah-behn spoke for Gangaji on one of his days of silence. 'So too, the Indian political tradition is one of utmost seriousness and respect for established institutions – provided these institutions are popularly supported and seen as reflective of the people's will.'

Check.

'The best reflection of the people's will,' declared Pandu in a speech to his supporters, 'is the figure at the bottom of the voting tally in a democratic election.'

A daring manoeuvre, Ganapathi. But one which left a flank exposed.

'History teaches us,' the Mahaguru told a prayer meeting, 'that it is always dangerous to mistake the enthusiasm of a select few for the support of the broad mass.'

That was when the castle fell. The letters began arriving at Pandu's home and at Kaurava Party headquarters – letters from party workers and leaders across the country, bearing addresses even Pandu could not recognize. The letters deplored the party's drift from the path of truth and moderation always espoused by Gangaji. Many of them found their way to the newspapers, colonialist and nationalist alike.

'I've been President barely three months,' mused a bewildered Pandu. 'What drift are these people going on about?'

Two letters in the same vein appeared in Gangaji's own paper, without accompanying editorial comment.

'Those who welcome the new directions of the movement,' Pandu declared defiantly to a Kaurava crowd meeting on a famous beachfront, who were more used to slogans than swimming, 'should let their voice be heard amidst the orchestrated clamour of the die-hards. Do you all not give me your loyal support?'

'N-o-o-o-o,' rose the crescendo from the sands.

Shaken, Pandu wrote to his former mentor. 'There appears to be a systematic campaign within the party to undermine me and question my leadership of the party. Such elements seem to derive solace from your silence on the matter, which could even be construed as tantamount to tolerance of anti-party activities. I shall be grateful if you would kindly lend your voice in support of my attempts to move the Kaurava party forward. A statement



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'Away with Tolstoy, Ruskin, Buddha:
Their ideas just make little men littler.
No more "truth-force", only *yuddha* –
It's time to learn from that chap Hitler.'

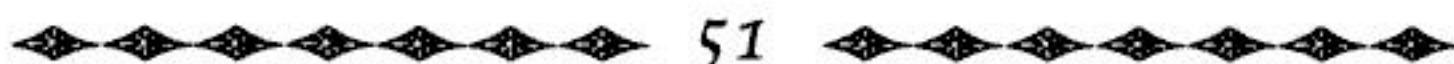
So saying, our angry hero
Became the country's first Fascist;
Admiring Roma's latest Nero
He practised how to clench his fist.

'Our Aryan brothers, full of go-go
Have revitalized the German nation.
As India's SS, I announce the OO –
Short for Onward Organization.

'Onward, my friends! our cause must march,
In discipline we must never slacken.
Our military shorts we must always starch,
For Britain's foes will need our backing.'

Then Poland fell, and the Nazi Panzer
Overrode Chamberlain's 'Peace with honour'.
'Let's join Hitler's extravaganza –
Britain will soon have our jackboots on her!'

So saying, Pandu bought a ticket
(First-class, appearances must be kept)
To Berlin; 'The rest of you can stick it –
Pandu acts while the Kauravas slept!'



But when our hero began his trip
(He'd got as far as the aerodrome)
The Brits, who'd briefly lost their grip
Declared war on Berlin, and on Rome.

Standing at the excess-baggage counter
(He'd packed too much for the winter season)
Pandu's plans began to flounder
When he was arrested – for intending treason.



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As he'd said to his wives, 'It's simply, my dears,
That my enemy's enemy's my friend.'

'*Sehr gut, mein Herr,*' the Consul said,
'In that case I'll give you your visa.
Good luck – and when you see the nation's head
Don't forget to salute the old geezer.'

He remembered; first day, Pandu snapped a salute,
Palm out, in the Nazi style,
It caught the Führer right in the snoot,
And made him see stars for a while.

'Heil – ouch! Oh, hell,' Chakravarti said,
As the Führer winced in pain,
'I'm sorry – I wish I were dead –'
'You will be, if this happens again.'

An inauspicious start! – but that's how it was
For our fighter in exile throughout;
His valiant efforts to work for the cause
Were hamstrung within and without.

'Radio broadcasts – that's what you can do,'
Said the Germans, when he asked for tanks;
So instead of invading, our disappointed Pandu
Made speeches to the other ranks.

Every Sunday and Thursday, on *Deutsche Welle*,
Chakravarti broadcast to the East;
But his stirring exhortations to march on Delhi
Came through like the yelps of a beast.

'What's this?' men would say, twiddling knobs on their sets,
As an awful squawk assaulted their ears,
And whine followed squeal like the screech of ten jets,
All braking while changing their gears.

'Can't make out a word!' – 'Is it a new song?'
'An announcement from Washington DC?'



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But the ex-POWs of Pandu's brigade
On the war-front, made little headway.

The Japanese were pleased as the numbers increased
– It made very good propaganda –
But when it came to the crunch, politeness ceased,
And they spoke with ruthless candour:

'Trust traitors? Oh, we know what you'll say,
"They're not traitors, but patriots and heroes" –
'But if the oath they had sworn can be broken today,
Can't they just as easily break tomorrow's?

'We don't blame them at all, for swallowing their pride –
Our prison camps aren't much fun;
They make good PR, but we must set them aside
When there's serious soldiering to be done.'

'So I'll wait,' swore Pandu, 'what the hell!
My forces will just bide their time;
And though the Japs are now doing well
Soon they'll need us, as reason needs rhyme.'

But while waiting, my son was determined
Not to suffer the grim solitude
That in Berlin (with door locked, and food tinned)
He had borne with such fortitude.

So he smuggled a message to Madri
Through a Japanese network of spies:
'Your husband needs you very badly –
Could you come? Discretion'd be wise.'

Excited and anxious, our princess
Wipes a tear of farewell from her eye;
'Take care of my thon' (Kunti winces)
'I mutht join my *patideva* – goodbye.'

After a journey both risky and torrid
Full of dangers (too many to relate)
Madri arrived – 'Oh dahling, 'twath horrid!' –
In Singapore, to seal Pandu's fate.



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We'll fathe the Raj, fight on night and day –
And I'll help you, for whatever that'h worth.'

'Oh Madri!' and here our Pandu was moved
By the sincerity of her love,
If anything, her declarations proved
She was a gift from the heavens above.

'Oh, Madri!' He took her in his arms
And kissed her long and wetly,
Till, attritioned by her charms,
His will collapsed completely.

'No – Pandu – don't!' his loved one cried,
As his hands explored her buttons;
'Remember the doctor – when you nearly died –
Let'th kith, but not be gluttonth!'

'Twas of no avail, he was possessed
By a need he could not define;
After years of restraint, now obsessed
To unite with his concubine.

'I want you!' his hiss was urgent
As he peeled off layers of clothes;
In the cold seat, his passion emergent
Repulsed his wife's feeble 'No's.

Poor Madri! Denial was not in her nature,
'No' was not a word she liked to speak;
Indeed (at the risk of caricature)
Her flesh was willing, and her spirit weak.

And Pandu was in no mood to be denied;
His hands moved with a probing persistence.
He caressed her: 'I want you!' he cried,
'You're the only joy left in my existence!'

In love and heat, Madri conceded defeat,
And yielded to her husband's great ardour.
Soon, despite her fears and the tilt of the seat,
She was gasping, 'Oh, yeth! Harder! Harder!'

'Oh, yes!' he breathed back in pneumatic bliss.
'Onward! That's my immortal credo!'
But then his lips, after a pulsating kiss,
Turned blue, and exhaled a croaking 'O . . . O . . . '



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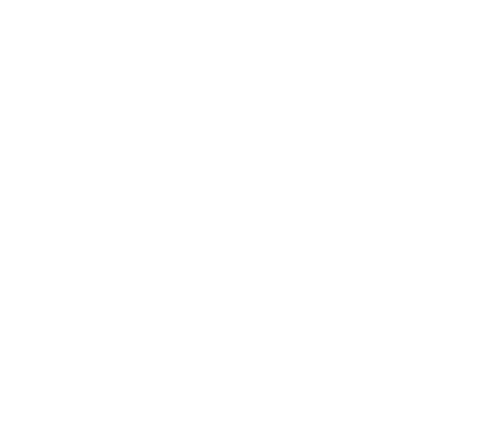
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'I haven't forgotten, Your Excellency.' Sir Richard, who tended to think of Hastinapur as a personal heirloom, harrumphed. 'But a lot of water, and some blood, has flowed under the bridge since those days. I've made something of a special study of Mr Ganga Datta over the years, and I'm not convinced for a minute by his pontifical pacifism. Today the sainted Mahaguru is just as opposed to British interests as his fellow vegetarian in Berlin.'

The Viceroy put down the dagger and gave his seniormost advisor a sharp look. 'I do believe your prejudices are showing, Sir Richard,' he said mildly. 'India's non-violent saint-statesman lending moral support to Germany's jackbooted stormtroopers? No, I think Ganga Datta and most of the Kauravas, certainly Dhritarashtra and his socialist followers, will be happy enough to go along with a declaration of war on Nazi Germany. They've been quite critical of the Nazis in their public pronouncements on international affairs. The point is, how do we go about it? It's easy enough to declare war, but do we, ah, consult them first, and in what manner? There were no elected Indian ministries to think about at the time of the last war. Now there are.'

'I don't see how it's any of their business,' Sir Richard, defeated, scowled.

'Come, come, Sir Richard. We propose to declare war on behalf of India and we don't think it's the business of the Indian leaders we have?'

'Precisely, sir.' Sir Richard's eyes glowed redly above his pink cheeks. 'You, the Viceroy of India, will be declaring war on behalf of His Majesty the King-Emperor, whose representative you are in this country, upon those who are his enemies. *India* only comes into the picture at all because it is one of the King-Emperor's possessions. It has no independent quarrel with Herr Hitler and his friends. I know you don't agree with my view that Ganga Datta and his ilk would support Attila the Hun if it would help drive the Raj out of Delhi, but leaving the political reliability of the Indians aside, the point is that the only reason for India to be at war with Germany is that she is ruled by Britain. *Britain* is at war with Germany. *British India* must follow suit. The Indians governing their provinces – under the supervision, in any case, of British Governors appointed by the Crown – have nothing to do with it at all. Defence isn't even their business; it's ours.' He raised an eyebrow at his sovereign's representative. '*Quod erat demonstrandum*, Your Excellency.'

'*Nec scire fas est omnia*,' the Viceroy riposted. 'None the less why not consult them anyway? It should buck up that po-faced lot the Kauravas have in office.'

'All the more reason not to, sir.' The Principal Private Secretary was emphatic. 'They're insufferable enough as it is. Why should we give them the additional satisfaction of being consulted, when it is our nation that is under attack, our homes under threat, our armies and aircraft under fire? Personally,



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So, Ganapathi, as Pandu strove and struggled in Berlin and Singapore, Gangaji and his Kaurava followers languished in prison while two very different individuals moved closer to realizing their ultimate ambitions of thwarting the Mahaguru.

Mohammed Ali Karna, with three provincial governments dancing to his tune and unchallenged as the most prominent Indian out of captivity, glowed with the lustre of quasi-divinity in which his followers had cloaked him. His name could no longer be taken in vain by lesser mortals: he was now referred to almost exclusively by the honorific 'Khalifa-e-Mashriq', or Caliph of the East, a choice of cognomen which ignored – indeed, blandly denied – his secular Anglicization. And as the Muslim Group consolidated its hold on, and its taste for, power, a vocal section of its adherents began openly calling for the creation of a new political entity where they could rule unchallenged, a state carved out of India's Muslim-majority areas. This Islamic Utopia would be called Karnistan – the Hacked-off Land: simultaneously a tribute to its eponymous founder and an advertisement for its proponents' physical political intent. The party's younger hotheads had already devised a flag for their state. It would carry, on a field of Mohammedan green, a representation of the half-moon that throbbed on their caliph's burnished forehead.

Yet there were already signs, if only we had known how to recognize them: signs that Karna, at his peak, had peaked. His long face began to look increasingly pallid at the post-sundown cocktails and receptions which celebrated and reinforced his prominence. As the darkness gathered Karna would withdraw even more into himself, until all that remained was the vividness of his birthmark against the pallor of his skin. Sometimes he would withdraw altogether, slipping out of the reception rooms where his awed followers gathered in respectfully distant clusters. It was thus that I found him once, shivering in an unlit garden while the hubbub of conversation continued on the terrace behind.

'It is late, isn't it?' I ventured conversationally.

'It is dark, Vyas,' Karna replied.

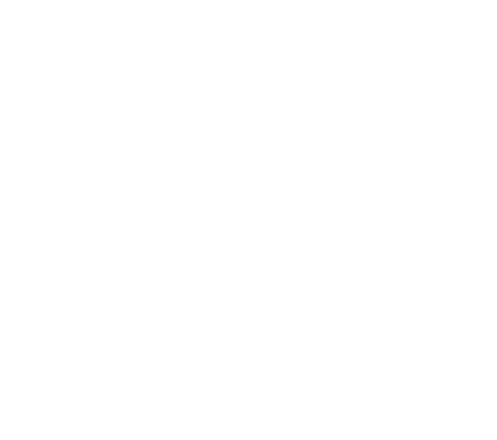
'You don't like the dark?'

My question seemed to ignite a dying ember in him. 'I hate the dark,' he replied with sudden vehemence. 'I hate the blackness of night. Even as a child, it was the sun I yearned for. The sun, enveloping me in its glow, setting me ablaze with its light. When the sun is up there I am warm, I am safe. But as dusk drops and the light fades, I feel the shadows creeping up behind my



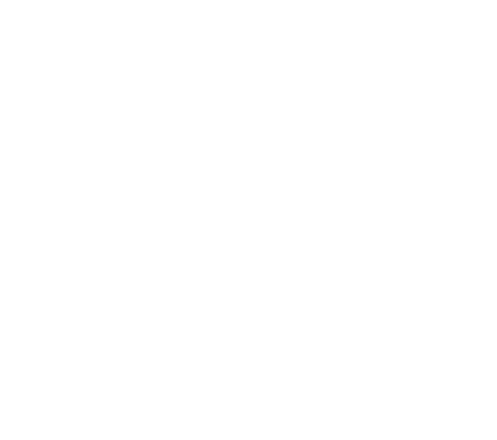
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In another high-ceilinged but considerably darker room in distant Hastinapur, with a small kerosene lantern flickering yellowly in a distant corner, Gandhari the Grim lay dying.

'Has he come?' The voice was strained and feeble, and Priya Duryodhani, hunched near her mother at the head of the bed, had to lean closer to hear it.

'Not yet, Mother.' She looked towards the curtained doorway without hope, knowing she would have heard the tap of her father's stick long before he appeared at the entrance to their room. 'Word has been sent. He will be coming soon.'

The faded face seemed to sink deeper into the pillow. I was reminded then of that other night, so many years ago, when Dhritarashtra's daughter had fought her way into the world.

'Don't strain yourself, Gandhari,' I said gently. 'He must have been detained. You know how things are these days.'

'These days?' The pale dry lips, highlighted by the bandage that still concealed her eyes, parted slightly in a bitter smile.

I said nothing. It had been no different in earlier days. The light from the lantern flitted briefly across the shadows.

'Water.' There was a sudden urgency in the voice. Duryodhani reached for the brass pitcher on a bedside table and poured the lukewarm liquid into a tumbler. Gandhari tried to raise herself, then gave up the effort. Her daughter's hand quickly interposed itself, half-raising Gandhari's head, while the other tilted the tumbler towards her mother's parched mouth. A little water dribbled down Gandhari's chin.

'Good boy.' Gandhari was holding her daughter's free hand in a tight grip. 'My son. You are all — all I had.' The words were coming out in gasps now. 'Alone. Always alone. In . . . the . . . darkness.'

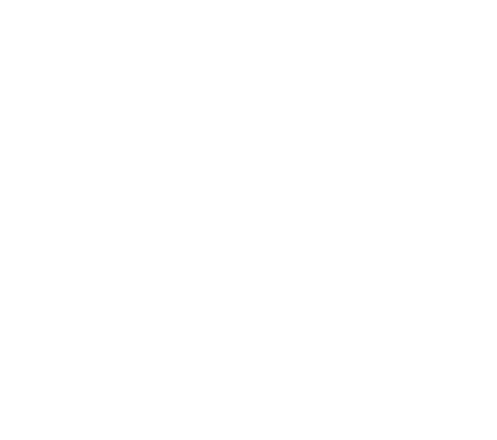
We were both still, Duryodhani motionless in her mother's grasp and I, destiny's observer, unable to move from my place in the shadows at the foot of the bed. And in the stillness I realized that nature too was quiet. There was an unnatural silence outside. The crickets had stopped their incessant chirping, the mynahs were no longer twittering in the trees, the hundred and one sounds that always came in from the garden at this time of day had mysteriously died. It was as if all creation was holding its breath.

'Darkness!' Gandhari screamed in one convulsive gasp. Her hand left Duryodhani's and seemed to reach for the bandage across her eyes; but before it could touch that slender satin shroud it fell back lifelessly across her breast.



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another twenty-two letters of the alphabet, Ganapathi, but I won't) creature whose life gives meaning to the rest of our story.

The India of those early years of Independence was a state of continual ferment. It was constantly being rethought, reformed, reshaped. Everything was open to discussion: the country's borders, its internal organization, its official languages, the permissible limits of its politics, its orientation to the outside world.

One of the first issues confronting the new government was the future of the 'princely states' – the hundreds of fiefdoms and kingdoms that had nominally remained outside British rule, as had Hastinapur before Gangaji incurred the Raj's wrath. Even before the British left they had made it clear to the nawabs and maharajas of these principalities that they were obliged to accede either to India or to Karnistan. Most made their choice according to the dictates of geography and common sense, but one or two of the bigger states dragged their constitutional feet in the hope that they might be able to hold out for their own independence. One of these was the large, scenically beautiful and chronically underdeveloped northern state of Manimir.

Manimir, with its verdant valley and its snowy mountain peaks, had been linked politically to the rest of India since the sixth century AD. Its Maharaja, in fact, traced his descent from the Rajput warrior-kings of western India, though this was elaborated in the officially inspired myth to imply a higher ancestry, both geographically and spiritually (the Maharaja numbered the sun and the god Shiva amongst his progenitors, and Shiva, at least, made his celestial home on the top of Mount Kailash in the Himalayan ranges to the north of Manimir). Whatever his genealogy, though, Maharaja Vyabhichar Singh was a soft-jowled hedonist, with pudgy hands and a taste for Caucasian carnality that had already dragged him at least once through the British courts. (There the Indian Office had succeeded in having him referred to throughout as 'Mr Z', an expedient which, far from concealing his identity, only presented his numerous detractors with another epithet of abuse.)

While princes to the south of him, with varying degrees of good grace, merged their possessions into the Indian Union and accepted ambassadorships and seats in Parliament as revised symbols of contemporary status, Vyabhichar Singh obstinately refused to cede either throne or title. He declared himself to be independent, a condition no other nation recognized, and sent 'ambassadors' to India and to Karnistan, who were ostentatiously ignored by all except the printers of visiting cards.

All this might have been mildly amusing, were it not for two inconvenient facts about Manimir. One, it was sandwiched between the border of what remained of India and what had emerged from Mr Nichols' tender mercies as



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Yet, Ganapathi, what a story it was. A story of India: of the decadence and debauchery of princes, of the imperatives and illusions of power; of the strengths of secular politics and the weaknesses of internationalist principle. An Indian story, with so many possible preambles and no conclusion.

It was also over Manimir that Dhritarashtra first revealed the technique of political self-perpetuation that he was to develop into such a fine art in the years to come. When the first criticisms were openly raised within the Kaurava Party, Dhritarashtra silenced them promptly by offering to resign. He knew perfectly well that with Gangaji gone and Pandu dead, Karna across the new frontiers and Rafi sidelined by the fact that much of his community had suddenly become foreigners, there was no obvious alternative leader the party could find. The critics responded by muting their objections; and Dhritarashtra learned how easy it was to get his own way.

The consequences of idealism and the impossibility of individual will were prime ministerial lessons also learned, and profoundly absorbed, by the dark-eyed young daughter whom the widower Prime Minister had appointed as his official hostess. Yes, Ganapathi, Priya Duryodhani listened, and watched, and imbibed tone and technique from her paternal model. With Manimir, she learned her first exercise from her father's political primer. It was an education from which the country was never to recover.

And what of the offspring of India's blind leader and Britain's all-seeing Vicereine, the infant Draupadi Mokrasi?

The frail girl quickly overcame the handicaps of her premature birth, her health improving as Dhritarashtra quietly devoted a discreet eye – forgive me the expression, Ganapathi, but it was one of Dhritarashtra's – and an equally discreet cheque-book to her welfare. It was soon clear she would grow into an extraordinarily beautiful woman, but in childhood her other traits of character were apparent in a way they would not be in later years, when her beauty too often blinded men to everything else.

One of her teachers at the time, a Professor Jennings, was asked to describe the young Draupadi. He cleared his throat in that unnecessary British way and spoke in a voice as dry as the tomes he had authored, looking through horn-rimmed glasses at a point just above the questioner's tilted head.

'To her exquisite looks,' he said in a self-consciously passionless tone, as if he were describing an English breakfast, 'she added an open manner, an ability



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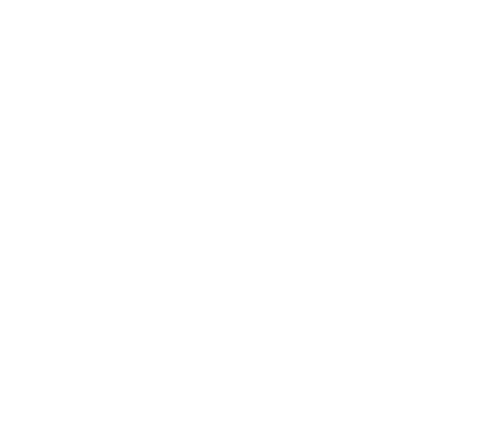
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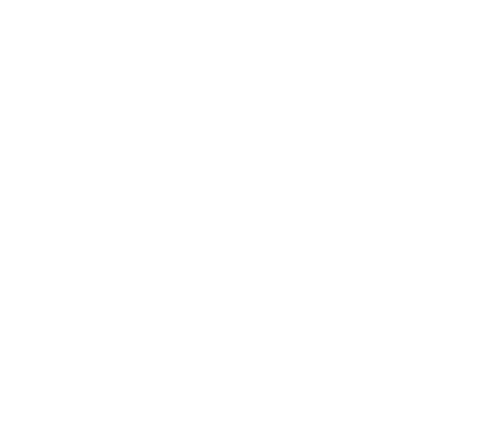
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It was being said that, for all his talk of peace and morality, Dhritarashtra had learned a lesson from his namby-pambiness over Manimir; there were some things for which cannons were far more effective than conferences.

To the north, however, there were frowns on the anti-colonialist faces of the mandarins of the world's most populous tyranny, the People's Republic of Chakra, as they contemplated the hubris of their southern neighbours.

'They are glowing too big for their boots,' said the Chairman, and a dozen inscrutable faces nodded as vigorously as the tight collars of their regulation tunics would allow.

The two countries had, for nearly two thousand years, been separated by the vast expanse of Tibia, a large nation of few people which had served as a willing conduit for a number of Indian religious innovations from Buddhism to Tantrism. Despite periodic ritual genuflections to the north (whenever the Chakars had a central regime strong enough to warrant Tibian circumspection), Tibia had maintained its independence till its casual conquest – in circumstances almost indistinguishable, in fact, from that of its homonym Tibet – by Sir Francis Oldwife. The British, eventually convinced it was the one place on earth to which it was not worth assigning a civil service, withdrew from Tibia not long after. But in order to feel they had got something for their pains, they took the trouble to conclude a peace treaty with their recent subjects, a document which among other things defined the border between Tibia and British India. Since it was drawn by a crusty Scot named MacDonald, the now-defined frontier came to be known as the Big Mac Line.

When Chakra's glamorous Generalissimo gave way before the raucous regiments of the cherubic Chairman, Dhritarashtra had been amongst the first to applaud, for sound anti-imperialist, pro-socialist reasons. India's was even the first government to accord the Communist regime the honour of formal diplomatic recognition. During the early phase of international ostracism endured by the People's Republic, India was seen frequently by Chakra's side, advocating its admission to various international forums, speaking regularly in favour of 'peaceful co-existence' with Sniping, as the capital of Chakra was then still called. As Dhritarashtra and Kanika bobbed and beamed alongside their yolk-hued counterparts for the benefit of the world's flashbulbs, a new slogan was, with official encouragement, given wide currency in India: 'Hindi-Chakar *bhai-bhai*.' That meant that, faith and physiognomy notwithstanding, Indians and Chakars were brothers; and since '*chakar*', carefully pronounced, also meant 'sugar' in Hindi, the slogan implied that sweetness infused the relationship. Little did its originators realize how easily it would soon be twisted into a pointed 'Hindi-Chakar bye-bye'.

The problem arose on two levels. On the more elemental level the Chakars,



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international initiatives and the high priest of proud non-alignment, would never be the same again. The military humiliation not only shattered his self-esteem; it broke his heart.

His decline was gradual but decisive. He ate little, began denying himself more and more of the little comforts we all take for granted, resigned himself to acts of painful penance. He began to sleep on the bare floor and to invent new privations for himself. He replaced his regular massages with flesh-mortifying exercises. When he had no official appointments he would be found in the woods behind his prime ministerial residence, clad in tattered rags and penitential strips of bark. 'It is time for me,' he said to me when I approached him sympathetically, 'to take to the life of *Vanaprastha*.'

You know the ancient concept, Ganapathi, of the four ages of man: his youthful and celibate *Brahmacharya* when he learns what life has to offer him, his marital and parental *Grihastha* phase when he exercises his duties and responsibilities as householder and professional, his *Vanaprastha* of renunciation in the forest and, for a select few, the ultimate *Sannyas* of the sages. But to hear this traditionalism from the lips of the Cambridge-accented, agnostic Dhritarashtra was the final indication for me that his spirit had completely evaporated.

He did not last long after that. One morning he walked, thus attired, into the foliage of the woods. He breathed for the last time the honey-laden fragrance of the flowers, felt the warmth of the sun's rays on his faded skin and the sharp scratches of twigs and brambles against his emaciated legs. Then he sat down in the lotus position, his bare back to a tree, facing the east, where the dawn breaks for all of us but had never done for him.

I found him there hours later, immobile in the yogic posture, perfectly still. I did not need to touch his heart.

Gently, I removed the dark glasses from his lifeless eyes and let them face the sun. Then I took away the empty bottle he had dropped near his feet. He belonged to the ages, but the instruments of his failure did not.



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and collapse by the side of a withered tree; and as he saw a village woman bend to pour the last precious drops of water from her own *lota* into the animal's mouth, the thought struck him with overwhelming intensity: 'This is my land'.

It was eye-opening, heart-rending – and exhausting. When the last sight and the last night had passed without either the event or the woman leaving an impression on him, Arjun realized he had seen and done too much. But he had to go on: the terms of exile were harsh.

It was thus a weary, jaded Arjun who arrived at the tip of the peninsula, at the last halt on his long traverse across the land, the obscure southern town of Gokarnam.

He did not, of course, know that it was to be his last halt. Arjun was looking for a young political giant-killer who was not well enough known outside the south, the man who had unseated the formidable local Tammany Hall boss, Kamsa, in his first election and had made himself something of a legend in the area since then. He was the Gokarnam Party secretary, and Arjun thought it would make an intriguing story to feature a local hero who had refused to seek national office. He could already visualize a quick, five-hundred word despatch: '**THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT BE KING**'. Then he would move on.

The town's Kaurava Party office was a long, musty room in the rutted main street with a painted aluminium board outside proclaiming its purpose. Inside, the busiest sound was the hum of a fly amidst the dusty stillness of scattered files. A young man in white – clerk or functionary, Arjun did not know – sat beneath a black-and-red Malayala Manorama calendar idly fanning himself with a yellowing *Mathrubhoomi Azhichapadippu*.

'Secretary gone out,' he informed Arjun with pleasure. 'Some party work he is having in near-by village. If you are wishing to go there, I will explain you how.'

Arjun was indeed wishing to go there, having nothing better to do. He soon found himself stepping off a shuddering rural bus at an enormous family-planning hoarding that dominated the centre of the village of Karinkolam. Tea drinkers at the rickety stall near the bus stop, their *mundus* tucked up around their knees, grinned at his attempts to communicate the object of his search in English, Hindi and the universal language of signs.

'Krishna, party secretary? From Gokarnam?' the *chaya-kadakaran*, the stall-keeper himself, finally put Arjun out of his misery. 'You will find at Ottamthullal – that way.'

Arjun followed the pointing finger down a dusty track that led from the village centre towards, and then through, the paddy-fields that covered most



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What they don't realize is that if they had to drive on Indian roads in Indian traffic conditions, they would prefer Ambassadors too.

Arjun sighed, then opened the boot and pulled out one more evidence of the Ambassador's appropriateness to Indian conditions – the crank. He took the L-shaped iron bar to the front of the vehicle, inserted it and turned it vigorously. The engine cranked, wheezed and spluttered into life. Arjun was back in the running.

He returned to the driver's seat and anxiously scanned the road. The girls had all disappeared. But he was fairly sure he knew which road Subhadra would take to walk home. Amidst the blaring of offended horns, he eased his car into the traffic.

That was it – the turning – and surely that was her, just beyond the last flickering street-lamp? Arjun began to turn, then realized it was a one-way street. This is not a consideration that always impedes Indian drivers, but in this case the entrance to the street was blocked by an enormous lorry prevented from heading the right way by a homesick cow yoked to an unattended cart. The impasse appeared likely to last: certainly the truck driver had resigned himself to the situation, for he had placed his prayer-mat on the bonnet and had begun performing his *namaz*. Arjun drove on. He would try the next street.

This time the turn was easier to execute. He proceeded slowly, looking for the first left turn that would bring him back to the street on which he had spotted Subhadra.

There wasn't one.

Arjun felt the sweat on his palms and the frustration higher up. He *had* to get her! He turned right, hoping to find two lefts later. The roads all seemed to curve away at impossible angles from the direction in which he wanted to go. Whenever he found a left, it seemed to be succeeded by a street with a no-entry sign or a cul-de-sac. He turned; he swerved; he reversed down one-way streets; he retraced his route and did the opposite of what he had done before. Finally, dizzied by seventeen left turns and thirteen unintended rights, he emerged on a quiet unlit street that seemed vaguely familiar. As familiar, in fact, as the skirted figure walking hip-swayingly ahead into the shadows.

Subhadra!

Amidst the darkness and the shadows of confusion in his own mind there shone a clear beam of determination. He was at last going to be able to do what he had set out to do.

He swung the car around and accelerated past the girl. The street was deserted; its lamps, which blinked half-heartedly at the best of times, had given up the attempt and were completely extinguished. He drew up at the edge of the pavement and waited.



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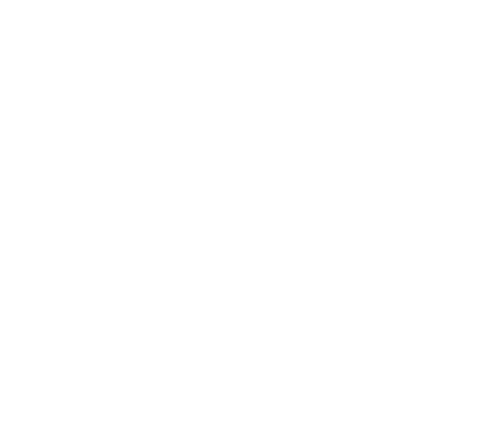
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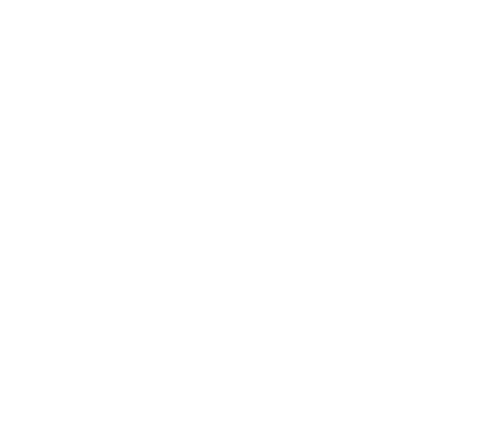
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At last the people rose. Or, as always in India, some of the people rose, led by an unlikely figure who had stepped from the pages – so it almost seemed – of the history books. Jayaprakash Drona emerged from his retreat and called for a People's Uprising against Priya Duryodhani.

It was a shock, not least because JD's son Ashwathaman was still in the Kaurava camp, though increasingly on the margin of it. And for the Prime Minister it was a particularly rude shock, since Priya Duryodhani had done nothing to prevent Drona's name and image from being kept quietly alive, like a musty heirloom on a darkened mantelpiece. Drona had even been allowed a brief recent return to the headlines when he was pressed into service by the government to persuade the fiercely moustachioed dacoits of the wild Chambal ravines to give up their violent ways, just as he had renounced his. Drona's sincerity was so transparent, his own example so transcendent, that many of the dacoits, men with twenty and thirty murders, rapes and abductions each to their name, had actually listened and been converted. Drona had brought them out from their underground hideouts in mind-boggling ceremonies where they had dropped their rifles and gun-belts at his feet before an applauding audience of their victims' families – and in exchange for nothing more than the promise of a fair trial.

This, then, was the Drona who rose one day, bathed his feet in the sacred Ganga, and proclaimed that he could not take it any more. He had converted the petty criminals, but the biggest were the ones running the country – and they would not listen to him. The dishonesty and cynicism of the government of Priya Duryodhani was an affront to his conscience that Drona could no longer abide. It was time, he declared, for a People's Uprising which would restore India's ancient values to its governance.

Where were all our protagonists at this time? You may well ask, and you would be right, Ganapathi, to do so. The trouble with telling a tale on an epic scale is that sometimes you neglect the characters in the foreground as you admire the broad sweep of the landscape you are painting, just as the overall



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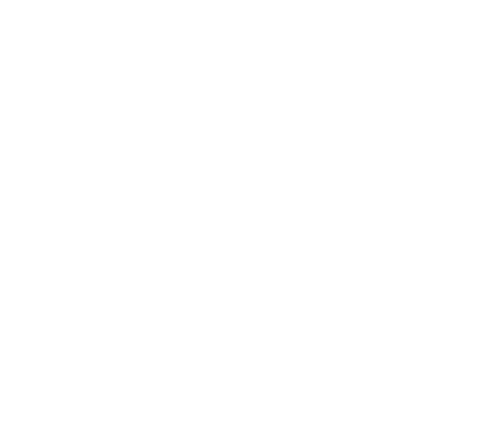
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Often these opinions, like the people who expressed them, had no visible means of support, but then Indian opinions are rarely founded on any sense of responsibility or any realistic expectation of action. For all her canny cynicism, Duryodhani had failed to make one simple discovery about the people she ruled: that you could let them say what they liked without feeling obliged to do something about it. There was no need for the censorship she had clamped upon the political commentaries of the élite. In India, the expression of private opinions was no proof of the existence of a viable and demanding public opinion.

Yes, Ganapathi, that was one of the ironies of Duryodhani's experiment with authoritarianism – it was more authoritarian than it needed to be. She could have let the newspapers write what they wanted, and it would have changed nothing. Instead, the very fact that they could no longer write what they wanted became a burning issue to those for whom conversation was now the only outlet.

And as so often in Indian life, Ganapathi, indeed as so often in this story, the really important issues were worked out not in action but through discourse. That is how we seek to arrive at objective perceptions in a land whose every complex crisis clamours for subjectivity. If we were to try to find our ethics empirically, Ganapathi, we would for ever be trapped by the limitations of experience: for every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganapathi. Every Indian must for ever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India.

How easily we Indians see the several sides to every question! This is what makes us such good bureaucrats, and such poor totalitarians. They say the new international organizations set up by the wonderfully optimistic (if oxymoronic) United Nations are full of highly successful Indian officials with quick, subtle minds and mellifluous tongues, for ever able to understand every global crisis from the point of view of each and every one of the contending parties. This is why they do so well, Ganapathi, in any situation that calls for an instinctive awareness of the subjectivity of truth, the relativity of judgement and the impossibility of action.

Yet one day, at the end of another intense conversation with an increasingly troubled Arjun, I found it impossible to sustain my comfortable ambivalence.

I was in full flow about the state of Indian politics, trying to convince myself as much as Arjun that what had been lost was not worth keeping – that



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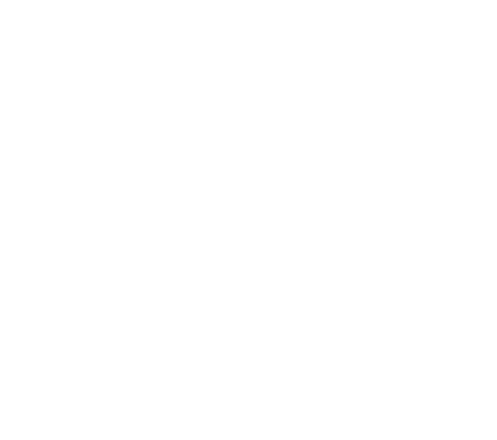
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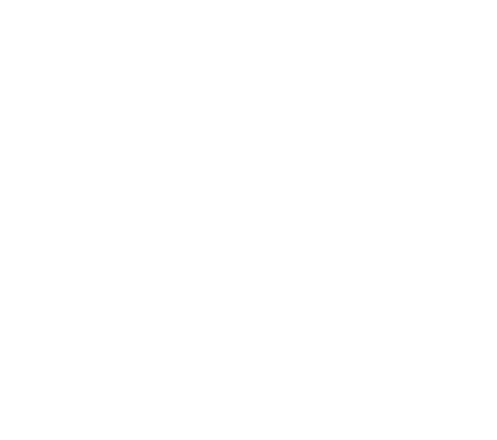
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Drona said. 'Tell me, Yudhishtir, is it true? I cannot believe it unless it comes from you. Tell me, is Ashwathaman safe?'

A look of genuine sadness appeared on the Prime Minister's face. 'I am sorry, Dronaji,' Yudhishtir said. 'Ashwathaman is dead.'

Even I believed him then, for Yudhishtir simply did not lie. His honesty was like the brightness of the sun or the wetness of the rain, one of the elements of the natural world: you simply took it for granted.

'Ashwathaman,' he repeated softly, 'is dead.'

A terrible cry rose from Drona's lips. He turned his face away from us, towards the white-plastered wall, his voice drained of all emotion. 'Then I have nothing more to live for.' His eyes closed.

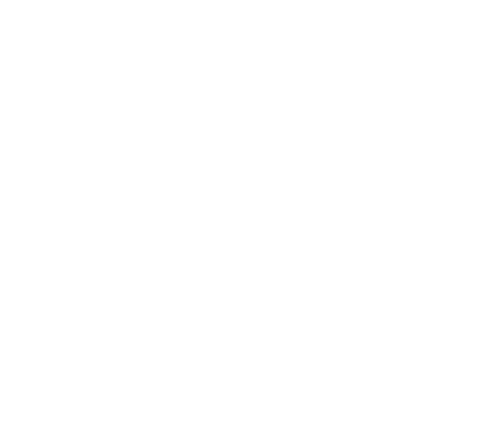
'I am sorry, Drona, to ask you this at this painful time,' the Prime Minister whispered, 'but will you not support the unity of the Front you did so much to create and place in power?'

The Messiah did not look at him. 'Yes,' he whispered. 'Of course.'

I saw the triumph in Yudhishtir's eyes at the same time that I saw the light fade from Drona's. Within minutes, the old guru was gone.

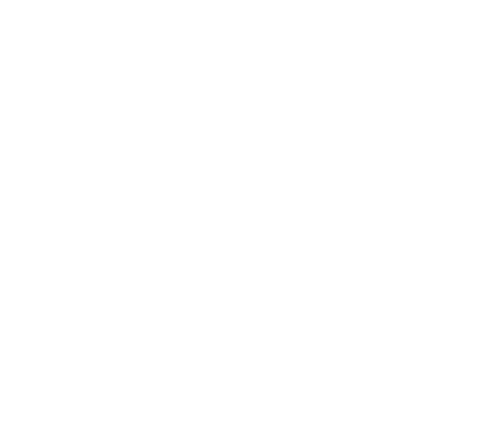
We stood in vigil as the life ebbed away from him, and I felt regret flood my spirit. Throughout his life, during his days of violence and of peace, his years of teaching and of withdrawal, Drona had been one of India's simplest men. 'The new Mahaguru', a Sunday magazine had dubbed him, but he was a flawed Mahaguru, a man whose goodness was not balanced by the shrewdness of the original. He had stood above his peers, a secular saint whose commitment to truth and justice was beyond question. But though his loyalty to the ideals of a democratic and egalitarian India could not be challenged, Drona's abhorrence of power had made him unfit to wield it. He had offered inspiration but not involvement, charisma but not change, hope but no harness. Having abandoned politics when he seemed the likely heir-apparent to Dhritarashtra, he tried to stay above it all after the fall of Dhritarashtra's daughter, and so he let the revolution he had wrought fall into the hands of lesser men who were unworthy of his ideals. Now he was dying, and the nation did not know what it would mourn.

"'J.D.,' our modern Messiah, is no more,' Yudhishtir announced outside when it was all over. 'And his last words were a stirring plea for unity amongst us in the Front. It is no secret that he was deeply saddened by the troubles that have affected the government – *his* government, a government he did more than anyone else to make possible. It is sadly true that Dronaji died a deeply disappointed man, but his legacy lives on in the hearts of the Indian people – to whom, in the last analysis, he taught their own strength.' Yudhishtir paused, his voice breaking. 'I plead with all his followers and heirs



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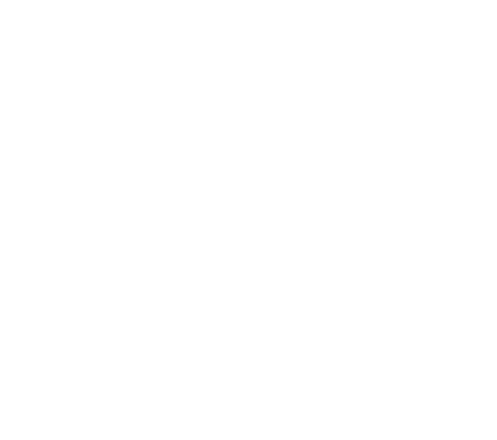
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