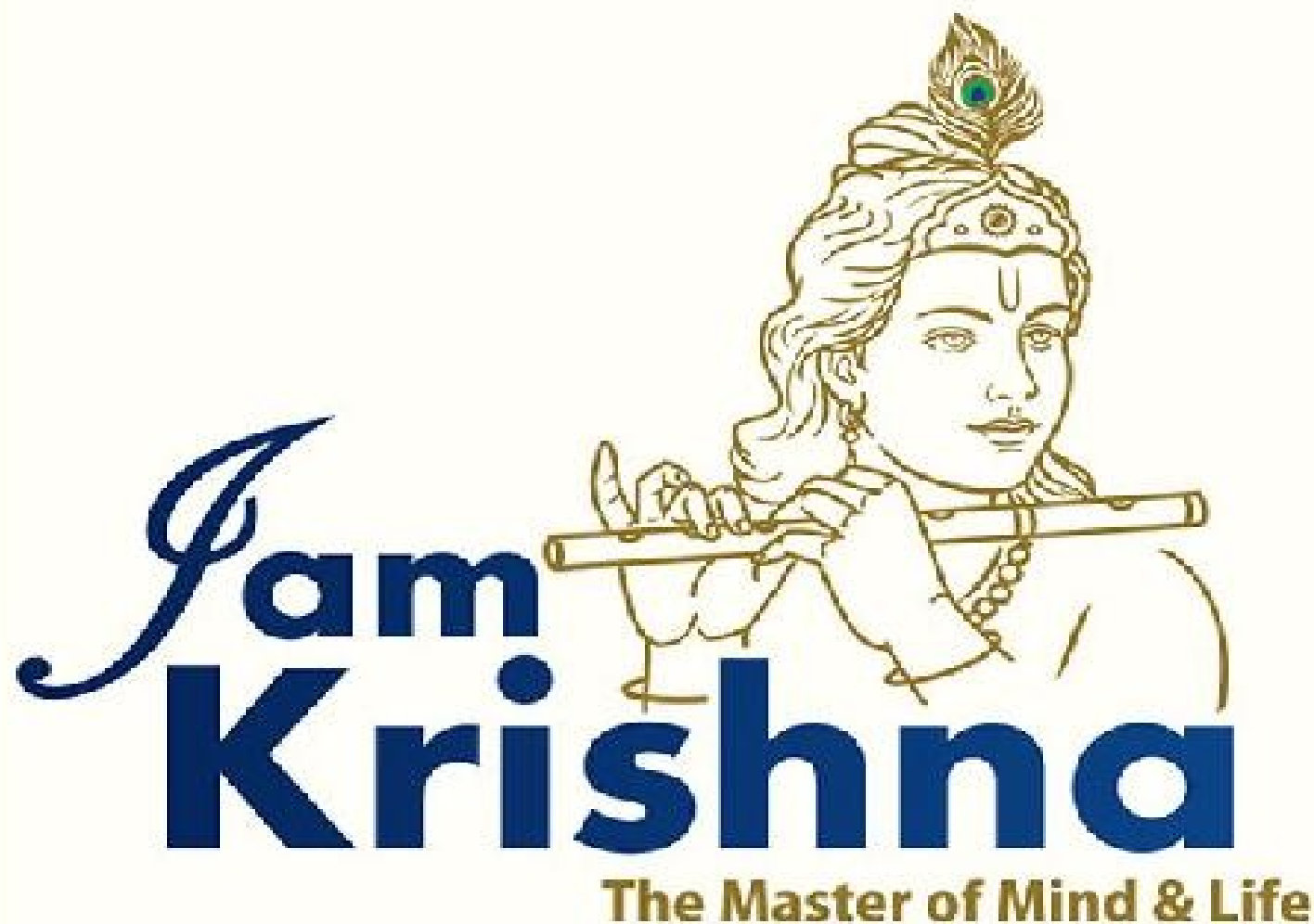


DEEP TRIVEDI

The Author of the Bestseller 'I am The Mind'
Unveils the Mind & Life of Krishna



- An Artist • A Lover • A Politician • A Psychologist
- A Businessman • A Visionary • A Spiritual Guru

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About Deep Trivedi



Deep Trivedi is a renowned author, speaker and pioneer in spiritual psychodynamics who writes and conducts lectures with an all-pervasive perspective, guiding an individual towards the achievement of his full potential. Till date, he has led thousands of people onto the path of success and happiness through his works.

In his voluminous works, Deep Trivedi has extensively explained Nature, its laws, its behaviour, its psychology and the effect it has on human life. No aspect of life and human psychology has been left untouched by him. He states that the lack of psychological knowledge and understanding is the sole reason for all the sorrows and failures pervading human life.

An author of the bestseller 'I am The Mind' and numerous other books, he is known for his special ability to touch upon the deepest aspects of life and explain them in a very lucid language, leaving no scope for any ambiguity.

His command over the biggest psychologies of life can be gauged by the fact that he holds the Record for 'Maximum Lectures on Human Life', 'Maximum

Lectures on Psychological Aspects of Tao Te Ching' and 'Maximum Lectures on Bhagavad Gita', which is 168 hrs, 28 mins, 50 secs in 58 days in Asia Book of Records and India Book of Records. These lectures have been delivered in front of a live audience across India.

His distinct spiritual-psychological language and expression in his writings and lectures, begins to have an instant effect on the mind of the reader or listener, which makes Deep Trivedi a pioneer in this field.

To know more about Deep Trivedi, visit www.deeptrivedi.com

The Speaker

For the first time ever in history, Deep Trivedi uses a unique combination of psycho-spiritual content, voice, language and expression which effectuates an instantaneous transformation in his viewers and listeners. Innumerable lives have been transformed just by listening to him. This is the reason why he is known as a pioneer in spiritual psychodynamics.

Deep Trivedi sheds light on every subject related to life. There is no aspect of human life that has been left untouched by him. He has spoken on numerous topics such as:

Destiny, God, Religion, Truth, Love, Anger, Phobias, Enthusiasm, Time and Space, Laws of Nature, The Mind, The Brain, The Ego, Concentration, Self-confidence, Intelligence, Marriage, The Body & DNA-Genes and many more...

Deep Trivedi, Record Holder for Asia Book of Records

Maximum Lectures on Human Life

Deep Trivedi, Record Holder for India Book of Records

Maximum Lectures on Human Life

I am Krishna

The Master of Mind and Life

A riveting well-researched story of Krishna's entire life which chronicles the transformation of a cowherd boy to become Jai Shri Krishna

The story from Krishna's birth to the slaying of Kansa
Deep Trivedi

Also available in Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati

Preface

‘Krishna’ is a name synonymous with victory and flamboyance, yet he has always been an enigma. The diverse facets of his personality make it difficult or rather impossible for anyone to grasp his personality in its entirety. Yet, the love showered on Krishna and the manner in which he is revered is nothing short of phenomenal.

Such is the uniqueness of his personality that for some, he is a lover, while for others he is a savant; some believe him to be an ascetic while others see him as a Karmaveer or a man of heroic deeds. Interestingly, whichever aspect of his personality one chooses to recognise or believe in, one cannot help but be smitten by it; although it is not that everyone is equally enchanted by him, after all, he also had - and still has - his share of detractors. His personality has such a paradoxical effect on people that on one hand, some learned followers of the Hindu religion have hailed him as the only 'complete-avatar', and on the other, the authors of Jain scriptures, as per their own understanding, reasons and perceptions have relegated him to hell! But Krishna's personality is not contingent on any of these views. Who thinks what, how does it matter to Krishna or his personality?

Even though Krishna's personality does not depend on others' perceptions about him, in the light of these contradictions, it is imperative to understand what exactly his personality was. It is also essential to know how he rose to become the King of Dwarka despite being born in a dungeon and having grown up in the shadow of death. Besides this, there are several other questions that invariably pique one's interest when talking about Krishna. It would also be interesting to know what kind of love he and Radha shared. Why did he leave Radha? Why did she roam the streets of Brij for the rest of her life like a woman madly consumed by her love for Krishna, who never returned? At the same time, it is important to decipher the mystery of this awe-inspiring personality, who, on one hand, has been accused of triggering an epic war like the Mahabharata, and on the other, has earned the distinction of being the supremely wise one who has imparted the words of supreme wisdom, which we know as the Bhagavad Gita. Krishna is such a multi-dimensional personality, that there has never been a dearth of names he has been addressed with such as thief, manipulator, liar and trickster, and at the same time, a colossal number of people view him as

Vasudeva, Madhusudan, Kanha, a supreme being and a supremely wise man! The numerous other questions which invariably make people curious about Krishna are: How many times did he marry? How many children did he have? What exactly is Yadavasthali?

This book contains the answers to all these questions. I have penned this work only after a long and thorough study of all the available scriptures related to Krishna such as Harivamsa Puran, Vishnu Puran, Shiva Puran, Shrimadbhagvat Puran, Markandey Puran, Kurma Puran, Bhavishya Puran, Mahabharat among other historical texts, and after grasping the practical and psychological aspects of all the dialogues and incidents mentioned therein. I have condensed the 108 years of Krishna's life and all its significant events into this book, endeavouring to keep this account close to the true psychology of Krishna, and needless to say, I have given it the form of a story to make it an interesting read. I have tried to make the events in Krishna's life come alive for the readers, by elaborating upon the incidents as much as possible, keeping in mind the requirements of modern literature.

I am a psychologist and a strong adherent of spiritual psychodynamics and if viewed from a psychological perspective, whether it is an individual or his life or any kind of incident occurring in his life, eventually, everything is a part of a psychological sequence. And Krishna's personality, in spite of its great aspects and complexities, is no exception to this. Even though psychologically, he has reached the greatest of heights, his state of mind is certainly not beyond comprehension. And I believe that the causes behind the event are far more significant than the event itself. Rather than knowing what a person has done, it is more important to know the reasons why he has done it. Therefore, in this book, I have given equal importance to Krishna's life as well as his state of mind. I am sure, this book will not only shed light on Krishna's life, but will also acquaint you with Krishna's personality and his evolution.

As far as I am concerned, it is the Bhagavad Gita which has transformed my life and taken it to new heights; in fact, Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita are firmly rooted in my heart in their true essence. But in a departure from common belief, I am of the firm opinion that hailing someone as God creates a distance between him and us. Declaring someone as God incarnate is a grave insult to the effort that he has put in to nurture and enhance his potential, his wisdom, his capabilities and his spirit of inquiry. Because the truth is, all those who have accomplished great feats in this world have done it on the strength of their intelligence, capabilities and sheer hard work. It is very convenient to say that

Krishna became great because he was destined to. Possibly, it may give you an excuse to conceal your inability to attain greatness. But the truth is, by linking the greatness of an individual to his destiny, we insult his skills and hard work. That is the reason why, in this book, I have attempted to shed light and elaborate upon all the virtues of Krishna, beginning from his phenomenal grasping power. And it is only by grasping the true essence of his life that we can learn from him and imbibe his qualities. Krishna too learnt from every person and each incident that came into his life. He has scaled the peaks of love, concentration, karma or action and wisdom, solely on the strength of his spirit of inquiry and determination. And this is what is worth learning from his life. As a matter of fact, this book, along with a complete account of his long, eventful life, contains the entire journey of his transformation from a simple cowherd boy 'Krishna' to the supremely powerful 'Jai Shri Krishna'. I affirm with conviction that yes, Krishna is the only 'complete' personality in the history of mankind; but I assert even more firmly that he has reached this state solely due to his diligence and virtues. Therefore, I salute not only him, but also his diligence and intrinsic qualities.

And as for me, I am determined to imbibe his qualities and endeavour to bridge the gap between his psychology and mine, so that I too emerge victorious at every juncture of my life; so that I too can spend my life in joy and bliss, and so that, inspired by him, my life too can be effectively utilised to help humanity, just like his life did.

Researching on and writing about Krishna has taken me on an incredibly rewarding journey of self-discovery and I hope with all my heart that this book helps you embark on an equally enriching voyage. With this ardent wish, I offer this humble labour of love to you.

DEEP TRIVEDI

The Saga Behind the Research on Krishna

As the annals of history have innumerable references to Krishna's iconic personality, there can be no two opinions about the fact that he was a real and historical personality. I am making this statement specifically with reference to the trend among scholars to casually dismiss the life and personality of such legendary personages as being nothing more than a riveting story. This may

indeed hold true in case of several other personalities, but Krishna is certainly not one among them. From a psychodynamic perspective, when the various threads of a story perfectly match the graph of an individual's personality, then such a person or his life cannot be considered to be a mere myth.

There are three factors which unambiguously prove the truth of Krishna's existence. Firstly, a fictional account has only one author. Meaning, if a character is fictional, the entire life of the character is summed up in that one story narrated by the author. However, there is no single book or scripture which details the entire life of Krishna. The most discussed, popular and the oldest literary work that offers glimpses of Krishna's life is the great epic, the Mahabharata. However, this epic focuses mainly on Hastinapur, and thus, the narrative revolves around the Pandava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas. The Mahabharata mentions Krishna only when he comes in contact with the Pandavas and Kauravas or Hastinapur. In the entire scripture, there is no reference to his birth or childhood nor is there any allusion to the last 36 years of his life. But it has to be admitted that the Mahabharata is the only tome which brings to light all the psychological aspects of Krishna's intriguing personality. I am saying this because the awe-inspiring Bhagavad Gita, is an integral part of the Mahabharata, which is included as a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. And the truths that Krishna reveals to Arjuna in this discourse not only stem from his experiences in life but are also an intrinsic part of his personality.

Other than the Mahabharata, fragments of the life of Krishna are available in many other historical texts, and if arranged chronologically, we can piece together his entire life history. At this juncture, it is imperative to understand that out of the 100,000 shlokas (cantos) of the Mahabharata only 8,800 were composed earlier than 3000 BC. The rest, that is to say, almost 90 percent of the shlokas have been added to the Mahabharata between 4th and 2nd BCE by different authors.

Fifteen major works, written over a 1000-year period after the Mahabharata war, have references to Krishna's life. The chief among these are the Harivamsa Purana and the Vishnu Purana, both of which have detailed descriptions of Krishna's life. And these are the only two books which can be considered the most important and reliable resources for those who choose to write or speak about the life of Krishna. Nevertheless, I am presenting to you a brief description of the 15 texts—including the Mahabharata—which have been used to piece together the life history of Krishna.

1. Mahabharata: Out of the total 100,000 verses, the main 8,800 shlokas, also referred to as Jai Khand, have been composed around 3000 BC. The rest were added approximately between 400 and 200 BC.

2. Shatapatha Brahmana: Composed around 900 BC., this Brahman text, which is a section of the Yajur Veda, describes Krishna as a valiant warrior of the Vrishnivanshis (descendants of Vrishni).

3. Aitareya Aaranyak: Composed around 900 BC, this text is a part of the Rig Veda. This work also describes Krishna as a heroic warrior of the clan of the Vrishnis.

4. Nirukta: Composed by Maharishi Yasyaka around 600 BC., this text describes the Syamantaka gem, which plays an important role in the life of Krishna.

5. Ashtadhyayi: A grammar treatise by Panini, this text was written in 600 BC and it contains meanings of terms used to describe Krishna and his life.

6. Garga Samhita: Composed in 400 BC, this text describes the birth and childhood of Krishna. However, in the 15th century, matter related to Brahmanism, avatars, rituals and worship was inserted into the book, corrupting its essence. Therefore, one needs to exercise caution while studying it.

7. Markandeya Purana: This text written between 400-200 BC also has many contextual references to Krishna's name.

8. Jataka Katha: Composed around 400 BC, this Buddhist text mentions Krishna in the Jataka Tale titled Ghat Pandit.

9. Arthashastra: This renowned political treatise, written by Kautilya in 400 BC, refers to Krishna as Vasudeva, the son of Vasudeva.

10. Indika: The Greek scholar Megasthenes wrote this text between 400 and 300 BC, in which he describes a warrior, Heracles, of the Shurasena clan. It is actually a description of Krishna.

11. Harivamsa Purana: Composed in 200 BC by Ugrashrava, this text contains the description of almost all the heroic deeds of Krishna right from his birth.

12. Vishnu Purana: Composed by an unknown author in 200 BC, this is the

oldest and the first text which describes the life of Krishna right from his birth to his death.

13. Mahabhashya: Composed in 200 BC by Patanjali, this text sings praises of Krishna.

14. Padma Purana: In the Patal Khand (section) of this book written in 200 BC, Krishna's birth and his childhood antics have been described contextually, along with those of Rama.

15. Kurma Purana: This text written in 400-200 BC carries a description of Krishna and Balarama, as well as the Yadu dynasty.

Please note that in these books too, there are several contradictions in the facts related to Krishna's life. Thus, while profiling Krishna's life, I have included only those events and descriptions that are in agreement with Krishna's character and personality. Let me make it clear that I am a psychologist, author and speaker, well-versed in spiritual psychology. And the meaning of spiritual psychology is that there are no secrets in the world, meaning there is nothing which cannot be known or revealed.

Indeed, reading the Bhagavad Gita from this unique perspective, one can readily understand that these words must have been spoken by a person who is firmly rooted in the highest levels of consciousness. Any person, well-versed with spiritual psychology, will vouch for this. And when the person who delivers the Bhagavad Gita is so wise, his experiences are bound to be powerful too, because psychologically speaking, anything that one states inevitably comes from his own experience, and needless to say, he has gained this experience from his life. Hence, any statement of a person is essentially a reflection of his life, and his personality, around which his entire life has revolved.

So, I would like to mention here that while writing this story, based on extensive research on Krishna's life, I have given greater importance to his nature as described by him in the Bhagavad Gita. It is a person's own psychology which is of paramount importance in his life, and it is his individual psychology that determines what he would do in a particular situation, or what he must have done. Therefore, what holds immense significance in Krishna's life is his thought process before taking a certain action or decision, and the reasons behind it. Honestly speaking, for a wise master of spiritual psychology, Krishna's entire life is clearly described in the Bhagavad Gita; all one has to do

is match the threads of his life. And this is precisely the reason why, throughout this book, I have linked all the experiences and incidents of Krishna's life to his shlokas in the Bhagavad Gita; it is through these shlokas that he expounds upon his experiences to inspire Arjuna.

It has taken me five years to research and write this book and during this period, I have done nothing but live and breathe Krishna. Frankly speaking, during these five years, my consciousness was entirely immersed in Krishna and his Bhagavad Gita.

If I divide the descriptions of Krishna available in the various historical texts into two parts, the first part contains texts that were written during the BC era, in which Krishna has been described as a skilled warrior and a supreme human being. The second part comprises texts written in the post-BC era, which include works such as Sursagar by the poet Surdas and the renowned Bhagavad Purana. And it is only in these relatively new works that Krishna's life is depicted as being replete with miracles and the Shringara Rasa, or the flavour of romance.

However, I have always perceived Krishna as an immensely gifted, supreme human being. So while researching for my book I have only referred to the ancient and more authoritative books. Of course, wherever I found a link missing, I have tried to bridge the gap by using psychodynamic extrapolations that I feel are congruent with Krishna's personality and story. Below is a list of the books from the post-BC era along with their descriptions:

1. Bhagavad Purana: Composed between 5-10 Century AD, the entire 10th volume and the beginning of the 11th volume contain descriptions about Krishna's life.

2. Harivamsa Purana of the Jains: This work was composed in the 7-8 AD by the Jain saint Acharya Jinsen and it carries a description of Krishna's life.

3. Geet Govinda: Composed in the 13th century by the famous poet Jaydeva, this poetic work speaks of the transcendental love between Radha and Krishna and glorifies their activities.

4. Padavali: Based on the Bhagavat Purana and Jaidev's Geet Govinda, Vidyapati from Bihar has described Radha and Krishna's acts of love in this book written in the 13th and 14th century.

5. Sur Sagar: Surdas, a poet-saint who was the follower of the Pustimarg sect, composed this work in the 15th century which mainly focuses on the childhood activities of Krishna.

6. Guru Granth Sahib: Out of the many couplets compiled in this book by various Sikh Gurus between 1469 to 1708 AD, 2492 are about Krishna's various acts.

7. Prem Sagar: Lallu Lal composed this work in 1810 AD, based on the Bhagavad Purana and the Vishnu Purana. It has hyperbolic descriptions of the acts of Krishna.

8. Shree Prem Sudha Sagar: This is a Hindi translation of the 10th canto of the Bhagavad Purana published by Gita Press.

9. Sukh Sagar: Makhanlal Khatri has translated the stories of the Bhagavad Purana in simple Hindi language in this work.

Apart from these, this book also includes some incidents from a story on Krishna, titled Meri Aatmakatha (My Autobiography).

NOTE: For the convenience of the readers, on every page that describes an incident in Krishna's life, I have also included a footnote which lists the books that it has been drawn from. It is hoped that this endeavour and captivating story will appeal to you and inspire you. Most importantly, I hope that Krishna's elevated level of consciousness and his art of living prove to be instrumental in helping all of us to take our life to new heights. With this fervent desire, I offer this book to you.

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CHAPTER 1

My Birth

The fading rays of the sun were casting long, dark shadows over the cool winter day. A gentle breeze had begun softly rustling through the trees, as if gently nudging the night to take over. The torches, which had started flickering in the distance, seemed to beckon people to return to their cosy homes. Mesmerised by their little orange glow, people had started heading towards their small dwellings and there I was, down on my knees, groaning helplessly, watching them go farther and farther. An intense pain had begun to clutch my heart in a vice-like grip. I had to drag myself to take refuge under a tree. There was no one around and neither was I in a position to call out to someone. At this juncture, I had begun to sense that perhaps, I was taking the last few breaths of my life. However, it was not a cause for grief; for, I had crossed ninety years of age. At present, the fact that was pinching me the most was, I had spent my entire life amidst sorrows and difficulties. But astonishingly, at this point, the painful journey of my entire life had suddenly started flashing before my eyes like a bad dream. Ever since I could remember, I had tolerated nothing, but humiliation. Whomsoever I met, had derided me; whoever had seen me, had cast disparaging glances. But surprisingly, even after enduring such grave humiliation, I had never been able to express my resentment to anyone. Instead, I had let it all simmer deep within myself.

However, during these last moments of my life, all the pain that I had endured and all the humiliation that I had faced, were distressing me deeply. But the nature of the suffering at present was different as it had a lesson embedded in it. Until now, I had blamed others for the ill-treatment meted out to me, which had caused me great anguish. I had believed that the world was full of ‘bad’ people and was not a fit place for a simpleton like me. However, in these last moments of my life, I had realised that it always takes two hands to clap. It had dawned on me now that there must have been some mistakes on my part too! The moment I realised this, I became upset with myself and my mind began to search for my own faults. In other words, the pain existed even now, but its dimension was completely different. The indignation still persisted, but now it was aimed at

none other than me.

Now, when death was knocking at my door, I began to wonder, were only others responsible for my failures and humiliation? Was I not also at fault? Was it not perhaps my very own disposition that was responsible for all my failures? Yes... Certainly, the fault was mine and mine alone! It was a flaw in my way of being. I was so naive that I could not comprehend even the simplest of things. For that matter, did I have the ability to execute even a single task diligently? And this was the reason why I had not been able to succeed in any of my endeavours or accomplish anything fruitful in life. As a result, I had been shoved around and humiliated throughout my life. Whatever I did, bore results to the contrary. But since the fault was mine, how could others be blamed for it? Why unnecessarily curse the whole world?

All in all, in these last moments of life, I was thoroughly convinced that I had needlessly wasted all those precious years blaming others, thinking they were at fault. Although the realisation had come late, it was good that I could discern my mistakes at this very last moment. Surprisingly, once I had realised my fault, all of a sudden, I felt an inner power awakening within me. I could see a serene but powerful personality emerging within me.

Astonishingly, here I was, at death's door, breathing my last, when owing to this personality transformation, a resolve formed within me and a voice emerged from my soul, "O people! Wait and see! In my next birth, I will be successful in whatever I choose to undertake! All my contemporaries will be awestruck by my intelligence, my knowledge and my inner strength. I will accomplish such remarkable feats that my intellectual prowess will be hailed for aeons to come! For, I have now come to realise the ways of the world; here, a person has to work hard to better his lot and I have already started doing so. Hence, in my next birth, no one can stop me from achieving stupendous success.

O Almighty! Mark my words! I will not live another life of despair at any cost! Even if you try putting obstacles in my path or dare to create hurdles, I will not let your evil intentions be successful. In these last moments of my life, I firmly resolve that irrespective of the nature of my next birth, I will emerge a winner at any cost. I will astound the whole world with my intelligence and wisdom and its resonance shall reverberate across the oceans. In this life, all I have seen is failure; everyone triumphed over me and I lost to all! But now, know it for certain; whether you co-operate or not, my next life will surely be a memorable victory march. And if you dare to thwart my progress, I will not only defy you

but also defeat you." No sooner had I taken this resolve than breath left my body. At last, I was free from a life of humiliation. After all, complaining about others merely reflects the weakness of one's own mind, whereas a strong-willed mind resolves to fight against the circumstances. Thank God! My mind had become resolute at least at this last minute. If nothing else, this had at least created the possibilities of bettering my next life.

As this life came to an end, I do not know for how many years my soul lingered in nothingness with my 'subtle mind'. Perhaps, four or five hundred earthly years might have passed. But if I state in terms of time in nothingness, hardly a week might have passed. In nothingness, the passage of time is not realised because here the mind is at peace as there are no physical bondages. Therefore, here, time does not merely pass, but it flies!

Suddenly, I felt as if someone was trying to wake me from my deep slumber. I awoke with a start and immediately understood that my time for enjoying heavenly bliss was over; meaning, the foundation for my next life had been laid. Once again, I was to enter the same mundane world and suffer the same bodily bondage. Once again the same illusion-filled life full of greed, lust and desire, and the same endless cycle of pain! But was there a way out? This was the flow of life; one had to simply accept it. However, I wondered, here I was peacefully asleep, free from all worldly worries; who then had become so anxious to give birth to me?

Close on the heels of this thought, I caught a glimpse of an event cutting through a haze on earth. Suddenly, I could see dust clouds rising. On taking a closer look, I saw a chariot moving swiftly, carrying in it a new bride, attired in exquisite bridal finery, sitting lovingly with her husband. Their rapture and bliss seemed to be soaring to the skies while a colossal figure rode their chariot with great gusto.

With the scene becoming clearer, my awareness as well as alertness, both were increasing. It did not take me long to realise that this newlywed bride on the chariot was my mother-to-be Devaki, from whose womb I was to take my next birth; and the man beside her was her husband and my father-to-be, Vasudeva. And the huge man riding the chariot with such alacrity was none other than my maternal uncle, Kansa. Seeing this wonderful scene, I felt elated and thought, 'Great! At least, now, I will be free from a life of humiliation. My next birth will take place in a royal family.' To tell you the truth, the very thought of growing up in a royal palace was making me delirious with joy.

I had just begun to dream of my future when all of a sudden, I lost consciousness

once again. I do not know for how many years I lay insentient again. In nothingness, the subtle mind remains in an unconscious or a sleeping state, because here, there is nothing much for the mind to do.

However, my subtle mind was repeatedly trying to become conscious, for reasons unknown to me. Finally, its endeavours bore fruit and once again I regained consciousness. No sooner had I become conscious than I saw a strange event unfolding on earth. Outside Mathura, in a remote forest, a saint called Narada was sitting under the shade of a dense tree with a **veena**¹ in his hand. Forty-odd inhabitants of Mathura stood before him, pleading with folded hands, voicing their grievances. In fact, they were all giving Narada an account of the atrocities committed by my soon-to-be Uncle Kansa, the King of Mathura. Their grievance was, Kansa had made their lives miserable. Such was the extent of his brutality that he had not even spared his own father, King Ugrasena; the fiend had imprisoned him as well. Not just that, he had given free rein to his soldiers to oppress the citizens of Mathura and they plundered the people and their shops at their discretion. Moreover, they even abducted young women from their homes whenever they pleased. Strangely enough, in spite of all this, there was not even a single person in Mathura who had the courage to oppose Kansa. There was nobody in Mathura at present, who could raise his voice against Kansa's atrocities. The people of Mathura were complaining to Narada that "In spite of the presence of a saint like you, we are leading the life of an animal. We urge you to look into this matter, show some mercy and kindly free us from such a distraught life." This scene shook me to the core of my being. Hey! These people were instigating Narada against my soon-to-be Uncle Kansa! They were poisoning Narada's ears against their own King! And can you believe it? Narada was actually falling for their story and needlessly becoming sentimental! Oh! This was too much! On hearing their lamentations, he was now getting incensed! These people were so strange! They were biting the hand that fed them. But forget them, what had happened to this saint? Why had he lost his temper on hearing about the atrocities of Kansa? Why was he unnecessarily becoming so furious? In my mind, I silently appealed to him, 'O revered saint! Look into the matter carefully; find out the truth first and then take a decision.' But no! Narada straightaway began to spew venom against Kansa. Enraged, he cried out, "Kansa seems to have been swayed, overshadowed by his arrogance! If a King who is supposed be the saviour of his subjects, turns into an oppressor, then for the good of all, such a King ought to be eliminated. I will definitely exterminate Kansa!"

As soon as I heard this, I began to tremble; I could see my dreams shattering into pieces. Where had this uninvited trouble come from? What had come over Narada? In my own mind, I began to plead with him, “Narada, please have some patience. After all, he is my uncle-to-be. If you destroy him, how will I take birth in a royal palace?” It appeared that doom and despair would keep stalking me even in the life to come, and with this depressing thought, despondency pervaded my entire being.

Meanwhile, Narada, completely beside himself with anger, stomped off to Kansa’s palace. The palace appeared to be imposing and magnificent at the first sight itself. A gigantic porch opened out to a grand courtyard. The entire palace was surrounded by beautiful gardens with exotic plants and flowers giving it an enchanting heavenly feel. The huge doors of the palace, embellished with intricate carvings, looked beautiful beyond words and formidable at the same time with burly, armed soldiers guarding them. Inside the palace, priceless adornments, made of gold, silver as well as wood lined the walls and corners. Upon entering through another splendidly designed gateway, which had exquisite statues lined on either side of the door, numerous corridors of various sizes had to be navigated to reach Kansa’s court. I was so mesmerised by the grandeur of the palace that I fell in love with it at the first sight and began to dream. My condition was quite strange; on one hand, my mind was dreaming of taking the next birth in a royal palace, and on the other, I was apprehensive about the fact that Narada’s anger could ruin everything.

When Narada entered Kansa’s court, it was filled to capacity. Kansa was seated in a stately manner on a high throne, overpowering everyone present in the court, and they too seemed to be in complete awe of him. In other words, it seemed quite unlikely that anybody would even think to cause him any harm. Good! But when they saw Narada’s livid appearance, neither the gatekeepers nor the palace guards could muster enough courage to stop him; he stomped straight into the court. Seeing an enraged Narada entering the court unannounced, Kansa was momentarily taken aback. However, he quickly managed to regain his royal composure. This development was indeed unexpected for Kansa and he was still feeling discomfited by Narada's sudden appearance. And in the same state of discomfiture, he invited Narada to take a seat and simultaneously used the opportunity to enquire about the purpose of his visit. But an incensed Narada was hardly in the mood to accept Kansa’s hospitality. Standing rooted to the spot, he thundered, “I have not come here to sit, but to rein in your atrocities. I have come to warn you that your death is stalking you!”

Hearing these words uttered by Narada, Kansa's blood ran cold. His jaw dropped and he gaped at the angry sage. An eerie silence had descended over the entire court. Seeing Narada's enraged countenance and hearing his ominous words, Kansa was disconcerted for a moment. However, his disposition changed almost immediately with the thought, 'How dare he challenge me in my own court and that too, in front of my own courtiers?' No sooner had this thought flashed through his mind than his fear dissipated and his original arrogant nature reasserted itself. Completely consumed by his arrogance, he asked, "Where is my death? Who can kill me? Is there anyone in Mathura who can even dream of confronting me?"

Although Kansa did make a valiant attempt at bravado with his disdainful counter challenge, his feigned feeling of self-assurance did not really permeate the courtiers. The fear that had overwhelmed them earlier had still held them in its grip. At that time, along with my soon-to-be parents, numerous other dignitaries were also present in the court, and prominent amongst them were Acharya Gargacharya and Chief Minister Anart. However, coming back to Narada, Kansa's egotistical outburst had only managed to fuel the fury of the sage. And in response, Narada raised his voice even louder and said, "O evil Kansa! Death is so close to you. But to see it, you have to remove the veil of conceit draped over your eyes!"²

Upon hearing this, Kansa, who was high on conceit, came crashing down to earth. All his self-confidence was shattered. With eyes wide with fright, he looked all around but he could not find anyone apart from his own coterie of yes-men. As a result, Kansa, brimming with arrogant enthusiasm, could not tolerate Narada's harsh words for long. At any rate, for how long could he be put up with such humiliation in his own court and that too, in front of his own people? Finally, he lost his temper and insanely ranted, "Where is it? Where is my death? O you mad fakir! As far as I can see, these are my own people. I don't see my death anywhere!"

Seeing Kansa screaming like a madman, Narada began to laugh. Perhaps, it was the sight of Kansa, who had broken out in a cold sweat that had amused him. Hence, he now replied very calmly, "Kansa! You don't have the vision that is required to see your own destruction. Your death is standing right beside you, hidden in your sister Devaki's womb! Beware! Devaki's eighth son will become the cause of your death! He will be your nemesis. He will be all powerful! He will be God!" With this chilling prediction, Narada walked out of the court, guffawing as he saw Kansa's expression change.

I was a little bewildered on seeing Narada's behaviour. Just a while ago, he was fuming. Then all of a sudden, he began laughing and just as quickly, he became calm, and then roaring with laughter, he even left the court. On the other hand, there was my uncle-to-be, whose rage just continued to intensify once it was triggered. As for the courtiers, they were still frightened even though Narada had left the court quite a while ago. Why? Was the saint's anger merely an act? On the face of it, that was certainly what it seemed to be. That is why he was able to change his frame of mind so swiftly. I found this truly intriguing; anger was displayed and yet, there was no internal turmoil. I began to wonder...Could this possibly be the difference between a saint and an ordinary man?! Well, irrespective of what the truth was, I was happy with the realisation that my mind had now begun to contemplate. Great! Now, with this contemplation, at least my mind had begun to evolve. If nothing else, it was certain that I would not be a fool in this life, like I was in the previous one.

However, whether I would be a fool or not was not a concern at present. Presently, the main question was, where would I be born? And to answer that let me return to the scene at the court. There, the effect of Narada's words was like that of an earthquake. While Gargacharya and Anart could be seen immersed in deep thought, Devaki was still trembling with fear, and Vasudeva too was absolutely shaken. But unlike others, Kansa was completely silent. Perhaps, this silence was an indication of the great storm brewing in his mind, and that was precisely what the case was. Narada's words had disturbed Kansa's mental equilibrium to such an extent that all of a sudden, he started screaming hysterically, "Eighth child! Devaki's womb! My death! First...second...third...fourth...fifth...sixth...seventh...and eighth! Ha...ha...ha...ha...! O, foolish Narada! I will kill Devaki right away! Then, neither will there be a womb nor will there be a child! This menace will be nipped in the bud itself!" Saying this, he drew his sword in a flash. On seeing this, Vasudeva, Gargacharya and Anart were aghast. And poor Devaki! She began to tremble like a dry leaf in the wind. Within no time, the atmosphere of perplexity in the court turned into that of sheer panic and terror.

Needless to say, Vasudeva's condition was by far the worst. After all, Devaki was his dear wife. It was just recently that he had been married to her. Indeed, he must have harboured sweet dreams of a long, blissful marital life with his stunningly beautiful wife. In that case, how could he bear the thought of his beloved Devaki's brutal murder, and that too, at the hands of her own brother?

However, his capacity to bear was not in question at the moment. At present, the issue was, how to counter the sudden menace that was staring them in their faces. Considering Kansa's current enraged state, any form of opposition would have been like adding fuel to the fire and would have only worsened the situation. However, Vasudeva could not let his beloved wife be killed in this manner either. Meaning, he had no option but to find some way of saving her. Indeed, Vasudeva was caught in a grave predicament. Finally, when he could not think of anything else, he somehow mustered enough courage and in a soft and entirely submissive tone, appealed to Kansa, "You are the most powerful King and Devaki is your dear sister. In fact, just a few days ago, you had yourself ridden her bridal chariot with such avid enthusiasm and great gusto. How surprising it is that you now want to kill this very dear sister, and that too, fearing a child?! Everyone knows that Narada is a vagrant saint. If you fall for his words, and propelled by fear, kill your own sister, then your reputation would be tarnished forever. Not only that, this misdeed of yours may even put an end to the stories of your incredible strength and valour. Heaven forbid; what if you fall from grace and also incur the sin of killing your own sister?"

Now, Vasudeva was trying his level best to save the situation, and admittedly, he had even presented his point of view quite well, but my condition still continued to be grave. It was with great difficulty that I was getting a royal womb and now would the bearer of the womb also be killed, and that too, by my own uncle? Although, from my uncle's demeanour, I could at least discern that the complaints made to Narada by the inhabitants of Mathura could not be wrong. Indeed, my uncle's actions were ample proof of his warped thinking. Was he not hell-bent on killing his own sister? Did one need any further proof of his vileness?

Well, leaving all this aside, if I go back to speaking about myself, then on one hand, I was dreaming of a royal, luxurious life, and on the other, the very question of my birth was now suspended in ambiguity. As a consequence, gloom and despair pervaded my entire being; and what can I say of my mind? It was persistently tossing around in a dense cloud of despondency. Nevertheless, this sadness did not last for long. After all, I was no longer my former timid self to accept defeat in just a couple of blows. I was now prepared to struggle to any extent to ensure a royal birth for me; therefore, to regain control over the situation, I once again evoked my earlier resolve. "I will ensure that my next birth becomes a reality at any cost, even if it means confronting fate itself!" That was it! As soon as I invoked my resolve, it began to show its effect. The

situation immediately began to change and turn in my favour. However, the deathly silence that had enveloped the court after listening to Vasudeva's proposal was still quite palpable. Yet, the good news was, it had assuaged Kansa's anger to some extent. He was gazing at Vasudeva in a manner which suggested that he was seriously contemplating the proposal. At times, Kansa also cast stealthy, sidelong glances at Devaki. After all, she was his dear sister and I could feel the brotherly love within him beginning to stir for her. His repeated glances at the trembling Devaki seemed to be melting his heart.

Not just me, even the frightened courtiers were keenly observing each and every expression of Kansa. But as he was still silent, it was too premature to clearly infer what was brewing in his mind. Do you think it is easy to discern the thoughts of a seasoned King by studying his facial expressions?...No, not at all! And in this case, it was all the more difficult, especially considering that the sword was still in his hands! It was also true that because he was lost deep in thought, the sword appeared to be almost frozen in his hand; and he did not seem likely to wield it immediately.

As for Vasudeva, seeing Kansa almost convinced by his proposal, his confidence was boosted. Indeed, success in one's machinations does tend to fuel one's courage. Thus, an encouraged Vasudeva pressed further and addressed Kansa with great humility, "I have a plan in my mind. If you permit, may I kindly present it to you?"

Hearing the word 'plan,' Kansa, who was already in a dilemma, began to feel relieved. For, not only did he want to save himself from death, but if possible, he also wanted to avoid committing the sin of killing his dear sister. Indeed, this was the quandary he had found himself in, because in spite of all his efforts, he was unable to find a way to save both Devaki and himself. And when a person is at his wits' end, he sees a sliver of hope in every suggestion; Kansa's condition too was no different. He immediately looked at Vasudeva and nodded his head in assent; meaning, he had granted him permission to explain the plan in detail.

An enthused Vasudeva, who was waiting anxiously to reveal his plan, immediately began to speak, "Instead of killing Devaki, it would be better if you keep us in the palace under house arrest. As soon as Devaki gives birth to a child, I will not only bring the news to you, but will also place the newborn at your feet. Then you can deal with the child in the manner you wish; we will not even wince. This will ensure that this secret remains confined to the palace walls and your reputation remains untarnished. Moreover, you will be saved from

committing the sin of killing your sister and will no longer need to fear the child either.”

Anart and Gargacharya immediately seconded Vasudeva’s proposal, perhaps because they too were strongly against the killing of Devaki. Now Kansa had also begun to see some merit in this plan. After all, this was the only plan that could fulfill all his desires in a single stroke. The plan was so sound that Kansa did not need to contemplate over it for long; after deliberating on it for a short while, he acceded to it. As soon as he gave his consent, he felt a great sense of relief and became quite reassured. Consequently, his anger also subsided. Then, addressing Vasudeva and Devaki together, he said, “All right! I agree to your plan. Both of you will be under house arrest from today itself.”

On hearing this, along with my soon-to-be parents, the entire court heaved a sigh of relief. As for me, you cannot even imagine what a huge sense of relief it was! With this, at least my birth in a royal family was assured. Meanwhile, to ensure that there was no scope for ambiguity in anybody's mind, a shrewd Kansa addressed Vasudeva, saying, “As soon as a child is born to Devaki, it will be your responsibility to hand over the child to me. And bear this in mind, I will kill the child as soon as he is born!

Narada’s predictions...Ha...ha...ha...!

Kansa’s death...Ha...ha...ha...!”

Guffawing thus, Kansa left the court. Certainly, he was now completely relieved and reassured about the success of his plan and the safety of his life.

However, upon hearing this, Devaki collapsed into Vasudeva’s arms, as if she was half-dead. Obviously, this was because she could not bear the shock of the inevitable murder of her children, who had not even seen the light of the day. Vasudeva, on the contrary, was happy thinking that the immediate threat to the life of his dear wife had been averted, though for the time being. But I thought, 'Fantastic! You have managed to save your wife’s life but what about me? I will be killed as soon as I am born! I had not only been wrenched away from the skies and unceremoniously dumped on earth, but here too, in this otherwise peaceful abode, the situation had become strange. While mother was lying unconscious on earth, her soon-to-be child had become extremely apprehensive here.

Nevertheless, as per the plan, Devaki was immediately put under house arrest in her own chamber. In addition, Kansa had also appointed four separate

chambermaids to keep a round-the-clock vigil on Devaki; and with this, Devaki's dream of a blissful married life came crashing down in no time. After all, she had just got married; she must have harboured so many dreams! But instead, what fell in her lap was house arrest! And added to her woes was a long and torturous wait for the murder of her yet-to-be-born children. Devaki was possibly the most helpless mother in the world; and I, the most helpless child who was to take birth only to be killed instantly.

As the days passed, on earth my mother's heart was racing faster and up here, my nervousness was growing exponentially. And time, unmindful of our plight, was flitting by at its own pace. Finally, it was time and my brother took birth from Devaki's womb. Just as father Vasudeva had promised, he informed Kansa about the birth of the child. What a cruel deed my father had to perform! No father in the entire history of mankind must have ever been compelled to invite someone to kill his own child!

Well, this was precisely the news that Kansa seemed to be eagerly waiting for. As soon as he received the news, he stormed into Devaki's chambers, with Vasudeva running helplessly behind him. My poor, helpless mother was still lying unconscious after her delivery. But why would Kansa worry about all this? He was so terrified of his own death that his cruelty knew no bounds. Without batting an eyelid, he viciously grabbed the innocent newborn sleeping next to Devaki, dangled him by his tiny feet and angrily smashed him against the wall. How could the poor little infant resist Kansa's might? In a single blow, the infant's blood and flesh splattered on the floor.

Shockingly, Kansa's hand did not tremble even once while carrying out such a ghastly, cruel and cold-blooded act. Moreover, after killing the child, he let out a cruel laugh and left the chamber as if nothing had happened. Vasudeva, who had been witnessing such a cruel scene leaning against the wall, instantly lost consciousness and collapsed on the ground. It was good that Devaki was still unconscious. What if she had stood witness to this brutal, inhumane act? Probably, she would not have even stayed alive to give birth to me. And what can I say about my state of mind? I thought, 'Was I being born only to be killed so mercilessly? Had my resolve to live a better life been in vain?'

No! No! My resolve could never be in vain. Having no one around, I continued to console and reassure myself with this thought. The situation was such that I was the one who needed comforting, but apart from myself, there was no one to console me. Gradually, the situation had come to such a pass that I seemed to be

destined to wait for my birth year after year, and if it was not my turn to be born, then I had to be prepared to witness this cruel scene yet again. In the next three years, I had seen three of my brothers being slaughtered in the same brutal manner. Each time, the same chain of events was repeated; Vasudeva reporting to Kansa and the latter cruelly killing the child; this terrible set of events had now become a routine. This meant that I had to wait for one full year for this traumatising moment and then be a witness to such a barbaric act. It was good that I had not taken birth as yet; otherwise my story would have ended before it had even begun! However, from another perspective, it could be said that destiny was being cruel to me, by making me a witness to the heinous killing of my brothers year after year.

Well, the occurrences up till now had brought Kansa's cruelty, Vasudeva's helplessness and Devaki's pain to the fore; and this began to etch a deep impression on my subtle mind. Until now, all I knew was, I had to take birth from Devaki's womb, but where I stood in the order of the birth, I did not know! Meaning, the only curiosity left now was to wait for my turn to be killed. And as for my mind, on one hand it was writhing in terrible anguish with the death of each child, and on the other, it was giving me the consolation that at least I had been spared so far; but for how long? When I thought about all this, my mind would plunge into the whirlpool of anxiety again. Surprisingly, even in this world beyond time, the wait seemed endless. Indeed, even in this timeless, heavenly world, I not only had to endure hell-like suffering in the form of time but also had to go through great emotional upheavals. In short, the suspense, whether I would be born sooner or later, had made me fully realise the presence of time. And simultaneously, I had also realised that not being aware of time was 'heaven' and the feeling of passage of time was 'hell'. Perhaps, this was the essence of heaven and hell described in the scriptures.

Coming back to the present, I was now relieved that my mind, which had experienced only anguish in my previous life, was now relatively much less perturbed in spite of these extremely adverse circumstances. This could undoubtedly be considered a great accomplishment for the evolution of my mind. And this development of my mind was inspiring as well as significant, because the body stays with the soul only for a single birth. So, even if I died as soon as I was born, what difference would it make? But, the mind perennially accompanies the soul, life after life; thus, the evolution of the mind holds much greater relevance.

You might remember that in my previous life, when I had analysed my entire life

at the time of death, I had come to realise that no one is responsible for an individual's failure except his own personality, his own way of being. Perhaps, it was this quality of self-analysis which was rapidly becoming immanent to my nature. Meaning, at this time, my mind was going through mixed experiences of anguish, analysis, satisfaction and introspection. But unfortunately, the resolve that I had taken at the time of my death was nowhere to be found.

Well, if the resolve was not present at the moment, I could at least engage the analyst in me. If nothing else, why not just analyse the events up till now, to while away time? And upon analysing, I could very well understand that grief, anxiety, pain, fear, etc., are all facets of time. For, I had seen my parents' distress surge and recede with the passage of time. At the same time, I had also seen Kansa's anger surge and subside with time. If this was the truth, then why worry unnecessarily? In that case, it was quite likely that even my current pain was just another facet of 'time'. And if this indeed was the case, then why not leave all worries to time? Surprisingly, no sooner had this thought crossed my mind than my pain vanished. And the moment I chose to leave all anxieties to time, amazingly, I felt the all-important quality of self-confidence surge within my mind. The good news was, as soon as my self-confidence increased, it began to show its effect and Kansa's frame of mind began to change as well.

In fact, Kansa had become quite complacent after killing four children and he did not see any difficulty in killing the rest, as and when they were born. Thus reassured, once again the thought of his dear sister Devaki crossed his mind; as somewhere deep within, he was indeed perturbed by his sister's suffering, and besides, not even a shred of doubt existed in his mind about Vasudeva's intentions or the plan proposed by him. Hence, he was now trying to kill two birds with one stone. In other words, he was looking for a solution to eliminate the cause of his death without having to inflict any more pain on his dear sister Devaki. Now, when the intentions are good, does it take time for a good action-plan to manifest? And sure enough, a sound plan emerged soon. Kansa thought, 'If Devaki's eighth child is to be the cause of my death, then why unnecessarily kill my other nephews? Why should I needlessly increase my sister's suffering?' When Kansa apprised Acharya Gargacharya of this noble idea, Gargacharya was beside himself with joy. He declared that Kansa's idea was quite appropriate and propitious. Upon hearing uncle's felicitous idea, naturally, even I, his nephew, was very pleased. Finally, a path for my escape had opened up. And now that a way had been found, I would soon be saved too!

However, that was something which would unfold only with time; but

meanwhile, my analytical skills were growing each day. Owing to this ability, I had realised that the waxing and waning of my self-confidence definitely had some connection with Kansa's state of mind. I had undeniable proof of this as well; an increase in my self-confidence invariably opened up a path for my survival, whereas a waning of my self-confidence instantly resulted in death stalking me in the form of Kansa. This meant that there had to be some link between the states of mind of two people. If this indeed was the case, then it meant that the future of an individual too was directly connected to his state of mind. See! That was why Kansa quickly acted upon his propitious thought and removed the strict vigil imposed on mother with immediate effect. Though her house arrest still continued, the good news was, the restrictions imposed upon people visiting her were withdrawn. This was indeed a good development, for if nothing else, it at least gave her an opportunity to share her grief with someone. However, this was as far as Devaki was concerned, whereas thanks to my analytical mind, I was learning an astonishing lesson. On the face of it, Kansa loved his sister dearly. Despite this, how easily he had been able to kill her four children! Really, one could not help but wonder at the vagaries of human nature! Perhaps, human love lasts only as long as an individual's own survival is not threatened.

Coming back to the present, let me first tell you about the fact that was threatening my existence at present. Though Kansa still continued his vigil on my mother as a precautionary measure, there was no restriction for father anymore; meaning, he was absolutely free now. His movements within the palace or visits in and out of Mathura were no longer restricted. Well, that was understandable; after all, the person who was to give birth, that is the bearer of the child, was still under house arrest. Needless to say, because of this one decision taken by Kansa, the entire family could breathe easy. See! This is exactly what I had said, that there was a direct connection between one's state of mind and his future. Nonetheless, barely a few moments of peace had passed, when one day, Narada unexpectedly landed in Mathura again. Perhaps, he had come to check the effect of his prediction on Kansa and the people of Mathura. I do not know why but as soon as he arrived in Mathura, for some reason, my heart began to sink. I was fearful that he may once again turn the tables in this game, which I was all set to win. This was quite possible indeed, because it was he, who was responsible for creating all this mayhem. As soon as he arrived, he headed straight to Gargacharya to enquire about the situation in Mathura. When Gargacharya told Narada that Kansa had already killed four of Devaki's children, Narada was very pleased. However, his joy triggered waves of anxiety

through my mind. It was bound to! For, Narada's glee was beyond my comprehension. To tell you the truth, I became very angry at his impertinence. What was even more surprising, or rather shocking was, when Gargacharya informed him that Kansa had changed his mind and had now decided to spare the next three children and kill only the eighth child of Devaki, Narada's disposition suddenly turned gloomy. As if that was not puzzling enough, the next moment, his face even became furrowed with lines of worry. Now, this was really strange! I had not been able to fathom the reason for Narada's happiness in the first place, and now, the rising anxiety on his face had perplexed me further. For, the news which should have normally delighted any saint, had caused him distress; and the information that four infants had been killed, which should have ordinarily been heart-rending for any saint, had caused him delight! All his calculations were topsy-turvy. In fact, to me, this man seemed to be a little demented! Ever since he had arrived on the scene, he had created havoc in my world as well as that of my family. Now I was not able to gauge what kind of a person Narada was, or what he wanted but one thing was certain —my self-confidence was thoroughly shaken by his strange behaviour, but what could I do except watch the drama unfold between Kansa and Narada? And that was precisely what I was doing. The next act in this chain of ongoing drama was enough to shake me out of my complacency; as soon as Narada heard from Gargacharya about Kansa's change of mind, anxious, he immediately strode into Kansa's palace. At that time, Kansa was taking a stroll in his garden. Certainly, he was in a very reassured frame of mind and it did not take long for Narada to gauge that. Moreover, Kansa also made his assured state of mind quite evident by greeting Narada with all the courtesy befitting a saint like him. Narada, on the other hand, seemed to be terribly shocked on seeing the current state of affairs and clearly appeared to be immersed in some deep thought. It was evident that he wanted to express a lot to Kansa but could not figure out how. In this puzzled state of mind, his eyes were wandering around Kansa's garden, when suddenly his gaze fell upon a bullock cart standing at a distant corner. Narada's eyes virtually lit up when he saw the cart. It seemed, he had perhaps found the opening he was looking for, to express what he had in his mind. He immediately beckoned Kansa to come near the bullock cart and then, pointing at the wooden spokes of the cartwheel, he asked, "Look at this cartwheel carefully. Can you tell which spoke in this wheel is the first and which one is the eighth?"

Kansa began to look at the wheel carefully. After staring intently for a while, when he still could not answer, he shook his head in bewilderment. Narada

seemed to have precisely elicited the response he had desired. He laughed and said, “Similarly, one of Devaki’s eight children will be the cause of your death. However, which one it is, cannot be said with certainty. He could either be the first or the eighth.”

Upon hearing this, Kansa instantly fell at Narada’s feet and exclaimed with folded hands, “You have provided me with the right knowledge at the right time, otherwise it would have proven disastrous for me. Had you not warned me, my killer would have slipped off my hands owing to my foolishness! Now I will kill all of Devaki’s children! Not a single one will I spare!”

That was it! Narada’s work was done! He immediately left chanting “Narayan-Narayan!” And believe it or not, his face was lit up with a mysterious smile. Not only that, he now appeared completely relaxed, as if some plan of his had just fructified. Seeing all this from above, I was plunged into the abyss of great anxiety. I had now realised that a person’s state of mind is deeply connected with his life. As you can see, the moment my self-confidence was kindled, Kansa had begun to have positive thoughts and as soon as my self-confidence waned, Narada had succeeded with his scheming. This clearly implied that our state of mind is the driving force which makes things happen around us; and indeed if this is the case, then every event is nothing, but the manifestation of our own state of mind. So, if I somehow managed to regain my lost self-confidence, then even at this juncture, a way to save myself could be found. But how? After all, it is not that easy to regain one’s lost self-confidence, right?

Forget it! Self-confidence would return when it has to. Until then, I thought why not delve deeper into analysis because I was still not able to build a firm and certain opinion about Narada. In fact, his mysterious smile had left me completely befuddled, and moreover, the gist of my initial analysis was also a little confusing. All in all, the combination of these two factors had put me in a dilemma regarding Narada. But, one thing was clear, that Narada was either a Satan in the guise of a saint, or someone supremely intelligent disguised as a demon. However, I also knew that my mind had not yet evolved enough to accurately analyse a person like Narada. So, before I lost my sanity, I thought it best to put a full stop to this process of deep analysis. To tell you the truth, Narada was just an excuse; I was actually trying to somehow reassure myself in order to regain the self-confidence that I had lost. Meaning, this entire analysis of mine was nothing but a part of my endeavour to bring my self-confidence back. Certainly, this was essential to turn the lost opportunity in my favour once again because from my experiences so far, I had surely realised the indisputable

truth that a person's future is directly linked to his own state of mind.

While I was immersed in these thoughts, all of a sudden I began to remember my past life. Along with that, I also recalled the resolve that I had made at the time of death: "In my next birth, I will ride the chariot of success under any circumstances, and for that, I will do whatever is necessary." So, in this birth I had to muster enough courage and strength so that when the time came, I could even confront God. 'You fool!' I admonished myself, 'Then act on it! Indeed, this is the time to confront God. He might be making plans to push you into the jaws of death but you must live, and that too, not just an ordinary life but a splendid one.' 'Yes! Yes! I will live and I must! Why should I take birth just to be killed?' That was it! I began to repeat this resolution over and over again to rekindle my self-confidence.

Then suddenly, I witnessed a scene which I had never even imagined. I saw my father Vasudeva travelling to Gokula and surprisingly, he looked extremely pleased. Perhaps, this was the result of being freed from house arrest after four long years. But no! There appeared to be an altogether different reason behind his happiness; but we will come to that later. First let me describe Gokula for you. It appeared to be a small, but a very beautiful village. There were hardly twenty-five to thirty mud-brick houses in the entire village. I do not know why, but at the very first sight, I fell in love with this village.

Upon reaching Gokula, my father went straight to the village headman Nanda's house. And thanks to his visit, guess what did I come to know! Apparently, my father had other wives too! In fact, my father's second wife Rohini was staying at Nanda's house. Needless to say, the purpose of father's visit to Gokula was just to meet her. So, this was the mystery behind his exuberance! Not only that, father's evident affection for Rohini was ample indication of the fact that she was his favourite wife. Interestingly, he also had eleven children from her! Seeing all this, I was relieved by the fact that even though Kansa had killed four of my brothers, my other siblings were still alive in Gokula. In the present adverse circumstances, this thought alone was enough to bring me immense joy. At the same time, from the conversation between Nanda and Vasudeva, I also came to know that my father-to-be had fourteen wives in all and some of them were, in fact, sisters of my soon-to-be mother, Devaki. Seeing the large family of my father, my mind had also begun to expand. And with the expansion of my mind, now, it became clear to me that perhaps I was to be Devaki's eighth child.

Just then, Narada's voice echoed in my ears: "Devaki's eighth child will be your nemesis. He will be extremely powerful. He will be God!" Oh, I see! This meant that it was me!... because, in all likelihood, I was the one who was going to be Devaki's eighth child. So would I really be all powerful? Would I be God? Well, I did not know what would happen in the future, but at this moment, the concurrence between the large family of my father and Narada's prediction was very heartening for me. I was, anyway attempting to regain my lost self-confidence and as you know, a person with a broken spirit is quick to take refuge in God. So, I too began to convince myself, 'Yes! I am God and why only God, I am the Supreme Lord! For, God's will is, I be killed but I will defy his will and live, and that too, not just an ordinary life but a life filled with accomplishments. And how can this be possible without being the God of the Gods? As from the very beginning, God's intentions for me have been far from good. When I am being sent in this world only to die, then how can I live my life depending on him? If I do, he would not rest until he has finally pushed me into the jaws of death. No! No! I will become my own God!' Meaning, suddenly, my mind began to get filled with great thoughts and resolves.

Perhaps 'God' is one such word which instantly sends the mind rushing into a thousand different directions. However, it was good that even after wandering places, my mind was finally able to take root and settle within itself. This made me realise that without becoming the God of my own life, I would not be able to change my life for the better. Indeed, as soon as this positive thought flashed through my mind, my self-confidence began to soar once again. And with this, yet another truth of human life became clear; if we assume ourselves to be the God of our life, our self-confidence increases, whereas if we live our life depending on other gods, our self-confidence dwindles. And, this was the very experience of mine that I had later reiterated in the Gita. You would remember, when Arjuna was repeatedly quoting the scriptures and the Vedas, it was precisely on the basis of this experience that I had said, "When your mind, confused by listening to thousands of things, is anchored in one universal God, meaning, when it becomes one with the soul, you will be spontaneously freed from all the pronouncements that you have overheard and all that you have allowed to sink within."³ And yes, I had also said, "Remember Arjuna! My devotee, that is, the one who is seeking God in his own soul, will never be destroyed." Well, as per this line of thought, I had no other option but to become my own God and so I was ready for it. Hence, I accepted myself as my God; which meant, now I would not be destroyed.

Thinking thus, I had just begun to feel reassured, when all of a sudden, everything turned topsy-turvy. As soon as my self-confidence increased, Kansa's cruelty intensified. In fact, it increased to such an extent that he now decided to kill Devaki's remaining four children ceremoniously in an open ground. Oh! Just see the height of his brutality! An uncle was going to hold the ceremony to celebrate the killing of his nephews! Meaning, what I was thinking so far had proved wrong, but then where did it go wrong? My mind, which had not been able to comprehend Narada's calculations earlier, was now even more bewildered by the antithetical impact of my self-confidence. And consequently, the self-confidence I had mustered with great difficulty was thoroughly shaken once again. This was like taking two steps forward and three backwards!⁴

At present, the time for the birth of Devaki's fifth child was drawing near and Kansa too was at his vigilant best. Indeed, as soon as Vasudeva brought the news of the birth of his fifth son, Kansa immediately sent trumpeters to notify the inhabitants of Mathura to assemble for the 'child-killing festival'. This time, all arrangements were in place to celebrate the killing of the infant like a carnival. I was aghast! Now, did I have to witness this terrible spectacle too? My resolution had come to naught. But yes, a good thing was, a bit of self-confidence still lingered in the remote recesses of my mind. There was still some hope that the resolution I had taken at the time of death would not be entirely wasted.

Finally, this was the day of the festival. The whole ground was bursting at the seams with the inhabitants of Mathura, as if a grand festival was to be celebrated. Some must have been prompted by curiosity but evidently, most of the people were present only because they feared Kansa's wrath. Undoubtedly, at this moment, Kansa was at the peak of cruelty. Gripped by the fear of his own death, he had even forgotten what it meant to be human. The extent of his cruelty was such that he mercilessly grabbed the newborn child sleeping next to Devaki and pompously marched towards the festival ground. He strutted towards the ground, heartlessly holding the newborn child in his vice-like grip, while poor Vasudeva went helplessly running after him, as he always did.

The moment Kansa entered the festival ground, he was greeted by a deafening applause. Encouraged by this, Kansa raised the child up in the air as if he was holding a trophy. As the crowd continued to applaud, he cruelly slammed the child in his hand with all his might, on a nearby rock; blood splattered all over the rock and pieces of flesh flew all around. Instantaneously, the soul of the newborn left his body. For Kansa, a task was accomplished and for the inhabitants of Mathura, the spectacle was over. But for Devaki, a mother, it was

the loss of one more child in the blink of an eye.

On seeing such a terrible end of my brother, my mind was numbed. Whose would not be? Could a newborn child be killed so mercilessly and that too by his own uncle? My mind had ceased to function. Besides, the question was, what was Kansa gaining by mercilessly killing his innocent nephews; an escape from death? That was just not possible! Death was anyway inevitable; but then why was he doing this? Is this world nothing, but a culmination of sinful acts driven by greed to gain something, or motivated by the fear of losing something? May be; but, at present, when my arrival into the world was uncertain and my survival itself was under threat, what was the use of thinking about the distant future?

Time was flitting by so fast, and soon it was time for Devaki to give birth to her sixth child. As soon as the child was born, Kansa once again caught the child in the same merciless manner and took him to the killing ground. Once again, Kansa was greeted with a loud applause and yet again, he ruthlessly killed the child. Now, the ones meant to die were dying but here, stuck in nothingness, I was neither able to live in peace nor take birth and attain freedom. To see my brothers being cruelly executed one after the other, had now become my fate. Neither was my self-confidence proving to be of any help nor was my resolve effective. But as they say, 'time is ever-changing'; and this is exactly what happened. The tide of time took a new twist altogether. A daughter was born as Devaki's seventh child. I was happy; perhaps she would be spared. Maybe, uncle would feel pity for his niece. He might think, 'What danger could a niece pose?' But no, Kansa was so terrified by Narada's prediction that he held a similar, spectacular event and cruelly killed my sister too. Seeing this horrible spectacle, my heart sank.

Well, by now it was confirmed that I was the one to be Devaki's eighth child. It was only because of me that Kansa had put seven innocents to death. On the other hand, it was also true that my own fate did not seem to be any different from the rest. Thinking of all this, I had become despondent, when all of a sudden, my mind was drawn into an entirely new direction of thinking. If I was to be the eighth child of Devaki, then why had Narada unnecessarily got the other seven children killed? If I too had to die as soon as I was born, then Narada had got the previous seven children killed for no reason. Did Narada harbour any animosity towards Devaki? Or had he just got them killed in jest? But why would anyone indulge in such vile humour without reason? It meant that there definitely was some mystery behind this, which I was unable to fathom. I do not know why, but suddenly, my mind inexplicably began to develop faith in

Narada. So what if it did? Does faith really need a reason? No, faith does not really need a reason or a ground to support itself. In short, the positive development was, somewhere deep within, a faith had kindled in me that there had to be some truth behind Narada's words. And if this was the case, then according to Narada's predictions, my fate would never be like that of my siblings. Then, did it mean that I would really be saved? Perhaps...yes!

The moment my confidence returned, good news knocked on my door. Obviously, it could not be from Mathura but from Gokula, the village I had fallen in love with at first sight. One more brother of mine had taken birth there. Vasudeva's wife, Rohini, had just given birth to a son named Balarama and the good news was, his life was not in danger, so there was no reason to worry. After all, Balarama did not have the sword of Narada's prediction dangling above his head. Meaning, other than Devaki's offspring, none of the children borne by the other wives of my father were in any danger whatsoever. Naturally, with this news, my mind which was distraught over the death of my sister, was now greatly relieved. And certainly, this relief was a great comfort to my present state of mind, which in turn, soon bore a positive outcome. I do not know what happened but suddenly my mind was completely free of all fear. No sooner was my mind freed from the fear, than my self-confidence began to soar. The moment my self-confidence returned, my introspective mind also swung into action. Seizing this opportunity, my analytical mind too delved deep and solved the long unresolved mystery of Narada's calculations. Now, I had latched onto his machinations. My intuition had proved right; Narada was a supremely intelligent man. Truly, he had made an astonishingly adroit move. Well, by solving this riddle I too had played nothing short of a masterstroke. As soon as this mystery was resolved, I was introduced to another feeling - pride. Yes, I suddenly began to feel proud of my reflective and analytical skills.

Well, speaking of Narada's machinations, he was absolutely clear in his calculations. He wanted to rein in Kansa's atrocities but his predicament was, during those days, he could not find anyone in Mathura who could stand up to Kansa or put an end to his atrocities. Hence, he felt the need for an extremely powerful personality to take birth for the execution of this formidable task. Narada, who was familiar with the subtle laws of Nature and was well-versed with the rubric of the invisible world, immediately conceived a plan for the birth of such a powerful child. And then by saying, "Devaki's eighth child will be your death," he even arranged for the birth of this powerful child. Not only that, by calling him God, he also provided the child with the adequate power of self-

confidence. The second fact worth considering in his calculation was, since Kansa's ego had not yet reached its peak, it could not be shattered immediately. Therefore, Narada wanted Kansa to kill seven of Devaki's children so that his ego would be sufficiently inflated. This was probably why he had said that the eighth child would be Kansa's nemesis, not the first, second or the ones in between. When Kansa killed the first four children, he was progressing well as per Narada's plan. But when Kansa had the propitious idea of sparing the rest of the children except the eighth one, Narada was perturbed and his plan, disturbed. He obviously knew that Kansa's change of heart could make his plan fall apart. For, if he had such noble ideas, how would his ego reach its peak? And until his ego reached its peak, how could it be shattered? But as it is said, 'A sage never accepts defeat and the one who easily accepts defeat cannot be called a sage'. So, Narada instigated Kansa to kill all the children by using the wooden spokes of the cartwheel as an analogy, and as a result, the poor frightened Kansa promptly fell into Narada's trap. In fact, by doing all this, Narada had given impetus to Kansa's sins and ego; because the essential nature of ego is, it gets destroyed by itself once it reaches its peak.

Earlier, unable to fathom these calculations, like any ordinary person, even I was bewildered; wondering what kind of a saint Narada was that he was instigating Kansa to commit infanticide. But now that I had fathomed the reason behind it, I was impressed by Narada's machinations. It was not that he had led to the killing of seven children, because in fact, here, in the 'invisible world', there are millions of subtle minds who have died in such a distressed state in their previous birth that in their next life, they are ready to embrace death as soon as they are born. They have no zest for life left in them, and are just looking for an excuse to die; meaning, even an illness suffices as an excuse for them to die.

Well, now my analysis was crystal clear. Two worlds are co-existent and functional at the same time. One, the visible world, where all these activities are being manifested, and the other, the invisible world of the mind and its vibrations, which is being ceaselessly manifested in the form of an individual's inner thoughts and emotions. In fact, the visible world where all these events are unfolding is merely a result, a reflection of an inner world, which has its causes emanating from that invisible world called mind. Truly! My analytical ability had taken a giant leap with my deciphering of Narada's calculations. It was clear; here in nothingness, millions of minds were waiting for a birth which would allow them to enter the clutches of death as soon as they were born so that they could be relieved from the despair of their past life, and begin their next life

with a new, fresh lease of hope. Narada had merely shown the path to seven such subtle minds. Therefore, Narada could definitely not be accused of infanticide. On the other hand, now, since I had fathomed the functioning of the invisible world, there was no reason for me to lament the death of my brothers. According to me, Narada also knew that the brutal killing of the newborns would fuel the simmering resentment among Mathura's inhabitants against Kansa, and sooner or later, this would prove to be beneficial to his plan. I could even discern that calling the eighth child 'God' was also nothing but a part of his machinations, so that the people would pin their hopes on this child, and this in turn, could possibly trigger the process of saving him.

Meaning, whatever had happened till now was actually the magic of Narada's words. Not only that, but even my soon-to-be parents, brother, sister and Kansa were nothing but the mere instruments in Narada's game. Indeed, even the ups and downs of my mind could be attributed to Narada. In fact, to an extent I would say that Narada also knew, there would be someone who, in his previous life, must have taken a firm resolve before dying and his subtle mind too would be waiting to take birth. So obviously, on seeing the brutal murder of his seven brothers and sisters and experiencing the anguish of his parents, he would begin to scale new heights of intelligence and power much before his birth. And this was exactly what had happened; my mind, which till now was solely equipped with the ability to take a firm resolve, had now transformed into a good analyst as well. Now, I did not seem to lack self-confidence either. And gradually, my mind had also begun mastering the art of calculation. So, even before I was born, my mind had begun to evolve in all respects. Indeed, I wonder, what my previous birth's resolve and Narada's calculations had transformed me into! In a way, it could be said that the foundation of my becoming great had been laid by Narada's calculations much before my birth. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Vasudeva and Devaki were my biological parents. But the true progenitors of my mind were the resolve made in my previous birth and Narada's calculations.

Fantastically, now even the events in Mathura had begun to transpire in accordance with Narada's calculations and as I had thought them to be. That was not all; gradually, even my mind had begun to believe that I was Kansa's nemesis. Meaning, my mind was now not only convinced that I would be able to survive Kansa's cruel intentions but it also believed that with time, I would become powerful enough to become the cause of his annihilation. And soon, good news followed; in Mathura, a series of efforts began to save the 'potential

destroyer' of Kansa. As the time drew nearer to the birth of the eighth child, Narada's prediction that Devaki's eighth child would be the destroyer of Kansa began to resound in Vasudeva's ears as well as those of others. And the positive outcome of this was, a strong desire to save me—the potential nemesis of Kansa—was kindled in Vasudeva's mind. Vasudeva, after all, was not an ordinary person, he was closely connected to the royal household; thus, he was well-acquainted with the people in the palace. Moreover, he already had an inkling that in their heart of hearts, both Chief Minister Anart and Acharya Gargacharya were extremely displeased with Kansa. At the same time, Vasudeva also knew that without the help of these people who held powerful positions, it would be impossible to save his eighth child. Hence, he somehow mustered courage and apprised these influential men of his desire to save his eighth child. Indeed, Vasudeva's guts and grit must be applauded, for, he had performed a truly daring task by blowing the trumpet of rebellion against Kansa. And with his display of courage, the tide of time turned in my favour too. It so happened that Narada's prediction was still fresh in both Anart and Gargacharya's mind and somewhere deep in their heart, both were extremely annoyed with Kansa. Therefore, both of them felt as if Vasudeva had voiced their own heartfelt desire. As a result, without any extensive discussion or elaboration, all three tacitly decided to collaborate in every possible way to save the eighth child. Not just that, each one of them also began to independently contemplate on different strategies to save the child. The change in the situation had enthused Vasudeva beyond words. Undoubtedly, the main reason behind his exultation was the wholehearted support of people like Anart and Gargacharya. As for me, you do not even have to ask! Even up here in nothingness, I was exhilarated and was literally jumping with joy. I could not believe that the efforts to save me had actually begun. Well, whether I could believe it or not, the truth was, now I was not the only one worrying about myself.

I do not think that any subtle mind in the transitory state of being would have ever experienced such happiness. And why just happiness? Had anyone ever suffered the kind of agony that I had endured? For that matter, who would have got the opportunity to experience this unsettling flux of a myriad feelings and emotions that I had had up here in nothingness? Indeed, no other mind lingering in nothingness would have ever undergone such a rapid and comprehensive evolution of personality as mine had. Meaning, in all respects, I was inexorably moving ahead on the path to achieving unparalleled greatness. Therefore, it was natural for me to wonder if Narada had, wittingly or unwittingly, laid the foundation of my supremacy. Now, whether I call it my elation or just a

misconception, it did not last for long. I do not know what happened, but on a sudden whim, father Vasudeva left for Gokula. I was despondent! There was so much left to be done in Mathura! Was this the time to visit Gokula? But then I thought, perhaps he had gone to meet his dear wife Rohini to get relief from the mental stress he was undergoing currently. After all, did he not have a life of his own? In short, despite being apprehensive, I had kept the positivity of my mind intact.

And see what an amazing event unfolded in Gokula! Surprisingly, father Vasudeva's visit yielded a very positive outcome and there emerged a new and unique way of saving me. It so happened that upon reaching Gokula, father Vasudeva found that Nanda's wife Yashoda was also expecting a child and was likely to deliver after four months. On hearing this, Vasudeva, who was anyway constantly ruminating over ways to save his eighth child, instantly struck upon a plan. The nature of the plan was such that it could not be easily conveyed to Nanda; yet, it had to be. Perhaps, because it was not merely a question of saving Vasudeva's unborn child, but also about bringing the probable nemesis of Kansa into this world. Finally, Vasudeva steeled his mind, and with a very heavy heart reminded Nanda about Narada's prediction and the brutal murder of his seven children by Kansa. Now, Nanda already had a sympathetic disposition towards Vasudeva ever since all these events had been transpiring. So, leveraging on this sympathy, Vasudeva, summoned up all his courage and implored Nanda that if he agreed to exchange Yashoda's child with Devaki's, not only would he gain the virtue of saving the destroyer of Kansa as Narada had predicted, but he would also get the wonderful opportunity of raising this child. Vasudeva's reasoning was clear; Nanda's wife Yashoda was expected to deliver a baby in about four months' time and my birth was also expected at about the same time. According to his plan, if their children could be exchanged then I could possibly be saved. But the snag was, for the effective implementation of this plan, Nanda would have to sacrifice his own child. Meaning, exchanging one life for another was the only possible solution to this problem.

Upon hearing the proposal, Nanda was shocked beyond words. He was ought to be, especially considering the nature of the proposal. To tell you the truth, it was only Vasudeva's positivity, firmness and determination which had provided him the strength and courage to present such a proposal to Nanda, and fortunately, Nanda agreed to exchange his child. It had to be acknowledged that it was undoubtedly an extremely tough decision for Nanda to hand over his child to Kansa. Indeed, it was a trial by fire, which was definitely not easy to pass

through. But truly speaking, many things had simultaneously conspired to influence Nanda to give away his beloved child with such apparent ease. First and foremost, Vasudeva was his closest and dearest friend and an ardent well-wisher too. And at this time, Nanda was overwhelmed by his grief of having lost his seven children. Secondly, even after losing a child, Nanda was still getting a child in exchange. And above all, he too wanted to put an end to Kansa's atrocities. So, perhaps he was fulfilling his duty as a noble citizen by making this supreme sacrifice. And most importantly, by doing so, he was getting an opportunity to raise the future destroyer of Kansa and also a glorious child. All in all, not one but many considerations had compelled Nanda to accept this proposal. Possibly, the fact that both, the Chief Minister and Acharya were also involved in this plan, must have also played a crucial role in his decision-making process. Needless to say, the involvement of key figures of the palace in the plan was obviously a matter of great reassurance in all respects.

Once Vasudeva and Nanda agreed to exchange their children, they decided to keep the matter a secret from Yashoda and Devaki. They believed that revealing such matters to women might compromise the secrecy of the plan. Not only this, Vasudeva was so enthused now that he finalised the entire plan right then and there. According to the plan, Nanda had to come to Mathura with Yashoda for her delivery and it was Vasudeva's responsibility to make all the necessary arrangements for their stay. And thereafter, the entire responsibility was to be shouldered by Chief Minister Anart and Acharya Gargacharya. Meaning, not only had the entire plan been formulated but the division of the responsibilities had also been clearly spelt out.

While the exercise to save me was gathering momentum, Kansa was not idling either. He too had speeded up the preparations for killing the eighth child as he was not willing to take any chance in the case of this eighth child. He just could not afford to; after all, it was this eighth child who had wreaked havoc in his life. Now, implementing the first step of his plan of action, he once again placed both Devaki and Vasudeva in a closely guarded dungeon. I must say, with this move, he had squashed all our rising hopes in one stroke.

Well, it did not really matter because now with both sides equally active, the balance seemed to be swaying from one side to another. So, my birth was not only a battle between two opposite forces but was also becoming a veritable focal point for the people who were curious for their own reasons. Remarkable! Such an eager wait for someone's birth? And so many manoeuvres being made before a child was born? This meant that even circumstances were not sparing

any effort in laying the foundation of my becoming a truly illustrious person!

However, at present, the news that brought me immense joy was, Gargacharya and Anart seemed truly determined not to lose this golden opportunity of saving the nemesis of Kansa at any cost. Even after so much had transpired, they appeared unwaveringly resolute in their mission to save me. But irrespective of the intensity of their desire to save me, the fact was, Kansa had dumped my parents in a prison where even a leaf could not flutter without his permission, especially in view of the fact that it was a deep dark dungeon situated right below the palace. Moreover, Kansa's terror and the exceptionally high walls of the dungeon were by themselves a great deterrent. One more point to note here was, this dungeon, surrounded by stout pillars, had two doors; one led upstairs to the palace and the other opened outside, towards the river Yamuna. This meant that it was necessary for Kansa to keep an eye on both the doorways. And if we looked at it from this perspective, a lot could still be done. After all, two pillars of the plan, meaning Gargacharya and Anart occupied very high positions in the administration. Though both of them were quite influential, accomplishing the tasks that lay ahead was the most daunting challenge for them too. After all, finding a weak link in Kansa's tight security was not an easy task. It was as difficult as a single man conquering a fort in the dark. All in all, the odds were equally stacked. Consequently, sometimes, my mind would become overjoyed with the hope of being saved and at other times, it would be engulfed in dark clouds of despondency.

Well, this was all about my survival and safety. On the other hand, the sad news was, my soon-to-be parents' condition had become terribly grave, as the dungeon in which they were imprisoned was pitch dark. To add to their woes, there was not even a single window or door which opened towards the sky. How can I describe their longing to see the open sky? How can I describe their longing to share their grief with someone? No one was around, except the two of them drowned into their loneliness. Obviously, I was bound to feel perplexed and perturbed on seeing their plight. After all, it was solely because of me that my parents were in such a miserable condition. And the torturous irony was, they were suffering so much pain only to consign their soon-to-be-born eighth child into the jaws of death, in the form of Kansa! Perhaps, no other parents in this world would have ever endured such an intense pain. Well, I do not know if someone else had endured or not, but right now, I was left with no option but to watch this drama unfold. Did I have a choice but to wait for my birth and its ensuing consequences? Meaning, it was a matter related to time and it was best

left to time. Did you see, all of a sudden a 'witness' was awakening within me! In other words, I had now become detached, merely a witness to all that was happening. Good! In this way, at least the best of qualities were developing within me, one after another of their own accord. 'But what will you do with these qualities, when you aren't even going to stay alive?' 'What do you mean, what will I do with them? These qualities will surely prove useful in the next life, if not in this birth.' Anyway, what option did I have other than to think optimistically?

However, coming back to the present situation; as father Vasudeva was imprisoned, the entire responsibility of saving me was now rested with Anart and Gargacharya. And I must acknowledge their efforts as they had left no stone unturned on their part. Diligent efforts inevitably bring results, and see... there was some good news for them. As the dungeon was situated in the basement of the palace, Kansa was a bit lax about the security in this area. He had appointed just two guards for each of the doorways. Now, managing a couple of guards was not a difficult task for a Chief Minister. Coincidentally, this carelessness on Kansa's part had emerged as a bright ray of hope for everybody.

As the time for my birth drew nearer, everyone's heartbeats, including those of my father, were on the rise. Simultaneously, the changes in circumstances, and the subsequent ups and downs in my mind were also persistent. Sometimes I would feel terribly anxious and at other times, completely reassured. In other words, even before birth, my mind was oscillating wildly between life and death. And after having been knocked around so much, I was gradually becoming a witness to the ups and downs of my own mind, though it was not going to make any difference to the current circumstances.

Now, only a few days were left for my birth. In the entire history of humankind, perhaps no other child would have waited so anxiously for his death before he was even born. For that matter, I do not think, there is any instance in history, where the birth of a child has been so eagerly awaited either. The day of my birth was fast approaching and this had increased not just my heartbeats or of those engaged in the mission to save me, but it had set Kansa's heart racing as well. Indeed, in such a situation, your condition would certainly not be any different either. So it is better that I get back to the situation on earth now. Ah, there was some good news for me! The probability of my being saved was increasing day by day. Chief Minister Anart had managed to secure the allegiance of the guards. In a way, this task was not difficult to accomplish, as everyone in their heart of hearts, was anyway exasperated with Kansa. Perhaps the guards too did not want

to lose the opportunity of performing a good deed by saving Kansa's nemesis. On the other hand, Gargacharya was also engaged in his preparations as he had called Nanda and Yashoda to Mathura well in time. And they had been put up in a cottage situated in an isolated place, on the opposite banks of the river Yamuna. Meaning, mission 'deceive Kansa' was on, in full swing. In fact, Kansa's hold on his administration was very strong; but with the two main pillars of the court rebelling against him, it was natural for lapses to occur. Still, in view of Kansa's influence, it was necessary to exercise utmost caution and maintain the secrecy of the plan; and thankfully, both Gargacharya and Anart were at their vigilant best. So much so, that since the last two months they had not even met my father, Vasudeva. Guards were the only medium through which messages were being exchanged.

Just as every wait comes to an end, the wait for my birth too finally came to an end. Gargacharya, Vasudeva and Anart were not only fully alert but also seemed to be prepared to deal with any kind of eventuality. The credit for such tireless efforts put in by everyone to save me certainly went to Narada's calculations. To tell you the truth, I would owe not only the evolution of my mind, but if I were to survive, then even my entire life to Narada and his manoeuvrings.

Be that as it may. At present, here if I was restless, the entire royal household too was holding its breath with great anxiety. As for the condition of the people involved in saving me – do not even ask! The condition of my poor parents was indeed very pitiable. There was so much that they wanted to do and yet, there was so little that they could. Owing to Narada's words, they had pinned high hopes on me, but perhaps, they were waiting only for their hopes to be shattered. At this last moment, it had indeed become impossible to predict which side would win. And finally, in the middle of this uncertainty, the time of my birth arrived. It was a dark night of the month of **Bhado**⁵. A fierce shower of torrential rain was lashing the entire region. Fearsome bolts of lightning repeatedly lit up the sky. All in all, the atmosphere was extremely terrifying. To tell you the truth, the circumstances that had preceded my birth were far less dangerous than the conditions that prevailed now, at the actual time of my birth. Seemingly, it appeared as if the apprehension and anxiety of my birth was now no longer limited just to the royal palace or Mathura, but it had spread over to Nature, which too seemed to be restless and uneasy in its anticipation. Well, now the moment of my birth had almost arrived. Acharya and the Chief Minister were fully prepared and alert, standing outside the door of the dungeon, waiting to hear the good news. Vasudeva's unexpected imprisonment had greatly increased

their responsibilities; so much so, that the onus of the entire co-ordination for exchanging the child with Nanda also lied on them. But then, if one wants to accomplish a mission, one has to deal with every eventuality that comes one's way. All in all, that night, not just the thunder, but restlessness too prevailed all around. However, the worst condition was mine. After all, it was a question of my future; my life was at stake.

So then, was the decisive moment far? There it came roaring with thunder and I was finally born on the starless eighth night of the waning moon. With it, a long and interminable wait also came to an end. Incidentally, let me reveal an interesting fact to you; I was born a little premature as I was born in the eighth month itself. And just see the play of destiny—what should have been the chief cause of anxiety—had actually proved to be a blessing in disguise. Coincidentally, Yashoda too had given birth to her baby girl at about the same time. Meaning, it was good that I was born a month earlier, otherwise it would have become impossible to exchange me with a one-month-old girl. In short, my premature birth had made the task of Acharya and the Chief Minister much easier, otherwise all efforts up till now would have been in vain. And yes, my prematurity had another immediate advantage as well. Since Kansa was under the delusion that there was still a month remaining for my birth, he was not at his vigilant best; this too had helped Acharya and the Chief Minister to expedite my escape.

In the dungeon, as soon as I was born, Vasudeva gently picked me up and kissed me with great love. Finding a beautiful, dark and effulgent child on his lap, Vasudeva indeed felt blessed. Waves of love gushed forth from his heart. But it was imperative for him to control his emotions as time demanded an entirely different set of actions. The formidable task of saving me from the clutches of Kansa before I was reduced to being just a fleeting existence, was staring them in their faces. Realising the urgency of the moment, he quickly ran, taking me in his arms, towards the back door of the dungeon. When the guards saw the child in Vasudeva's arms, they immediately opened the door. Outside the door, Chief Minister Anart and Gargacharya were anxiously waiting for Vasudeva with a wicker basket; everybody was fully alert and prepared, keeping a close watch all around.

Though I had come out of the dungeon, it could not yet be said that I was saved. Indeed, the next task appeared to be even more formidable; because not only Kansa, even Nature seemed to be hell-bent on testing everyone's resolve and will power. Unleashing its fury in the form of stormy winds and

incessant rain, it had now made the task that was already daunting enough, almost impossible. In a way, it was nothing but the proclamation of Nature that even if I were to survive, nothing in my life would be easy to accomplish. All in all, the rain, the wind and the moonless dark night, all connived to collectively create such adverse circumstances that it became impossible to see even a few steps ahead. To make matters worse, the stormy winds repeatedly snuffed out the torches. But why should I blame only Nature for this arduous situation? After all, I too had left no stone unturned in testing everybody's resolve. Why else would I have been born on a pitch black night, the eighth of the dark phase of the moon?⁶

Now that I had taken birth on such a night, so be it. But as far as my rescuers were concerned, irrespective of the circumstances, they had no option but to make efforts to save me and that was precisely what they were doing at present. According to their plan, Vasudeva had to swim across the river with me in a wicker basket in this dark, stormy night. He not only had to leave me with Nanda but also immediately swim back with Nanda's girl child. Certainly, the task had become increasingly challenging in the present circumstances but it had to be accomplished at any cost. And in such a precarious situation, the brilliantly conceived basket emerged as a great beacon of hope. Seen from afar, it looked like a serpent with its hood flared; the basket was not only strong but because of its serpent-like design, it also seemed quite capable of maintaining its own balance. Most importantly, as the basket was made of wicker, there was no fear of it sinking. Truly, the Chief Minister had poured the experience of his lifetime in the making of this basket. If I managed to survive unscathed, the contribution of this basket in making my survival possible could certainly not be undermined.

The Chief Minister had performed his duties well, and now it was Vasudeva's turn, for it was he who had to swim across. Although Vasudeva was an exceptionally good swimmer, this was the true test of his skill; and that too, a test in which he had no option but to excel. After all, it was the question of my life - the life of his much-awaited child and the probable nemesis of Kansa. Considering the lack of time, the rope of the basket was quickly looped around Vasudeva's neck and I was hurriedly placed in it. And then, without wasting even a single moment, Vasudeva instantly jumped into the tempestuous waters of the Yamuna. Indeed, at this moment, Vasudeva was carrying a huge responsibility on his shoulders. Not just my life but everyone's efforts and hopes too rested on his proficiency as a swimmer. In other words, I had escaped into

the open from the dungeon but the shadow of death was still stalking me. So what was new about this? The time preceding my birth had also been spent under the shadow of death and even now, my life was trapped under its looming shadow. As soon as Vasudeva jumped into the water, the strong current of the river tried its best to sweep him under. But the waves were no match for my father's swimming skills and his firm determination. Thereafter, throughout the journey, Vasudeva was locked in this deadly game with the tumultuous waves; but fortunately, each time it was Vasudeva who emerged victorious. At last, he succeeded in transporting me safely across to the other bank of the Yamuna. And undoubtedly, the contribution of the basket in his success was certainly no less than that of his swimming prowess.

On the other bank of the river, Nanda was anxiously waiting for my father with his girl child wrapped in his arms. The moment father reached there, they quickly swapped the babies. With the swapping of the babies, the mission was partially successful, though not fully. Hence, as soon as the swapping was done, Vasudeva swiftly jumped into the water once again with the girl child. Seen from a distance, Vasudeva, vigorously swimming with the basket looped around his neck, looked like the serpent, **Shesha Naga**⁷, swimming with its hood flared up. Well, the good news was, he had managed to return safely. Seeing him return unharmed with the girl child, Gargacharya and Anart heaved a huge sigh of relief. Vasudeva, who had swum continuously through this stormy night, had run completely out of breath. But still, the joy of my having escaped unscathed was certainly a great source of relief for him. Meanwhile, the guards standing near the doors were also waiting anxiously for Vasudeva's return. Naturally, any slip in the plan at this juncture could become the cause of their death. They had handed over a child, and therefore, they needed another child as a replacement. Without a doubt, if Kansa were to get even the slightest hint of a conspiracy, his rage would first claim the lives of these guards. So when the guards saw Vasudeva return safely, they were able to breathe easy. And within moments, the atmosphere on the banks of Yamuna outside the dungeon, turned into one of great rejoice. Everyone was congratulating each other. However, considering the lack of time, this mood did not last for long. Immediately, Vasudeva slipped back into the dungeon and placed the innocent girl child next to Devaki in a manner that it looked like her own newborn sleeping. Fortunately for him, my mother was still unconscious, just like Yashoda was, when the girl child was quietly taken away. This had at least made it easy for everyone to keep the matter a secret, as now neither

Devaki nor Yashoda knew anything about this exchange.

Having managed to move me safely out of the prison, even Vasudeva had now regained his usual composed demeanour, so much so, that he confidently took the girl child and placed it at Kansa's feet. As soon as Kansa heard that Devaki's eighth child was a girl, he roared with laughter. On one hand, he was proud of his luck, on the other, he was feeling pity for Narada and his apparently failed prophecy. The mixed emotions that he displayed gave rise to the hope that Kansa might perhaps spare the girl child. But no, the very next day, he killed the girl child with the same brutality, in the same ceremonial function, in the same premises, and in front of the same inhabitants of Mathura.

And with this, the veil of uncertainty over my future was cast away. It could now be said with certainty that I was saved; or rather I had been rescued. And definitely, along with Gargacharya, Anant and father, the wicker basket, my resolve and Narada's machinations too had made a great contribution in the accomplishment of this mission. This is why I say that my firm resolve was my first mother and Narada's machinations were my first father. Needless to say, Devaki and Vasudeva were my second set of parents. And amazingly, I had now acquired a third set of parents in the form of Nanda and Yashoda. However, the present circumstances made it difficult for an innocent child like me to decide whether I was fortunate to gain the love of three sets of parents on the very first day I was born, or I was an unfortunate child who had been separated from his biological parents immediately after birth. Well, that was for time to decide, and at present, it was best left to time. All I knew was, I had once again left the world of consciousness and entered the insentient world. Incidentally, I do not know why but in a corner of my heart, I had a feeling that irrespective of the circumstances preceding my birth or at the time of my birth, my life would certainly be incredible. For, when my birth had been so amazing; then, my life too had to be extraordinary, right? Generally, the story of every person's life begins with his birth but the story of my life had started ten years prior to my birth. So I had all the right to believe that my life could prove to be an extraordinary saga of an incredible child.

At any rate, Narada's machinations had already shown what wonders the knowledge of the laws of time can perform. The one who is a master of time can not only create time, but can also alter the course of time; that is not all, if he desires, he can even terminate time. Just see! Narada had just uttered the word

'eighth' and the rescuers of the eighth child had assembled; but no efforts were made to save the first seven. After all, they too were Devaki and Vasudeva's children; but the only difference was, they did not have the might of Narada's prediction to back them.

End of CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

The Childhood I Cherished

Now, Kansa was sure that he had killed all the eight children of Devaki and thereby had eliminated the cause of his death; as a result, he was quite reassured. And as a person who is confident and assured naturally becomes generous, even Kansa realised the futility of keeping Devaki and Vasudeva in prison anymore. Hence, he immediately set them free and also begged for forgiveness from Devaki and Vasudeva for his deeds. He was, in particular, very embarrassed for the treatment he had meted out to his dear sister Devaki. He truly loved her a lot and this was the reason why he gave her an explanation and apprised her of the extenuating circumstances and the resultant helplessness on his part. For that matter, my darling mother's love for her brother was no less either. She too assured him that she was not in the least angry with him and could well understand his predicament. So now, there was no conflict left between the brother and sister. Old issues were forgotten and soon life began on a fresh note.

But as for my poor mother's condition, she had been set free after four long years! She had been able to see the open blue sky after four years of languishing in prison, and above all, while in duress, she had suffered the terrible agony of the death of her eight children. It was natural for her to feel drained from the physical and mental trauma that she had endured, and under the circumstances, she was in dire need of rest. But father, on the contrary, appeared quite fresh and happy. In fact, I was the secret behind his joy but unfortunately, my grief-stricken mother was not lucky enough to avail of this emotional succour; the poor soul was absolutely unaware of the secret that I was still alive.

As soon as they were freed, father Vasudeva yearned for another glimpse of his dear child, so he immediately set out for Nanda's temporary residence. Upon reaching there, when he saw that nothing untoward had occurred, he breathed easy. In fact, it was only now that father had got the opportunity to look at me carefully for the first time. My lovely eyes and my charming, smiling face cast such a magical spell on him that in no time, he was overwhelmed by his parental affection for me. But alas! For the sake of my safety and life, he had to part from me. Realising the need of the hour, he mustered courage and requested Nanda to immediately leave Mathura. Moreover, father also advised him to exercise

extreme caution and constantly be on guard.

Though as per the protocol, Nanda was Vasudeva's deputy, they in fact, were very good friends; and this was the reason why Vasudeva's dear wife, Rohini was residing at Nanda's house. And now, the apple of his eye was also going to be brought up in Nanda's house. It can be said that Vasudeva had asserted his right as a friend and entrusted Nanda with the responsibility of providing the best upbringing to both his sons, meaning me, Devaki's son and Balarama, Rohini's son. And for Nanda, father's request was nothing short of a command, though he was considerably older than Vasudeva. And his age was the reason that his daughter had been very weak at birth. Indeed, it is futile to hope for a healthy child after crossing a certain age.

Now, if I stop beating about the bush and get back to the main topic, then following Vasudeva's instructions, Nanda immediately left for Gokula with Yashoda and me. Indeed, staying any longer in Mathura for no reason could prove to be dangerous anytime. Even the slightest suspicion in Kansa's mind could put my life in danger. And then how could it be forgotten that saving me was the sole purpose behind all the trickery that was indulged in, the risks that were taken and the treachery that was committed against the royal court? So, there was no question of being lax in matters pertaining to my security... Did you see the effect of Narada's astute calculations? Overnight, my life had become more valuable to others than it was to me!

Soon, our journey to Gokula began. The journey between Mathura city and Gokula was only about a day or two. Gokula, in fact was a small village in the Kingdom of Mathura and from the very beginning, it was Vasudeva who was the head in charge of the annual revenue of Gokula. And as the village headman, naturally, it was Nanda's responsibility to manage the tax collection in Gokula. This was also one of the main reasons for the close bond of friendship shared between Vasudeva and Nanda. Meaning, even though I had been separated from my parents, I was going to be raised by none other than the dearest friend of my father. Surprisingly, this was my second journey since my birth just two days ago...Have you forgotten? Had I not crossed the river Yamuna on a stormy night just after I was born? And now see, here I was, travelling from Mathura to Gokula. I began to wonder, was my life going to be just a series of endless journeys? Even if it was, so be it. At present, I was peacefully ensconced in my mother's lap, riding in a splendidly decorated bullock cart, well on my way to Gokula. In a way, it can be said that my association with the hustle and bustle of life had begun right since childhood and on similar lines, the bullock cart too

was inexorably grinding its way to Gokula. Another noteworthy fact was, I was born under the shadow of death and this journey too was not free from its perils.

Mother Yashoda, oblivious to all that had transpired, was completely mesmerised by her dear one quietly ensconced in her lap. She was lost in my enchanting eyes. Though we had two nannies with us, Yashoda was not ready to part with me even for a second. To tell you the truth, this incredible love of my doting mother had made me forget the shadow of death still looming large over my head. On the other hand, Nanda's efforts must be acknowledged, for he had made all the requisite arrangements to provide maximum possible comfort to his beloved child during the journey. The bullock cart was not only fully covered from above but there was also a thick mattress spread inside the cart. Meaning, even after being separated from my parents, there was no dearth of love and affection for me.

Bullock carts are anyway ridden slowly on mud tracks; and at present, with a newborn child on mother Yashoda's lap, father Nanda had slowed down the pace of the bullock cart even further. In spite of this, Mathura had been left behind a long time ago, and at present, our cart was passing through dense forests. The scene outside had become extremely pleasant; tall, huge trees could be seen lined on both sides of the road. Another favourable development was, the rains had stopped since morning. Perhaps, that night had turned stormy only to give an indication of my tumultuous life ahead.

Nevertheless, passing through dense forests and mountains, our bullock cart was moving towards Gokula. The entire pathway was lined with thick trees laden with ripe and luscious fruits and flowers, and along the way, numerous big and small lakes and ponds made the scene even more picturesque. In all, it was a delightful journey where everyone enjoyed the pleasant scenery while they lovingly played with me. After a night's halt, by the next afternoon we reached the village of Gokula; and with this, I reached the place where I was to spend my entire childhood.

The lanes of Gokula were extremely narrow, so much so that our bullock cart could barely pass through. In a way, it could be said that the cart was not rolling but crawling. The village of Gokula looked extremely beautiful surrounded by rows of small mud-brick houses plastered with mud and cow dung. Surprisingly, every house had a veranda on the outside. These verandas were enhancing the beauty of the houses and also the natural beauty of the village. All these houses had one more feature in common; all of them had cows and buffaloes tethered on

their verandas. Also, a few gopis could be seen outside their houses, churning yoghurt to make butter. Cattle and other domestic animals could also be seen freely moving about in the lanes. Moreover, as we passed the village, gopas and gopis⁸ draped in colourful attire could also be seen running to and fro. In all this revelry, what attracted me the most was a group of children who were adorned with peacock feathers. The weather was also very pleasant, with lush green cover spread all around. And the constant, sweet chirping of various birds was enough to enrapture the mind. However, striking a discordant note in this harmony were the occasional terrible howls of wild animals which were quite frightening. Even so, this village situated at the foothills of Govardhana Hill, by the banks of the river Yamuna was truly picturesque. And the people too appeared very friendly here. Perhaps, this was why, as the cart passed through the lanes, the passersby would eagerly ask Nanda, “What is the news?”

And Nanda would delightfully answer, “A son!” On hearing this, everybody would become delirious with joy. And the news began to spread like wildfire; so much so that even before we reached home, all the inhabitants of Gokula had received the news - “Nanda’s house has been blessed with joy!”

Thus, meandering through the narrow bylanes, our bullock cart finally came to a halt outside the biggest house in the village. Like other houses, this house too was a mud-brick house plastered with mud and cow dung. But, decorated with several colours and much larger in size than the rest of the houses, it looked like the palace of the village in every way. Yes, it was Nanda's house, meaning our house. This one too had a large veranda which was surrounded by huge, lush green trees. Attached to this veranda was another smaller veranda, where two swings were put up. Adjoining this veranda was a large spacious hall; perhaps this was Nanda’s assembly room. Apart from that, the house had four other rooms. The special feature of this house was, it was surrounded by a variety of trees. Nanda was one of the village elite and the grandeur of his house made it amply evident.

We were greeted by Mother Rohini at the entrance. On her lap sat my brother Balarama. While Rohini was gazing lovingly at me, Balarama was looking at me in bewilderment. As for mother Yashoda, her love knew no bounds. Even after we had reached home, she refused to part with me; she kept me pressed to her bosom and carried me wherever she went. Mother Rohini and father Nanda were also hovering around me; and as for Balarama, so enchanted was he that he just clung on to me. Did you see, right from the first day, I had become everybody’s darling!

We had hardly settled down when the village elders started streaming in to congratulate Nanda. By the evening, groups of gopas and gopis too began to pour in. To make it convenient for everyone to see, two beautiful cradles had been set up in the veranda itself, one for me and the other for bhaiya. Moreover, by evening mother Rohini had beautifully decorated the entire veranda with a variety of flowers and garlands of alluring fragrances.

Within moments, the gopis had queued up to swing the cradle. Whoever saw me could not resist but kiss me with great affection. Remarkably, from the very first day, my dark complexion, enchanting eyes, mesmerising face and irresistibly sweet smile, had captivated the hearts of the gopis. You will find it difficult to believe, but within a few hours of my arrival, the gopas and gopis were so taken by me that they began urging Nanda and Yashoda to organise a festival to celebrate my birth. With my stepping into Gokula, the entire village had already been thrown into a jubilant mood of festivities but even so, a festival is a festival. Mother Yashoda was delighted on just hearing the word 'festival' but Nanda was a bit reluctant. It was not that he was not excited for a celebration; but out of concern for my safety, he thought it wise to avoid it. But, for how long could he? Eventually, Nanda had to surrender to everyone's demand and it was decided that the celebration would be held three days later. As such, Nanda was the happiest to have me; in his heart of hearts, he was bursting with unfettered joy as he had gained a supremely beautiful child. But as a precautionary measure, he was reluctant to express his happiness in front of anybody.

The cradle rocking ceremony was to be held in the veranda and obviously, the whole of Gokula was invited. The rest of the ceremonies had been organised in the open ground adjoining the veranda. A gaiety and festive mood soon pervaded the entire village and in such a jovial atmosphere, how long was it going to take for two days to pass? Finally, the day of the festival arrived. Right from morning, mother Yashoda and Rohini were busy decorating the veranda along with a few gopis; by afternoon, all the four sides of the veranda had been decorated with colourful garlands. Whereas, Nanda was in charge of the food arrangements. He, along with a few gopas, was engaged in preparations with full gusto right since morning.

Nevertheless, the happiest person here was mother Rohini, because owing to the preparations, she had been given the charge of looking after me and Balarama; meaning, she was getting ample opportunity to play with me. By evening, every corner of the veranda had been lit up with lamps. As the evening set in, both our cradles were placed near the front door of the house. Even our cradles were

bedecked with colourful flowers. Mother Yashoda had decorated them herself. She was so delirious with joy that her enthusiasm was indescribable. Meanwhile, Nanda had already taken care of the seating arrangements. The men were to be seated to the right of the cradle and the women to the left. In short, all the arrangements were in place to ensure that the festival was successful.

As the evening drew its multihued curtains over the day, the gopas and gopis, attired in their colourful best, began to swarm in. For that matter, mother Yashoda and Rohini too did not lag behind; as far as their attire was concerned both were beautifully festooned with flowers, ornaments and their choicest fineries. Honestly speaking, the opulence of both the mothers' attire made it amply evident that they belonged to affluent families. Still, mother Yashoda's enthusiasm outshone her clothes. She was on cloud nine! Ever since morning she had been working with such gusto that it could even put a sixteen-year old gopi to shame. For that matter, even the gopas were not any less enthusiastic; they all arrived with their drums with every intention of having a boisterous celebration. Moreover, most of them had adorned their heads with peacock feathers. As for the gopis, I have no words to describe their enthusiasm. Since morning they were literally bouncing and skipping around, and by evening, clad in colourful traditional dresses, they were sashaying around so majestically that I have no words to describe it. Meaning, nobody had spared any effort to make the festival a success. The enthusiasm was such that by early evening, the veranda was packed with people; and such was the commotion that it would hurt anyone's ears.

For a long time everybody was engaged in playing with me and bhaiya and rocking our cradles. Of course, the fiercest competition was among the gopis as to who would be the first one to play with us; in fact, numerous quarrels had broken out among them for the same. Soon, dinner was served and after everybody had finished their meals, the gopas and gopis sang, danced and created such an uproar that the atmosphere became simply electric. You would not believe it but the festivities continued well into the night. Bhaiya and I had been put to bed well on time. As the night advanced, the elders too had left for their homes but the tireless dancing of the gopas and gopis continued till almost midnight. Needless to say, no other festival had ever been celebrated in Gokula with such great fervour on such a grand scale. Certainly, "Nanda's house had been blessed with joy," and that too, in a way that it would be remembered for years to come. Interestingly, on that very same day, Kansa too held a celebration in the palace. Regardless of the reasons given by the palace, it was quite clear

that the festival was held to celebrate the killing of Devaki's eight children. In fact, Nanda too was invited for this festival; but when such a grand festival was being celebrated at his own place, there was no question of him visiting Mathura.

Well, as far as we were concerned, we were being brought up like princes here in Gokula. When it came to providing for us, Nanda and Yashoda spent beyond their means and ensured that we never lacked anything. In fact, they never differentiated between me and bhaiya. In short, though I was not being brought up in a palace, I was certainly being raised in the most royal manner possible. Truly, I was fortunate to have an opportunity to be brought up by such simple-hearted parents, and that too, in such a splendid environment! Yashoda was so enamoured of me that she was not ready to part with me even for a second. Not just she, but the entire Gokula grew to love both of us brothers dearly. Especially, the ten-twelve-year-old gopis were absolutely smitten by us. They came to play with us on one pretext or the other, whenever they found the opportunity. For that matter, even Yashoda and Rohini were no less; keeping their chores at bay, they were busy all day long in just dressing and adorning us. To tell you the truth, there was competition between both the mothers to adorn me. Making me wear different kinds of ornaments, dressing me up in all kinds of colourful clothes, then changing them often was gradually becoming their daily pastime, so much so, that Yashoda had now stopped taking interest in any household chores whatsoever.

As I grew up, I had become the darling of not only Yashoda and Rohini but also of the whole of Gokula. In a matter of days, my dark complexion, endearing face and sweet smile had had such a magical effect on everybody, that right from childhood itself, I had far surpassed bhaiya when it came to attracting and garnering love.

Meanwhile, Nanda and Vasudeva continued being alert and cautious and ensured that there was no compromise on the security front. So as to not raise suspicion, Vasudeva's visits to Gokula had substantially reduced in number, and Nanda too would avoid meeting Vasudeva on his visits to Mathura. But yes, whenever Nanda returned from Mathura, he made it a point to bring new clothes and ornaments for bhaiya and me. Vasudeva too, never failed to send gifts for both of us. In short, there was no dearth of love and affection or for that matter, any kind of material comforts for us.

Bhaiya was two years elder to me and ever since childhood, his presence had

had a deep impact on me. To tell you the truth, having a friend at home in the form of bhaiya had made my childhood a truly wonderful experience. Amidst this pampering and love received from one and all, time was passing by swiftly. And with the swift passage of time, we were also growing up quickly. Surprisingly, the love and affection we received only grew with our age. Now, growing up in such a loving and caring atmosphere, how would we ever realise the passage of time? Time was flitting by and we too, were growing up at an equal pace.

By now, bhaiya had begun to toddle. As for me, I would sit on the floor and in absolute wonderment, watch him waddling around the house. In any case, more than spending time with their parents, children enjoy playing with other children of their age. And truly speaking, bhaiya fulfilled this need of mine in every way. As time passed, the competition among the gopis to play with me grew to such an extent that now, playing with me had become an integral feature of their life. As soon as the evening set in, they would all promptly troop up to my house. At times, mother Yashoda would even get exasperated by the gopis' constantly entering and exiting the house; but they would hardly pay heed to Yashoda's annoyance.

Meanwhile, bhaiya had learnt to walk quite steadily. And with bhaiya now able to saunter around all by himself, life for both the mothers had become synonymous with a series of troubles! Rohini, in particular was greatly affected, as her running around as well as household chores had increased exponentially; this was because bhaiya would keep running out of the veranda and every time, Rohini had to run after him and bring him back. All day long, bhaiya kept running out, and mother Rohini had to rush behind to catch him. On one hand, Yashoda and Rohini had to attend to us all day, and on the other, our growing age had substantially increased their household chores. Consequently, by nightfall both would be tired to the bone. Truly, a mother's fate is quite ironical; a child gives her the greatest joy and yet it is the same child who troubles her the most!

Well, anything that gives you pleasure also inflicts pain in equal measure. As for myself, when I saw bhaiya moving around, I too would keep trying to stand up and walk. But what could I do? My age foiled every effort of mine. Honestly speaking, my infantile ego could not tolerate the fact that bhaiya could walk and I could not. And feeling helpless, I began to feel frustrated. But to whom could I talk about this and how? I had not learnt to speak as yet. But yes! Bhaiya certainly did try to teach me to walk by holding my finger and if nothing else,

this at least served to assuage my hurt feelings.

Let me share one more fact of our childhood with you. Both bhaiya and I had curly hair since childhood. And oh yes, ever since childhood, both of us were in the habit of drinking large quantities of milk. As a result, the two of us had become very plump with time. In short, both bhaiya and I shared quite a few similar traits. In contrast to this, bhaiya was no match for me when it came to winning the hearts of people; however when it came to gaining weight, he emerged a winner. In fact, he had become so hefty that it had now become difficult to even lift him; and this proved advantageous to me. Now, I began to receive even more affection from both the mothers because in their eyes, I was the only one left to play with; so now I was the only one whom they could dress and adorn.

And right from the beginning, the gopis' interest was limited to playing with me alone, which soon had an undesirable effect too! Bhaiya began to feel hurt with all the attention that mother and the gopis showered on me. How could his little mind tolerate being ignored like this? But just as my infantile ego had been hurt on seeing bhaiya walk, and was assuaged when he tried to teach me to walk, I was the one who assuaged his childish pride that was hurt on seeing mother and gopis play with me alone. You still did not understand? Above everything else, bhaiya loved playing with me and it was I who fulfilled his ardent wish by playing with him all day. Indeed, as soon as he found an opportunity to play with me, he would forget all his troubles. Meaning, ever since childhood, we had both developed the habit of looking after each other, even though we may have been unaware of it. But as the evening would set in, the gopis would gather, and everything would be back to square one. Once they came, bhaiya would hardly get an opportunity to play with me; and its negative outcome was, for no reason, he began to resent the gopis.

Children anyway have a natural tendency to draw as much attention as they can to themselves. If someone ignores them, it becomes impossible for them to bear it. At this juncture, bhaiya certainly felt left out; and the second undesirable result of this was, slowly but steadily, he was becoming mischievous and rebellious. Obviously, he was indulging in pranks and mischief only to attract their attention. Well, I did not need to resort to any such tactics, as I already possessed quite a few magnetic qualities to attract everyone's attention. My beauty, my enigmatic smile, even my crying and crawling on my knees; everything about me was so endearing! On top of it, clothes and ornaments looked so magnificent on me that words would not suffice to describe the appeal

it added to my charming looks. So, as far as receiving love from others was concerned, it was just not possible for anybody to be one up on me.

Let me tell you about one more peculiarity of bhaiya. No matter how angry or displeased he was, the moment he got a chance to play with me, he would forget all his troubles and be filled with joy again. Not only that, whenever we were alone, he would take such good care of me! He was older than me and ever since childhood, he always looked after me, just like an elder brother would. To cut a long story short, our childhood was just like a childhood should ideally be. Moreover, we were fortunate to be growing up in the village headman's house; as every day, we were dressed in new clothes and jewellery which made our little faces framed by curly, black hair, look enchanting.

Gradually, the magic of my beauty and smiling face had won the hearts of all the inhabitants of Gokula. So much so, that now there was no greater joy for them than to play with me. Meanwhile, bhaiya's efforts in teaching me to walk were also beginning to show results; for, now I could hold his finger and walk. And as I walked a few steps, I began to feel as if I had conquered the whole world.

At this time, I was about two and a half years old and bhaiya was about four and a half. So, we were now grown up enough for other children of our age to come and play with us. And with this, an entirely new chapter of joy began in our lives. From my experience, I can say that there is no greater joy for a child than to play with other children of his age.

Since most of the children I played with hailed from simple cowherd families, they found my clothes and ornaments a source of great wonder. And if nothing else, the bewilderment that arose in their minds as they gazed at me, gave rise to a feeling of someone special in me. Moreover, not just my dresses and ornaments, but even the unbridled attention that I was enjoying, indeed, made me feel extraordinary. And perhaps I really was; probably this was the reason why the people of Gokula loved me even more than their own children. And possibly, it was from this point in my life that the feeling of being someone special took root in me. In any case, the rise of this feeling at such a tender age was a positive sign, as it has been observed that the feeling of being special often brings about miraculous results in a child. This not only kindles confidence in the child, but also motivates him to become someone special in life. However, it is important to remember that in contrast to this, the same feeling of being special in grown ups is nothing but a sign of ego.

Now, that bhaiya and I both had learnt to walk, it really made the lives of the two

mothers miserable. We did not want to sit at home even for a second. And why should we? Obviously, all children want to live freely and so did we; we were having a great time, but it was a source of great trouble for our mothers; especially mother Yashoda, who was getting on in years, found it difficult to keep up with me, and would get exhausted running after me. Bhaiya and I had become very healthy and plump, thanks to the large quantity of milk we consumed. Moreover, as we kept running out of the house repeatedly, it was no longer an easy task to pick and carry us back home every time. As for me, no matter how many times I was caught and brought home, I would still escape to play in the mud. And which mother could bear to see her darling child play in the mud and get dirty all over? She would come and pick me up somehow and seat me in the veranda. But as soon as she got busy elsewhere, I would once again run outside to play. This sequence would be repeated multiple times a day. Now you can imagine what my mother's condition must have been like!

Well, if I compare the two of us, bhaiya was more mischievous, whereas I was more playful. His interest lay more in breaking things and creating disturbances while I was more inclined towards playing and running around. This was the reason why mother Yashoda had to keep chasing me endlessly. But for how long could poor mother continue to drain her energy and ruin her health? Weary of the daily chase, she soon began to tie me with a rope to the door that opened to the veranda. What else could she do? After all, she had to take care of a number of household chores as well.

But then this is the way of life of a village woman; so how could she get a respite from this, and that too, by tying me? My mother was forgetting that for every single person to torment Krishna, there were a hundred others to save him. When I had managed to escape even from the clutches of Kansa, did Yashoda really stand a chance? She would tie me with ropes, and as soon as she got busy with her work, one of the gopis would come by and promptly untie the ropes. Poor mother! All of her efforts would be rendered futile. Needless to say, as soon as the ropes were untied, I would dash off to play outside; and once again, poor mother would be compelled to chase me. To my misfortune, she would soon catch me. After all, I was still quite young; but then this implied that I had been defeated. And even though I was a little child, I still did not like to be defeated. And the person who does not want to lose inevitably manages to find ways to become victorious, which I too found soon; I learnt to hide. In other words, adding to her woes, I had discovered a new way of harassing mother who was already facing enough troubles because of me!

Now, this was the situation as viewed from Yashoda's perspective. But for me, this game turned out to be a very interesting medium of entertainment. I had enjoyed troubling mother much more than just making her chase me. Oh, the joy of hiding was indescribable! If she did not find me for a while, a scared Yashoda would set out to search for me with Rohini and bhaiya. To see Yashoda run helter-skelter in great anxiety thrilled me beyond words. And look at bhaiya! Whenever she sought his help to look for me, his heart would throb with immense joy. With his little chest puffed up, he would strut around proudly as if he had been summoned for a momentous mission. Many a time, he would walk ahead of mother, holding a small stick in his hand, as if he would move heaven and earth to find me! But what was the use? I was smart enough to find a new hideout every time. My poor, distraught mother would waste her time in checking my previous hideouts. Although I truly loved this game of hide-and-seek, for poor mother, this whole exercise was extremely exhausting. Just see my childlike nature! Rather than worrying about her exhaustion or sympathising with her, I derived immense pleasure from wearing her out and troubling her. Wasn't I an amazing son? On one hand, mother was getting dead tired, and on the other I was enjoying every bit of it!

As I grew a little older, these games of running and catching, playing hide-and-seek with mother also came to an end; because mother's age and stamina did not permit her to play these games anymore. So finally, I took pity on my weary mother, and it soon had a positive result too! Now bhaiya and I both were free to roam around and go anywhere we pleased. In other words, mother had surrendered completely. This was bound to happen sooner or later; after all, for how long could mother compete with her hyperactive children? She had to accept defeat one day. This was certainly the first victory of my life and perhaps, it was from here on, that the determination to always emerge victorious took root in me. In fact, for me, victory is synonymous with life; according to me, those who accept defeat easily and give up too soon, waste their precious human life.

Anyway, why talk about such profound things at such a tender age? For now, let me discuss the consequences of this first victory. With mother relenting, I was free not only to roam around, but also to play with other children. And you must be aware that freedom is synonymous with joy. Needless to say, at this time, I was truly enjoying this freedom to the fullest. How can I describe the pleasure of playing in the mud with children of my age and getting dirty? As it is, free spirit tends to soar a bit too high, and I had gained this freedom with my own efforts; so the pleasure I derived from it was bound to be unique! To tell you the truth,

from this point in life, I had learned that nothing can be achieved in life without affirmative action. And the positive outcome of it was, from then onwards, I remained an ardent follower of Karma—an advocate of action—all through my life. Did you see how this freedom had triggered a transformation of my personality?

These days, my enthusiasm and happiness were at their peak. During this period, my life was a series of endless games and pranks with other children of my age. Now there was no one who would stop or scold me; poor mother had long since left me to my own devices. Yes, in the evening, she certainly bathed her darling, who invariably got drenched in mud after playing in it all day. That is to say, though she had surrendered, she had not turned her back on performing the duties towards her son. Perhaps, it was from here on that the quality of diligently honouring one's duty had begun to grow in me. Coming back to the present, as soon as I was given a bath and dressed in the evening, the gopis would begin to flock to the house. They would all want to play with me, so much so, that as soon as they arrived, quarrels would break out amongst them. Actually, even Yashoda and Rohini did not want to miss any opportunity to play with me. Not only they, but bhaiya too would eagerly wait for his turn to play with me. In short, the poor mothers hardly got a chance to play with me. Every evening, the gopis would surround me and during the day, bhaiya would not leave me alone. In other words, while both the mothers were diligently performing their duties, both of them were denied the joy of playing with me. Perhaps, this is the fate of a mother!

Sometimes, playful fist fights would also break out between the cowherd children and me. Needless to say, in these fights, bhaiya and I would give them all a sound beating. Ah! This too had its own unique charm! Such actions filled us with courage and zeal to face anything head on. And such was the extent of the fun we had, that our fun and frolicking continued day in and day out; not only that, if I was the only child to play, there were many who wanted to play with me. Now what more does a little child want? In this respect, my childhood was undoubtedly the best that anybody could ask for. Well, since we are discussing my childhood in such detail, let me tell you about another great development. I had now started to babble and everybody found my childish prattle so endearing that the entire Gokula had fallen under the spell of my sweet baby talk. Everyone wanted to talk more and more with me. And to tell you the truth, I was even more anxious to speak than they were; after all, I had just learnt to talk. By the way, most of my conversations were with none other than

Yashoda. There were several reasons that compelled us to talk to each other, like asking for milk, wanting to be swung, wanting to go out, so on and so forth. In other words, even though she had not found a chance to play with me, she was fortunate, at least as far as talking with me was concerned.

By now, my naming ceremony had also been conducted. The good news was, the same Gargacharya, who had been instrumental in saving me from Kansa's clutches, had come to perform the ceremony. Needless to say, my name had been chosen by none other than my mother. As my complexion was dark, she had named me **Krishna**⁹ or the dark one, which everyone lovingly shortened and began to call me Kahn or Kanhaa. Many people even called me Shyam. And as if these many names were not enough, later, as I was extremely attractive, they also named me Shyamsundara, meaning dark and handsome. Just see! I had acquired so many names even at this tender age! By this, you can gauge the love and affection that people had in their hearts for me.

Oh yes! I forgot to mention an important fact while talking about all this. As I grew older, I had become very fond of eating curd and butter. Ironically, I had lost my fondness for milk. Although this was my personal choice, mother Yashoda could not digest this change in taste. She would insistently try to convince me with the health benefits of milk; but I was happy with my newly acquired taste. However, mother continued to remain exasperated by it. But she was my mother after all; when she could not manage to do anything about it, she accepted it as a personal defeat. As a result, she found a new task; now, all day long, she would devise ways to make me drink milk. And you would not believe it, but she even resorted to offering me bribes, just to make me drink milk. Now what can I say! Sometimes, she would bribe me by reading fairytales and at other times she would promise to bring down **Chandamama**¹⁰, or the moon, to play with me, and she would invariably succeed in making me drink that odious stuff every day. Basically, it was wrong, but being a naive and innocent child that I was, I invariably fell for my mother's tricks and quietly drank it up each time. Finally, one day I got fed up. I detested drinking milk, but still, here I was, guzzling it down daily! Was this fair? Even to me, this seemed like a personal defeat. Losing was one thing, but I wondered what would be the ill-effects of this continual defeat on my nascent psyche. But all these thoughts came to me only after I had drunk the milk. At the time of drinking, I inevitably fell for my mother's tricks. And how would I not?...I loved the moon so much! And fairytales...they invariably enthrall tender minds! Poor me; I always fell into her trap!

However, irrespective of the number of times I had been tricked, in my heart of hearts, I was getting determined not to drink milk. Finally one day, I took it as a challenge to my ego. That night I was sitting outside in the veranda. And according to mother, it was time for that dreaded glass of milk. However, by now, my infantile brain was irritated by these repeated episodes of drinking milk against my liking. After all, for how long could I fall for mother's tricks and keep drinking milk? Did I have any individuality or not? For how long could I accept defeat at my mother's hands? Enough was enough! My budding intellect was firm that today I was not going to drink milk under any circumstances. I was determined to not fall for any of my mother's ruse. I still recollect vividly; it was a full moon night. I was sitting outside in the veranda gazing fixedly at the moon. The effulgent full moon was driving me crazy. Just then mother breezed in with her glass of milk, intending to pour it all down my throat. She quickly lifted me, made me sit on her lap and began forcing me to drink the milk. First she rattled off her fairytales, and then promised me the moon. But this time, Krishna was not going to fall into her trap! I had made up my mind! So, as soon as I heard the word *Chandamama* I balked and obstinately said, "No, today you first call the *Chandamama* down, only then will I drink the milk." Hearing this, at first mother was taken aback. Even so, it appeared as if she had not taken me seriously as yet. For, she still continued her attempts to shove the milk down my throat. But when she was not successful in her efforts, she began to entice me with newer temptations. I was happy thinking that if nothing else, this had at least compelled her to come up with something new, which certainly was a step towards victory.

Well, whether the temptations were new or old, it was certain that I was not going to fall for any of my mother's tricks now! I had made up my mind not to drink milk; and once I had made up my mind, nothing was going to change it. Honestly, how often was I to be fooled by the same old trick? Finally, mother accepted defeat; she even had tears in her eyes. But do you seriously think this time I was going to melt on seeing her tears? In the end, defeated, she almost cried and asked me, "My darling, why are you not drinking milk today?"

Good! Finally I had set her right. Krishna was happy and with that happiness, came pride. Then, I spoke imperiously in my baby talk, "Every day you lie to me and make me drink milk, but it will not work now. Today you have to bring *Chandamama* down. And if *Chandamama* does not come, I will not drink the milk."

Truly, the choice of words that I had used and the emotional expressions I had

managed to mix at this tender age, were unparalleled. With this, I had successfully conveyed the firmness of my resolve, although it was done in broken baby words.

On hearing this, Yashoda became extremely sad. She understood that her darling was no longer going to fall for her empty promises of bringing Chandamama down. What could she do? Accepting defeat, the poor thing replied, “Kanha, *Chandamama* is very far away. See, it is so far away! How can I bring it down for you?”

It was quite evident that mother had dropped all her weapons and had fully capitulated by now. Well, did she have a choice? After all, just see who had taken a determined stance! And I too was one of a kind; instead of taking pity on her helplessness, I was encouraged and in the same enthused spirit, I said, “Send your fairies to fetch it; you have been endlessly singing their praises!”

Now Yashoda was absolutely dumbfounded. She had no clue as to what to say! And there was nothing that she could do. But just see her determination! She just had to make me drink milk. One had to admit that she too was second to none when it came to obstinacy. How could she not be? After all, she was my mother! Nonetheless, she realised that this time around, mere words would not suffice to help her wriggle out of this sticky situation. If she was really keen on making me drink milk, she would have to discover a new trick anyhow. But what trick? She sat for a while in deep contemplation and I naively assumed that she had accepted defeat. I thought, at last, I was spared from having to drink milk. Moreover, on seeing my invincible mother in this state of capitulation, my infantile ego was pleased. But my joy did not last for long. As mother too, was an ardent follower of Karma, a true *karmaveer*, who would not rest until the desired result was achieved. Perhaps, it was my parents' proactive nature that had laid the foundation of my immense faith in karma. I had never seen either of them shirking their duties or responsibilities.

However, for now, let us move on to the next course of events. Suddenly, mother went indoors, and before I could comprehend what she was upto, she came back in a flash, with her face lit up with a big smile. To my surprise, there was a large plate filled with water in her hands. As she carefully placed the plate in front of me, she instantly wiped out my misconception that she had surrendered. Before I could react, the luminous chandamama, the moon, had descended on my plate! Seeing the shimmering reflection of the moon in the water, I was ecstatic. Forgetting everything, I joyfully began to slosh water in the plate with my tiny

hands. Needless to say, I was so elated on seeing the moon on the plate, that I gulped down the entire glassful of milk at one go. Truly, the innocence of children entitles them to such wonderful pleasures of life! And as for a mother's love, what can one say about it? Did you not see? She had even brought the moon down for her darling! I was happy beyond words and so was my mother!

Well, as I said earlier, I was always fully groomed and adorned in new clothes, fancy jewellery, beautiful anklets on my feet, round earrings in my ears and what not! Interestingly, even my growing age was not at all proving a deterrent to my mother's fondness for dressing me up. Moreover, these days when at home, the gopas, who kept dropping by, would invariably stick peacock feathers in my hair. As if that was not enough, when the gopis came to play with me in the evening, they would begin to adorn and dress me up all over again! And since I was so beautifully dressed and adorned every day, the habit of always being well-groomed took root early in my childhood. I had also realised that it becomes easy to attract people if one is well-dressed. And let me tell you, a new kind of change had occurred in me these days. Now, as the afternoon wore on, I eagerly awaited the arrival of the gopis. I thoroughly loved the warmth and enthusiasm with which they played with me. So much so, that many a time, the moment I saw them heading towards my house even from a distance, I would break into a little jiggle in sheer delight. The gopis would be completely enamoured by this dance of mine. And not only the gopis but the whole of Gokula had gradually begun to develop fondness for my fascinating little jiggle. Yet, the love showered on me by the gopis was unparalleled. They were so taken in with my dancing that they would keep trying to make me dance, day in and day out. And just look at their smartness, now they had even found an innovative way of tempting me to dance, as they were aware of my fondness for buttermilk and curd; every time they passed by, they would lure me, "Dance Kanhaiya, dance, I will give you curd!" Another would soon come by and say, "Kanhaiya, show me your adorable little jiggle; look, I have bought you some fresh buttermilk!" Greedy as I was for curd and buttermilk, I would instantly break into my special jiggle and my ankle bells would jingle rhythmically with my steps. And needless to say, not just the gopis but even mother Yashoda would feel very blessed on seeing this artistic facet of her little darling's personality.

Amidst this immense love, pampering and fun, the journey of my life was moving on at a fast pace. With growing age came newer opportunities that brought joy and ardour. Especially, when the gopis played with me, the pleasure I derived from it was simply divine. But as it is said, those who bring you

happiness also become the cause of your pain. Soon, this indeed proved to be true. Holi, the festival of colours was celebrated once every year. Earlier, my mother used to gently apply a bit of colour on me and bhaiya. But this year, the gopis were hell-bent on colouring us, especially me. This time around, I could not fathom why, but the gopis were chirpier than ever. Just see! I was sitting quietly in a corner of the veranda, already drenched in colour showered on me by my mother, and yet, every gopi who passed by continued to smear more colour on me. I was beginning to get a little irritated with all that colour smeared on me, and seeing me irritated, mother too was getting annoyed with them. And there was one more reason behind mother's exasperation. This relentless sprinkling of colours was making the veranda dirty and ultimately, it was my poor mother who would have to clean it up. But these mad gopis neither showed any consideration for my discomfort nor did they care about mother's plight. Indeed, these naughty girls had troubled both mother and son a lot today! In fact, I felt I was paying a heavy price for my closeness with the gopis, as many a time, the colour would get into my eyes and I would end up crying, but these heartless gopis refused to relent. I would keep on crying and they would go on colouring me. Whenever a group of gopas and gopis passed by, the poor gopas would be busy beating their drums but the mischievous gopis would unfailingly run in to trouble me. It annoyed me greatly, but what was the use? I was just a small child; what could I do? But it did not matter; I said to myself, 'Wait! Let me grow up. I will drench them in so much colour that they will never dare to celebrate the festival of colours ever again!' Well, I could not take revenge on the gopis as of now, but I could at least resolve to do so in the future and thus calm my mind at present. So that was what I did! Truly, I was drenched in so much colour that mother had a very difficult time bathing me and I had to go through a very rough and difficult bath. Mother's situation was even worse as she still had to clean the messy veranda; both of us were silently fuming at the gopis.

But apart from this one bitter experience, everything was going well. As I was growing up, I was becoming increasingly restless. I was no longer content with playing only in the house or in the veranda nearby. Now my mind wanted to soar; every day it wanted to do something new. To tell you the truth, when I saw the gopas roaming here and there all day long, I too longed to roam around with them. I was so greatly attracted by the dancing and cavorting gopas. But alas! As you know, I did not have the permission to go far; for, caution was the topmost priority for father during my childhood. He had given explicit instructions to all the gopas that they must never take Kanhaiya anywhere with them. And this instruction had left me with no other option, but to gaze longingly at the passing

gopas. It was a strange situation; the gopas knew very well that I was dying to roam around with them. In fact, I knew, they had no personal objection to taking me along. On the contrary, they would feel blessed on having me with them. Yet, fearing Nanda, neither could I go with them nor could they take me along. To tell you the truth, not only the gopas, but I too was afraid of Nanda. But for how long could I continue to live with such constraint? Eventually, the day arrived when the desperate longing to freely roam about with the romping gopas overpowered the fear of Nanda and the longing transformed into a burning desire. Indeed, suppressing one's desires intensifies their magnitude and they take on a monstrous and perverted form!

Well, all these changes had occurred within me, but outwardly, I still had not been able to muster the courage to move about with the gopas. However, I soon found an opportune moment. One day, I was playing by myself in the veranda; father was not at home and mother was busy in the bathroom. Such golden opportunities seldom came my way. These days, my mind longed to make a splash and now was the time when I could sense the perfect opportunity for it. While I was still busy contemplating, a group of merry gopas passed by, on their way to Govardhana Hill. Upon seeing me sitting alone in the veranda, they, as usual, came in to lovingly greet me. As they had a few cows with them, it did not take long for my little brain to discern that they were taking the cows to Govardhana for grazing. I longed to see Govardhana because I had not seen this beautiful hill as yet, and this was the perfect chance. I knew it was a 'now or never' opportunity because it was only in father's absence that I could grab this opportunity and venture out with the gopas. That was it! My mind immediately conceived a plan, following which I instantly began to smile, breaking into my special jiggle. Everyone was delighted on seeing my alluring little dance form and consequently, the playing and the pampering increased. I thought I had them under my spell now! My dance had worked! But what was this? After playing with me for a while, all of them began to troop out and that too, without me. I was crestfallen! All my dancing had been in vain. I had been at my alluring best, but it had no effect on the gopas whatsoever. It did not matter. I was not the one to accept defeat either. In my heart of hearts, I had made up my mind to go with them, and as you know, I was stubborn right from my birth. So, in one more attempt to ensnare them, I spoke with my endearing lisp, "I too want to see Govardhana."

Hearing my words, for a second everyone's face lit up with a pleasant surprise, but the very next moment, everyone became wary. After all, father did have a

terrorising influence over them. Even though they would have loved to take me along, no one could gather the requisite courage. That is to say, everybody wanted to, but nobody was able to defy my father and run the gauntlet. Meaning, the fear of Nanda had won and I, the innocent one, had lost; but as you know, I did not like being defeated. However, it was not so easy to win back this lost game, was it? Yet no matter what happened, I had to win. I had to go to Govardhana. So once again, I expressed my desire in my baby talk, but to no avail. Hearing my endearing lisping, the gopas did stop for a moment to give me a loving embrace, but once that was done they slipped away leaving me behind.

Poor me! I was all alone once again! Really, father's terror had defeated my charm thoroughly. Such a terrible defeat was not acceptable to me at any cost. Hence, I took a vow to win. I was determined to go to Govardhana under any circumstances. In the end, not finding any other way, I used **my baal brahmastra** ¹¹— the ultimate weapon of all children; I began to cry and run after them. I thought if they were not stirred by love then let them be moved by pity, but I just had to go to Govardhana, under any circumstances. However, this too did not seem to have much of an effect on the gopas. After pausing in their tracks for a moment or two, they set off again. Perhaps, they were well-acquainted with my histrionics and Nanda's fury. So much so, that I continued to run after them crying but still, no one was willing to pay any heed to me, meaning, I was being completely ignored. My infantile ego was hurt even more by such indifferent behaviour. Krishna was being snubbed so callously! Now even if I had to move heaven and earth, I would go to Govardhana! Now, it was a question of my self-esteem. But what alternative did I have? I was using every trick that I knew. Stubbornly crying and following them, I had come quite far, thinking that perhaps somebody would take pity on me. Finally, my determination paid off, some of the gopas felt sorry for me. Now, once sympathy was gained, could victory be far behind? One of them bent down and folding his hands in mock respect, picked me up and made me sit on his shoulder. Thus, I set out on my way to Govardhana. But my wailing still persisted... Now what should I hide from you? Though I was well on my way and we had even started walking towards Govardhana, this drama was quite essential according to my infantile intelligence. That is to say, in my heart of hearts, I was jumping with joy but outwardly, the pretension of crying continued. What if an expression of happiness exposed my act and I was left at home?

No way! It was better to continue crying for some more time. Yes! Only when I was sure that they had brought me out quite far and could not possibly turn back,

did I stop crying, allowing a big smile to light up my face. To tell you the truth, only now could it be said that I had gained victory over father's terror. Did you see what a clever little devil I was from childhood itself! And at this moment, I was so happy that I was swaying with delight. And why wouldn't I? My happiness had doubled for two reasons. One, I was feeling proud of gaining victory over father's terror, and on top of it, the sheer joy of seeing Govardhana had suffused my entire being.

Walking at a steady pace, we had now trod out of the village. It was a sheer delight to see mud roads with trees on both sides and lush greenery greeting the eye as far as one could see. Birds flitted about and animals wandered here and there. How can I describe the experience? I was ecstatic! The chirping birds and the wandering animals created such a spellbinding ambience that my heart did not wish for anything else. This was the first time that I had found the opportunity to venture out so far from home. Amazed and full of wonder, I was just staring fixedly at everything on the way. Many a time, when I spotted a new kind of animal, I would even clap with my little hands.

Finally, I reached Govardhana sitting on one shoulder after the other. What a high hill it was! Surrounded by different kinds of trees, it looked extraordinarily breathtaking! I fell in love with Govardhana's massiveness and beauty at the first sight itself! The entire afternoon, shifting my perch from one shoulder to another, I kept roaming around Govardhana. With great wonderment, I was looking at each and every corner of the hill and was so elated that it is impossible to express my feelings in words. For that matter, even the gopas were thrilled to have me in their company. I was not only being treated like a very important guest but was also being fed different kinds of fruits with great affection. In fact, there was a competition amongst them to pick various kinds of fruits to feed me. Not only that, a couple of times, I had also been lovingly fed fresh cow milk. And just see, this time, to make me drink milk, no moon was needed to be called. This in itself was proof of how happy I was. But as it is said, moments of joy flit by very quickly. That is exactly what happened. Here I was still playing, and there in no time, the cows had been grazed to their fill. This meant, now it was time for us to return. It did not matter; this visit to Govardhana was etched forever in my mind as an unforgettable experience. I had never been so happy in my life before. Although every new joy that comes in one's life invokes the same feeling, the happiness that I felt at this moment was truly exceptional. And on the way back, I was even more delighted. I was riding on the shoulders of the gopas as if it was my victory march. In a way, it really

was my victory march! For, I had won over both, Nanda's discipline and his terror.

But alas! As soon as I reached home, my euphoria vanished in an instant. For, mother and father were anxiously waiting outside; both their faces were creased with great anxiety. When the gopas saw father's livid expression, they were extremely terrified. I too thought, 'Now where did he come from and that too, in such a sullen mood?' While we still stood there thinking, on seeing me with the gopas, father's anxiety quickly transformed into rage. It did not take me long to understand that unless I acted quickly, I was sure to get a sound beating. Indeed, unless I quickly thought of a way out, my victory could fast turn into an ignominious defeat. When I could not think of anything, in haste, I quickly resorted to using my brahmastra – my ultimate weapon; I did not even look at father and crying loudly, instantly took refuge in my mother's lap. Then with tearful eyes, I lisped sweetly, "Maa¹², give me something to eat, I am very hungry."

I thought, father, on seeing his child hungry, would forget his anger. But Nanda was Nanda after all; was his anger going to subside so easily? He was certainly not going to be fooled by my feigned hunger or crying. On the contrary, he ignored me just as I had ignored him and began to scold the gopas severely, "I had ordered you to not take Krishna out with you. Why did you still take him along?"

The gopas, who were already quite nervous on seeing Nanda's incensed expression, were terrified on hearing this question. They all began to quake with fear; but how would that have helped? They still had to answer him. So gathering his wits, one of them finally spoke, "We did not take him; he himself had come running behind us."

On hearing this, father became even more furious. He probably had known this all along and had exhibited anger merely to ferret out the truth; for he knew quite well that the gopas would not disobey his order so easily. In short, I was the prime suspect in his eyes from the very beginning and now that the gopas' answer had put me in the dock, how long could it take for my turn to come? And sure enough, it did. Nanda spun angrily towards me and hissed, "When you have been instructed not to go anywhere, why did you follow these people?"

What could I say? The fault was undoubtedly mine. Thus, I thought it wise not to answer and to continue my act further. I began to cry even louder and clung on to my mother's neck. At this moment, mother was my commander-in-chief;

for, only she could save me from father's wrath if she so desired. Honestly speaking, had I left her with any other option? She had to melt on seeing tears in her hungry darling's eyes. In the end, what was expected came to pass and mother promptly reprimanded father saying, "Can't you see? Kanha is so tired and hungry! Are you not ashamed to scold my darling child in this manner?"

Uttering this, mother immediately took me into the kitchen to feed me. Phew! I was saved; that was a narrow escape from a sound beating. Now, I was not hungry at all as I had done nothing but eat the entire day at Govardhana, but still, it was imperative for my act that I eat. Well, what difference would it make to a glutton like me? I had barely eaten two mouthfuls when a gopa came into the kitchen with summons from Nanda. This was too much; he was not even letting me eat in peace! Well, Nanda had summoned, so I had to go. I told mother, "You too come along with me." Obviously, it is not wise to go to the battlefield without the commander-in-chief.

Expectedly, as soon as father saw me, he lost his temper again and this time, he asked in a stern voice, "Tell me the truth, what had happened? These gopas are saying that you followed them to a great distance, crying and insisting that you wanted to go along. So they were compelled to take you with them."

I already knew that father was not the one to spare me so easily. But then, was I the one to accept defeat so easily, especially when I could see that this defeat could prove catastrophic? It was quite possible that if I lost this time, I could even get a sound thrashing. Realising that there was no way of escape, I thought it prudent to continue with my act, and therefore, still crying, I lisped endearingly pointing at my tiny feet, "These gopas are lying to you out of fear. Look at my feet! They are so tiny. Tell me, how on earth could I ever run after them? And as far as Govardhana is concerned, I just cannot climb that mountain." Saying thus, I started wailing.

I thought father would surely be compelled to soften his stance now. But he was my father after all, how would he buy my story so easily? He was continuously frowning at me. Even I was realising that this menace called 'father' was not so easy to vanquish. But so what? I thought, 'Let me tweak my act a bit more.' So I innocently stated, gesturing as if I was swearing to tell the truth, "I am telling the truth father, these gopas themselves had taken me forcibly." Saying this, I began to cry once again and wailing loudly, went and clung to my mother. Naturally, mother could not bear to see her darling cry inconsolably. She promptly jumped to my rescue with great force and almost scolding father, said, "How can my

little child follow them? Now let him eat in peace and for God's sake leave him alone!" Saying this, she once again took me back to the kitchen. I was now convinced that I had escaped. Nevertheless, as a precaution, I continued casting sidelong glances at father even while going inside. The poor baffled man stood there scratching his head; so at least for once, he had admitted defeat despite his obvious reluctance. As for the gopas, they were looking at me in complete disbelief. They could not understand how such a small child could lie and that too so blatantly!

I had performed a truly remarkable feat. Indeed, father was not in the least satisfied with my explanation. Moreover, he was confident that I was the culprit behind this mischief. But what could he do? The poor man was helpless in front of mother. Can you guess my age at this time? Just three-and-a-half years! Even at this tender age I knew very well, when and how to manipulate mother's affection and to what extent. Moreover, I was also a master of acting and was capable of lying right since childhood. That is to say, I had developed my survival instincts from childhood itself. To be able to escape every tricky situation is certainly not an ordinary quality. And when saving oneself is the topmost priority, it is necessary to put on an act and lie too. I had understood such simple, yet profound facts of life in early childhood itself. Meaning, I had made lying and putting on an act an integral part of my life right since childhood.

Well, all this was about Gokula and myself. Engrossed in these discussions, I forgot to tell you about the situation prevailing in Mathura. Mother Devaki was still under the illusion that all her eight children had been killed. On the other hand, mother Yashoda was under the impression that I was her biological offspring. Meaning, both the mothers were unaware of the reality; and interestingly, I was the focal point of their erroneous beliefs. This meant that even destiny was determined to make me a 'deceiver' right from childhood. Perhaps, that is why both my mothers were under an illusion about my birth.

As for the situation in Mathura, Kansa was in such high spirits that it defied description. He looked quite reassured as he believed that he had killed his seven nephews and a niece, who could have spelt his doom. As far as father Vasudeva was concerned, he was busy living quietly, but with utmost caution.

On the other hand in Gokula, my days were passing amidst great fun and frolic. Life was streaming at a gentle pace with nothing new happening in the past several days. But soon, a beautiful, new chapter began in my life. Mother Rohini

gave birth to a baby girl who was named Subhadra. Bhaiya and I, both were overjoyed by the arrival of our baby sister. Indeed, my happiness knew no bounds; you tell me, if a child has an elder brother and a younger sister to play with at home, what else would he want?

Now, this was as far as we brothers were concerned. As for Yashoda and Rohini, they already had considerable household chores to take care of, and over and above that, bhaiya's mischief and my skittishness were an added source of trouble for them. And now, with the arrival of Subhadra, naturally mother Rohini was totally occupied in looking after her. Therefore, the complete responsibility of looking after me and bhaiya had now shifted to Yashoda. And as if this was not enough, all the household chores had also now become her responsibility. But it was indeed praiseworthy that in spite of all this, neither of the mothers ever appeared flustered. Perhaps, the habit of working hard and performing one's duties under all circumstances was ingrained in me by my mother. Even at this tender age, I could surely say that gradually I was becoming the 'doer' child of a mother who was a go-getter. As it is, children are invariably influenced by the positive and negative qualities of their parents, so how could I remain uninfluenced by them? And besides, we were cowherds, extremely hard-working by nature. That is why I had never seen my mother shy away from any work, despite her age or health. And how can I forget my diligence too? Had you ever seen this 'doer' child of his 'doer' mother getting tired of finding new, innovative ways to harass her? Let alone getting tired; on the contrary, I was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to make some mischief! When she herself was not concerned about her age and exhaustion, why should I worry about it?

And sure enough it had not been long, when an opportunity presented itself. Mother would often go to river Yamuna to bathe. One day, I do not know what came over her but she took her little devil along. Frankly, her benevolence was beyond my comprehension. Perhaps, she had done so to relieve Rohini of the inconvenience of taking care of three children at a time. Well, it may have been a relief for Rohini, but for mother I could say with certainty that it was her own foolishness that had spelt trouble for her.

All through the way, the very thought of playing on the banks of the river was making me delirious with joy. Travelling by the cart, the journey of this mother and her son was passing very enjoyably. But my happiness did not last for long. No sooner had we reached the river than my happiness vanished into thin air. My clever mother had already come prepared with a strategy to deal with me before

taking on the peril of bringing me along. So, not only did she leave me under the cart while going for a bath but even tied me with a rope to one of its wheels. What else could she do? For her to bathe peacefully, it was necessary to tame my skittishness. However, I too had a problem; ever since my birth, I detested any kind of restraints or bondage. You already know how hard mother and father had been trying to control me since childhood; although they could never succeed, their attempts had certainly made me obstinate. Hence, on being tied with a rope, I naturally became incensed. Had she brought me to Yamuna for this? And besides, this was an overt attack on my freedom which I could never tolerate.

Was she trying to be smart, and that too, with Krishna? That was it! I immediately began to struggle and kick around in an attempt to free myself. Now, these were not the chains of a prison; they were ropes tied by a mother to restrain her beloved child. Even though the ropes were loosely tied, I had to try hard to untie them. But being a child, I just could not free myself, no matter how determined I was or how hard I tried. So, digging my heels into the ground I pushed the wheel of the cart very hard and it worked. Along with the wheel, the entire cart collapsed and as the ropes came loose, I managed to free myself.

I could accomplish this feat despite my young age because even though I was four years old, I looked like a six-year-old and had the strength of an eight-year-old. And look at the wonder of Nature, the cart collapsed in a manner that I remained completely unharmed. And like every other child, I quickly forgot the crashing of the cart and became engrossed in the joy of being freed from the shackles. This is the boon bestowed upon the minds of children by God; fear and worries do not linger in their mind for long; in no time, they are back to their natural merrymaking and frolicking.

But in spite of the great opportunity that I had had, on this occasion, my playing did not seem to go down well with anyone. After disentangling myself with great difficulty, I had just started playing, when some women and children standing at a distance spoiled everything. Actually, they had seen the cart falling on me, so it was but natural for them to be terribly scared on seeing this accident. They ran to Yashoda at once and informed her of the accident. That was it! My plans were ruined! An alarmed mother Yashoda quickly ran up to me. Poor thing, she nearly died of fright. However, finding me unhurt, a wave of relief washed over her face; yet, in spite of seeing me safe I do not know why, she took me in her arms and began to wail. Perhaps, this is the innate quality of a mother's heart. While mother and son were showering tender love on each other, a few boys who had witnessed the entire incident from a distance, instantly came running towards

mother Yashoda and told her that the cart had not fallen on its own, it was Kanhaiya who had made it fall by repeatedly kicking it. The devils had come to complain about me! Well, they finished with their complaining and had succeeded in creating one more problem for me.

On hearing this, instead of getting angry, mother was dumbfounded. She started looking at me carefully; she clearly could not believe that her little darling could make such a big cart fall. Seeing the look of disbelief on mother's face, the cowherd boys reiterated their story. This time, with double the self-confidence, they assured mother Yashoda that they had seen me with their own eyes, kicking the cart repeatedly in a fit of rage. With her eyes full of wonder, mother still kept looking at me. Instead of scolding me, she was perhaps trying to accurately gauge my strength. Now whatever it may be, my pleasure trip ended abruptly. I had thought, I would play for a long time on the banks of Yamuna but the cart had upset everything. We returned home. Neither did mother have a bath, nor did I get a chance to play.

Considering it to be a trivial matter, I had already forgotten this incident but somehow, the news of the cart being toppled spread rapidly. Getting increasingly exaggerated each time it was told, it spread like wildfire across the village. As a rural lifestyle does not leave much scope for interesting conversation, this exciting news became the major topic of discussion. I was anyway everybody's darling because of my beauty, my naughty pranks, my dance and my baby talk. And now, this event had turned me into someone special in the eyes of the people of Gokula. Well, what objection could I have to being regarded as someone special? On the contrary, I was enjoying it thoroughly and that was the right thing to do. Perhaps, this was the incident that had ignited within me the desire to become someone special. So what was wrong with that? As it is, a human birth is not meant to be wasted by leading a mundane life, as one amongst the crowd. In fact, becoming someone special or undertaking some great task should be the sole aim of human life.

So far, the exaggeration of this incident had appeared to be quite harmless. However, it became a matter of concern, when this nonsensical tale reached Mathura; and spreading by word of mouth, it eventually reached the ears of Kansa. Now, the news that has travelled from mouth to mouth is bound to become exaggerated and sensationalised. So, by the time the news reached Kansa, the story had turned into one of a mysterious and powerful child's remarkable feats. On hearing this astounding tale, Kansa became cautious. Well, to be always on guard is the sign of a good King and Kansa had always

exercised caution when it came to matters pertaining to himself. Consequently, on hearing the term 'powerful child', for a second, many wild thoughts flashed through his mind. Suddenly, Narada's reverberating voice echoed in his ear - "The child will be extremely powerful! He will be your nemesis!"

However, the matter did not end here. He then began to mumble to himself, "No, no! How can this be possible? The prison was heavily guarded; besides, Devaki's eighth child was a girl; I had killed her with these very hands." While he was thinking about all this, Kansa's suspicious line of thought suddenly veered towards a new direction. He began to think, 'Since the past few years, Vasudeva's visits to the palace have become rather infrequent and even Nanda hardly ever visits the palace. Could these two facts have any connection with that powerful child?'

No sooner had this thought crossed uncle Kansa's mind, than he began to ponder over it again with far greater concentration. He recalled the great bond of friendship that Vasudeva and Nanda shared from the very beginning. Also, Vasudeva's dear wife Rohini was residing at Nanda's house. Needless to say, all these facts put together gave rise to a suspicion in his mind. Could he be the eighth child of Devaki? What if he was? As he continued to reflect on this, Kansa conceived a devious plan in his mind. He immediately summoned Nanda to the palace on the pretext of discussing matters related to the annual tax revenue from Gokula. When Nanda received this unexpected summons from the palace he became unnerved. But fortunately, it was not in his nature to remain worried for long. If he had been summoned to the royal palace, he had no option but to go. So was there any point in worrying about it?

This time, when Nanda reached the palace, Kansa greeted him with far greater warmth and affection than ever before. He then gently chided him by asking, "Are you upset with the royal palace? Why is it that in spite of your frequent visits to Mathura, you do not oblige us with a visit? Not only that, when a son was born to you, you had hosted a grand festival but the royal palace was not invited to the event." An innocent Nanda became badly flustered on being ambushed in this manner by Kansa and blurted, "What could I do! The palace too was busy at that time celebrating the killing of Devaki's eighth child."

On hearing this, Kansa's facial expressions changed dramatically. Nanda too realised his folly. It was now confirmed that Nanda's son and Devaki's eighth child were born almost around the same time. But Kansa being an astute politician, did not let anything more than this be revealed to Nanda. In fact, to

put him in a quandary, Kansa even made elaborate arrangements for his stay at the royal palace, so as not to raise his suspicions. But Nanda, being intuitive and equally astute, had discerned all that was worth discerning, which made him so distraught that he lay wide awake all night. He knew that he had committed a terrible blunder. Consequently, tormented by this thought, the poor man spent the entire night tossing and turning in bed.

Even Kansa's devious mind could hardly find any sleep. He too was pacing up and down in his quarters, busy plotting and scheming, trying to come up with a foolproof plan to tackle this issue. As such, he had a mere suspicion that I was Devaki's eighth child. But he did not want to be under any delusion and allow this menace to grow bigger. So, irrespective of whether his suspicion was right or wrong, he wanted to close this particular chapter right then and there. Suddenly, he remembered Trinavarta who was an expert bird catcher. No sooner had Kansa thought of him, than a treacherous plan struck his diabolic mind. And he was not the kind to procrastinate in such matters; he summoned the bird catcher that very night. Trinavarta was frightened on being summoned at this late hour by Kansa. His nervousness was justified; this late night summons from his King could certainly not portend good news, but if he was summoned, he would have to present himself before Kansa.

As soon as Trinavarta arrived, Kansa explained the entire plan to him in detail and said, "Tomorrow morning itself, you have to accompany Nanda to Gokula as his servant. As soon as you reach there, you have to catch various kinds of birds and amuse Kanhaiya, the son of Nanda and win his heart at any cost. And when Kanhaiya falls under your spell, you have to somehow trap him and bring him to the palace." ¹³

Well, these were the details of the plan and Kansa wanted it to be effectively executed at any cost. So he craftily used a double-edged sword on Trinavarta. On one hand, he lured him with a huge sum of money if he succeeded, and on the other, he threatened him with death if he failed. What would one not do, when faced with death? Trinavarta was not only forced to agree to the plan but in order to save his life, he had to succeed as well. Thus, the matter was quickly settled between both of them.

Early next morning, when Nanda came to seek Kansa's permission to leave for Gokula, Kansa readily agreed. However, feigning great respect for Nanda, he gifted him Trinavarta as a servant. Now Nanda was in a great dilemma; he was not at all keen on accepting his benevolent gesture, but he could not refuse

Kansa's gift either. So, with a heavy heart, a helpless Nanda took the servant along with him and left for Gokula. All through the journey, he immensely regretted his foolishness, whereas Kansa, on the other hand, was feeling very proud of his intelligence on having managed to send Trinavarta in the guise of a servant.

However, with Trinavarta's arrival in Gokula, Nanda became extremely vigilant. He strictly commanded both his servants to keep a close watch on Trinavarta. He was so worried and cautious that he even advised Yashoda to always be careful of Trinavarta. But unfortunately for him, the biggest lacuna in his security measures was, I was still a small child. I was not old enough to be explained the trickiness of the situation. Even so, Nanda had made all the necessary arrangements to ensure that I did not go anywhere alone with Trinavarta.

As for Trinavarta, upon his arrival in Gokula, he immediately engaged himself in the execution of his game plan. In order to enchant me, on the very first day he caught many beautiful birds from the banks of the river Yamuna and brought them to me. Now as you know, little children always have a fascination for flying birds; and if someone puts them in a cage in front of a child, then tell me, what else would the child want? This was indeed a new and unprecedented experience for me. Needless to say, these caged birds thrilled me to bits. In short, I had found a new avenue to keep myself engaged; my entire day was spent in playing with the birds. Sometimes, I would put grains for them to eat and at other times, I would just sit enraptured by their sweet chirps.

Truly, after Trinavarta's arrival, my days were just flitting by. I had completely stopped venturing out of the house or playing with the cowherd children. In fact, I had even stopped playing with bhैया or entertaining Subhadra. I was just absorbed in watching and playing with the caged colourful birds. I must say that I was thoroughly smitten by their sweet songs. Seeing me happily engrossed in this manner, even mother was jubilant. Indeed, what greater joy can a mother experience than to watch her child happily at play?

On the other hand, Trinavarta too was no less elated. Of course, not because he enjoyed watching me play, but because he could see his plan becoming successful at the very first attempt. So in short, I was happy, my mother was delighted and Trinavarta was elated; but the reason behind each one's happiness was different. As such, mother's happiness had other reasons too; for one, due to this indoor entertainment I was constantly under her watchful eyes and besides, she did not have to chase me anymore. In short, Trinavarta's arrival had

made mother happy and her life easy, in every way.

Meanwhile, Trinavarta and I had become good friends. Trinavarta continued to catch new birds every day and enthusiastically bring them for me, and I too continued to be cheerful and enchanted, seeing new birds every day. Mother Yashoda was ecstatic on seeing me happily play with the birds. In short, within a few days of his arrival, Trinavarta had completely won over the hearts of both, mother and son. As such, it is not very hard to win over a mother's heart; anyone who makes a child happy inevitably brings a smile on the mother's face. In other words, anyone who has the knack of keeping a child happy, wins the confidence of the mother as well. Speaking of Trinavarta, he too was very excited with his initial success. And mother and I were so enchanted by him and the birds he brought for me that we never realised when the day would pass. But the cowherd children had become very unhappy with the arrival of Trinavarta. Actually, in just a few days of playing with the cowherd children of my age, I had become their leader. And now, they were unhappy for the fact that their leader was not playing with them. Nevertheless, since I was thoroughly enjoying the company of Trinavarta and the birds, there was no question of my going out to play with them. However, the condition of the gopis was by far the worst; they were just not getting any opportunity to talk to me, play with me or watch my dance. And without all this, how could they sleep at night? But such was the height of my brazenness that earlier, while I would eagerly wait for them every evening, I now got irked when they arrived. Obviously, they could not tolerate being snubbed in this manner. But what recourse did they have against a shameless child like me? In short, everyone including Nanda was distressed with the arrival of Trinavarta, except for mother and me.

But then, under the circumstances, what solace could I provide to them? In the company of these birds, when I was at the zenith of ecstasy, how could the sorrowful sighs of the gopis or the cowherd boys reach me? And even if they did, what purpose would they serve? After all, can one really notice the sorrows of others when one is perched on the pinnacle of joy? In short, even to understand others' sorrow, it is essential to have some measure of it within oneself. Why should a happy person torment himself with others' feelings of unhappiness? Well, others could decide for themselves, but my days were passing by with much merriment, as I continued playing with Trinavarta and the birds.

Trinavarta, who had successfully won my mother's as well as my trust, had miserably failed in winning Nanda's trust. It was not that he had not tried; once

or twice, he had even attempted to bring himself close to him but father maintained a distance from him. He and his two servants were constantly keeping an eye on Trinavarta. Try as he might, they were not showing any laxity in their approach towards him.

Now, Trinavarta had come here with a specific aim; the days were slipping by but he was not able to accomplish anything. He had failed to break through Nanda's security cordon, and had also got bored with Gokula. Yet, he could not leave without the successful completion of his task. But as they say, patience is bitter but its fruit is sweet; one day he finally found the chance he so desired.

That day, father Nanda was compelled to go out for some work and he also had to take both his servants along. Precisely, this was the moment that Trinavarta had long been waiting for. He was certainly not going to find such a golden opportunity again to carry out Kansa's orders. Without wasting a moment, he enticed me with an offer to take me to the banks of Yamuna to catch colourful birds. Receiving such a wonderful offer, I was exhilarated beyond words. Even mother was no hindrance for Trinavarta now; she happily gave me permission to go with him. Upon getting the permission, my joy knew no bounds. Trinavarta wasn't any less delighted either. But the difference was, we both had our own reasons for being happy. Even mother was pleased but the reason for her happiness was the most unique; naturally, her happiness was directly linked to the delight of her darling son.

Holding on tightly to Trinavarta's finger, I set out for the banks of Yamuna. Such was the state of my happiness that I was literally skipping with joy. Indeed, I was so thrilled that in spite of having such small feet, I was matching my steps to those of Trinavarta and hopping along. When the caged birds had made me so crazy with joy, you can imagine how happy I must have been when I found a chance to actually catch them? Clearly, at this time my innocent mind was completely unaware of Trinavarta's evil intentions. Meaning, at this time, like all other children, I too was solely dependent on my innocence to keep me safe; and there was nothing wrong in it either. In Nature, nothing can provide greater security than innocence.

However, holding Trinavarta's finger, filled with enthusiasm, I reached the banks of river Yamuna. The moment we reached there, Trinavarta began calling out to the birds. I was closely watching his every move. It was absolutely amazing! He mimicked the sounds of various birds so effortlessly, that it seemed as if the birds were just waiting for his call! The entire scene was so spellbinding!

Trinavarta standing on the picturesque banks of the Yamuna calling out to the birds, as I stood beside him, watching in wonder while the birds came flying towards me. My condition was strange; firstly, delighted, my feet refused to stay put on the ground, and secondly, I was unable to take my eyes off the sky. And whenever a flock of birds swooped down, I would begin clapping my hands in sheer excitement.

This time, however, even Trinavarta was not fully focused on his task. Although he was still catching birds, he repeatedly kept glancing at me in a strange manner. Indeed, he was attempting to focus on the successful execution of his plan, but for some reason, he seemed to be extremely perturbed. Ultimately, when his uneasiness grew too much to bear, he resorted to drinking liquor. In fact, he just did not resort to it, but also drank way too much. He clearly appeared to be struggling with some great inner conflict. His mental anguish was understandable; for, after having played with a sweet and innocent child like me for so long, it was but natural for him to develop great fondness and attachment with me. Therefore, though he had set out on a mission to harm me, a part of his mind had rendered him incapable of doing so. But on the other hand, he had Kansa's order to follow, which if not executed, was certain to attract the death penalty. Meaning, on one hand, he feared the corruption of his soul, while on the other, the spectre of death loomed large in his mind. It was certainly not easy for him to select one. The poor man was indeed caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. But what could he do? The innocence of children is such that it attracts and softens up even the most callous people. Sometimes, even the most fearsome demon spares a family because they are accompanied by young children.

Indeed, when just the presence of children is enough to melt the sinful intentions of even mighty demons, what chance did poor Trinavarta stand? He was just a bird catcher. In fact, he was in this dilemma because of his nature. Actually he was not evil or a demon by nature; he had been forced to carry out this abominable task. This, in turn, had led to an ensuing struggle between the saint in him and the demon that Kansa had instilled in him.

However, at that time, unaware of all this, I was still busy playing with the birds. Suddenly, Trinavarta fell unconscious; perhaps, it was the result of drinking excessive liquor. My innocence prompted me to think that he must have become exhausted with the long spell of bird-catching. As soon as he fell, the birds flew away. Seeing them flutter away so suddenly, I felt miserable and in this disheartened mood I sat down quietly, gazing at the Yamuna flowing by. What

other option did I have other than to wait for Trinavarta to wake up?

But sadness does not stay with children for long, does it? If Trinavarta was not getting up, so be it; I began to play with mud and suddenly, a big snake emerged out of nowhere. I was so engrossed in playing that I began amusing myself with that snake as well. The snake too began to happily play with me. By nature, animals are less violent than human beings; and for an innocent child, what is the difference between a bird and a snake? Certainly, animals recognise love and innocence much better than human beings! There are many evils among humans such as Kansa but among animals there are hardly any. This is the reason why animals usually do not attack children. And as an affirmation of this truth, both of us were engrossed in innocently playing with each other. Naive as I was, I thought the snake too was just another bird summoned by Trinavarta, although he was still lying unconscious.

Just then, a group of gopas wended their way to the banks of the river Yamuna. When they saw from a distance that I was playing with a snake, alarmed, they rushed towards me with great agility. Frightened by the commotion, the snake quickly slithered off. And once again, I felt dejected on seeing the snake slink away. Oblivious of my sadness, a gopa quickly picked me up. It was then that some of the gopas noticed Trinavarta lying there beside me. Upon taking a closer look, they immediately realised that he was lying there in an intoxicated state. His carelessness infuriated them. That was it! All the gopas pounced on Trinavarta! Already in an unconscious state, his body could not bear the weight of all the gopas, and he was squeezed to death. It was only after the gopas had put the innocent Trinavarta to death that their anger subsided. Their blind rage had not allowed them to weigh the pros and cons of the situation. They were unable to control their temper, and how could they? After all, due to Trinavarta's carelessness, their dear Kanhaiya's life had been jeopardised! However, unaware of the reality, I was very angry with the gopas. For, they had not only killed my dear friend Trinavarta, but with his death, they had also put a full stop to my frolicking with the birds. Unaware of what was brewing in my mind, the gopas, thrilled after killing Trinavarta, picked me up on their shoulders and skipping and singing with joy, made their way home. On the other hand, dismayed by Trinavarta's death, in spite of riding on their shoulders, I kept flailing my hands and legs in anger.

On reaching home, when the gopas narrated the incident to mother Yashoda, she was very frightened. She immediately pulled me close to her bosom and hugging me tightly, began to wail. When father learnt about it, naturally, he unleashed his

fury on poor mother. Poor mother also accepted the fact that it was her carelessness that had put my life in danger.

Nevertheless, father breathed easy with the death of Trinavarta; but a pall of gloom descended over me. I really missed the colourful birds. And my anger at the gopas, who had unnecessarily killed my dear Trinavarta, refused to subside. You will not believe, but I was so angry with them that I did not talk to the gopas for many days. But how could it help? The reality was, I had become very lonely at this time; nothing seemed to interest me. I just sat and stared fixedly at the birds flying in the sky. But what difference was it going to make? Now there was no one to catch them and bring them to me. However, mother could not bear to see her darling in such a dejected mood. She was relentlessly trying to amuse me, but my gloom just refused to dissipate.

Nevertheless, as stated earlier, does sadness remain with children for long? Besides, I was anyway a happy-go-lucky child by nature. For me, one person could be easily replaced by another and the second one by the third! After all, for how long could I sit in the veranda and wait for the birds? If they did not come, so be it; I began to go out and play in the neighbouring houses. Now, during the day, the gopas used to take the cows out for grazing and only the gopis were left at home. They too would be busy making curd and buttermilk and churning butter. Even so, irrespective of the house I entered, the gopis would feel blessed on finding me at their doorsteps. They would pick me up lovingly, seat me on their lap and give me curd and buttermilk to drink. They would never fail to tie a peacock feather on my head too. Perhaps, their love, that had been lying dormant for so many days, was now gushing forth. I too loved their pampering, and thus, flitting from one house to another soon became my daily routine.

All in all, the wheel of time had taken such a turn that the very same gopis who longed to play with Kanhaiya now found him at their doorstep, eager to play. This was certainly the effect of Trinavarta's death, and therefore, the gopis naturally seemed to be the happiest with him out of their way. This time, they showered me with such warmth that I completely lost interest in playing with other children of my age. At present, playing with the gopis and wandering all day from one house to another was what interested me the most. And why wouldn't I find it delightful? I enjoyed playing; and additionally, I was getting an opportunity to feast on the curd and butter offered to me. However, the gopis were not truly benevolent either. In a sense, they would lovingly make me dance first and only then feed me curd, butter and buttermilk. But what objection could I have to this? I was getting an opportunity to dance as well as to feast on curd

and butter...double joy! I greedily ate all that was lovingly offered to me. I was least bothered about my gluttony, except for all this overeating was making me chubbier by the day. Actually, it was not right to blame only my overeating for this; I had also stopped playing and running around.

Well, as I grew older, my mind yearned to experiment with new things. Thus, it was not long before I was bored of this routine as well. I wanted to do something new, but I could not fathom what. And I was clueless for how to go about it. But I definitely needed to do something new. And when I could not think of anything, I decided to become self-reliant. 'Dance and you will get butter'? What was that! Now that I had grown older, I could eat as much butter as I liked to, and that too, whenever I desired. Was it befitting for me to go from door to door and dance just to get some butter?

No sooner had I made up my mind to become self-reliant, than I began to implement it. I began to eat butter, helping myself from the pots kept in the verandas of the houses. My hands were very small and the pots too large, so it was very difficult to hold the big pots with my tiny hands. As a result, many a time a pot would slip from my hands causing all the butter to spill on the floor; but why would I bother? I was having fun! I really liked this new found game; eating butter as I pleased and dancing at my wish. Why should I dance to someone else's tune? However, in this entire process I ate less and spilt more. But what difference did it make to me? I broke the pots in almost every house that I visited. However, on the flipside, the gopis were not amused by my antics, in fact, they were getting increasingly annoyed. Some of them even tried to reason it out with me, saying, "Kanhaha, please ask us for the butter, we will give you as much as you want. Why do you unnecessarily break all our pots?" But what was the fun in asking and then eating? Especially, when I could wipe off the butter with my own hands, what was the need to ask for favours? After all, it was important to be self-reliant, wasn't it? So I turned a deaf ear to them. Finally, my stubbornness and their inability to find a solution to persuade me compelled them to hang the pots higher, so as to ensure that my hands do not reach them. And as a result, once again, I was compelled to ask them for butter.

But I was extremely irked by their precautionary measure. 'They dared to throw a wet blanket on Kanhaiya's revelry?! This would not do! I would eat butter at any cost and it would be my own hard-earned butter. So what if I could not reach the butter pot? The butter could come to me!' Then, without even a moment's hesitation, I started breaking the pots by throwing stones at them. Now how could earthen pots stand the assault of stones? They would soon crack and

droplets of butter would begin to fall on the ground. I would just stand under the broken pot with my mouth open, and allow the butter to drop into my mouth and relish it. But sadly, only a little of it would fall into my mouth, the rest of it would spill on my clothes and on the floor. But how did it matter to me? I would lick the butter off even from the floor! This had become a fabulous game. As soon as the butter pot broke, a victorious smile would light up my face, as asking for butter implied my defeat. And I for one, loved to win; the butter reaching me directly from the pot was giving me a reassuring sense of victory. And certainly, for me, the joy of victory was far greater than the pleasure of eating the butter.

Inversely, the gopis were upset more by the loss of the butter than by their defeat. In short, one's happiness was another's sorrow. Consequently, the very same gopis, who would get thrilled upon my arrival, were now stressed with my mischief. After all, butter was the source of their livelihood. Finally, having no other option left, they once again tried to persuade me; they even showered me with lots of love and affection. But was I the one to fall for their sweet words? On the contrary, I immensely enjoyed seeing them in such distraught condition. To tell you the truth, this had emerged as an entirely new, interesting game for me - indulge in an act that irritated the gopis and then derive pleasure on seeing them in a distraught condition.

On the other hand, the problem with the gopis was, they could not bear such a huge loss of butter for long. For, such an extensive wastage of butter could soon jeopardise their very existence. Moreover, they were very well aware how stubborn I was. Not being able to find a way to resolve the problem by themselves, they all finally decided to complain to my mother. So one fine day, early morning, the gopis with this wicked intention, flocked to my house. Seeing the gopis at such an early hour at my doorstep, I was taken aback for a moment. I do not know why, but with their sudden arrival, I was gripped by a sense of foreboding. Perhaps the proverb, 'A guilty conscience always pricks the mind', was proving to be true. Seeing the ominous manner in which the gopis stared at me upon their arrival, I clearly discerned that this time around, they had not come here to play with me, and the subsequent course of events proved me right.

One after the other, everybody sternly voiced their complaint against me. Mother too was shocked when she heard about such a brazen wastage of butter. Angered by their complaint, she gave me a thorough dressing down in front of all the gopis. What else could she do? After all, she was not just my mother but the wife of the village headman too! It was her duty to look after the welfare of the village and its inhabitants; so, I kept my head down and quietly listened to it all.

For, I was duty-bound to do so for now; but, this was all just a pretence; deep within, I was cursing the gopis. This was the first time in my life that I had been humiliated and that too, in front of everybody. I had not only been reprimanded, but had also been defeated. Indeed, my infantile ego had been deeply scarred by this incident. Such an ignominious defeat, such humiliation and such betrayal! I just could not digest any of it!

Anyway, the gopis had done their damage and left. My mother was so perturbed that in order to console her, I had to promise her never to indulge in such mischief again. Mother's pain was on two counts; on one hand, she was disturbed by the senseless wastage of valuable butter, and on the other, she was now upset about having to scold her darling in front of everyone. I too was feeling utterly dejected, caught between my mother and the gopis; after all, it was I who had been humiliated. In short, both of us, mother and son, were extremely unhappy and the only ones happy were the mischievous gopis. I thought, 'How can gopis be happy while I am unhappy!' No! This could not last for long! In my heart of hearts, I decided to retaliate and resolved to ruin their happiness. Meaning, very soon, I had to do something which would make Kanhaiya happy and the gopis unhappy. But how?

Despite contemplating over it for quite some time when I still could not think of anything, I resorted to my old ways. I had promised mother that I would not break the pots and spill the butter. So what? My primary objective was to teach the gopis a lesson. Thus, without bothering about the promise I had made to mother or worrying about another round of scolding, I once again began to break the butter pots. Shocked by this sudden attack, the gopis once again found themselves helpless against the might of Krishna. Finally fed up, with tears in their eyes, they once again landed at my doorstep to complain to mother. Mother scolded me again. But this time I did not feel hurt; for I had adopted 'brazenness is the highest virtue', as my motto. Gradually, this became our weekly routine. I would break the pots, the gopis would come home to complain and my mother would reprimand me. Meaning, this mischief of mine had tied my mother, the gopis and me to this weekly routine.

Now the question was, how would this routine break? And who would accept defeat? Indeed, the issue had become extremely complicated. Well, no matter how complicated things became, failure was earmarked for mother and the gopis as I had donned the garb of brazenness. The gopis could keep crying and mother could keep scolding; I just did not care! I would shamelessly go at it again with defiance and break their butter pots time and again. In fact, I had become so

brash that instead of restraining me, the sobbing complaints of gopis and mother's reprimands actually encouraged me to break even more pots, and that too, with renewed vigour! Meaning, just for the sake of winning, I let impudence pervade my entire being.

Ultimately, mother was fed up with my bottomless bag of mischief and the persistent complaints received from the gopis. She wanted to do a lot, but the helplessness of a mother's love was restraining her from taking any stern action. However, gradually, this helplessness dissipated too. One day, on returning home after another successful bout of breaking butter pots at gopis' houses, I was shocked to find them already seated at my house. My mother was seething with anger. This was the first time I had seen her in such a furious mood. Clearly, the gopis had done a fair bit of tale-telling. To tell you the truth, seeing mother so enraged, deep within, I too was scared for a moment, and in that fear I suddenly blurted, "*Maiya mori main nahin makhana khayi!*" ("O my dear mother, I have not eaten any butter!") At this, my furious mother gave me a stern look as butter was still smeared all over my face. Not just this, my clothes too were soaked in butter. Such a blatant lie! Mother went berserk with rage. First, her orders had been disobeyed and to top it, there was my shamelessness, and now, such a blatant lie! I was doomed. She began to beat me up right in front of all the gopis. This was so unexpected, but then what could I do about it? I stood there, quietly taking the blows.

However, my beloved gopis could not bear to see me being beaten up for long in this heartless manner. Certainly, these troublemakers had come to complain but perhaps they had not expected such a furious reaction from mother Yashoda. On the other hand, in a fit of rage, mother too had given me a sound thrashing. Perhaps, she had vented out all the anger that had been simmering within her for quite a few days. Be that as it may; I had already taken quite a lot of beating, but despite this, I was stubbornly standing there to get some more of it. Unbelievably, mother Yashoda was showing no signs of mercy while beating up her four-year-old darling either.

However, my continuous pounding had put the gopis in a grave predicament. They were almost moved to tears. All in all, the tables were turned. Now all of them were imploring mother, "Please do not beat up Kanhaiya! Mother, please do not thrash Kanhaa!" Hearing their pleas, I became even more infuriated and glaring at them from the corner of my eyes, I ran into my room. I had become so furious that I just banged the door and locked it. They had themselves complained about me and now they were imploring mother not to beat me;

“These despicable girls!”

At this point of time, I was sad as well as angry. As neither could I understand why mother had beaten me up so hard, nor could I fathom why the gopis had complained. Such is the innocence of children; even while indulging in mischief, they do it with such innocence that they are unable to realise their mistake. That day I was so angry that I did not step out of my room. In fact, I did not even eat anything the entire day; and surprisingly, neither did mother enquire if I was hungry nor did she offer me any food. After all, she was my mother; her anger was bound to persist. But in the evening, when mother Rohini learnt about the incident, she cajoled me and somehow persuaded me to eat some food. Actually, by the evening even I had become so hungry that she did not really have to coax me much. At any rate, going hungry for a day, I had understood that pointless anger hurts oneself alone. If you are angry, your anger should lead to an effective outcome; anger which causes pain to oneself is futile.

Incidentally, after this episode of my beating, I soon returned to normalcy but the gopis were gripped by remorse. Well, they were bound to; after all, it was the result of their own action. Not only had they got me thrashed but they had also fostered trouble between a mother and her son. I was really very angry with these gopis and did not speak to them for many days; instead I began to ignore them, which indeed made them quite miserable and restless. They desperately wanted to play with me, chat with me but I had to be willing for it, right? They made numerous attempts to entice me; they apologised too but I did not budge. I continued to ignore them.

But to be honest, deep within, I was really enjoying their persuasive efforts. In fact, my anger had dissipated long back and my mind was yearning to play with them for quite some time. In short, now my anger and avoidance was just a pretence to savour the attention and the lofty feeling of self-importance it afforded me. What other option did I have? The gopas would be out all day, taking the animals to graze and gathering fruits and vegetables. As for children of my age, I had never been interested in playing with them. Thus, the only ones left for me to play with were these gopis. And for how many days could a little child remain without playing? So, in fact I was more anxious to play with them than they were to play with me; but my astuteness lay in successfully concealing my impatience and anxiety from them. In any case, I had to make up with them sooner or later; but then I thought, since they were feeling so repentant, why not take some advantage of it? In all, my scheming little mind was caught up in garnering as much attention as I could.

Finally, I managed to take advantage of the situation that was begging to be exploited. I agreed to play and talk with the gopis but only on the condition that in the future, no matter what mischief I indulged in, they would never go and complain about it to mother. The poor, helpless gopis! What could they do? They had no choice but to agree to my condition. Did you see? How I had taken advantage of their helplessness to the fullest!

In short, I had learned to skilfully exploit every situation right from my childhood. Now it was a win-win situation for me; I could indulge in double the mischief and the complaints would be nil! However, from this incident I had also learnt the lesson that whatever is done, is done! Why regret it? The gopis were paying such a hefty compensation for their guilty conscience. They had complained to mother; so be it! Mother had thrashed me; so be it! All these were actions demanded by a particular situation; so what was the point in grieving and repenting over them?

So far, this was all that was happening in Gokula. Trinavarta's death too had long since forgotten. But the situation had started heating up in Mathura. When Kansa heard of Trinavarta's death, he was absolutely shocked. He was now forced to wonder if I indeed was Devaki's eighth son. But then he thought, 'How could it be? Vasudeva could not have pulled off such a daring feat all by himself. Considering the sway I hold over the administration, no one from the palace would have dared to support him either. Even if one were to believe it all to be true, where did the girl child come from?'

Surprisingly, Kansa was posing the questions to himself and it was he himself who was answering them as well. Ever since he had heard this news, he had begun to play this game with himself, several times during the day. However, after having carefully considered all the possible scenarios, Kansa began to realise that my escape from the dungeon could well have been difficult but certainly not impossible. If nothing else, Trinavarta's death had at least planted the seed of suspicion in Kansa's mind that I may be alive. And as a result, he vowed to kill me for his own peace of mind, irrespective of the fact, whether I was Devaki's eighth child or not. However, being the astute politician that he was, he decided to have me killed in a manner which would not reveal the royal palace's hand in the act, because he was not even sure, if I indeed was Devaki's eighth child. In such a case, he did not see any point in unnecessarily embroiling the royal palace in the murder of a child.

While Kansa was still mulling over a way to eliminate me, a bizarre incident

occurred in Mathura. The incident was unfortunate but Kansa's scheming mind spotted an opportunity in that too, and he tried to manipulate it to his advantage. It so happened that during those days, the whole of Mathura was living under the shadow of fear because of a mentally deranged woman called Antara. Unable to bear the loss of her two children, she was so traumatised that she had become the enemy of children in general; that is to say, she had lost her sanity.

One day, in her full-blown psychotic state, she had killed a few children who were playing in a garden in Mathura. Naturally, the whole of Mathura was horrified by these brutal killings of innocent children. After this gruesome incident, the children of Mathura had stopped venturing out of their homes, and being imprisoned within those walls made their lives miserable. Infuriated by the woman's reprehensible act, the inhabitants of Mathura, began to call her 'Putana', the slayer of children.

When news of this insane woman and her ghastly deeds reached Kansa, his diabolic mind immediately formulated a plan. The scared Kansa took an instantaneous liking to Antara's fearsome public image of 'Putana', and began to see a ray of hope in her.¹⁴ He immediately summoned Putana to the royal palace. But unfortunately for Kansa, the shock of the gruesome killing of the children in the garden had such a strong counter-reaction on Putana's mind that she was jolted back to normalcy again. Meaning, she was no longer the deranged Putana but an entirely sane Antara, completely normal and in full control of her senses. But Kansa had liked her in the form of Putana because that was what he needed at present, not Antara. Thus, he decided to force Antara to do his bidding and act like Putana.

Using the double-edged sword of fear and greed, Kansa ordered Antara to kill me. Upon hearing his fiendish scheme, Antara was utterly shocked. But did Kansa care? He was absolutely adamant. Before she could comprehend anything, Kansa firmly placed a bottle of poison in an astounded Antara's hands and said, "On the forthcoming Sharad Purnima — the winter full moon festival, a grand dance programme has been arranged at Nanda's place. You have to attend this programme and at the first opportunity you find, you have to apply this poison on your breast, and under the pretext of breastfeeding, you have to poison Krishna, Nanda's son. As soon as the poison touches his mouth, he will die, and with his death, your job will also be done."

Now a sane Antara was naturally not prepared to undertake such a dastardly deed. But she could not even bring herself to defy Kansa's command; instead she

accepted the bottle of poison, and quietly left. However, from that day onwards, Antara became very restless. She was already burning in the fire of remorse for killing those innocent children in the garden; and now the pressure to kill one more child had made Antara miserable beyond words.

Unaware of all these developments, preparations for the ‘Sharad Purnima’ festival were on in full swing in Gokula. This time, the festival was to be held in a large open ground, and not in our courtyard. Excited, I too was assisting in the preparations with great enthusiasm and fervour, as this was the first festival of my life; hence it was but natural for me to feel so excited.

Although I had no idea what this Sharad Purnima festival was all about, the ongoing festive preparations had surely aroused my curiosity and had lured me to heartily participate in the preparations. Whenever someone called, I would run back and forth, delivering garlands with my tiny hands to the gopas, who would drape them above all the doorways, forming scallops. The excitement of the preparations, which were on in full swing, had slowed the pace of time for me. I was impatiently waiting for the festival day to arrive.

Finally, the night of the Sharad Purnima arrived. Thanks to my special affection for the moon, I was always very excited on the full moon night. And adding to my happiness was the fact that this was the night of the festival. Naturally, I was feeling on top of the world from the break of dawn itself, and I had performed all my activities with renewed vigour. Mother Yashoda’s condition was no different; she had dressed me up in an exquisite outfit, complete with complementing fine jewellery. And of course, she had not forgotten to insert the peacock feather in my beautiful locks. In fact, the excitement of the festival was not limited to us alone. It pervaded the whole of Gokula, and everyone was overwhelmed with the excitement that could barely be contained.

But I was certainly far more excited than anyone else, and perhaps that was the reason why I had reached the festival ground long before anyone else. The ground was only a few yards away from my house. As soon as I reached, I was lost in admiring the beauty of the ground. It was indeed a sight to behold; I was thoroughly enjoying watching the ground bathed in the rays of the setting sun. The garlands, looped here and there with my help, were indeed looking very beautiful; especially the ones tied onto the branches of trees. Three sides of the ground had been covered with rugs for all of us to sit. Quite a lot of open space had been left in the centre; where perhaps the event was to take place. I was still taking in this scene when a few gopa friends also arrived. Undoubtedly, they

had come early to perform a final inspection of the preparations. Their arrival charged me up further and they too were very pleased to see me there. And then, imitating them, I too began to walk behind the gopas with one hand behind my back, as if I was also inspecting the preparations. In the meantime, some of the gopis also reached the ground. They were all very well dressed in their dazzling festive fineries. As soon as they arrived, I began to chirp even more. Naturally, on seeing me standing there, the gopis promptly gathered around me. It surely must have been a sight to behold: I, a tiny child, standing in the midst of all those tall and grown up gopis! As the evening set in, the village elders arrived too. But, they did not seem to be as enthusiastic and excited as the younger crowd. However, even the excitement of the younger crowd was no match for mine.

In some time, Nanda and Yashoda also arrived with Rohini, bhaiya and Subhadra. As soon as they came in, everyone took their seats. I took my seat besides bhaiya and near my mother. All the elders sat scattered here and there. But the gopas and gopis were still standing in the middle of the ground. In sheer excitement, I sat watching everyone thoroughly amused. I could understand all that had transpired so far; but I was keen to see what would happen next in the festival. And in no time, the gopas began singing and beating the drums. As the music began, a wave of excitement coursed through the gopis and they immediately began swaying to the music, tapping their feet. Soon, the beats and the foot-tapping fell into a perfect rhythm, and then, a few gopas also began to dance in pairs with the gopis. With this, the atmosphere had now turned extremely vibrant! I was thoroughly enjoying myself. Sitting beside my mother, I also began bobbing my head in sync with the beats. In no time, the festivities reached a crescendo; I was yearning to do so many things all at once; I was after all, the most excited! But what could I do? Age was proving to be a detrimental factor. Gradually, everyone was drawn into the festive mood and now the singing and dancing was no longer limited to the younger crowd; some older women also swung into action and begun to dance. It was just then that Putana arrived on the scene in the company of some women. So as not to raise suspicion, she too had come dressed and decked up in her festival fineries. Indeed, at this time, she looked no less than a goddess. She had smartly arrived along with a group of local women, so that she would be considered as their guest. And because the group was large, the question of whose guest she was would never even arise. All she had to do was share a joke and giggle with someone from the group, which would give an impression that she was the guest of that particular person. No sooner had she entered the festival ground than she glided straight to the

dance floor. Right from the beginning, her dance had cast a magical spell on everyone. It could well be discerned that she was an accomplished dancer. The gopis were already dancing with great gusto. And irresistibly drawn by the feverish dancing mood that had been set, mother Yashoda too went in, all set to scorch the dance floor. Seeing mother gracefully swing and twirl, I too became greatly enthused. Bouncing with uncontrollable excitement, I too skipped and tossed around for a couple of rounds with her. In short, with Putana's arrival, the atmosphere at the festival had become electric. Though everyone was dancing enthusiastically, one had to admit that Putana's dance was simply a class apart. Truly, her beauty as well as her dancing skills, both were magnificent. And this was why she had become the centre of attraction almost instantly.

As for me, I had already been very excited just upon hearing the word 'festival'; and with the festive mood gaining momentum, I had become even more animated. Now even I began to frequently move about in the dancing arena. Every time I entered the dance floor, the gopis surrounded me and encouraged me by clapping their hands. Even the gopas yelled out to me, "Dance Kanhaiya, dance!" Excited, I jiggled and jumped with even more enthusiasm and vigour. On the other hand, bhaiya had no interest in dancing. Why only dance, he did not appear to have any special interest in the festival either. He sat at a distance and was content to just watch the show. Well, he could do as he pleased.

Returning to the dance arena, the drum beats were growing faster and the dancers were becoming increasingly ecstatic. Everyone seemed to be mesmerised by Putana's dance and captivated by her beauty. Even I, in spite of my very young age, was greatly impressed by her dancing skills. Not only that; her dress and her sense of style, both had attracted me greatly. Meaning, the ability to recognise and appreciate the finer aspects of art and beauty was ingrained in me right from childhood. And I not only carefully honed this quality in the due course of my life but also sustained it. Interestingly, it was not that only I was impressed by Putana, but my gambolling and my love for dance seemed to have greatly appealed to her as well. She was lovingly looking at every gesture of mine, and not only that, many a time, our eyes had met too.

Well, it was quite late now; all the children had gone home, bhaiya too had fallen asleep. Even the gopis appeared a little tired but Putana had amazing energy; she was still dancing. To be very frank, the festive spirit of the celebration was now being sustained solely because of her. However, now even my eyes were drooping. Seeing me so sleepy, Yashoda immediately took me home to put me to bed. I was so tired that as soon as I was laid in bed, I fell asleep. Yashoda then

closed and bolted the door from outside and went back to the festival ground. All this while, Putana's eyes were constantly fixed on me and this was quite understandable; after all, her dance was merely a pretence; actually she was here on a specific mission.

This was as far as Putana was concerned, but at the festival ground, fatigue had gradually crept up on everybody. And as a result, dance had become very sporadic, though not stopped entirely. The lethargy in the dance made Putana realise that the festive mood would not last for long now and once it was over, it would become difficult for her to reach me. Meaning, for her it was a do-or-die situation, so she quietly slipped away from the festival ground and quickly stepped into our house. Needless to say, as soon as she entered the house, she immediately searched for me and headed straight towards my room. She swept in with great agility and bolted the door from inside. She then immediately sat next to me and began looking at me with great affection. Perhaps, while sleeping I looked even more endearing to her. After all, who could resist adoring a child like me?

But, suddenly she became restless; beads of sweat appeared on her forehead. Perhaps, she had recalled the mission she was on. Possibly, she was terrified by the mere thought of the great sin she was about to commit. At any rate, was it an easy task to kill an adorable child like me, and that too, while he was asleep? And anyway, Putana was not a demon by nature. Now whether she was a demon or not, she had no choice but to accomplish the task which had been entrusted to her by Kansa. Hence, suddenly she exposed her breasts and applied poison on them; and then she quickly picked me up and struggled to place me on her lap. Naturally, I was far heavier than she had expected and in her struggle to seat me on her lap, I suddenly woke up. For a second, I was stunned to see her in my room but the very next moment, I struggled to break free from the force she was exerting upon me. As a result, a new game of tug of war began between the two of us. Now, she was anyway doing all this with great reluctance, and somehow, in the ensuing struggle, the poison on her breast got smeared on to her lips, probably by her own hands. Either it was this or heaven knows what, but she promptly dropped dead!

Now, whatever it was, my infantile mind started believing that I had somehow defeated her in a monumental struggle. Feeling victorious and pleased with myself, I climbed on top of her inert body and began to vigorously trample on it. Now you might find it hard to believe but at this point of time, a natural smile had settled upon my lips. Ah, I loved victories! And over time, winning was

becoming intrinsic to my nature. And such being the case, naturally, every victory that I had gained invariably triggered a new wave of happiness within me. Well, my happiness was comprehensible, but Putana, after her death, had suddenly started becoming more and more grotesque. Her open hair and exposed breasts were only adding to her monstrous appearance. Her tongue was fully hanging out, and additionally, there were dark blood stains around her lips too. Naive that I was, I did not quite understand the situation and began clapping my hands while still jumping on her.

Meanwhile, at the festival ground, when Putana was finally noticed to be missing, it was mother who first became suspicious. Fearing the worst, she quickly ran towards my quarters. But to her utter shock, the door was locked from inside. Her heart nearly stopped beating and she began screaming. Hearing her screams, everybody rushed to the spot. On one hand, mother was screaming at the top of her voice, whereas on the other, she was desperately trying to break open the door. When many people began pushing and kicking the door, it soon gave way. And looking at the scenario inside, everybody was left dumbfounded. Both of Putana's breasts were exposed; I was on top of her; both my hands were on her breasts and my face was lit with an enigmatic smile that was spread across my face! And seeing my smile, life seemed to have returned to my mother's face which had gone pale with fright. She quickly lifted me up and took me to another room. I soon fell asleep but she kept crying all through the night, blaming herself for the negligence. It was not just my mother who sat wide awake that night, but shocked by the incident, apparently the whole of Gokula could not sleep, as they were disturbed with the thoughts of the eventuality that could have possibly occurred. Nevertheless, a feeling had sunk in everyone that their darling Kanhaiya had acquired a fresh lease of life.

It had now become clear that Putana had come here on a specific mission to kill me. And as far as the inhabitants of Gokula were concerned, everybody was obviously cursing and deriding her. As for poor Nanda, he was standing in a corner with a sorrowful face, as if struck by a thunderbolt, gloomily taking in all the drama that was unfolding around him. This incident had not only spoilt the fun of the festival, but had also caused a wave of anxiety to spread all across Gokula. At the same time, everybody was astonished as to how could such a small child kill such a huge and heavy woman like Putana. Also, they could not fathom why Putana wanted to kill me. What enmity could an unknown woman have towards me? In short, Putana's death had not only distressed the entire village, but it had also raised a barrage of questions, the answers to which were

still shrouded in mystery.

Although in my opinion, one possibility which could not be ignored in this entire episode was, Putana had deliberately consumed the poison herself. For, considering the great agony of remorse that she was suffering, it seemed more likely that she would have thought it best to take her own life, instead of killing one more innocent child. Impressed by my beauty and my dance; quite possibly, she could have become fond of me. Even otherwise, it is not so easy to kill a child. Anyway, now she was dead. As far as everyone else was concerned, they thought, she was a demon, but in my opinion, she had sacrificed her life.

Nevertheless, the entire incident proved to be extremely beneficial for me. For, the whole of Gokula began to consider me as an extremely strong and exceptional child. And this meant a lot to me because I was born under the shadow of death. The question whether I would survive or not had existed even before I was born. And just see where I was born...in a dungeon! As a matter of fact, even after so many years of my birth, I was still living under the shadow of death. Of course, at that time I was unaware of all these facts. At that time, only Nanda and Vasudeva were privy to this secret, but gradually, even Kansa, the one who was inflicting all these troubles on me, a mere child, was becoming aware of this. It was incredible! While the deadly game between the killer and the saviours inexorably continued, the one around whose life this game was being played was completely clueless about it.

With time, this incident was soon forgotten by me and I was once again absorbed in my fun and games. But Nanda had become far more cautious; after my narrow escape from death, he was always on guard. He, along with the help of some gopas, even tried to find out exactly whose guest Putana was. After a long and exhaustive search, a fact that came to light was, she was nobody's guest in the village. This revelation plunged everybody, especially Nanda, into deep anxiety.

After this incident, obviously, Nanda not only wanted to beef up my security but also sought the co-operation of the inhabitants of Gokula for this task. But alas! His predicament was, he could not reveal the truth about me to anyone in Gokula. Meaning, under no circumstances could he disclose the reasons why I needed to be safeguarded. And to add to his woes, he could not tell me anything either, as I was, after all, just a five-year-old child. All in all, shadowed by all these problems, Nanda remained a little disturbed these days but fortunately, he was not the kind who would remain worried for long. He knew the art of freeing himself from all his worries and leaving them to Nature's justice.

Well, this was about the situation in Gokula. On the other hand, in Mathura, the news of the killing of Putana had created a sensation. While this came as good news for the common people of Mathura, Kansa was badly rattled upon hearing about the incident. And the peculiar characteristic of distant events is, they tend to appear far more frightening and much more exaggerated than they are in reality. On top of it, when Narada's words that he will be "an extremely powerful child" echoed in his ears, his mind perceived it as even more frightening.

As a result, Kansa was completely unnerved at the news of Putana's death. Indeed, to him it appeared as if Putana, who had killed more than ten children in one go, was now killed singlehandedly by a child, Krishna! Thinking repeatedly thus, Kansa had now slipped into a state of constant fear. And as his fear grew deeper, he became increasingly depraved as well. The proverb, "The fear of the devil is far greater than the devil himself" exactly described Kansa's mental state at present. Seeing all his pawns—first Trinavarta and now Putana—being killed one after the other, Kansa's suspicion was fast turning into a deep-rooted conviction that I was indeed Devaki's eighth child. Interestingly, this growing conviction not only magnified his fear a thousand-fold but it also intensified the mental instability that was tightening its tentacles around him. In short, now it was not only Nanda's household, but even the royal household which lived under the shadow of an unknown terror. And the best part was, I was the one behind all this drama, yet I was entirely oblivious of it! Nevertheless, an atmosphere of cold war had begun to ensue between Mathura and Gokula, just because of me.

Under these circumstances, Kansa's condition had turned really ludicrous. On one hand, he felt alarmed by the knowledge that his nemesis was alive, and on the other, he was furious at the treachery of the royal palace. Really! Putana's death had left him terribly perturbed or rather utterly dismayed. He just could not understand what conclusion to derive from Putana's death, and how to deal with it. When he was at his wits' end, he thought, 'Why not interrogate and provoke Vasudeva; maybe he will inadvertently reveal something.' With this thought, he immediately summoned Vasudeva. As soon as Vasudeva stepped in, Kansa launched a frontal attack on him, "I have heard that Nanda's son in Gokula, Krishna, is truly exceptional. For his age, he has emerged to be really very powerful."

Hearing this question, Vasudeva felt the ground slip away from beneath his feet. Kansa's sudden questioning about me, terrified him and made him extremely jittery. What could he say? Still, he had no option, but to reply; so, Vasudeva

somehow composed himself and answered, “Yes, even I have heard something similar.”

Annoyed by his answer, Kansa replied, “Heard? Why? Do you not visit Nanda’s house anymore?”

Sensing Kansa’s foul mood, Vasudeva became even more flustered; and Kansa too did not fail to notice Vasudeva’s extreme nervousness. But he was crafty enough not to let this fact be revealed to Vasudeva. Both of them were silent for a while. Then with an intention to bewilder Vasudeva, Kansa said, “Ah yes! I just remembered. If Devaki’s eighth child had been alive he would have been of the same age as Krishna, right?” On hearing this, Vasudeva’s face lost its colour; he was so frightened that he could only nod his head in affirmation. Now was there anything left to be understood? Kansa ended the conversation there and Vasudeva left, but only after turning Kansa’s suspicion into conviction and also implicating himself in an act of treason.

Naturally, Kansa's blood began to boil. Along with Vasudeva’s treason, he was also enraged at the treachery of the royal staff. But, though he was so furious, he knew that this was not the time to dwell on this matter or investigate further, for it could prove dangerous to his own throne. It was in his interest to remain silent for now; hence, he quietly swallowed his anger. Nevertheless, a definite change came over Kansa after this incident; he now began to view everyone in the royal palace with dark suspicion. And when there is no trust, there can be no companion too. Hence, due to loneliness, his insanity only grew with each passing day.

As for the anxious Vasudeva, right after this interrogation by Kansa, he hastened to Gokula. Undoubtedly, it was his worry for my safety that had compelled him to rush to Gokula. When Vasudeva narrated the exchange he had had with Kansa to Nanda, naturally, Nanda also became anxious. Vasudeva tried to convince him in no uncertain terms that Kansa, whose suspicions about Krishna were now confirmed, was not the kind to sit quietly; he would now surely launch a murderous attack on Krishna. Upon hearing this, Nanda, as was his nature, resignedly agreed with Vasudeva and said, "What you are saying is true, that is what I think too; but under the circumstances what we can do?"

Nanda’s helpless reply enraged Vasudeva, and in great anger, he retorted, “If nothing else, we can at least be cautious! And if the need arises, you can even confront the threat with the support of the people of Gokula.”

On hearing this, Nanda became a little more proactive and spoke like a wise man, “All that is fine, but our problem is, we cannot even let anyone know that Krishna is Devaki’s eighth child and that Kansa is after his life.”

Vasudeva, who was even more irritated on hearing this, spoke brusquely, “But you can at least convene a meeting of the people of Gokula and inform them that strangers pose a threat to the children of the village. They can at least be requested to be on guard and take all the necessary proactive measures to safeguard children against strangers. In my opinion, right after I leave, you should convene this meeting and alert them. Along with, you should also instruct them clearly that if they see any strange and suspicious person in Gokula or its vicinity, they should get together and kill him immediately.”

In view of the gravity of the situation, Nanda readily agreed. He assured Vasudeva that he would immediately convene a meeting and instruct and warn everybody on this matter. While they were still discussing this matter, I who was engrossed in playing, happened to reach there. Looking at me, Vasudeva’s eyes lit up. Before I could comprehend what was going on, Nanda lifted me onto his lap and asked, “Do you know who this is?” Vasudeva had visited Gokula a number of times before, but I had never been formally introduced to him. Therefore, I did not know what to say, so I remained silent; if I had recognised him, would I not have said so? Seeing me sit quietly, Nanda laughed and said, “This is your real father, Vasudeva; we are merely bringing you up.”

I could not understand what Nanda meant, but from Vasudeva’s facial expressions, I could discern that he was not pleased with this ill-timed and foolish remark by Nanda. Clearly, Vasudeva did not think it wise to reveal this secret at this time. Anyway, I went back to my playing, and Vasudeva left for Mathura. Thus, this formal meeting between a father and his son was soon concluded.

So far, so good; but after this, what Nanda did was just incredible! He thought now that the secret was out, why hide it from Yashoda? So, that very day, father revealed the secret of my birth to mother Yashoda as well. Perhaps, he was committing one blunder after another under duress. Yashoda was no less remarkable either, for instead of being unhappy with this revelation, she was even more delighted! She did not express any sorrow at the death of her own offspring. She had already showered all her motherly affection upon me, leaving nothing in store for anyone else; so she had nothing to be sorrowful about. What was even more astonishing was, after she came to know the truth, she found me

even more lovable. Now as far as life is concerned, I cannot say anything with certainty, but yes, as far as having a mother was concerned, I was certainly very fortunate.

Stressed and troubled by all these incidents, the very next day, father convened a meeting in Gokula. Addressing the meeting, he said in no uncertain terms, "As it is evident, the safety of our children is being endangered by strangers. Hence, I have convened this meeting to instruct you all that from now on, if any suspicious person is seen in or around Gokula, then you should all get together, and kill him without any hesitation."

The people of Gokula, who were already frightened after life-threatening attempts made by Putana and Trinavarta to kill me, readily agreed to this proposal. Taking a formal vow, they all resolved to do all that was necessary for the safety of the children of Gokula. Indeed, the children were just an excuse; in fact, it was I who had to be protected. In other words, it could be said that I was the cause of the turmoil brewing in Gokula and Mathura. In a way, since the past fifteen years, I alone was the epicentre of activities in the royal palace at Mathura.

However, leaving all these matters aside, if I talk about myself, then I had become quite depressed since the past few days. Although I had not been able to grasp what Nanda had said about Vasudeva, for some reason his words had made a deep impression on my mind and I found myself constantly meditating upon their import. Perhaps, this was the main reason for my despondency. One night, those words bore down heavily upon my heart. Vasudeva's face continued to flash before my eyes again and again. For no evident reason, I was embroiled in a senseless mental turmoil. Despite a lot of effort, I was not being able to sleep that night, but what could I do? Nanda's words and Vasudeva's face were just not leaving me in peace. The night was racing by but sleep was still eluding me.

Suddenly, I felt as if a bolt of lightning was tearing through my body. My entire body had begun to burn; my mind was frozen. It could be said that I had almost become unconscious. Just then, all of a sudden, I began recalling my previous life. The first thing I remembered was the resolve to be victorious at all costs, which I had made at the time of my death. Then Kansa's cruelty, the killing of my brothers, Devaki's suffering visage and Vasudeva, all flooded back to my mind one after another. Remembering all this, my self-confidence surged forth. I was once again becoming as resolute as before.

My analytical mind had also jolted back into action. Wonderfully, all of a

sudden, I was feeling the presence of all the qualities which I had acquired before birth. A person involuntarily gains the results of the good and bad karma or actions of his previous lives as a good and bad state of the mind. He obtains the results of his good karma in the form of self-confidence, vision, foresight, love, concentration, enthusiasm and other such positive qualities that can nurture and enhance his life. Similarly, as a result of bad karma, he is saddled with negative traits such as worry, fear, anger, greed, envy, violence and other such destructive qualities that ruin a person's life. And needless to say, these indeed are the qualities which lay the foundation of a person's present life. If you remember, this is precisely what I had explained to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. "In this life, a person involuntarily obtains the treasure of his past deeds and then, he performs the activities in accordance with those deeds and progresses in his new life."¹⁵

Just see, even I had involuntarily obtained the fruits of good karma performed in my previous life in the form of a firm resolve, self-confidence and an analytical mind. Yet, how can I forget how great was Narada's contribution in all this? The effects that I was experiencing now were nothing but the outcome of my suffering during those ten years, when I had endured the stress of the killing of my siblings. Otherwise, the only wealth I possessed in my previous life was a 'resolve'. And with this chain of thoughts, I was gradually returning to peace. But, sleep was still eluding me; it only came much later when I had become completely peaceful. Needless to mention, the next day I slept in for a very long time.

Even though I woke up late the next day, I woke up with a wave of transformation coursing through my veins. Nothing had changed in Gokula—at any rate, what could have changed in Gokula in a day—but personally I had undergone a thorough transformation. On the face of it, everything was just the same; but for me everything appeared new; everything seemed to have changed. I was now seeing my house, the veranda, the streets of Gokula and everything around with a new perspective. Now, my respect for Yashoda and Nanda had also increased manifold. Why only this? Immediately after waking up, as my analytical mind became active, I began to scrutinise and analyse my life up till now. My life was something very unusual; I was born under the shadow of death and was still living under its looming shadow. I am sure that no other child of my age would have seen death so close and so often. But of course, it would be wrong to say that this was all that was there to my life. There was yet another facet to it and that was my wonderful childhood. At this very young age, I had

won the love of all of Gokula and that too, in abundance. Apart from this, I played all day long and indulged in mischief with abandon; what was it that I did not have in my childhood? Also, was the companionship of my dear gopas and gopis any less significant? And on top of it, I also had the world's most wonderful mother. What did I not have in my life?

To put it in a nutshell, on one side there was this magnificently wonderful childhood and on the other, was the constant hovering of the shadow of death. And between these two paradoxical facets of my life, my personality was burgeoning. Similarly, if I were to analyse my two fathers, then Vasudeva believed in action, in performing one's duties with utmost diligence, while in contrast to this, Nanda believed in letting Nature and its laws take their own course. In other words, striking a proper balance between these two radically opposite qualities, my mind was developing swiftly. And most significantly, all the remarkable effects which these diverse traits could have had on me had already taken place at this tender age itself.

On one hand, I had learnt to perform my 'karma' or actions from Vasudeva; on the other, Nanda had taught me to leave the anxiety about the fruits of my Karma i.e. actions to Nature. This was the reason, whether it was my acting stubborn with mother, or harassing the gopis, I had always performed my actions with utmost diligence. I can say that I had always put my heart and soul into my actions, and as far as the fruits of labour were concerned, what option does a man have other than to face and accept the resultant fruits of his deeds? Indeed, I had learnt such a wonderful secret of life in childhood itself. You might recall that in the Gita, the most beautiful shloka or verse, I had recited to Arjuna for becoming successful in life was, 'Do your karma¹⁶ but do not worry about its fruits'¹⁷ i.e. perform your actions wholeheartedly with utmost diligence, without worrying for its results. In this respect, I can say that I had acquired the 'supreme wisdom' of my life in childhood itself.

Now that I have broached the topic of supremacy, let me reveal something more to you. As I hailed from a prominent family, I naturally received the affection of the entire village. It is quite possible that in the beginning I was showered with all this love in an effort to appease the most influential and affluent figure of the village; as people generally find children from richer households to be more attractive and intelligent than the rest. But, without a doubt, gradually, I had become the darling of everyone's heart, solely because of my beautiful face, my enchanting eyes and of course, my endearing, mischievous nature. And let us not

forget the allure of my dancing and lisping. Over and above that, the incidents of the falling of the cart and the death of Putana had very easily earned me the title of being an 'exceptional and extraordinary child'. Admittedly, I had not played any active part in these two incidents which had made me special, but still, the truth was, it was because of these very incidents that I had become popular as an unusual child. As they say, if you have some good qualities, then you will inevitably find Nature lending you the requisite support.

All in all, what I mean to say is, with growing age, there was an all-round development of my personality. And naturally, the sudden development of mind that I had experienced was compelling me to do something big in life. Or should I say that I wanted to do something even more extraordinary, just to impress the people of Gokula with my exceptional capabilities and inner development. In short, although I was a child, now I was not ready to accept myself as a child at all. Thus, I wanted to do something new, something significant and phenomenal. But my problem was, how? Meaning, these days, my predicament was, even though I wanted to prove myself under any circumstances, how would I do it in Gokula? After all, was it easy to think of and do something phenomenal in a small village like Gokula?

And, this was where the trouble began. Because lost in these thoughts, I was no longer happy being at home, and on the other hand, I had lost interest in many of my previous activities. Besides, how much could one wander outside all alone? But the problem was not as grave as you think. To while away time, I still played my old favourite game; that is to say, I continued to barge into the houses of gopis, to steal and polish off their stock of curd and butter. But the difference was, this routine did not have the same old charm anymore. For, with my growing strength and power, how could I be satiated with this small victory? In other words, I could not see my restlessness abating until I did something new and great. But do what? When I could not think of anything new for several days, I thought why not take the old game to the next level? Why not harass the gopis even more? But the question was, how could they be further harassed? There was only one way I could do that, and that was to devour all their laboriously made butter and curd. But I could not possibly eat the curd and butter of the entire Gokula all by myself! As it is, I was already eating much more than I could manage. So eventually, I found a solution to this problem as well. I began to feed the butter to the monkeys.¹⁸ This went on from one monkey to another, then onto the third, and soon, all the monkeys of Gokula began developing a taste for butter.

Gradually, this game gained such momentum that under my able leadership, all the gopis of Gokula began to be systematically terrorised by my monkey brigade. Truly, the monkeys of Gokula appeared to be the most fortunate among their ilk to get nothing less than butter to eat. And that was not all; in addition, they were also getting the opportunity to harass the adorable gopis. Indeed, the monkeys were having such a good time, that all of them were implicitly dancing to my tune. In short, instead of becoming the leader of the gopas, I had managed to become the leader of the monkeys! However, to tell you the truth, after staying in the company of monkeys all day, I had realised that as far as mischief making was concerned, they were far ahead of me. They invariably guzzled off the entire stock of butter of Gokula in a matter of hours. On top of it, the terrible mess that they would create in the houses had to be seen to be believed. I was thoroughly enjoying my time frolicking with these monkeys. I had become so friendly with them that it almost seemed as if I was one among them!

While I was enjoying myself; my new game had rendered the gopis completely defenceless and helpless. For, after the formation of my monkey brigade, there was practically no point in tying the butter pots high off the ground. The gopis were now exasperated because they did not know what to do, what countermeasures to take. The best the poor things could do was to try and reason out with me, which they constantly did, but without much success. Their main hitch was, they could not even complain to mother anymore. For they had dared to do this once and they were suffering its consequences to this day!

In other words, the gopis of Gokula had collectively surrendered to me. All of them were forced to hang their heads in defeat in front of one boy! Well, they had no other option; after all, for how long could they hold out against the leader of the monkeys? To tell you the truth, on seeing them so helpless, my enthusiasm soared; my infantile ego began bloating even more. As a result, I assiduously began searching for new ways to harass the life out of the gopis. Additionally, the most formidable aspect of my association with the monkeys was, since we were in close proximity to each other for several days, we had developed a very good rapport. Now all that they needed was just a signal from me and they would instantly be at my command. And taking advantage of this, I found a new way to trouble the gopis; I taught the monkeys to snatch their food plates when they sat down to eat and escape into the trees. The monkeys were thoroughly enjoying themselves; after all, where else could they get such delicious food? On the other hand, where else could even I find the satisfaction of seeing my army enjoying such sumptuous meals? And the most amazing part was, in spite of our

relatively new association, the monkeys understood my cues far better than my cowherd friends!

In short, this new game of mine wreaked havoc on the gopis. It is indeed difficult to describe the fun that I was having on seeing them run helter-skelter out of sheer helplessness! The gopis were so terrorised by us that whenever I ran into them, they would greet me with folded hands. This greeting was reflective of their despair, as if they were pleading, “Kanhaiya, please spare us now!” Finally, I could say, my desire to do something monumental was fulfilled.

'O silly gopis! For long, I have been trying to explain this simple fact to you, that I am no longer a child and not an ordinary one for sure; so you must surrender to me. But no, you did not pay heed to me. Very well then, now bear the consequences!' And bear they did, for over time, the terror that we had unleashed reached such heights that the gopis stopped making butter altogether. Well, this was not a good news for us; for they had nipped the fun in the bud itself; now how was I to enjoy myself? But then I thought, 'So what? Should I forsake the joy of harassing the gopis? No way!' I just had to trouble the gopis. There was no question of relenting or sparing them, especially after this effrontery of theirs. I once again began to think of novel ways to harass them. And as the saying goes, where there is a will there is a way. So now, I began to untie the ropes that bound their calves. As soon as their ropes came loose, the calves would begin to run hither and thither and the gopis would be compelled to chase them, which they did, but not without flinging curses at me. With great difficulty they would catch the calves and bring them home, and in the meanwhile, my monkey brigade and I would clean out the remaining curd and buttermilk in their homes! If there was no butter, then curd would serve the purpose; the objective after all, was to trouble these women. What kind of a life I had made for myself! When I think back, I just burst into laughter. I had no other activity of my liking; so I had made it my mission to harass the gopis.

But now, the gopis had lost their patience. My mischief had driven them to the edge, especially in consideration of the fact that running after the calves and catching them was not an easy task for women. Many a times, the gopis would get hurt and at times some would even start weeping. So much so, that I myself often caught the tail of the calf and ran after it and many a time, I too got dragged along in this effort and got wounded in the process! Besides, my clothes would also get soaked in mud and poor mother would get exhausted while washing my clothes. In other words, even though the gopis no longer came complaining to mother, Yashoda still had to bear the brunt of my increasing

pranks. And this resulted in her venting out her frustration on me, in the form of anger. But, who really cared?

Now, whether I cared or not, it was clear that my increasing mischief had gone beyond the tolerance level of the gopis. Quite evidently, they were fed up now. So, in short, now mother was frustrated and the gopis were helpless. If there was anyone who was happy, it was only Kanhaiya. But as they say, two parties who are aggrieved are bound to meet and make a pact eventually. And that was exactly what happened; when the pain crossed its threshold of tolerance, the wicked gopis broke their vow and once again resorted to complaining about me. Another round of complaining by the gopis added fuel to my mother's burning rage; and her rage turned into fury. So what! This had given me the privilege of getting thrashed by mother at least once a week. Gradually, mother's scolding, tying me with ropes, or beating me up when she was really angry, was all becoming a routine affair in my life as well as hers. Nevertheless, the truth was, mother was really exhausted now. On one hand, she had grown old and on the other, I had grown to become big and strong. And that being the case, for how long could her thrashing or tying me up with ropes last? In fact, she too had been rendered absolutely helpless, just like the gopis. It seemed, by slapping me a couple of times, she was only consoling herself for not being able to control me or vent out her anger in its entirety. At any rate, what else could be expected when one helpless party was entreating another to deal with me?

Finally, when she could not find a solution, Yashoda resorted to complaining to Nanda about my conduct. Now who was to explain to mother that she had knocked on the door of a third helpless party? Nanda, who had reposed his trust and faith in Nature alone while accepting me, heard her out, but as was his wont, instead of exhausting his brains by arguing with me, he thought it wise to leave the matter to Nature. And anyway, this was a matter between mother and son; why would father interfere in it?

Thus, the last weapon of the gopis and my mother also proved ineffective against me. And with this, I, who had been born in a dungeon, got liberated from every kind of confinement in life. The gopis were helpless, mother was at her wits' end and father was defeated. Meaning, now there was no one to scold or stop me; and this was exactly what I wanted. I do not know why mother and the gopis could not understand the simple fact that I had grown up now; and grown so big that it was useless to match wits with me. Going hither and thither complaining about me was certainly not a solution to this problem; there was absolutely no other way out of this quandary other than to surrender to me. Well, they were

unable to grasp such a simple fact, and that is precisely why they were suffering!

- End of CHAPTER 2 -

CHAPTER 3

The Terror Spread by Wolves in Gokula

Time was flitting by at its own pace, and with time, I was also growing up rapidly. Needless to say, with my growing age, my mischief was also on the rise and so was my eagerness to enjoy the festivals and celebrations, and then, was there a dearth of celebrations in Gokula? Speaking of festivals, the Hindola¹⁹ festival was celebrated every year with great fanfare in Gokula. This year too, the preparations for its celebration were on in full swing well in advance. As I had grown to love festivals, my heart brimmed over with joy on just hearing about the preparations for the celebrations, so much so, that now I had even begun to proactively participate in all such preparations.

Well, this was about me and my dear Gokula. In Mathura, Kansa's state of mind was deteriorating with each passing day. His biggest problem was, he could not share his anxiety with anyone; for how could he discuss matters pertaining to me with anyone, irrespective of however much he desired? And it is an indisputable fact that anxiety decreases when it is shared with others and conversely, it builds up and takes on a frightening form, if bottled up within. This was precisely what was happening with Kansa too! Having to deal with his anxiety all by himself, his thinking was getting distorted, which in turn, was leading him to become mentally unstable with each passing day.

With the entire palace under the shadow of suspicion, obviously, he could not freely speak of his fears to anyone. For, if his fears were to be publicly known, it would have caused an uproar amongst the people in case of my death. It was also possible that if it had become known that Devaki's eighth child was still alive, my security would be beefed up or that many more people would have come forward to show solidarity with me and offer me protection. It was also possible that some people would step to the fore to help me, for I still had the strength of Narada's predictions to back me up. In short, Kansa had to kill me somehow, and yet, he had to keep it to himself, and not let the secrecy of the matter be compromised. Even though he could not afford to share his anxiety with anyone, it was still necessary for him to talk to someone to unburden his mind. So, a warped Kansa began talking to the palace walls, perhaps thinking that at least the walls did not have ears. "Could he really be Devaki's eighth child? If this were

true, then who all could be party to this conspiracy? Where in my own royal palace are these enemies of mine hiding?” But do stones ever talk? On the contrary, because of his repeated conversations with the stones, Kansa’s mind was gradually metamorphosing into a stone. His mental condition had deteriorated to such an extent that he kept drivelling all night in his sleep, “Is he really the same child? Has he really escaped alive? If this is the case, then he should be eliminated as soon as possible. But how?” This question of how to kill me, was the subject of his constant worry. Of course, at that time, I was oblivious to all these matters but now I can certainly say with pride that even at that tender age, I had grown to become so important that our King was constantly meditating upon me day and night!

In the midst of such restlessness, late one night, Kansa was pacing up and down in his chambers, when he suddenly remembered the Hindola festival that was celebrated by us, the cowherds on the Govardhana hill every year. And as soon as he thought of the festival, he remembered Shatak. He was the fastest runner in Mathura; his speciality was that he could even outrun a chariot. That was it! The very next day, Kansa summoned Shatak to the palace. When he arrived, Kansa instructed him, “Reach Gokula on the day of the Hindola festival, get hold of Nanda’s son Krishna and bring him to Mathura.” As Shatak was an obedient servant of Kansa, he readily agreed to do his bidding and immediately left for Gokula.

Oblivious to Kansa’s malicious intentions or the arrival of Shatak, the entire Gokula was enthusiastically engaged in the preparations for the forthcoming festival. Surprisingly, I, the one over whose head the shadow of death was hovering, was the most enthusiastic of them all. Amongst all this frenzy, the day of the festival finally arrived. Dressed in their finest attires, all the inhabitants of Gokula were out of their homes long before dawn. The gaily dressed swinging and dancing gopis, accompanied by the drum-beating gopas created a thrilling, festive atmosphere right in the bylanes of Gokula. By dawn, half of the village had gathered at the village square. Since early morning, I too was yearning to reach there and join in the festivities but what could I do? I was still being dressed and adorned! Mother was sitting right in the veranda and dressing and decking me up. To tell you the truth, the yellow silk garments my mother had adorned me with today were looking fabulous on me, and as if this was not enough, she had covered me from head to toe with beautiful ornaments too.

Needless to say, I was extremely excited on seeing the gopas and gopis scurrying past my house. And to add to my excitement, everybody who passed by called

out to me inviting me to join them. In that case, for how long could I be patient? As I was anyway raring to go and join them; now I was fed up of my adornment by mother. For how long did I have to sit in the veranda watching the dancing, cavorting gopas and gopis pass by? If mother had her way, she would have sat here happily for hours just dressing and adorning me. Truly, I seemed to have become a living toy for her! Finally, my patience ran out. At any rate, I was a big boy now, for how long could I be her plaything? Without waiting for her to complete dressing me up, I wrenched myself free from her and joined a group of gopis; skipping and dancing with them, I reached the ground.

By then, almost the entire village appeared to have gathered at the village square. It was amazing to see the fervour and enthusiasm in the atmosphere. The singing and dancing had started long back. Meaning, I alone had arrived quite late. It did not matter; within no time, even I was engrossed in it, enthusiastically dancing with the gopas and gopis, completely oblivious of the impending shadow of death. No sooner had Nanda and the other elders arrived than everybody together set out for our journey to Govardhana, since the Hindola festival was held at the Govardhana Hill every year. Of course, we had ensured that we had an adequate stock of essential food items for all of us.

Our first halt was on the banks of the river Yamuna; everyone had some snacks and drank water. The elderly managed to take some rest, and we, the younger children, grabbed the opportunity to play for a while. Bhaiya and I were so full of energy and enthusiasm that we were walking right up ahead with the older gopas. Not really walking—that was what the gopas were doing—we, in fact, were just jogging along to keep up with them. Seeing us running, a few other children of our age had also joined us.

Bhaiya and I were rapidly climbing the Govardhana, matching our pace with the gopas; so you can imagine how excited we were. Yes, the gopis were climbing slowly and so were the older people. In any case, we were not waiting for them. Thoroughly enjoying the journey, dancing and prancing along, we reached Govardhana well before afternoon. Our gopa brothers had already climbed the Govardhana; that is to say, our playing and frolicking had soon begun. Within a short while, the gopis also reached the top of the hill along with the elders. And as soon as the gopis arrived, the dance programme began. As our programme commenced, the elders fanned out in search of trees so that they could rest in the shade. That was understandable; after all, it was essential for them to relieve some of their fatigue while we were still engrossed in our singing and dancing.

It was good that our playing and dancing was going on in the centre of the circle created by the resting elders. Thus, they too felt included in the festivities and were getting entertained in the bargain. By afternoon, even we were tired; after all, we had walked all the way up to Govardhana, and on top of that, we had been playing and dancing all along. Now that our stomachs were growling with hunger, we decided to take a break and during this time, everyone ate to their heart's content. But then, having eaten too much, we all began to feel much more exhausted and lethargic than we had anticipated. All our enthusiasm was dampened; so, after lunch, everybody took a short nap.

On waking up, we realised that it was time to head back home. Obviously, we had to return to the village before it was dusk. I was disheartened! This was not fair. The festival was over even before it had begun! I had not even played to my heart's content. But then, do ever-enthusiastic children like us ever have enough of playing?

We were just descending from Govardhana when some gopas spotted a tall, well-built stranger standing behind a tree, spying on us. He aroused their suspicion and they quickly shouted out a warning to everybody. At this, Nanda became alert and rushed ahead to where bhaiya and I were walking. He immediately instructed the gopas to surround both of us and proceed with extreme caution. The gopas expeditiously obeyed his command and now everybody was walking close to us. Of course, the current situation was beyond my comprehension; as all I could understand was, some precautions were being taken. But then, caution is necessary when one confronts danger!...however, no apparent threat was visible here. Meaning, though I could vaguely understand what was going on, my intelligence was not yet evolved enough to be able to recognise the lurking danger.

Hidden behind a tree, Shatak was watching the sudden spurt in activity around us. Seeing that everybody had closed ranks and were now walking together, naturally his agitation increased. Moreover, when he saw that bhaiya and I were cordoned by people, it was but natural for his perplexity to grow. We were now descending Govardhana hill slowly and with extreme caution, and needless to say, Shatak too was stealthily following us downhill. For him, the problem was that I, his target, was surrounded from all sides. He was puzzled about how to break the human barricade and grab hold of me. It was also true that if he managed to get his hands on me, then he would surely carry me on his shoulder and run straight to Mathura; it would then be impossible to stop him or catch him. Meaning, then he would certainly throw me at Kansa's feet.

However, now it was not going to be easy for him to accomplish his mission. The poor fellow had perhaps not expected such alertness from the people of Gokula. Certainly, Vasudeva and Nanda's cautious nature had made even this seemingly easy task, difficult for him to execute. But it was Kansa's command, so he had to try his best to accomplish his mission. After all, was he not an obedient servant of Kansa? Thus, a strange cat and mouse game was set into motion. We were proceeding with extreme caution and Shatak was stealthily following us, waiting for the slightest of opportunity. Carrying on in this manner, we had almost reached the bottom of Govardhana Hill. Expectedly, the further we descended, the more restless Shatak became. After all, for how long could he wait? We were almost near the bottom of the hill and just a short distance away from the village. Now, for Shatak, it no longer mattered whether he would get the opportunity to grab me or not; since it was a do-or-die situation, he decided to take his chance and let courage do the trick. Losing his patience, he rushed from behind and barged into the crowd with incredible strength.

The sheer force of his attack sent many people crashing to the ground. Shatak had pounced upon us like an eagle darting towards its prey. He not only seemed to be incredibly agile but quite strong and powerful too. Seeing him tearing into the crowd, all the gopas pounced on him, yet amazingly, he single-handedly managed to fight them all back. Fortunately, Nanda showed great presence of mind and immediately separated us, the children, from the group, and sent us racing ahead along with a group of elders and gopis. This immediately had two positive effects; firstly, we were gradually moving farther away from Shatak's reach and secondly, it freed the people protecting us who then pounced on him. Now, Shatak may have been extremely strong but the fact was, he was all alone; for how long could he fight such a large and angry crowd? He soon fell to the ground. And as soon as he fell, everyone climbed onto him and started kicking, punching and hitting him with big rocks. In no time, Shatak was sent to death.

Seeing him dead, Nanda obviously breathed a huge sigh of relief and of course, the gopas celebrated too; but this bizarre attack ruined the festive mood. Not only this, this incident sent the whole of Gokula in a state of shock for several days. For some days, even my gopa friends did not come out much to play. Even I had become aware that something untoward had occurred.

Well, with time, this incident became a thing of the past. However, I was now at that awkward age where I was still too young to venture out with the gopas to take the cows for grazing, and too old to run around breaking the pots of the gopis. Now, the only people left to play with, were cowherd boys of my age; but

I had stopped enjoying their company long ago. Playing with Subhadra did not particularly interest me anymore. So the only one left now was bhaiya; but he used to be engaged in mischief-making all day and those pranks of his were truly beyond me.

In short, I had become lonely in every possible way. Consequently, I found an entirely new game for myself. Suddenly, I started talking to myself. In a way, you could say, I was spending time in introspection. As it is, I had grown far more intelligent for my age; so, at this time I really enjoyed this game. And, ever since the strength of resolve and determination had kindled in me, my self-confidence had continued to soar higher and higher. By now, my analytical mind had begun to observe and understand everything very carefully. When my mind refused to be occupied with anything else, I engaged it in observing and understanding the things happening around me. Propelled by this new-found hobby of mine, I began to closely reflect on mother and father in the ample time that I had at my disposal these days.

I had been living with my foster parents for six years, but now they appeared much more extraordinary than before. Both of them possessed the quality of simplicity; especially, mother was truly an embodiment of love. Surely, only parents of their kind could have sacrificed their own daughter for my sake. To tell you the truth, for the first time, I had now observed bhaiya also a little more carefully. Though he was just two years older than me, he had grown very tall and was physically much stronger than me. His nature was also quite different from mine. He did not like to speak much...and lying...that was something he was simply incapable of. He could never lie! Moreover, neither did he have any interest in dance or music, nor did he get along with the gopis. He was just interested in playing pranks and displaying his incredible strength. Contrary to this, I, who was fond of talking, could lie very naturally! Besides, I got along famously with the gopis, and also loved to sing and dance! Unlike bhaiya, I preferred using my intelligence rather than my physical strength. Surprisingly, in spite of these differences, both of us shared a terrific rapport with each other. We always looked after each other and the bond of love we shared was just exemplary.

Further, during these days of leisure, I also paid a close attention to my own looks. Black, long, curly hair reaching up to the shoulders, a peacock feather tucked in the hair, dark complexion, round face, a garland of jungle flowers hanging around the neck...I was so attractive that I was often captivated by my own looks! To tell you the truth, whenever I looked at myself closely, I just fell

in love with myself. Yes! If there was one aspect of my looks that did not appeal much to me, it was my dark complexion. Many a time I would even ask mother, “Mother, when all the gopis are so fair, why am I so dark? Why do you not make me fair too?” Hearing such an endearing wish of mine, mother would simply smile at my innocence. And if I pestered her too much, she would laugh and say, “It is your dark complexion that makes you look so attractive.”

At any rate, attractiveness was one of the important aspects of my personality, but it was not the be all and end all of my existence. Life was much beyond all this and I needed much more in life, and that included long hours of playing as well. But no one could play all day long by oneself. And to top it, nothing in particular interested me anymore; neither did I want to play with my fellow gopa friends nor did I enjoy troubling the gopis anymore. But then, for how many days could life continue in this manner? My mind needed some activity to remain engaged; so, I, along with bhaiya, began to play with the gopas older than me. This group of cavorting boys was in the age group of ten to fifteen years. It can be said that when I could not think of anything else, I took a leap that was far too big for my age. However, this too yielded an immediate positive result; for, with this quantum leap, I began to feel a huge change come over me. Normally, I was a very observant sort, and now, even while at play, I had begun to make a mental note of everything around me. Meaning, in a way, my analytical mind was now active round the clock. Gradually, it was becoming my nature to analyse anything and everything that I saw or observed, whether it was an object, event or incident.

In short, it could be said that my analytical mind was functioning beyond all the normal parameters of being active. So much so, that it even began to try to dissect the lifestyle of the people of Gokula, their daily routine, their way of living, their means of livelihood - everything. I now began to keenly observe the daily activities of the village elders and the gopas and gopis. And after this continuous observation, I drew a few conclusions regarding Gokula and the life of its inhabitants. This analysis, carried out at such a young age, was certainly praiseworthy. Indeed, the conclusions arrived at were good enough to make anyone feel proud of himself.

If I share the details of my analysis with you, which I had carried out at such a tender age, even you will be left astounded. For instance, I had found that in all, there were about fifty cowherd families in Gokula and the population was well below a thousand. The village was entirely dependent on the royal palace or in other words, it was living entirely at Kansa’s mercy. Nanda, the village headman,

was given cows and buffaloes to be tended from the royal palace, which meant that only Nanda had direct contact with the royal palace. And he, in turn, further divided these cows and buffaloes for tending amongst the families living in Gokula. Owing to this, the young gopas spent all day taking the cows out for grazing. They not only had to feed, provide water and bathe them but they were also responsible for their health and well-being. In addition to this, they were also responsible for gathering the essential firewood, fruits and flowers from the forest for the entire village. In short, the gopas had to work round the clock throughout the year.

As for the gopis, they had to milk the cows, look after the calves, make curd and churn butter, collect cow dung, make its cakes and dry them. The butter and dried cow dung cakes were then taken to Mathura by the village elders and sold for a profit. Since Nanda was the village headman, it was naturally his responsibility to maintain the books of accounts, pay taxes and so on. Now the only ones left were the women; they remained busy all day long in cleaning their houses and preparing the meals. Nurturing and raising the children was also solely their responsibility. In short, Gokula – the entire village led a very hard life. Everybody here was busy doing their duties round the clock, which rarely allowed them a few moments of relaxation.

On the other hand, we, the younger gopas and gopis were busy playing all day; meaning, we had no task or duty to be performed. Thus, in a way it was only we who really had a life full of enjoyment; the rest of them were destined to just toil hard all day long. And the saddest part of this situation was, even after working so hard, neither did the people have any means of comfort nor did they have any financial stability in their lives. Forget comfortable living and financial stability, they could not even afford to have proper meals or good clothes! In fact, most of the inhabitants of Gokula longed for just a few moments of rest from their hard labour. As a source of joy and relaxation, all they had were the festivals that they celebrated. But what could be done? That was how it was! At this point of time, I was too young to bring about a change in the current circumstances. Still, for me, a matter of contentment was, even though I was very young, my analytical mind had succeeded in grasping and analysing the harsh realities of life in Gokula.

Soon, this analysis bore a positive outcome too. Even though I played all day with the gopas and gopis, in my mind, I was deeply concerned for the simple and hardworking people of Gokula; so much so, that you might find it hard to believe, but I even began to reflect upon the ways to improve the lives of these

people. Not only this, quite often, I even found myself immersed in pondering over their plight till late into the night. This constant meditation brought about two major changes in me; firstly, I stopped harassing my mother altogether and secondly, I drastically cut down troubling the gopis unnecessarily. More importantly, I completely stopped wasting their butter and breaking curd pots. Indeed, increasing mother's exhaustion by being needlessly naughty was wrong; especially considering her age, it was absolutely wrong!

Now that I had become so sagacious, I realised that if I did not worry about my mother then who would? On the other hand, I also understood the extent of hard labour the gopis were putting in and the high hopes they harboured while churning their butter - which I wasted so ruthlessly. I had not realised then that butter was the source of their livelihood; it was this butter that their entire families had pinned their hopes on. Upon analysing the living conditions in Gokula, I could now understand the severity of the pain and problems I had created for the gopis by wasting their butter and curd. It was so wrong on my part! But all that can be attributed to the playfulness of my age, just as the fact that I was able to understand all this was proof of my mature consciousness. If understood correctly, one would realise that even though my physical age was six-seven years, mentally I had grown as intelligent as an eighteen-year-old. Have you forgotten? My mind had become active and had begun to grow long before my physical birth when Narada had made the prophecy and warned Kansa that Devaki's eighth child would be his nemesis.

Now, while playing all day long with the gopas and gopis, I had realised that along with our fun and games, if we children helped everyone with their daily chores, then their exertion could be considerably reduced. While this would not result in the people of Gokula getting better food or nice clothes to wear, they could at least get some time to rest. And was this also any less of a relief? As it was, I had already given enough trouble to my mother and the gopis in my younger years, thanks to my immaturity! And by wasting butter and curd, I had made a big dent in Gokula's economy as well. But now that I had become sensible, was it not my duty to worry about their happiness and relaxation? If I had caused them pain, I had to provide them the cure too! From the moment this positive thought crossed my mind, day in and day out, I remained absorbed in thinking of ways to honour my duty. Meaning, though I was still engaged in playing, at the back of my mind there always remained an anxiousness to fulfil my duty to better their life.

One day, I do not know what struck me, but I gathered all the ten to fifteen-year-

old gopas, or you can say, I convened a meeting of young gopas; because my constant meditation had given me many creative ideas, one better than the other. Now I had the ideas but could I accomplish the task all alone? For that, we all needed to join hands and come together. Now, to call a meeting of all the older cowherd boys at such a young age, address them, acquaint them with one's views was no child's play; only Krishna could do this. Indeed, to pull this off, one requires great self-confidence and there I was brimming with it. Nevertheless, to tell you the truth, I was experiencing a little bit of nervousness before the meeting began. But you will not believe, even at this tender age of about seven years, not only did I address the older gopas, but also greatly impressed them with my speech.

Beginning my address, I said, "You must all be aware of the hard work put in by our family members and you must have also seen the resultant exhaustion endured by them. And if you have not, then just observe their daily activities for a few days, and soon you will understand. Certainly, in spite of numerous adverse situations and circumstances, our parents have brought us up well. Not only this, they have provided us with good food and clothes, far beyond their means. Meaning, they have fulfilled their duties commendably in every way. I do not know why but I feel that we are failing to perform our duty towards them. Therefore, in my opinion, we should persuade even the younger gopis to take care of the calves and help the elder gopis in making butter and other domestic chores. And as far as we, the younger gopas are concerned, we should help the older boys in taking the cows for grazing and collecting flowers, fruits and firewood from the forest. Thus, not only can we reduce their workload but overnight, we can also become the blue-eyed boys of the entire village. Over and above this, the pride which we will experience upon honouring our responsibilities would be an additional reward. It is also entirely possible that one day, our hard work may bear fruits, and in the future we might get better clothes to wear and better food to eat too. For, our lives are dependent on hard work and the theory of hard work says, 'the greater the efforts, the better the life would be'.

The point that I had put forward was like putting two and two together. The choice of words and the simplicity of language were such that even I could not help being impressed with myself. Besides, had I left any room for refusals or discussions? Soon, everybody happily agreed; not just agreed, they started jumping with joy on hearing the proposal. Hearing about doing 'work', everybody became so enthused that not only did they praise me but glorifying

me, they also began shouting slogans. In a way, everyone had accepted me as their leader. In other words, it can be said that this had paved the path for the advent of politics in my life. In my heart of hearts I was thrilled; I too could barely contain my excitement; even so, just see my astuteness at this young age! Externally, I remained absolutely normal, as if their praises had not had any effect on me. Was I not a smart fellow right from childhood?

However, the significant point was, it was I who had informed Nanda and the village elders of the decisions taken at this meeting. Yashoda too was given the responsibility of training the younger gopis. They all were doubtful about how useful we would actually prove to be; but still, everyone was pleased with the constructive idea we had proposed. After all, which parents in the world would not be happy upon hearing that their children were growing responsible? Not only the elders but the entire village was pleasantly surprised by our decision.

As for me, I was anyway their favourite child, but now this decision had made me the apple of everyone's eyes. Even the gopis were very happy, but the reason for their happiness was entirely different. To them, whether we helped or not, did not matter much; they were content that at least they would not be harassed now! Well, irrespective of the reason, they were at least happy! I had anyway taken up this new responsibility solely with the aim to make everyone happy, so it was good that the gopis were the first to experience this happiness.

Now, brimming with enthusiasm, bhaiya, gopas and I would leave early morning.²⁰ Moreover, we had taken it upon ourselves to bathe the cows and buffaloes in the river Yamuna while setting out, and again while returning. Many a time, we even had to go up the Govardhana Hill to graze the cows. Did you see how our lives had changed with just one decision? The very same Govardhana Hill, for the first sight of which I had to throw endless tantrums, had now become our regular haunt. Although we were engaged in greater tasks, we were still children; so whenever we found time in between our work, we made it a point to make it our playtime. Just because we had taken on a huge responsibility, did it mean that we had to deprive ourselves of the joys of childhood and stop being childlike?

Well, this 'work-cum-play' routine that I had introduced had had immediate and pleasant consequences as well. Flowers, fruit and firewood were gathered in far greater quantities than before. And the positive impact this had yielded on our lives could be clearly seen. All of us, gopa children were the happiest when we threw stones and picked fruits from the trees. This was a responsibility which we

had voluntarily taken upon our young shoulders. And now this new-found game in which we threw stones and dropped fruits turned out to be so enjoyable, that it far outclassed all the games that we had previously played. Truly! At such a young age, we had come to realise that the pleasure that can be derived from honouring one's responsibilities is much greater than that gained from ordinary games and mischief.

Even more pleasing was the fact that the new set of activities wherein we shared the responsibility had given rise to a feeling of self-importance in us and in our heart of hearts, we indeed felt very proud of ourselves. Such was our childish innocence that our walk now had a distinct swagger to it. Indeed, we felt as if we were carrying the responsibility of the entire Gokula on our young shoulders! On the other hand, adding to our glory, the attitude of the entire village towards us had also become very respectful. All said and done, this one decision of ours had made our childhood truly meaningful. And unbelievably, we were so enthusiastic that our children's team was the first to reach the village square every morning, all bathed, dressed and ready for work.

However, though I had taken up responsibilities, I had certainly not given up on my analysis. I still continued to analyse everything that I came across. After a few days of consistent analysis, I could discern that life in Gokula was completely dependent on its green cover and its flora and fauna. I could even take a note of the fact that all the trees around Gokula reaching up to the banks of the river Yamuna had dried up and were no longer bearing fruit. This was the reason why, for the past so many days, we were forced to take our cows all the way to Govardhana for grazing. Unfortunately, in spite of so much hard work, we were neither able to get good fruits for ourselves nor good fodder for our cattle. From all these observations, it was clear that Gokula, with its resources depleted, was no longer a fit place for our herdsmen's community.

Now after having successfully addressed a gathering, my zeal and conviction were at their peak. Perhaps, this was the reason why my mind remained absorbed in contemplating over newer ways to create an impression of my insightfulness on the people of my village. As per the empirical records, after about two to three decades, the cowherds were compelled to migrate from one place to another; because within this span of time, they exhausted the water and green cover of that region considerably. If you look at it from another perspective, this was the gravest compulsion and the harsh reality of the lives of herdsmen, which could not be ignored. Therefore, after considerable thought and reflection, I felt it was necessary for us to relocate from Gokula.

Though it was the need of the hour, the daunting question was - who would take this grave reflection and in-depth analysis of a small child seriously? With this thought in mind, I decided that it would be better to first experiment my in-depth analysis with the gopa children and acquaint them with it. Moreover, it was better to discuss the matter with them first and take them into confidence before approaching the elders. And expectedly, the gopa children did not pose any problem, they grasped my proposal immediately. As it was, I had now become their leader, so they had to acknowledge all that I said.

Encouraged by this, I requested Nanda to convene a meeting of the village elders along with the gopas, but Nanda could not comprehend the need for such a meeting. Nevertheless, he could not be blamed for this, as I had not explained to him the reason or objective of this meeting. Thus, for him to be taken aback by such a strange request was quite understandable. Truly speaking, I had intentionally avoided divulging the details to him because if it did not appeal to him, he could put an immediate full stop to this great idea. Howbeit, another positive development was, Nanda did not refuse point blank but rather began to contemplate on the advisability of calling such a meeting. And this is where the foundation of my victory was laid.

There were a couple of factors that made him consider my request. One, by engaging the younger boys and girls in productive work, I had already created an impression with my leadership abilities. Besides, which father would want to throw cold water on his son's enthusiasm? After duly considering the evident aspects of convening a meeting, Nanda finally agreed. Certainly, it was a big victory for me and I had become quite enthusiastic by this; for, Nanda's assent to call a meeting solely based on the trust he had in me, without even knowing the reason, was not a small victory by any means.

Self-confidence is a prerequisite for the successful accomplishment of a great task and I had no dearth of it. Expectedly, I was not able to sleep a wink on the night before the meeting; after all, it was for the very first time that I was going to put forward my views in front of the elders. And that too, not a trivial matter, but an issue that involved the permanent migration from Gokula. It was but natural that all night long, my mind was filled with thoughts of what to say, how to say it and so on. Would it be right to address such a big gathering at such a young age? What if the village elders thought that I was out of my mind? All these dilemmas and thoughts were crowding in my mind, obviously because my consciousness or my self-confidence had not fully evolved as yet, and for that matter, neither was my 'spontaneous consciousness' fully awakened.

Well, the night had passed and now the meeting was about to commence. Almost all the village elders and gopas were present at the gathering. Needless to say, our children's party was stationed there well ahead of time. Everybody was extremely excited because a child, one amongst them was about to address such a huge gathering. I did not break the trust of my cowherd friends either; I rose up very confidently to speak.²¹ Fortunately, I had fully regained my composure by the time it was my turn to address. Confidently, I began my address saying, "On behalf of my cowherd children's party, I offer my respects to Nanda, the village headman and all the village elders who are the pillars of strength of Gokula. I also welcome our gopa brothers who have always been our guiding force. It is a fact well known to all of us that our lives are completely dependent on green cover and livestock. You are all aware that the grass around Gokula has been depleted and most of the trees have dried up, which forces us to take our cattle all the way to Govardhana to graze. Unfortunately, now the conditions there are also not very favourable either! Neither are we able to get good fruits there, nor are the animals able to get good grass to graze. Moreover, the great distance makes it difficult for us to bring back essential firewood, flowers and fruits; obviously so, because carrying such a heavy load after a long and exhausting day of work proves to be quite back-breaking. In fact, the condition has worsened to such an extent that now even wild animals might begin to target our village for sustenance, and in my opinion, this danger can assume frightening proportions at any time.

Therefore, in view of the prevalent circumstances, I feel it is in our best interests that we forsake our attachment for Gokula. If we migrate to a place which has abundant greenery all around, it will make our life a lot easier. Then we will not have to take our animals far to graze which will reduce our work load by half and consequently, our exhaustion will also be drastically reduced. Needless to say, if our fatigue is reduced, then the quality of our lives will improve too, and quite possibly, by this move, we may even be in a position to ask for more cattle for tending from the royal palace. Moreover, if our cattle get lush green and abundant graze nearby, their exhaustion will also be substantially reduced and they will consequently yield more milk. And if this new place is close to Mathura, it will be all the more better, for then it will be easier for us to sell our curd and butter. As a result, our leisure time will increase and so will our prosperity. Of course, you elders understand these matters much better than us children. We are merely trying to bring your attention to the facts we have observed and understood; the final decision will certainly be yours. I would like to beg your pardon if we have said something beyond our age and

understanding.”

Concluding thus, I took to my seat. Bhaiya and the group of gopa children clapped their hands in appreciation of my speech. As for the others, they were simply flabbergasted by my speech. I was also surprised that I had been able to make such an elaborate speech and that too with such clarity and ease in front of an assembly of elders. 'Wow, Kanhaiya!'

That clinched it; from that day onwards, not only the gopa children but deep within their hearts, the older gopas too accepted me as their leader. Well, did I have an objection to it? I anyway reveled in being a leader. But unfortunately, the entire enthusiasm of my address remained confined only to us. As soon as my speech was over, the elders began discussing my proposal amongst themselves. In general, they were in agreement with all the points that I had put forward, but migrating from Gokula and finalising the place of relocation, did not seem easy to them. They did wish to migrate but their predicament was, they did not know where. In the end, the main issues that surfaced were, it was not easy to leave Gokula, and also resettling at another place was no child's play. The result - for the time being, it was decided to stay put in Gokula.

However, to me, it did not matter that my advice was not heeded. The very fact that I was able to make my proposal penetrate deep into everyone's mind was an achievement by itself! Meaning, the fact that my proposal was not implemented did not pinch me even a bit; on the contrary, I was happy that I had performed my karma in totality. But from this interaction, I could grasp that in general, the capability of implementation is very weak among elders. Their mind gets tangled in innumerable worthless questions like, 'What will happen?' 'How will it happen?', so on and so forth.

But then, what could I do about this? So, very soon, even I forgot about the matter. But just see the play of Nature! Barely a few days had elapsed since this meeting was held, when suddenly, Gokula was terrorised by a pack of **wolves**.²² Well, I had a premonition about such an occurrence and in fact, I had expressed this fear in my address too. I had said that due to the rapid depletion of the greenery of the forest, the wild animals could venture towards the village. That being the case, if wild animals had reached Gokula in search of food, what was so surprising about it? I must be appreciated for having foreseen this possibility so clearly. This incident made me realise that if a person foresees the difficulties coming his way, and accordingly makes a plan to save himself well in time, and also acts upon his plan just as quickly, then he can always save himself from all

problems befalling him.

However, this was my thinking and my analysis, but even such an accurate analysis of mine was unable to make an impression on anyone. My foresight had been bluntly ignored and now everyone was facing its disastrous consequences. Yes, the problem had quickly assumed a dreadful form. Within no time, the terror of the wolves had spread so much, that the gopas had stopped taking the animals out for grazing. Consequently, the daily supply of flowers and fruits for food, had ceased as well. The terrified gopis had also stopped venturing out to fill water. All these factors put together had led to an acute shortage of food and water in Gokula. All in all, the terrorising rampage of the wolves had turned our lives into hell. As if that was not enough, due to lack of prey in the forest, these wild wolves, in search of sustenance, had ultimately reached our homes too! A pack of four or five wolves routinely began to attack late at night and carried off the livestock. These sharp-toothed, black-faced, fearsome creatures were bloodsuckers; they attacked the cattle ferociously, tore their flesh and devoured them in no time. Encouraged by their initial success, they now began to come in packs of ten or more. They would tear up cows effortlessly with a single slash of the paw! Swift as lightning and lethally precise, in no time, this pack of wolves would come storming into the village, create havoc, ravage the settlement and carry off the domestic animals and disappear just as quickly. Helpless as everyone was, nobody could muster the courage to take any firm action. The entire Gokula stood powerless against their might. Their terror had already led to an acute shortage of food and water, and now, adding to our woes, the life of our dear animals too was under constant threat.

Finally, the villagers' patience gave way when the wolves carried off a child. With a small child being dragged away, naturally, the whole of Gokula was shocked beyond words. Many elders now began to grumble that if they had heeded my advice, they probably would not have had to see this day. With the pressure of all these accusations mounting, Nanda hurriedly convened a meeting, and finally everyone unanimously agreed to migrate from Gokula. This time, no objections were raised against the relocation. But now, another grave question stared them in their faces; where would they migrate to? The main issue still remained unresolved. One elderly person thoughtfully suggested that we migrate to Vrindavan. According to him, it was a place full of greenery with plenty of grass and trees laden with fruits. Besides, the water was also very sweet in that region. Moreover, since Vrindavan was situated on the banks of the river Yamuna and surrounded by the Govardhana hill, it was safe and secure as well.

A consensus was reached and considering the emergency of the situation, it was unanimously decided that we would move to Vrindavan, as soon as possible, that is, in just a couple of days.

Naturally, I was the happiest on hearing this decision as this was my personal achievement. Needless to say, this unexpected victory raised my confidence level to its zenith and filled me with so much enthusiasm that if asked to, I was even prepared to pluck the stars from heaven for Gokula!

Early next morning, when our children's group gathered at the village ground, everyone's face was radiating enthusiasm. Some were excited by the thought of the relocation while others were thrilled by our victory. All were congratulating one another, for finally the elders were compelled to agree to our proposal. However, this kind of thinking reflected their petty ego; and I had obviously distanced myself from it.

In contrast to their line of thinking, my enthusiastic mind was ceaselessly engaged in seeking new avenues for the betterment of Gokula. In fact, moving a step further, I was considering taking up a major chunk of the relocation responsibilities on my shoulders. I, who was already excited by the sheer thought of relocation to Vrindavan, was further pumped up with this positive thought. So, driven by this avid enthusiasm, I launched into another speech, addressing the gopa children. Truly speaking, I was now growing to like speaking, explaining and addressing others. As it is, success tends to boost an individual's self-confidence and perhaps, these frequent speeches of mine were a proof of my growing self-confidence.

Anyway, the summary of my speech was, "Now we are not just gopa children, but have grown to become mature and capable. However, to prove this, we will have to provide strong evidence of our maturity and capability to the entire village and to this effect; first and foremost, we have to believe in ourselves. I personally believe that we are capable of shouldering many responsibilities associated with the relocation, and we should definitely take them up. In my view, we should not lose this opportunity that has fallen our way, as the fact is, responsibility is not something to be given, but to be taken upon oneself. The elders will always consider us as children, but it is our responsibility to demonstrate our maturity through our actions and prove that we are not children anymore." And with this, I ended my speech.

As I had already become the ideal leader of the gopa children, and here they had an opportunity to prove their maturity and conduct themselves like adults, they

were bound to follow my command. The enthusiasm was in plenty but the question before us was, what were the responsibilities which we children could shoulder? I had already given considerable thought to this matter; I was just giving the gopa children an opportunity to exercise their minds...perhaps, this would awaken their consciousness too! If nothing else, I would ultimately be able to impress them with my intelligence. When enough time had passed and no one could come up with a solution, I offered a solution myself and said, "First and foremost, let us divide the people of the village into three groups and count them - the elderly, the young and the children. Thereafter, we can count the animals, and in the end, we can count the carts and chariots."

Of course, nobody could understand the purpose of this exercise, but my influence was such that all of them immediately engaged themselves in the task. It was a small village, everyone knew each other; thus the task was completed in a matter of a few hours. Unaware of our preparations, the village elders were also engaged in preparations under the leadership of Nanda. Not only this, a meeting of the village elders was also convened at our house to deliberate upon the details of the plan and the preparations, because until now, they were the ones who allocated such tasks. But, astonishingly, this time, I too was invited to this meeting. I was feeling immensely blessed on having been bestowed with this special honour; in a way, I truly deserved it.

When I informed the gopa boys of this development, their excitement knew no bounds. I too was feeling dazed by the honour. And to tell you the truth, I could barely contain my happiness. Yet, keeping the joy to my heart, I maintained a composed demeanour. For, as far as I was concerned, this invitation was a chance for me to prove my intelligence rather than to jump with joy; and that being the case, I did not want to lose this opportunity that had come my way. This was the reason I also advised the gopa children to keep their excitement in control and accompany me to the meeting. I decided to take them along because under the pretext of the meeting, I, in fact, wanted to give them an opportunity to grow and get exposure. And as far as making an impression on the gathering was concerned, I was well prepared, I had thought all about it. I very well knew the importance of this golden opportunity, which had fallen into my lap.

So, accompanied by my children's group, I reached the meeting hall well in time. Of course, I alone had been invited but I had brought them all with me. Naturally, seeing us arrive at the venue as a group did take the elders by surprise, at least for a moment. But they were by now impressed enough by us to seat us all. Needless to say, the meeting started with Nanda's address.²³ He made a few

points regarding the relocation strategy and ended his speech with an invitation to the elders to give their suggestions. I sat there for a long time, listening to their discussions, but the sad part was, shackled by their old habits, they all were thinking on the same old lines. Not a single one of their suggestions had even a hint of anything remotely new!

Finally, I ran out of patience and sought permission from Nanda to speak a few words. Obviously, I was attending the meeting after due deliberation, so, requesting permission to speak was merely a formality. I had performed such great feats recently that my speech was bound to be eagerly awaited. So, I stood up and began my address with full confidence. After touching upon a few preliminary formalities, I came straight to the point and said, "In view of the relocation, we have already completed the counting of the entire village, dividing it into three parts. Along with it, we have also counted the cattle, the bullock carts and the chariots that we have."

I knew that just by revealing this much, all the elders would immediately be impressed and the census completed by us would compel them to take us seriously. For, when one speaks and no one pays attention, or is not willing to give the subject matter adequate consideration, then it is pointless to say anything; hence, the beginning should always be strikingly powerful. My beginning was terrific and it yielded the desired effect too; everybody now appeared eager to hear me out. Enthused by my preliminary victory, I continued to speak.

I said, "The meaning of 'successful migration' is to safely transport maximum goods with minimum labour and loss to the new location. Thus, a relocation program can be divided into three major parts; packing and loading the goods onto the carts is the first task, the next important consideration is security on the way and the third most important task would be to arrange for proper food for sustenance while travelling. We are now confident that our children's party is fully capable of taking care of all these three main activities. Therefore, I humbly request you all to entrust these tasks to us and give us an opportunity to prove ourselves. We also want all the elders to take rest this time and just guide us.

But astonishingly, even after this well chalked out plan of action, Nanda and the other elders did not seem to be willing to entrust us with such a huge responsibility. But was I the one to give up so easily? I obstinately insisted that they at least listen to our plan in detail; who knows, it could perhaps change their

minds! Thus, elaborating on my plan I said, “According to our count, the number of bullock carts that we have are sufficient for all the elders to sit comfortably during the travel. According to our analysis, we will still be left with four bullock carts, out of which two can be used for storing goods, and in the other two, the gopis can be seated turn by turn.

Apart from this, according to our plan, out of the four chariots we have, two can be used for weapons and the other two, for carrying food items. The rest of the luggage obviously will have to be loaded on the animals. Moreover, we have also decided that our children’s team as well as the older gopas will walk all through the journey. Not only this, from the packing, loading, tying down of the baggage to arranging for food, we will take responsibility for everything along the way. And as far as security and selection of a place for the night halt is concerned, certainly, the older gopas will have to shoulder this responsibility; for we are not yet capable enough to assume this important duty.”

Undoubtedly, the proposal, in itself, was complete and practically feasible. Fortunately, by the end of the speech, the detailed plan had successfully been able to exert its desired influence upon Nanda and all the other elders. More than being happy with the fact that their journey was going to be comfortable, the elders were certainly far happier with the fact that their children had come forward and shouldered such a huge responsibility. Indeed, seeing their children becoming responsible gives the greatest happiness to parents. So we had become responsible, and that too, to such an extent, that as soon as we got the permission, without wasting a single moment, we enthusiastically engaged ourselves in collecting the utensils, clothes, firewood, food and so on, and packing them up in neat bundles, and in about two days, we completed this task.

In the meantime, the elder gopas too had overhauled all the bullock carts and chariots and carried out minor repairs. The bullock carts were now ready for a long journey. In short, all the preparations had been completed well in time; early next morning, we had to leave, so there was no question of slackening tonight. We began gathering all the baggage and cattle at the village square on the night preceding the journey itself. The bullock carts and chariots too were brought well in advance. And before long, they were all loaded and ready to go. The gopas had polished and sharpened all their weapons too, as they had to be prepared to protect the caravan from dacoits and wild animals and ensure its safe migration to Vrindavan.

This was certainly a fateful night; no gopa, young or old, slept that night.

Needless to say, by dawn all the preparations were complete. By early morning, the elders and even the gopis had begun gathering at the village square. The elders were simply stunned by our arrangements; they were bound to, because our preparations were truly remarkable. In spite of having years of experience, probably even they would not have been able to make such immaculate arrangements! But, let us leave this aside; this was not the time to beat our own drums as there were thousand other things that still needed to be taken care of.

By morning, the entire village had gathered at the village square. As the preparations were complete beforehand, there was no reason to delay the journey. The enthusiasm of the gopas and gopis had to be seen to be believed; but in contrast, the elders seemed to be caught in a dilemma. In fact, they were happy as well as sad. Naturally, they were happy about migrating to a better place, and sad at having to bid adieu to Gokula.

Finally, our journey began. The fully armed chariots were stationed in the front and back of the caravan; in the middle were the bullock carts and the two extra chariots loaded with food. The animals were walking on either side of the caravan; however, some had managed to overtake the caravan and a few stragglers trailed behind. And needless to say, right in front of the caravan, our party of young gopas was dancing and cavorting as if it was our merry wedding procession. Well, though not a wedding procession, it definitely was the victory march of our intelligence and action.

As soon as our caravan reached the banks of the river Yamuna, all the elders became very emotional. Consequently, in spite of our reluctance, this became the first unscheduled halt of the caravan. Indeed, this halt was less of a practical necessity and more of an emotional need. In fact, the elders were so overwhelmed that it had become difficult for them to control their emotions; so much so that they even had tears in their eyes. Well, I suppose it was but natural for them to get emotional, for their association with Gokula went back to several years.

Anyway, after an emotion-filled, short rest, our caravan resumed its journey. Interestingly, even after the elders had left the river Yamuna behind, the pain of this separation from the river was still fresh in their minds. On the other hand, we youngsters had no qualms about leaving Gokula. But then, how old was our relationship with Gokula? Besides, were we old enough to understand the distress associated with meeting and separation? On the contrary, we were delirious with joy, for we were going to settle down in a new place. And we were

so overwhelmed by our sense of responsibility, that on the way, wherever we spotted trees laden with good fruits, our gang would get busy plucking them. Merrily, we ate some and also distributed the rest amongst the women and elders in the carts. It was such a big procession with so many people... It was a truly magnificent sight to behold!

The first day of our journey passed splendidly. The elder gopas had made good arrangements for the night halt too. And then, it became a routine; the first halt in the day was made on the banks of a river or by a lake where everybody could peacefully have lunch and rest for a while. And by the evening, we made the last halt, during which our main concern was of course, safety. Not only we children, but the gopas and gopis were also enthusiastic that in spite of the arduous journey, nobody felt exhausted. As proof of this, every night, there was a song and dance performance by the gopis after dinner. Sometimes, unable to contain my enthusiasm, I too would happily join in and sing and dance with them. As soon as I joined them, all of them would surround me making the scene even more pleasant, with the gopis all around and Kanhaiya in the centre!

Our dance was just amazing! It was not only a source of joy for everybody but it also helped them unwind and release the exhaustion of an otherwise tiring day. To tell you the truth, in spite of the fatigue of travelling through the day, everybody was especially happy at breaking free from the daily grind of mechanical life in Gokula. The arrangements throughout the journey were so immaculate that no one felt the exhaustion of an otherwise tiring, bone-breaking journey; neither was there a problem with organising the meals, nor was there a lack of festivities all along the way. Yes, we did have to constantly fight off wild animals, but then it did not pose a problem, as for us, the herdsmen, it was more of a routine affair.

After about eight days of travelling thus, our caravan reached Vrindavan. With our successful migration, this Kanhaa, who was born as a helpless infant in a dungeon, had effectively transformed into 'Krishna', the leader of the gang of gopas, at the tender age of eight. And now, all of us were no longer 'Gokulwasis', the inhabitants of Gokula; but instead we had become 'Vrindavanwasis', the inhabitants of Vrindavan. The elders still could not believe that such a large scale migration could be accomplished with such ease. And most importantly, after having orchestrated this successful relocation, my stature had grown exponentially.

End of CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

Establishment of Vrindavan

As soon as we stepped into Vrindavan, everybody was ecstatic.²⁴ But the procession slowed down to a crawl as everyone wanted to stop and take in the entire beauty of Vrindavan in one sweeping glance. The village appeared extremely beautiful at the very first sight; in fact, its allure wiped away whatever little exhaustion the journey had caused.

Propelled by sheer excitement, we, the little cowherd children and the gopas and gopis, began to dance. And even more heartening was the fact that due to the resounding success of the journey, I was being showered with praises from people all around. Certainly, I too was filled with pride and happiness. For that matter, the elders were no less enthusiastic either; however, in spite of being overwhelmed with excitement, they seemed to be perplexed by a deep-seated anxiety, and indubitably, it was beyond my comprehension. However, all they wanted was an excuse to get worried; so be it. I blissfully engaged myself in frolicking and merrymaking with my group of gopas and gopis.

After a short stopover, when everyone was satiated with the beauty of Vrindavan, the caravan once again resumed its journey. But what was this? As we proceeded, we saw that Vrindavan was beginning to look like a thick forest. Gradually, as we went further, we found it difficult to even find our way due to the thick wild grass grown everywhere. Still, we somehow managed to reach the banks of the river Yamuna. As soon as we reached there, a wave of happiness once again washed over all of us. We could see an extensive clearing right in front of the river. Seeing this vast open space, the elders' eyes were lit up instantly. Everybody was elated beyond measure. It was only then that I understood the reason for their worry; their main concern was finding a proper place as the base for the caravan, and this anxiety had disappeared as soon as they had set their eyes on the vast clearing.

Without much deliberation and discussion, this place was selected to set up a permanent base for the caravan. With this, our caravan had completed its first phase of migration to Vrindavan. In other words, now we had truly become 'Vrindavanwasis', the inhabitants of Vrindavan.

As soon as the bullock carts came to a halt, all the elders immediately alighted from the carts. Their bodies must have been tired to the bone from the eight-day long journey; that was the reason, as soon as they got off the carts, all of them began stretching out and ambled towards the Peepal trees to relax under their shade. In contrast to their condition, our enthusiasm and energy was at a different level altogether. In spite of having walked continuously for the past eight days, we were not in the least exhausted. On the contrary, we were longing to explore the whole of Vrindavan and soak in its beauty that very instant. After all, if a child gets tired so easily, then what kind of a child would he be?

The greenery in Vrindavan was indeed very rich and lush, and the view, very scenic. Like in Gokula, the river Yamuna flowed here too, but here it was much bigger and more beautiful. Not only that, the sparkling and gurgling waters of the Yamuna also looked extremely pristine here. Indeed, after the lush green cover of Vrindavan, now it was river Yamuna that impressed us the most. We were thoroughly enchanted by its shimmering, pristine and flowing water. Neither did we wish to nor did we need to take rest. Hence, excited, our gang of gopas and gopis set out to stroll on the banks of the river. Hand in hand, dancing and hopping, we went up and down the banks of the river Yamuna a couple of times. So far, so good, but soon the clear flowing water of the river was now beckoning us all to take a dip. The temptation was propitious as well as necessary. During the eight-day long journey, we had hardly been able to bathe two or three times, so there was no question of missing out on this opportunity. Hence, without losing another moment, all of us gopas and gopis jumped into the Yamuna and bathed to our heart's content.

What a bath it was! All our exhaustion was absorbed by the waters of the Yamuna. But now that we had bathed, we were tormented by severe pangs of hunger. And as far as food was concerned, Vrindavan had it in abundance. All around us, there were a variety of trees laden with fruits. So, we began to hurl stones with great vigour to pick the fruits from the trees. Soon, we had a big heap of fruits lying at our feet. After having such a lavish feast of sweet and sour fruits, even our souls were satiated like never before; we carried off the remaining fruits with us for the elders.

Seeing us bring such luscious fruits for them, overwhelmed with joy, the elders became teary-eyed. But as soon as they ate the fruits, sluggishness began to overpower them and again, they immediately went to relax under the shade of the trees. That was good for us; now we were free to roam around as we pleased. We were so excited, that neither were we feeling tired nor could we think of

anything else but visit every nook and cranny of Vrindavan. As such, the forest here was so dense that there was no dearth of shade; one could laze around wherever one pleased. But we had to first feel like resting, hadn't we? The bath in the river Yamuna had invigorated us to such an extent, that we were ready for anything. We had now realised beyond any doubt, that a royal bath is capable of relieving even the greatest of exhaustion.

Suddenly, we remembered the animals, and with that we found a chore to perform and immediately engaged ourselves in the task. After all, it was necessary to relieve their exhaustion as well, they too needed to be de-stressed. But even while performing this duty, such was our eagerness to explore, that we left the animals to bathe in the Yamuna by themselves, and set off to the forest. Our exploration was such a delight that it was just inexplicable. What a thick forest it was! What a variety of fruit-laden trees there were! We were left thoroughly enchanted by the spell-binding beauty of Nature that this place had to offer. As soon as we spotted a new fruit, our little group would become instantly active and begin picking it. Needless to say, all of us were experts at picking fruits with the help of stones; so we just continued eating and gathering fruits, and then moving ahead.

Truly, never before had we eaten such fresh, delicious fruits. From this perspective at least, the purpose of coming to Vrindavan had been served, especially for a glutton like me. Yet another beautiful aspect of Vrindavan was its forest, which was bedecked with Kadambari flowers. There were so many Kadamba trees that from a distance, it seemed as if the greenery was covered by a white blanket. There were numerous thick, dense Peepal trees which not only provided protection from the sun but also seemed adequate enough to provide shelter during the rains.

Well, having eaten a large amount of fruits and the pulp of numerous flowers, our stomachs were filled beyond capacity. And when our stomachs were full, we suddenly remembered the elders. What about them? They too would need to eat in the evening. So we once again began to pick fruits from the trees and collect flowers. By evening, we reached the camp with heaps of fruits and flowers. After eating so many fresh fruits and the pulp of flowers, even the elders were satiated, and why would they not be? It was after so many years that they were eating two square meals comprising their most favourite food, and that too, a meal so juicy, fresh and delicious!

As soon as the elders had eaten, we remembered our animals. Well, for them,

there was abundant fodder near the banks of the Yamuna. So they had already helped themselves and satiated their hunger on their own. Hence, we returned to the clearing with all our companions who were feeling satiated after a long time. Brimming with enthusiasm, we had not felt tired the entire day, but now, exhaustion suddenly began to overcome us all. Today, there was neither much chatting nor singing and dancing.

No sooner had the night fallen than everybody found cosy spots under various trees and fell asleep. Even I fell asleep as soon as I lay down. Yes, the older gopas were not so lucky; after all, they had to take turns in guarding the caravan. Ultimately, it was their responsibility to protect us from the wild animals. Well, the weariness of the journey could be gauged by the fact that some people woke up only by next day afternoon and some, by evening. For food, we now merely had to go into the forest and pluck fruits and flowers and this duty was naturally entrusted to us, the children's troupe. The task was necessary and to our liking too. From the time we woke up, till late in the evening, we remained engaged in our favourite task. Simultaneously, as and when we found an opportunity, we quickly took a dip in the Yamuna.

Fortunately, we had completed the four-day journey leisurely in eight days. The end result of this prudent decision was, everyone was completely rejuvenated with just a day's rest. Feeling reinvigorated, everyone engaged themselves in the chore of their liking. Before dusk, the older gopas had lit fires all around the camp. We had already brought the fruits and flowers. With dusk setting in, the scene had become very alluring indeed. With the bonfires burning on all sides, the camp looked so enchanting! The caravan, enclosed within this circle of fire and the river Yamuna glistening nearby, added the extra sparkle of magic to the landscape. The scene was so captivating that one wanted to capture it in one's eyes forever. Why should I lie; I had already etched and indelibly preserved this timeless and incredibly enchanting scene in my mind forever.

Well, returning to the camp, everyone had formed groups of their own and were sitting in small circles. The women had formed one of their own; we had formed another just when the gopis came and joined us. The elder men, however, had chosen to sit separately and they too appeared to be engrossed in some serious discussions. Well, we did not care. We were solely concerned with our fun and frolic which anyway, was on in full swing. The gopis too appeared to be chirpier than ever before. In short, on one hand, we were engaged in merrymaking, while on the other, the elders were engaged in serious discussions. In fact, the mood in general was inclined towards celebration, to which the seriousness of the elders

was proving to be a hindrance. Even so, it must be said that on our part, we had left no stone unturned to ensure a hearty celebration.

However, all of a sudden, the atmosphere changed, and the casual banter turned into a formal meeting. Leaving their discussions and deliberations aside, Nanda stood up to address the gathering. For us, it was an unnecessary disruption to our festive mood, yet, we could not be insolent to Nanda. So we were compelled to act as if we were listening. Well, we were still pondering over the agenda behind this addressal. Heaving a deep sigh, he said, "Seeing the verdant landscape all around us, it is obvious that our coming from Gokula to Vrindavan has proved auspicious."

On hearing this, I grumbled inside my mind. 'Did we all not know this? Had he disrupted our festivities just to say this?' However, what he said next caught my attention. Indeed, his words were such that they compelled me to become serious.

Very gravely, he said, "But we must not be satisfied with this alone, because the task that lies ahead is indeed very difficult. In order to set up an establishment here, we will not only need to immediately construct homes, but pathways too. And all this is not going to be as easy as it sounds. To undertake this task, we will need to work hard with an ironclad plan. Until now, we elders have been making plans and taking decisions, but now, our youngsters have also begun to make plans and as we have witnessed recently, they have adequately demonstrated their capabilities too; so today, we are holding these discussions in the presence of everyone. Today, it indeed gives me great pride to know that each one of us is well aware of their responsibilities."

Although father had not mentioned my name, it was clear that the person he was hinting at was me. If nothing else, at the very least, I had every right to feel proud about this indirect praise. While Nanda's address was still on, my ego was getting unnecessarily bloated. However, he continued, "Thus, we have decided that tomorrow evening, we will have another meeting here at about the same time. Until then, everybody must contemplate on how we can construct a good establishment as quickly as possible and come forward with a definite plan of action. Tomorrow evening, we will discuss all the plans in detail and the best and the most feasible plan will be implemented with immediate effect."

I and my thought process both were completely shaken by father's speech. Such a difficult task lay ahead of us and it had not even struck me! I now understood that sharp intelligence, in-depth thinking and an analytical mind were

undoubtedly necessary but the importance of experience could not be undermined at any cost. To be honest, it was for the first time that I had understood the significance of experience. I had now realised that experience in itself was a vast reservoir of knowledge. My analytical mind would immediately absorb everything important. This was why, from then on and all through my life, I always held the opinions of experienced individuals as very important and in high regard.

At night everyone fell asleep, but my contemplation kept me awake. I was constantly considering one plan after another. Success inevitably inspires and encourages people, so with each new thought I was getting increasingly determined to come up with a perfect master plan. After poring over it at length, I found one plan quite convincing; it seemed to be a nearly perfect and practically viable plan. As such, before conceiving any plan, one has to be clear of its objective. For, if one has perfectly understood the purpose it is meant to serve, it becomes very easy to formulate a sound plan. From this perspective, the plan that was needed now had to address three main issues; constructing the best settlement with minimal use of labour, and in the least possible time; therefore I continued to think in the same direction. That was it! Once the purpose of the plan was clear, then was it difficult to come up with a sound plan? Gradually, a detailed plan was conceived in my mind and you will not believe, but I was so deeply engrossed in refining it that I did not even realise when the vibrant rays of the sun began to warm the day. I had not slept even a wink; how could I? There is an old proverb: "The one who sleeps, loses, the one who is awake, gains." Yes, this was precisely the condition I was in. I wanted to come up with the best plan at any cost. I was obsessed with the desire to have only my plan chosen and implemented. And why forget that this was the first time I was getting an opportunity to prove my mettle in front of the gopis? You would remember that so far, all my meetings had either been with the elders or with my cowherd friends, or sometimes with both. This was the first meeting where the women and gopis were also going to remain present and naturally, under no circumstances did I want to lose this opportunity to make an indelible impression on them. Well, one does not get repeated opportunities in life to prove oneself or realise one's potential. And it is also true that only the one who is able to grab and utilise such opportunities to the fullest can progress in life. So, how could I let go of this opportunity to impress the gopis? Earlier, I had harassed them endlessly and had also played innumerable pranks upon them. So in all fairness, they deserved to be the first to witness Kanhaiya's transformed personality. Besides, you always need to impress those, who think you are worthless.

However, all that would happen when the time would be ripe. Meanwhile, as soon as morning dawned, I freshened up quickly and in spite of not having slept even a wink, went out with the gopa boys to gather fruits and flowers. For, despite being engaged in my flights of fancy, I was fully aware of my responsibilities. Truly speaking, my mind was still completely absorbed in refining the details of my plan. It was neither interested in roaming in the forest nor in the delights of eating; nor did I derive any pleasure in plucking fruits, which was my favourite pastime and most enjoyable work. The main reason for my distraction today was, though the plan was ready in my mind, it could not be termed perfect, as it still needed considerable deliberation and attention to detail. I am sure you must have now understood why I could not bring my mind to tear itself off this chain of thoughts, even if I wished to.

Nevertheless, by afternoon, my plan had finally taken shape as I desired, and to tell you the truth, only then was my mind at peace. And no sooner was my plan ready than I began to realise and feel the fatigue it had caused. Sleep was overpowering me now; I was compelled to return, leaving everyone behind. And now that I had returned, it was better to catch up on my sleep for some time. So, I quietly went to the bullock cart and fell asleep as soon as I put my head down. The sleep was so deep and sound that by the time I woke up, it was evening already. It was but natural, as I had not slept even a wink the previous night. Indeed, this sleep was much needed and it completely washed my fatigue away. It was good that I had slept, otherwise in spite of having a brilliant plan up my sleeve, my exhaustion would have ruined it all. And now, in order to fully refresh myself, I went to the river Yamuna and pampered myself with a royal evening bath. Needless to say, after the bath, I was brimming with energy again. Truly, had I not slept in the afternoon, I would not have had the energy to present my plan in front of the gathering.

As a matter of fact, this meeting was not much different from the one held the previous day; it was only I, who was so enthusiastic. The elders still appeared to be engrossed in deep thought. They certainly had a valid reason to be worried; there was, after all, a gruelling task that lay ahead of them, waiting to be accomplished. As the meeting began, Nanda presented his proposal. The plan however, was not detailed enough for it to be called a sound plan. Even so, it had one good feature, and this possibly could be attributed to Nanda's vast experience. He mentioned that the settlement had to be at a little distance from the banks of the river Yamuna, because firstly, in case of heavy rains the banks would be prone to flooding and secondly, wild animals invariably came to the

river banks to quench their thirst, which could pose a grave danger to our lives and our livestock. Contrary to Nanda's proposal, I had been thinking of building the settlement close to the river so that everyone could feast their eyes on the beauty of the river. But it did not take me long to realise that any such idea could be termed as anything but practical. A couple of other elders too presented their plans. In view of their considerable efforts, their plans could certainly be termed as a good philosophy, but they could hardly be called sound plans!

Finally, Nanda invited others also to present their plans but surprisingly, no one came forward. At least one among the youth should have come forward. For that matter, in my opinion, even the women should have participated in deliberations over such important matters, because, after all, it is the thinking that grows a human being and helps the individual grow. Besides, as far as thinking is concerned, Nature has not been partial to any human being, be it male or female. The process of thinking is neither the prerogative of a King nor is it out of reach for a poor man. Neither is it close to a powerful person nor is it too distant from a weakling. Thus, in my opinion, everyone is equally entitled to think; all it demands is the willingness of an individual...and Ashtavakra was a living and breathing example of this. During the time of Shri Rama, he was the only one who could be called supremely wise, absolutely egoless and god in its true sense. When Ashtavakra had imparted knowledge to King Janaka, the father-in-law of Rama, he was around ten years old. As for his physical appearance, eight of his body parts were deformed, which was why he was called Ashtavakra²⁵. This is the reason why I am asserting so firmly that everyone has an equal right to thinking. Indeed, even if a person does nothing but just elevates his standard of thinking, he can lead a life of heavenly bliss; and barring this, even if he tries or does a thousand other things, no one or nothing can stop his life from becoming a hell.

Finally, when no one came forward, Nanda directly asked me, “Why Kanhaiya, have you not thought of any plan?”

I replied, “Yes, I have.”

As soon as I said this, all the young gopas, gopis and even bhaiya began to look at me with astonishment. They could not believe that I could dwell on such weighty issues as well. On the other hand, upon hearing my answer, father was overwhelmed by parental pride and encouraging me further, he said, “Come forward and present your plan without any hesitation.”

As it is well known to all, a mother derives great pleasure from the beauty and

naughtiness of her child whereas a father takes pride in his child's intelligence, boldness and bravery; and at this time, my father's expression made it amply evident that he was delighted beyond words. Well, of what use was my plan if I could not transform his happiness into pride? With this thought, I began to elaborate upon my proposal with great enthusiasm. At the very outset, I mentioned the point that I had just picked up at the beginning of the meeting. I said, "The point that father made about having the settlement away from the river is indeed valid and crucial too. As for how the settlement should be and how it should be made, I have deeply reflected upon these matters. As such, Nature has blessed Vrindavan with abundance; there is no shortage of mud, stones and wood for us to build our homes. But to construct the settlement, first of all, we will have to hunt for an expansive, flat land to avoid unnecessary digging. Secondly, since all the houses cannot be constructed simultaneously, we should initially focus on making three large rooms. If we work hard, this task can easily be accomplished in a month's time. Its immediate advantage would be, at least the elderly women and the infants will not have to sleep in the forest for long. Besides, our household goods too can be safely tucked away in these rooms."

Hearing my words, all the elders gazed at me with wonder; some even encouraged me with their praise. And as you already know, once my enthusiasm was fanned, I would be in great form and my performance would inevitably peak. So, enthused by an encouraging response, I began to elaborate upon my proposal with double the self-confidence. I said, "An open space should be left vacant in the centre of the settlement, as it would serve two purposes. One, we can celebrate our festivals there and two, we can keep all our animals together in this open space where they too will be able to take care of their own safety as a herd. And the houses will be constructed all around this ground. There are several advantages of this layout; firstly, we will not have to build too many unnecessary pathways and secondly, the safety concerns of the settlement too will be addressed. Indeed, after this measure, no wild animal will be able to easily attack the settlement. Besides this, another advantage would be, in the event of an emergency, all of Vrindavan would be able to assemble at the village square in no time."

The attack of the wild wolves was still fresh in everyone's mind; the reason why we were compelled to leave Gokula. Given the circumstances, this suggestion of mine was bound to be greatly appreciated. And it was; not only the young gopas but even the elders, including Nanda, applauded in appreciation. Truly, these

frequent, small gestures of appreciation and encouragement were fast enhancing my personality. Honestly speaking, it was only because of these gestures of appreciation and encouragement that I had been able to reach the position that I was in at this time. Anyway, my address was not yet over; so there was no point in focusing on these secondary things right now. Hence, concentrating on my speech again, I continued, “If you are all satisfied with my proposal, then right away we should go ahead with the division of tasks amongst ourselves.”

Of course, I had merely said this to affirm and acknowledge their appreciation for the plan I had presented. It was clearly evident from everybody’s expressions that they were all extremely impressed with my proposal. Still, appreciation makes one feel rewarded for the hard work one has put in, and it immediately fetched a positive reaction too; as was expected, everybody nodded their heads in agreement. Undoubtedly, my infantile ego was appeased to see every head nodding in agreement. I hope by now you must have understood why I had purposely asked them. And now that I had proven the supremacy of my intellect beyond any doubt, why would I leave the task half-done? So, I initiated the division of the tasks myself and assigned them to the respective people. In any case, since it was my plan, naturally, allocating the tasks had to be my privilege. Besides, it is a well known fact that the division of duties can best be decided by the architect of the plan. I have already told you that there is no age bar for contemplation; as far as the power of thinking is concerned, everybody is at par. When one has accepted the plan presented by a child, then certainly the division of tasks by that child should also be acceptable. Hence, with full confidence, I began to elaborate upon how the tasks were to be assigned. I expounded, “First and foremost, from tomorrow itself, the elder women should take care of food arrangements for everyone. The gopis should begin bathing and milking the cows so that we start getting curd and butter in our meals as soon as possible. Just think, will it not be great if we get curd and butter too along with the luscious fruits of Vrindavan? Wouldn't it be a feast everyday? Can there be any meal better than this for us? Indeed, with this one step, we will soon begin to feel that our life has returned to normalcy. And this feeling alone will prove to be extremely helpful in completing the back-breaking tasks that lie ahead. Besides, healthy and nutritious food is extremely necessary for the rigorous work that we will have to undertake over the next few months.”

To tell you the truth, I had a vested interest in this. Why should I lie to you? The truth was, I myself could not do without butter for long. Well, selfishness in a little measure is absolutely normal. Thus, continuing my address, I said, “The

elders will supervise the construction activities. Their task will be to guide us with their experience. And while performing our duty of taking the cattle to graze, we, the young gopas, will also bring in essential wood, stones and mud. Apart from this, we will also continue to pluck and bring fruits from the forest. We will form separate teams amongst ourselves for all these tasks. The older gopas will concentrate solely on the construction work, and they too will have to form their own groups for this purpose. Because constructing houses is not a task possible for us children, nor is it possible for the elders. As far as the selection of the site is concerned, we leave that to the elders because it requires considerable experience.”

My presentation was so lucid and comprehensive that everybody appreciated and accepted my proposal as it is. As for the gopas, they were so pleased with my presentation that their applause continued for a long while. Even the elders, for that matter, were all singing praises of me. Needless to say, the most astonished among the audience were the gopis. They just could not comprehend how such a small Kanhaiya, the mischief-monger who had troubled all of Gokula, and had especially made their lives a living hell not so long ago, had suddenly become so sensible and wise! Mission accomplished! It was these very gopis I was so eager to impress; as for the rest, I had already made a deep impact on them on numerous occasions previously.

After the meeting was over, father came up, and blessing and congratulating me, caressed my hair with great pride. Mother too hugged and showered me with abundant affection. And as for me, what can I say? Physically, my feet were still on the ground and my face relatively emotionless but my mind...it was soaring high up in the sky! I was feeling immensely proud of myself. To tell you the truth, this was the first time in my life that I had encountered *Param Ahankar* – the supreme ego. I was so thrilled that I could not sleep a wink again the entire night. I felt like patting my back again and again. In fact, I had mentally patted my back a thousand times already! Though I had not been able to sleep the previous night either, there was a vast difference between these two nights. The previous night, it was anxiety that had kept me wide awake, whereas today, it was pride that had driven the sleep away from my eyes. This was the first time that I was experiencing how dangerous success could be. Undoubtedly, one needs to have a steady mind and a large heart to handle success, and that could not be expected from me as a child. This is precisely why the saying in Hindi, ‘Pride suits children but it is humility which is more becoming of the elders,’ is so true.

However, pride and arrogance were the matters of that night, and they vanished with the darkness of the night, at the first rays of the sun. From the next day onwards, everyone engaged themselves in the tasks respectively assigned to them. Though we had no comforts, our enthusiasm was soaring high. Though we had to sleep under the trees in the forest, the joy we experienced was akin to that of luxuriously living in a royal palace. Undoubtedly, it was the dream of having our settlement constructed that had triggered this inexplicable joy. The gopas, the gopis and we children; all of us were so absorbed in our work that from dawn to dusk, the entire day passed in the blink of an eye. It was only work, work and work! This had become the way of our life. Bhaiya and I occasionally went out with the group that took the cattle for grazing, and at other times, we joined the group that went out to pluck fruits. We did not have to go far; there was green, succulent grass available in abundance everywhere. Truly, there could not be a better place than this for us, herdsmen. Every nook and corner of Vrindavan was filled with trees laden with fruits and flowers. Another advantage of this location was, the clearing chosen by the elders was a vast area, located between the Govardhana Hill and the river Yamuna. It can be said that the selection of the site fully reflected the experience of the elders. To tell you the truth, with this migration, we could see our lives acquiring a new meaning. This was the reason why, despite getting exhausted after toiling through the day, we were still left with energy to indulge in small festivities at night. Singing and dancing had almost become a regular feature of our evenings.

With the passage of time, the construction work had begun to gather pace. Everyone was engaged in fulfilling their duties diligently. We would get so exhausted, that in spite of sleeping out in the open, everyone slept right through the night until morning, without waking up even once. As it is, hard-working people invariably sleep at a stretch until morning. The construction was also taking shape as per schedule and now the completion of the basic structure of the rooms had infused greater energy into all of us, which in turn had fuelled the speed of construction. As a result, after a month of hard labour, all the three halls were ready. Now when the rooms were ready, what was the need to wait? All the elders, women and infants were immediately moved into these halls. We somehow managed to stack all the household goods that were lying outside into these rooms. With this, the first and basic part of our establishment, the three halls, were ready and everybody's enthusiasm soared to the skies. Once again, everyone engaged themselves in their respective tasks with double the enthusiasm.

However, it could not be said that everything was going well, as one problem was still staring us right in our faces; actually, the monsoon season was barely three-four months away. Therefore, it had become imperative for us to finish the remaining construction work before the rains came pouring down, and it was not so easy to accomplish that. Admittedly, after the three halls were ready, we were so enthusiastic that work was progressing with double the speed. And on top of that, the fast approaching monsoon season too had forced us to ramp up the pace of work. But still, considering the long list of work yet to be accomplished, completing the work before the onset of monsoon appeared to be an uphill task. But then, when do we herdsmen ever get anything easily anyway? Even the fruits of our hard labour become available to us only after due penance. Fortunately, nobody was slacking off at work; everyone was carrying out their assigned tasks with exemplary diligence. But truly speaking, this alone was not enough to complete the task before the onset of the monsoon; to me, a time-bound framework seemed essential to complete the tasks. Since the suggestion was mine, naturally, I was the one who had set the deadline too. In the herdsmen community, we had a special quality; there was no sense of 'yours' and 'mine'; whatever we possessed, collectively belonged to the entire community. Thus, there were no ego clashes amongst us, which was the reason why everything had been accomplished so easily and smoothly.

One afternoon, while we were resting in the forest after plucking fruits and flowers, I suddenly received a message from Nanda, asking me to return home immediately. Neither could I understand the reason behind this urgent summons, nor did I have the time to give it a thought, because at present, my mind was fully occupied with the construction activity. But, since the summons was sent by father, I had no option but to go. However, while leaving, I did wonder for a moment if some unforeseen trouble had befallen us yet again. But to me, everything seemed to be progressing well. As far as I could think, I did not see any difficulty; so I decided to go and have a look.

As soon as I reached there, I saw that father Nanda, mother Yashoda and mother Rohini were sitting together in the chamber, and to my great surprise, father Vasudeva and mother Devaki were also present there. I had already met Vasudeva but this was the first time I was meeting mother. After all, a mother is a mother and it did not take me long to recognise her. I immediately touched their feet. Lifting me instantly from his feet, Vasudeva hugged me and pointing to my mother, he asked, “Do you recognise her? This is your mother, Devaki!”

Upon seeing me, Devaki seemed to surpass the barriers of joy that a human

being could ordinarily experience. Her joy was indescribable and understandable too. To find her presumably dead son alive, and that too, now grown up as a supremely talented child, was nothing short of a miracle for her as a mother. Her excitement knew no bounds. Such was the height of Devaki's impatience, that she pulled my hand, hugged me tightly and held me close to her bosom for a long, long time; I too felt blessed on embracing my mother. But what was this? As soon as she embraced me, a torrent of tears came pouring down her eyes. Seeing this, Yashoda and Rohini too began to weep quietly. It was natural for mother Devaki to have tears in her eyes. You know that the two of us had never seen each other till date, for, father had taken me away from her side while she was still unconscious. Surely, it was the height of our misfortune that we were meeting today for the first time after nine long years. And how can it be forgotten that I was this unfortunate mother's only son who had survived? Nonetheless, these moments of emotion also passed and as soon as mother Devaki regained her composure, she was amazed by her dear son's beauty, capability and ability to take responsibility. It did not take me long to understand that Nanda and Yashoda must have certainly praised me to high heavens in front of Devaki and Vasudeva.

As for me, who does not like meeting his mother? I too was overwhelmed by emotions; my happiness knew no bounds either, but not for long. Soon, my mind was entangled in the tasks that lay ahead and with that, I became increasingly anxious to head back to my work at the earliest in the forest. All in all, it was not possible for me to stay put there for long; for, at this juncture, my mind was thoroughly engrossed in the tasks which had to be accomplished before the onset of the monsoon. With this thought, I jumped up saying that I still had to pluck a lot of fruits, touched mother Devaki's and father Vasudeva's feet and ran towards the forest. With this, a mother and her son's first brief meeting was concluded. Although the meeting was brief, it was immensely satisfying for both mother and father. They were quite pleased on seeing that though their child was being raised far away from them, he was certainly growing up wonderfully. And what else could they want as parents?

Soon after I left, mother Devaki and father Vasudeva also departed for Mathura. While leaving, the news that Vasudeva imparted to Nanda regarding Kansa, greatly relieved his anxieties. The gist of it was, the news of Shatak's death had virtually driven Kansa insane and in this frenzied state, he was venting his ire not just on his family members but also on the walls of the palace! He could see that his death was not only certain, but was fast approaching; and as a result, he

was turning into an insomniac. The situation had come to such a pass that he constantly dwelled in a state of fear. Amazing, isn't it? The one who had brutally killed his sister's eight newborn children was now petrified of his own death! Perhaps, this is the difference between a callous, wicked person and a valiant one. The valiant person can embrace even death with a smile, because he never commits any sins, whereas a callous, wicked person perpetuates such terrible acts that he is terrified of his own death. Anyway, both of Kansa's wives were petrified by his growing insanity. And for the sake of information, let me tell you that Kansa was married to the two daughters of Jarasandha, the mighty King of Magadha; and it was the result of the favours bestowed upon Kansa by Jarasandha that he was seated on the throne of Mathura.

Moving ahead with the story; not finding any solution to the deteriorating condition of their husband, my aunts, the anxious wives of Kansa, sought the help and advice of their astute father. On being apprised of the situation by his daughters, a disturbed Jarasandha immediately called Kansa to his capital, Magadha. On reaching there, when Kansa told Jarasandha about Narada's prediction, the killing of the eight children of Devaki, the death of Trinavarta, Putana and Shatak in detail, Jarasandha too was taken aback for a moment. But then, he suddenly burst out laughing. In fact, Jarasandha felt sorry and was extremely stunned to see Kansa in such a mental state. Jarasandha was after all, a shrewd, seasoned and experienced King with a stable mind. Hence, understanding the crux of the matter, he seated Kansa beside him, spoke to him, gave him immense moral support and courage, and even advised him to take rest for a few days.

After resting for a few days when Kansa recuperated and returned to normalcy, Jarasandha drew upon his years of experience and advised him, "First of all, an astute King should not trust the words of wandering holy men, as their utterances and predictions are as diverse as they themselves are from each other; making nonsensical statements is their means of livelihood. And not only did you fall for Narada's so-called predictions, but you also killed eight children of your own sister on his advice! And now, you suspect that Devaki's eighth child is still alive, so you even want to kill Krishna. To make matters worse, the three people you had sent to kill Krishna were themselves killed and this made you a nervous wreck; because you think that all three of them were killed by that child! Think with a calm mind, how can a child kill anybody? Firstly, you are unnecessarily becoming jittery and suspicious, and secondly, your own suspicious nature is driving you to live in constant fear. You are a King, and as a King, you should be

thoroughly acquainted with the history and the lifestyle of herdsmen communities. You should be aware of the fact that they live as one large joint family. If they find anyone even remotely threatening to them or their children, they all get together and kill him. This is how they react; this is the way of their life. I am sure, this is precisely what happened to the three people sent by you; therefore, stop worrying unnecessarily, stay with me and rest for a few days until you have recovered completely. And when you feel better, you can return to Mathura. And yes... from now on, do not even think of Gokula and never should you target that child. Believe me, this is nothing but the result of your own suspicions.”

Now, Jarasandha was Kansa’s father-in-law and also an influential King. Besides, at present, he was one of the few most powerful Kings of Aryavrata. So it was but natural for Kansa to heed to his counsel. The news of these developments conveyed by Vasudeva was actually the reason behind Nanda’s happiness these days. Now there was no danger to his son's life and there was no need to fear for the safety of his child! Could there be a bigger reason to rejoice for him? By the way, these two men never even mentioned Kansa’s name in my presence. For me, all these facts came to light only when I had grown up.

Well, on that day, I had been working all day long. But at night when I was alone, I could not help but think of my mother Devaki. Truly, I was one unique human being; I was her only living child and this was the first time she had seen me! Besides, she had endured such unbearable anguish of seeing her seven children being murdered. Imagine then, how happy she must have been on seeing me! What great expectations she must have had from this meeting! And look at me, what did I do? Like a fool, I had fled just as quickly as I had come. Now I myself wondered what kind of a person I was; but what could I do? This was my nature. I would get so absorbed in the task at hand that it became impossible for me to divert my attention from that task. As such, when there is constructive work at hand, there is no question of one’s mind dwelling on anything else, and I truly believe that it should not either. Obviously, the construction of the houses was my first priority and at that time, mother’s love was proving to be a hindrance to it.

But, at present, lying awake in my bed with nothing else to do, I was really missing my mother; and neither was it wrong for me to feel thus. Who knows when would I be able to meet her again? Would it even be possible to meet her again or not? It was only because Kansa was not present in Mathura that Vasudeva could dare to bring Devaki to Vrindavan. But for how long could one

think about something which was beyond one's control? Incidentally, let me reveal one more thing to you which had transpired in the meeting between my two fathers. While leaving from Vrindavan, although Vasudeva had mitigated Nanda's fears regarding Kansa, he had also said something that had saddled Nanda with a new set of worries.

According to Vasudeva, many powerful cannibals had made the forests surrounding Vrindavan their home, over the past several years; the chief among them was Keshi, and hence, he advised Nanda to always be on guard against them. Just imagine! We had migrated from Gokula to Vrindavan because of security issues; and now if this place had also become unsafe, where were we to go? As herdsmen, we are destined to live under the constant shadow of struggle and danger and Nanda was well aware of this fact. But as was his nature, he was anyway not someone prone to worrying. Therefore, this new threat did not overly perturb him or linger on his mind for long. It was a good advice, so he listened to it. Yet there was nothing much he could do about it, so he put the matter to rest.

Coming back to the present, the houses were being constructed in full swing. And as the settlement began to take shape, it fuelled everybody's enthusiasm to complete the work even more quickly. It had to be admitted that everybody was working to their fullest capacity. And the most comforting fact was, with the completion of the three halls, the problem of accommodation for the elderly and the women folk was resolved. As for the youth, there was nothing to be worried about; to sleep under a starlit sky was a source of sheer joy for them. I too was immersed in hard work, day in and day out. Even I would feel very tired, but the thought of being useful to my village invariably washed away all my exhaustion. Moreover, getting such a wonderful experience at such a young age was indeed precious. In the process, not only was I becoming more responsible but extremely self-confident too. Why just me, everyone was thoroughly engaged in their respective tasks and still, it seemed as if no one knew what exhaustion was. You could say that the excitement of starting life anew, was the reason behind the undying enthusiasm of everyone.

For us, a matter of delight was, we invariably found an opportunity for fun and frolic waiting for us, in the evening after dinner, as the elders and the women retired to their halls, and we, the gopas and the gopis, were the only ones left in the clearing. Thus, we ended up having a singing and dancing celebration, two or three times a week. Gradually, my dancing too was becoming a regular feature. Earlier, as a child, I would join and do a jig or two out of sheer excitement,

whenever everybody danced. But now with the passage of time, dancing was fast becoming my passion. And with the elders no longer a hindrance, our merrymaking was at its peak.

We did not even realise how quickly three months had flitted by. The fact that came as a relief was, the construction work was completed as per schedule. In other words, driven by sheer determination and hard work, we did not allow the rains to become a deterrent, for naturally, the rains could have ruined all our efforts. Needless to mention, the biggest and the best house was that of the village headman, father Nanda, that is, our house, and indeed at present it almost provided us the comfort of a royal palace. How pleasurable it can be to sleep in one's own house can be understood only by someone, who has been sleeping in thick forests for months at a stretch. Besides, we had also laboured extremely hard to construct this particular house. And I especially was very happy, as the master plan was mine; so, at least for me, this house that I had helped build with my own hands, was bound to provide me immense peace and pleasure. Why just me, the contentment of having completed the work and the joy of living in new homes was radiating from every single person's face. After plodding hard and having lived a tough life in the open, we were once again bestowed with an opportunity to live like human beings; such being the case, who would not be happy?

Incidentally, the most distinctive and important development was, as soon as we moved into the settlement, we felt ourselves truly transformed from Gokulwasis, the inhabitants of Gokula to Vrindavanwasis, the inhabitants of Vrindavan.

To describe my new house, it was right in front of a large village square situated in the centre of the village. This house was much bigger and spacious than our previous house in Gokula. Adjoining the main door of the house was a beautiful courtyard that opened out into the activity ground, which gave the house an open and spacious feel from all four sides. It had large rooms, a big kitchen, a beautiful courtyard...there was nothing that was amiss in this wonderful house!

As for the village ground, words would not suffice to describe its beauty. The whole ground was covered with a green carpet of grass and in between there were large Peepal trees. Many of the trees had swings tied to them. And as if all this was not enchanting enough, in view of the festivals we held at night, torches were also installed all around the ground. And when the torches were lit, the ground looked alluring beyond compare! There could not have been a better place than this to hold the festivities. Adding to its uniqueness was the fact that

everyone had tied their cattle in front of their homes, making it appear as if there was a wall of animals separating the houses from the village ground. The most important feature of the settlement was, after having confronted the security issues at Gokula, safety was given the topmost priority and all security measures had been put in place while preparing the layout of this ground. After all, learning from experience is the greatest quality possessed by a human being. Thus, it had been ensured that there was just one entrance to the ground and even that was dutifully closed every night. To sum up, life had reached a new high within a few days of settling down in our new abode, in Vrindavan.

Once settled, for a few weeks, everyone just rested. But then, for how long could our youthful energy rest? Thus, needless to mention, we, gopas and gopis were the first ones to get tired of rest. After experiencing a long spell of rest and relaxation, now the entire day would turn into a long series of fun and games, and at night, a community dinner was followed by festivities, music and dance programmes; this had become our daily routine for the next few days. But does the life of a herdsman ever permit such a long rest? Slowly, everyone returned to their grind of routine activities, that is, earning their livelihood. Yes, some had opted to do so by choice, and the rest, by compulsion.

Well, I do not know about others, but I had become such a workaholic that I had now begun to enjoy learning newer tasks. After all, work is work; no work is big or small; it need not even be classified as 'your work' or 'mine'. And you will not believe it, but in keeping with this motto, the first task I learnt to do was milking the cows and churning butter. Now, I was engaging myself in these new tasks with the purpose of learning, but what can I say, even this did not go down well with the world! One day, I was churning butter with the gopis, when bhaiya landed there to call me to accompany him to the forest. Now bhaiya was not at all at fault as it was our daily routine to accompany the gopas in taking the cows out for grazing; but unfortunately, this time he saw me churning butter with the gopis. Perhaps, he did not approve of me indulging in such a menial task, for he passed a snide remark which I feel embarrassed to even repeat, but what is the point in hiding it from you? Bhaiya tousled my hair in front of everyone and said, "Kanhaiya, the work of the gopis suits you better. I wonder why you unnecessarily come with us to graze the cows." Saying this, he left for the forest, leaving me feeling deeply embarrassed. And here, the gopis had a hearty laugh at my expense. Now what could I do about this? To save my self-respect, I quickly sprinted after bhaiya without even washing my hands.

Undoubtedly, I had been gravely humiliated because of these wicked gopis. My

mind yearned to teach them a lesson. I had condescended to accompany them on their strolls and then, I had to endure their snide titters! And that too at my expense! Furious at their temerity, I was just mulling over all this when I suddenly remembered Holi, the festival of colours. Oh yes! The festival was just ten days away. Where could I find an opportunity better than this to harass the gopis? The moment this brilliant idea cropped up in my mind, I became energetic once again. Soon, I was busy collecting various kinds of fast as well as easily washable colours. In short, the plan was ready in my mind, now all I had to do was wait for the day of the festival of colours. I anyway loved troubling the gopis at any available opportunity, but I knew that the fun of troubling them on this particular festival day would be far greater! Have you forgotten? When I was a small child, had these heartless gopis spared any effort in harassing me as they repeatedly drenched me with colours? Had the wicked women pitied my helplessness at that time? Unmoved by my constant wailing, they would keep splattering colour all over my body. Tell me, wouldn't I rejoice on seeing them caught in a similarly helpless condition? To me, the days seemed to be passing by at a snail's pace. I had devised such a spectacular plan; how could I wait for the time to pass? Finally, the day arrived. This was the opportunity for me to avenge an old harassment. I was exuberant and along with me the entire Vrindavan was very excited for the festival. Well, everybody had their own reasons for being enthusiastic and excited. Initially, the festival of colours would begin early in the morning with a small gathering arranged at our house. But this time the get-together was taking place at the house of a gentleman named Vrishbhanu who lived in Barsana, a village close to Vrindavan. Thus, mother and father took me and bhaiya along with them early in the morning to his house, to wish him and participate in the festival. We were greeted by his wife, Kirtikumari. Soon, everybody began exchanging greetings, embracing and affectionately drenching one another in a shower of numerous hues. Meanwhile, ignoring my age, their daughter Radha took me on her lap and applied colour to me. She showered me with loads of affection too; and to tell you the truth, even I liked the love she lavished on me. Yet, I began to feel restless now sitting in the house; since past one week, my mind was preoccupied with thinking only about the lesson that I wanted to teach the gopis. Thus, I took bhaiya along and quickly escaped from there.

In the village, the gopas and gopis were roaming about in a group since early morning, with colour in their hands. Many of the gopas even had drums hanging around their necks. Singing and dancing, they were rambling all over Vrindavan; soon we too joined the cavorting group of gopas. In between, I switched to

roaming with the older gopas as well. The moment they saw me approaching them, they began beating their drums harder and I broke into a dance to the beat, and seeing me dancing, the gopis also joined us. In fact, unable to contain themselves, some even began dancing with me. Seeing the gopis dance, the gopas began to beat the drums even harder, electrifying the atmosphere in no time. Everything was well until now, but the wicked gopis made it a point to harass me by colouring me before they moved on. However, I too coloured them at every opportunity but in this colourful encounter with the gopis, I usually found myself at the receiving end. What could I do? I was still too young. But yes, the elder gopas were certainly outsmarting the gopis, accosting and drenching them with colour at every opportunity. Meaning, the older gopas were easily able to carry out the task which I so yearned to accomplish. I desperately wanted to colour the gopis but I was not grown up enough to forcefully colour them. For that matter, I was not even grown up enough to strongly object when they coloured me. All in all, the situation was that I was helpless against the gopis and they, in turn, were helpless against the gopas; this meant that the only ones who were actually having all the fun were the gopas! As for me, going by the manner in which the gopis had teamed up and were colouring me, it seemed as if they were all out to take revenge on me for having broken their butter pots. Nonetheless, I was tolerating it all thinking that this time it was their turn but the next will be mine for sure. Though I was intellectually very sharp, what could I do? The need of the hour was physical strength, not intelligence. Oh, when would I grow up! Once I did, I would colour these wicked gopis with the darkest shade of black colour so that they would not be able to show their faces ever again! But all this was possible only when I grew up, right?

However, by afternoon, everybody was exhausted. Gradually, everyone started leaving for their homes. With a long face, I too walked back home. I was quite dejected; I had planned to do so much, yet had not been able to accomplish anything. My age had defeated me. I deeply regretted the fact that I could not colour these gopis the way I had desired to. But this meant that I had been trounced; and I did not like to be defeated. But then, was I defeated? Though I had ended up being an easy target owing to lack of physical strength, the day was not yet over. My diabolical mind had already devised a mischievous plan and I was soon engaged in preparing for its implementation. As the dusk set in, the gopas and the gopis, bathed and refreshed, began stepping out of their houses, dressed in new clothes. I was the only one still sitting in coloured clothes; because this was what my plan demanded. The moment I had been waiting for, had finally arrived. Taking some colour in my hand, I quietly left the

house to execute my plan. Needless to say, at this time I was at my mischievous best. Wherever I saw gopis wearing beautiful new clothes, I pounced upon them, covering them in layers of colour all over again. They screamed, “What are you doing Kanhaiya? Why are you spoiling our new clothes?” Another pleaded, “Don’t do this Kanhaiya; we have just had a bath.” All of them repeatedly squealed, “Nobody applies colour after noon; and certainly not after a bath! This is the rule.” Even I knew that nobody applied colour after noon; but was I the one to follow the rules? In my mind, I said to them, 'Oh foolish girls! I am on Mission Trouble! I want to trouble you as much as possible! My aim is to take revenge!' And you will not believe, the execution of my plan was so successful that within no time, I had coloured scores of gopis. Poor gopis! They had to go back to bathe and change into fresh clothes yet again. All their new clothes were ruined. Ultimately, the victory was mine. Did you see? The gopis had once again been defeated single-handedly by Kanhaiya. To tell you the truth, this was the first time that I had truly enjoyed the festival of colours. And as for the gopis, by the time they were able to bathe once again and come out of their houses, night was about to set in. And to add to my delight, they were still so terrified that they stepped out in ordinary, everyday clothes! I had been telling them from the very beginning: “It was not a good idea to rub Kanhaiya the wrong way.” They would invariably bite the dust whenever they dared to cross my path.

Amusingly, such fun episodes are a part of life, but admittedly, with each passing day, the quality of life in Vrindavan was touching newer heights. Now, neither did we need to take the cows far to graze, nor did we have to wander about in the jungle looking for fruits of our choice. The young gopis too were helping their mothers in their household chores. Indeed, if every member of a family works and shares the burden of responsibilities, then happiness and prosperity is bound to prevail in the family, and the changing circumstances in Vrindavan was a testimony to this fact. Now, nobody ever appeared tired or worn out at anytime. As a result, celebrations at the festival ground became a routine affair. Working, eating, playing and holding music and dance programmes - this was what life in Vrindavan was fast turning into, and we really did not want anything more from life either. Besides, even if one did wish for something more, what else was there to do in Vrindavan? Yes, the only new feature of our life was, we now had ample time at our disposal during the day, since we no longer needed to spend our entire day in tending to the cattle. And as we could not think of anything else to do in this leisure time, playing different kinds of games had become a daily routine for us. It was the same games which we played in Gokula; the only difference was, in Gokula we used to get an opportunity to play only once or

twice in a week, but here in Vrindavan, it had become a daily activity for us. If nothing else, this had at least provided an outlet to our exuberant, youthful energy. You probably know that among all the games, hide-and-seek was our favourite one. At times, we would also make pairs and race with each other, which too was an interesting game for us. In this game, the one who lost had to carry the winner on his shoulders. All in all, playing had emerged as our new and favourite pastime.

Enjoying thus, our days in Vrindavan were flitting by, when one day, the wheel of time took such a turn that accidents began to occur even in our games now. In other words, even games were no longer free from the incessant struggles of life. It so happened that one day, wandering at leisure, all of us gopas set out towards Govardhana Hill. As soon as we reached there, everybody wished to play 'couple racing' so we quickly started making pairs. I was paired off with quite an elderly person. I was confounded; if I lost, how would I carry him on my shoulders? But fortunately, what happened was exactly the opposite; it was he who lost to me in the race. I had barely got my bearings back after the race and had not even celebrated my victory, when without wasting even a moment, he put me on his shoulders and began to run. Well, what objection could I have had to that? For, as per the rules of the race, he anyway had to run with me on his shoulders. In fact, I was thoroughly enjoying myself, sitting on his shoulder as he ran. Indeed, how often would a child of my age get an opportunity to roam around like this, leisurely sitting on someone's shoulder? But, surprisingly, running thus, he had come quite far. For me, it was a pleasure as I was enjoying the long ride. But all of a sudden, bhaiya noticed us. I do not know what happened but when he saw this person carrying me off, he was alarmed. It was probably because this person was steadily taking me away from him. Bhaiya became a little suspicious, perhaps because the person was an outsider. Oblivious to all that was happening, I was lost in my own world. But an alarmed bhaiya speedily raced towards me and promptly pulled me down from that stranger's shoulders. For some reason, the threshold of bhaiya's anger was breached at this moment, and I do not know why, but in a fit of rage he promptly killed that stranger. Great! I just could not comprehend why he had killed him. He was a stranger, perhaps somebody's guest. Quite possibly, he was roaming around and had just happened to reach here; then why was the poor man treated so unjustly without any reason? It was probably because of Nanda's standing instructions. Oh yes! I remembered now; Nanda had instructed everybody, "If you see any suspicious outsider, then he should be promptly killed." However, it was also possible that bhaiya did not want to let go of any opportunity to show his might and bravery. Irrespective of

what the case was, I suppose it was for the best. At least because of this incident, Vrindavan had now found one more saviour!

Nevertheless, accidents, dangers and struggles were an intrinsic part of a herdsman's life. Whether it was Gokula or Vrindavan, we had to accept this as the fact of our life and live with it. So let us not dwell further on it. Instead, let us talk about the beauty of Vrindavan. Whether it was Govardhana or Yamuna, the forest or the village, fruits and flowers or the lush green vegetation, I was enthralled by everything that Vrindavan had to offer. And surpassing all this was a small, beautiful pond, a little away from the settlement, not far from Yamuna. Enclosed on all sides by dense vegetation, the ambience of this lake was beautiful beyond a poet's imagination. Adjoining the pond on one side, there were huge boulders through which a little stream steadily gurgled by. On the right side of the lake was a cluster of Peepal trees. All this made the lake and its environment look magnificent and beautiful beyond description. Truly speaking, I had fallen in love with this lake at the very first sight. I often went there either alone or with my friends, the gopas and gopis. We spent hours sitting under the Peepal trees and chatting. I was so enchanted by this spot, that when I came alone at times, I would not even realise how time flew by. I do not know why, but my hyperactive mind found immense peace in the solitude of this place. Perhaps, this was my true nature - hyperactive on the outside and peaceful on the inside.

All of a sudden, life took an unexpected turn. During those days, an itinerant band which sang devotional songs arrived in Vrindavan. They were visiting Mathura and upon their return they stopped here to rest for a day, as Vrindavan was on their way. Ordinarily, we hardly had any guests in our small village. Thus, excited by the arrival of these unexpected guests, all the inhabitants of Vrindavan, including Nanda, spared no efforts in offering the best of their hospitality. In the evening, I too accompanied Nanda to take the guests for a stroll by the river Yamuna. They all were captivated by the scenic beauty and the lush greenery of Vrindavan; it was especially the Yamuna which thoroughly mesmerised them. On the other hand, we were impressed by the guests' geniality and other qualities; especially those of Acharya Shrutiketu, the head of the troupe. Hence, everyone insisted the band to stay in Vrindavan for a few more days. And on Nanda's insistence, they finally agreed to it. Obviously, the arrangements for their stay were made at our house. And needless to say, father ensured that no efforts were spared in the hospitality extended towards the members of the band. All of them were equally pleased with the beautiful, scenic

environs of Vrindavan and Nanda's hospitality. But that was not all; the next evening, an enthused father Nanda organised a community meal for all of Vrindavan in honour of the guests, which was followed by a devotional music programme. I, in particular, was extremely thrilled ever since this programme was scheduled. You are well aware of my special affinity for singing and dancing ever since early childhood. We usually danced and sang only among ourselves; it was the first time that we had had an opportunity to enjoy a well-organised musical concert by professional singers. So, it was but natural for me to be excited.

By the time the setting sun cast its long shadows over the festival ground, all of Vrindavan had gathered there, dressed and adorned in their finery. The excitement created by the concert was quite palpable. And if this was the condition of all the other inhabitants of Vrindavan, you can imagine what my state of mind must have been? The musical troupe treated everyone to a magical performance. The cultural programme presented by them was indeed the finest of its kind. Not just I, but all the inhabitants of Vrindavan were left utterly mesmerised. In fact, you will not believe, but besotted by their magical performance, I was so excited that I found myself getting up and dancing umpteen times, or you may say, my feet kept dragging me to the dance floor on their own. Perhaps, I was following the beat quite well. Whatever it was, but whenever I jumped into the dance arena, the little gopas and gopis would begin to cheer me and I would be so thrilled by their applause that I would dance with even more zeal and fervour. To our delight, the festivities continued late into the night. Truly, this was the most wonderful festival held in the history of Gokula and Vrindavan. This program had etched such a deep impression on the minds of the inhabitants of Vrindavan that since early next morning, it had become the topic of conversation in every corner of Vrindavan. And as far as I was concerned, this magnificent programme had charged up every nerve and cell in my body.

Barely a few days might have passed after the concert when all of a sudden, a turn of events took me by surprise and changed the course of my life forever. It so happened that the next day, when I was leaving home to take the cows for grazing, I saw father and Acharya Shrutiketu engaged in a deep conversation. I immediately approached Acharya, reverently touched his feet and then sought permission from father to leave for the forest. I had touched Acharya Shrutiketu's feet out of my deep reverence for him, as his musical prowess had etched an indelible impression on my mind. And even otherwise, the charisma

and the magnetism that Acharya exuded, was uniquely his own. Seated in an all-white dress, he looked more resplendent than a thousand Kings put together. When I was about to leave after taking their permission, a dreamlike opportunity, coupled with immense hope, suddenly came knocking into my life, sweeping me off my feet. Acharya beckoned me to come near him; I silently went and sat at his feet. He looked at me very kindly and lovingly stroked my head. I felt blessed on receiving his grace in the guise of love. Then suddenly, I do not know what struck him, but he addressed father Nanda, “This child has great potential for art. If you permit, I would like to teach him music.”

I was speechless on hearing this; in my heart of hearts, I was absolutely thrilled and floored too! But father was of a different opinion. He immediately expressed his contrary view and said, “But Acharya, we are herdsman; our job entails hard work. How will art suit us?”

I was listening to their conversation very intently; naturally, the outcome of their discussion was very important for me and my life. Honestly speaking, in my mind, I had already developed a burning desire to learn music; but by expressing my wish, I did not want to let father down. However, fortunately for me, Acharya did not agree with his view. Giving Nanda a philosophical piece of advice, he said, “If one is a cowherd today, does it mean that he will have to remain a cowherd all his life? Man should never lose an opportunity to advance and progress in life, nor should he suppress his talents.”

I do not know to what extent father comprehended Acharya's words of wisdom, but through his words, I could see a new path opening up in my life. Until now, I had thought that I was born a cowherd and would die as one. Frankly, I had never quite thought beyond it. But today, Acharya's advice had opened up new avenues of thinking and growth for me. It had, in fact, vastly expanded my horizons. For the first time in my life I had realised that there was a life beyond cows and buffaloes, Vrindavan and Gokula; a life which could be several times more beautiful and glorious than the one we lived at present. As such, intensely grasping the essence of things in their totality was my speciality since childhood, and this was the ability that had set me apart from the other gopas. Just a subtle hint was enough for me to get to the very core of an idea. No matter how intricate the matter was, I could understand it in all its depth, in just a moment. And to tell you the truth, this was the fundamental difference between my way of being and that of the other gopas.

Now why am I discussing all this? As of now, let me talk about my music

education which was still suspended in ambiguity because it did not just depend on me or the willingness of Acharya to teach; ultimately, it was father who had to be convinced. And it did not seem as if he had truly comprehended the essence of what Acharya was trying to convey. Still, Acharya's request could not be rejected out of hand; therefore, to avoid giving a definite reply, father asked him rather seriously, "How did you come to know that Kanhaiya has a latent talent for music in him?"

At this Acharya laughed and said, "A stone does not tell the sculptor, 'Carve me there is a beautiful form concealed within me.' It is the sculptor who has an eye to recognise and identify the stone in which a beautiful form is hidden."

Now father had no words to counter this beautiful reply; meaning, it was decided...I would learn music. And on hearing this, naturally, I was jubilant. And my heart...it had got immersed in music from this very moment! You will not believe, but the very thought that I would get to learn dance and music was causing waves of ecstasy to course through my body. And over and above that the good news was, I did not have to wait too long for this propitious activity to begin. Early in the morning, the very next day, my music lessons commenced. Did you see what an amazing turn life had taken!

The first lesson that Acharya had imparted is still distinctly imprinted in my mind. He had said, three arts—singing, playing musical instruments and dancing—together define music in its totality. He had said, "Always remember Kanhaiya, without literature, music and art, man would be like an animal without its horns and tail." Like a good student, I listened with rapt attention to everything that Acharya was teaching me. For the first time in my life, I was getting an opportunity to listen to such erudite talk. It was for the first time in life that I was being formally educated and trained; earlier, I had just learnt the practical lessons that life had taught me. Needless to say, I was deeply impressed by every word that Acharya spoke. He too was delighted to see my keen interest. Perhaps, passion is the key to learning; for, the first lesson that Acharya taught me was about concentration. I very well remember his teachings about the virtues of concentration; he had said, "Kanhaiya, please listen with utmost concentration to what I am telling you now. Concentration means the ability to focus on just one task, that is, to be absorbed in one task. And the mind can focus on one thing only when it is not distracted by other things. That is why, first of all, you try to forget everything else. In fact, it is our memory that acts as the main hindrance to concentration. Therefore, you now close your eyes and slowly repeat each word that I say within your mind." I immediately closed my

eyes and sat in the deep, meditative position. Acharya said, “I choose to forget that my name is Kanhaiya. I choose to forget that I live in Vrindavan. I am a nameless student who has taken birth only to learn music.” As he continued saying this, I kept repeating it after him.

Then, for three to four days, he continued only with this meditation of unlearning from morning to evening, and only after this constant endeavour, was he satisfied. But it did not end here; he then made me meditate on forgetting my future too! Since my hold on the future was already weak, he was quickly satisfied. And you will not believe, but only after all these exercises of unlearning did my formal training in music commence. In the early stage of the training itself, Acharya had clearly underlined the approach one should adopt while learning. He said, “Not just while learning music, but in any task that you perform, you should focus only on the task at hand. There should be no memories – no future, concentrate only on the present. In fact, you should even forget your own existence while performing that task.” My ability to concentrate was already quite good, and now that Acharya had explained its virtue to me, I ingrained this profound teaching so deep into my mind that from then onwards, I made the ‘present’ moment my very life. Acharya also imparted another important lesson to me. He said, “Art is nothing but a name for bringing out the best possible results in any task that you undertake; and this art springs forth only at the peak of concentration.” With this final lesson, according to Acharya, I was now fully prepared for the training in music. And very soon, my formal education in music commenced.

In accordance with Acharya’s teachings, I just remained a nameless student while learning music; Kanhaiya would vanish into thin air; and it soon bore a positive result too. Seeing my concentration and devotion, Acharya began teaching me twice a day, in the morning as well as in the evening. While mornings were devoted to singing and dancing, evenings were earmarked for playing instruments. Being trained in two skills at a time fuelled my enthusiasm even further. And looking at Acharya’s keenness to teach me, it was clear that he was absolutely satisfied with my progress. Thus, an excellent rapport was built between the student and the teacher. I was happy for the fact that I had successfully surpassed his expectations and proved myself to be a much more talented student than what he had anticipated. On the other hand, the depth of Acharya’s knowledge and wisdom was also much greater than what I had expected. In a way, it seemed as if in a matter of days, both of us, the student and the teacher had surprised each other with our abilities. Every day, both of us

were surpassing our expectations that we had had from each other.

Well, among the musical instruments, I chose to play the flute. And in just a couple of months, I had mastered all three - singing, dancing and playing the flute. Especially, my dancing and flute-playing were truly exceptional. And when I played the flute, even Acharya was left utterly mesmerised. Really, the seed of my talent was sprouting forth like a sapling piercing through rock; and the flute was fast becoming the channel for my talent to flow. Remarkably, I had mastered all the three facets of the art of music in such a short time! Now, could this be attributed to the expertise of the teacher, or the dedication of the student, or both? Well, it does not matter whom I give the credit to, but one thing was certain, in these two months of rigorous training, music had permeated my very being. All in all, I can now say with certainty that I was no longer the Kanhaiya that I was; a lot had changed within me. Indeed, concentration had become my very nature now. And with the dawn of concentration, my firmness, self-confidence and analytical ability too had improved manifold. Meaning, this training had not only taught me music but it had also made my innate qualities grow by leaps and bounds.

To my great surprise, one day, Acharya requested father to arrange a cultural programme for me, to celebrate the completion of my musical training. On hearing this, I was dumbfounded for a moment, but then, I was instantly overjoyed. The programme was organised in the village festival ground and as expected, the excitement of the teacher as well as the student was naturally inexplicable. In other words, the teacher was eager to demonstrate his student's accomplishment and the student was keen to impress everyone with his new-found talent. Father too was very excited and had invited the whole of Vrindavan to the event. It was but natural for a father, as he too did not want to lose a golden opportunity to impress everybody with his son's talent. I was fully prepared to perform, and Acharya too had spared no effort in training me for the event ever since the event was announced. He had spent the rest of his time in just preparing me for the programme. Obviously, being a teacher, his reputation was also at stake. As it is, the relationship between a student and a teacher is such that if there is anyone who stands to gain the most in terms of reputation and reverence from a student's talents, it is the teacher himself.

Occupied with all these preparations, the day of the programme arrived. And before I realised it, the setting sun had already begun to engulf the festival ground with its ethereal, orange glow. Father had completed all the arrangements with the help of the gopas and I too was ready to perform. However, the

excitement of this programme was not confined to us - the teacher, the student or the father alone; in fact, all the inhabitants of Vrindavan were beside themselves with excitement since morning. Hence, propelled by sheer excitement, as soon as the evening set in, all the people of Vrindavan began to assemble in the village ground. The excitement of the gopas and gopis was just inexplicable. And why not? After all, their very own Kanhaiya was going to perform! Soon, the entire ground was filled to capacity. On one hand, Nanda was bursting with pride, and on the other, mother Yashoda was thrilled beyond words; her feet simply refused to touch the ground; after all, her dear child, the apple of her eye, was going to amaze everybody. Well, the programme began as soon as the night had cloaked the ground in its inky hue. I sat by Acharya's side, wearing white clothes and simple jewellery. The programme began with the music party singing some hymns. Thereafter, Acharya invited me on the stage. I had to demonstrate my newly acquired musical abilities before a huge audience; so what? Did I lack any self-confidence? I touched my teacher's feet and headed straight onto the dais to prove my mettle.

I had just begun singing and the gopas and gopis echoing their excitement, made the whole ground reverberate with their thunderous applause, providing ample proof of their exuberance. Why just them, all the inhabitants of Vrindavan were also going berserk with elation. They just could not believe that a cowherd boy, one of their own, could sing! And that too, so well! This very thought was making all of them go euphoric. The scenario was such that I was singing, and the whole of Vrindavan was brimming with pride! Having enchanted the audience with my singing, and enthralled by the overwhelming response I received, I now began to charm them with my dancing skills. I presented four different dance sequences. Although the people of Vrindavan had been treated to my dance on many occasions previously, today's performance was a class apart. For the herdsmen who spent their days grazing animals, this was nothing short of a great achievement. At the end of every song and dance that I performed, the ground would resonate with a thunderous applause. On one hand, for father, it was a proud moment to see my splendid performance, and on the other, for mother, it was a very emotional moment. And what can I say about the gopis? They had gone berserk with sheer delight. Acharya knew the pulse of the audience so well that he had scheduled my flute recital at the very end of the program. First there was singing performance, then dancing and finally, the flute playing. I began to wonder, 'If my singing and dancing performance had made the people of Vrindavan so hysterical with delight, then what would happen when I played the flute?'

Finally, with Acharya's permission and blessings, I coaxed a melody out of my flute. No sooner had the notes hauntingly wafted from it than the whole of Vrindavan seemed to have fallen under a magical spell. The festival ground was steeped in such serenity and bliss that nothing could be heard except for the sound of my flute. It almost seemed as if the people were afraid even to breathe, lest it disturbed the exquisite melody emanating from my flute. I too was so engrossed in playing the flute that I do not remember for how long I played it. Hearing the sweet music of my flute, tears were streaming down the faces of mother and father. Indeed, their tears reflected their joy, which was at its zenith. On finding their child so extraordinarily talented, obviously, at present, their chests swelled with pride. As for the gopis, they were ecstatic beyond description. They were so enraptured by the mellifluous notes of the flute that they had lost the very sense of their existence. My gopa friends too were feeling very proud of me and needless to add, they were the ones who were clapping the hardest.

So, with the blessings of Acharya, the program concluded. The whole of Vrindavan was swaying with joy; there was only one name on everybody's lips - Kanhaiya. People were coming in droves to congratulate me and bless me; for that matter, my teacher and my parents were being congratulated too! Honestly speaking, they were the ones who truly deserved the felicitation. No matter how tall a tree grows, it is the root that deserves the credit for it. Incidentally, at this time, along with the musical programme, father had also organised a feast for all the people of Vrindavan. Soon, dinner was served and the feasting had begun. Well, the elders had dinner and left for home and after some time, Acharya and father left too; but the gopis and my other friends were still crowding around me. And to tell you the truth, now, when the elders had left, the fun really began. The gopas were so thrilled that they lifted me on their shoulders. My pride was also soaring to new highs with each accolade I received. Although this fun and frolicking continued far into the night, I still did not want to leave the festival ground. For today, only I was the subject of discussion; I was being praised sky-high; I was being congratulated by one and all; what a wonderful atmosphere it was! Who would feel like leaving from such a place? You will not believe but it was nearly dawn by the time we dispersed.

Naturally, the next day, I slept well into the afternoon, but on waking up, I quickly got ready. I had just come out of the house after my daily ablutions when I saw Acharya in a conversation with father. Just as I bowed down to touch Acharya's feet, he came forward and pulled me into his arms, giving me a warm

embrace. He then made me sit next to him and said, “Kanhaiya, human life is very precious. Therefore, to protect one’s life and that of others is the first and foremost duty of a human being; and it is not possible to protect anyone without weapons. So, you must learn to wield weapons too.”

Though I held Acharya in very high esteem, this suggestion of his was not in keeping with my nature; for training to wield weapons did not interest me at all! It was true that I was so impressed with Acharya that I considered every suggestion of his to be of utmost importance. And to consider something important, it is not necessary to understand it; having faith is sufficient. So, if Acharya had said that learning to wield weapons was essential, then it was! It did not matter whether I had understood what he said or whether I liked it or not. So, bound by the unbreakable bond of trust, my training in martial arts soon began with Acharya's blessings. Bhaiya too participated with me in this training; as, from the very beginning, he was more interested in displaying his physical prowess than I was. Acharya began our training at one corner of the village ground and the very first lessons imparted to us were in sword-fighting and wielding the mace. Bhaiya quickly showed an affinity for the mace; but in my case, it was a problem. Even after several days of relentless efforts, neither could I lift the mace properly, nor did the sword remain steady in my hands. Bhaiya soon gained mastery at wielding the mace while I was still struggling with the two weapons; the saying in hindi, ‘taking one step forward, two steps backwards’ neatly summed up my condition. Acharya did not take long to understand that this art-loving Kanhaiya, the soft-hearted artist, would not be able to learn martial arts easily. Truly speaking, I was very happy that Acharya had at least been able to discern my likings and predicament. I was a lover of arts and Nature and above all, a lover of life. How could I wield weapons? Not that I was lacking in my endeavour, but it is not easy to learn something that one is not really fond of. Really, even thousands of endeavours are no match for the power of a human being’s mind. So, a person should only follow his heart and do what he truly enjoys.

However, Acharya was not the one to give up so soon. According to him, if I had to learn to wield a weapon and was unable to get a grip on the mace and sword, then I could try something else. Finally, exhausted after his relentless, futile attempts, Acharya found a new weapon for me — the chakra or the discus weapon. Now my training in the use of the chakra commenced. I quickly grasped the art of wielding this weapon since it was smaller and not so heavy. This was the reason why the chakra soon captured the heart of Kanhaiya – the

lover of life. Unbelievably, in a matter of just a few days of practice, I had become adept at wielding the chakra. I was delighted! At last, the martial arts' training was over. But I was wrong! Acharya was not content with this alone; perhaps his love for me was growing by the day! According to him, how could a cowherd boy survive only by learning to wield the discus weapon? For, encountering various kinds of threats on a daily basis was an intrinsic part of a cowherd's life. Hence, physical strength and agility were of paramount importance for cowherds. For this purpose, Acharya initiated me and bhaiya into performing various kinds of exercises. Thereafter, he also taught us wrestling. Both bhaiya and I quickly mastered the art of wrestling, and only then was Acharya satisfied. Honestly speaking, after learning to wield the chakra and wrestling, for some reason, my confidence had grown exponentially. All said and done, the matter of great surprise for me was the fact that a music teacher could teach martial arts too! This implied that life is not about gaining expertise in just one field or flowing in a single stream. And perhaps, this teaching had laid the foundation of my becoming an accomplished artist in every field and navigating through every possible stream of life in the future.

But now that my training was completed, Acharya did not want to stay in Vrindavan any longer. Besides, now he did not have much to do either; having taught me, he had fulfilled his duty. And for those, who are duty-conscious, it becomes difficult to stay at a place after they have diligently and successfully discharged their duties. Thus, he sought permission from father to leave. I became depressed on merely hearing the news of his departure as I had developed such a strong emotional bond with him that the very thought of separating from him shook me up. And in this emotional state of mind, I could not restrain myself from requesting him to stay for a few more days. But I was caught on the wrong foot. He not only rejected my plea, but also taught me a good lesson for this irrational request of mine saying, "Listen Kanhaiya, the very meaning of life is to move on, and people who are duty-conscious ought to keep moving day and night, without wasting any time. My work here is done and now, my duty is beckoning me elsewhere. Bear it in mind Kanhaiya, only a person who keeps treading forward assiduously day and night can reach his destination. Therefore, propelled by your own weak sentimentality, never ask a person to stay on, nor should someone else's emotional fragility compel you to stay on, because a life without movement is like stagnant water which emits only a stench. Nobody can gain anything from a life that is static. All the heights of life have been scaled only by those who have persistently continued to move on."

‘Great, Acharya! You have opened my eyes.’ I was not that old but I could still comprehend his words of wisdom. What do I say? His words were having a strikingly inspiring effect on me. There was so much to learn from each word he said, each advice he gave. I wished he would keep speaking and I kept listening to his valuable teachings until they seeped into every pore of my being. Truly, what was it that this person had not taught me in a matter of a few months! He had thoroughly transformed me! And even as I was ruminating over all this, Nanda requested him to extend his stay for some more time. I do not know why, but Acharya accepted his request, perhaps because Nanda was an elderly person; and besides, Acharya was already impressed by father’s hospitality. Moreover, what was the point of preaching to Nanda at his age? All in all, irrespective of the reason, for me, the good news was, he had decided to extend his stay for three more days. Well, this was not the time to keep pondering over this topic; instead, I wanted to make optimum use of the three days which I had in my hands. For, I still had so much to imbibe from him; I knew that in spite of teaching us so much, he had not taught us even a fraction of the skills and experience that he had. Perhaps, Acharya too shared a similar opinion about me. He too felt that I had honed merely a fraction of my innate talent. This was the reason why he seemed eager to teach me as much as he possibly could. Meaning, the fervour was equally intense in Acharya’s heart too.

However, I also knew that to gain more knowledge, I had to constantly engage him with a barrage of questions. But then, was this a difficult task for me? I knew that he had arrived here from Mathura and I was naturally keen to know about the city. I wanted to know what the cities looked like. What was the difference between a city and a village? My young mind was keen to find answers to these curious questions, especially considering the fact that father had never even uttered the name of Mathura in front of me. As you know quite well, the very mention of the words ‘Kansa’ or ‘Mathura’ was forbidden in our house.

Hence, as soon as we were alone, I expressed my curiosity to know about Mathura to Acharya. And in response, he described the city so splendidly that I was completely enraptured. Huge festival grounds, a magnificent palace, fabulous gardens, marketplaces, broad avenues...what was it that Mathura did not have! I felt so drawn to the city by merely listening to these descriptions that if possible, I would have flown to Mathura that very instant! Consequently, most of the questions that I asked thereafter pertained only to Mathura and other cities. This, in turn, made me realise that life is much brighter and far more expansive than the life that I was experiencing and living in Vrindavan. Thus,

engaged and immersed in conversations and imbibing knowledge, I did not even realise how these three days flitted by. The past few days were certainly the most extraordinary days of my life and now it was time for Acharya to leave. The entire village including Nanda had come to bid a farewell to him and his entourage. In a way, in just a few months of his stay in Vrindavan, he had captured the hearts of all Vrindavanwasis. The scene was very emotional indeed, nobody wanted to part from him. Even I, for that matter, was in a very dejected state of mind and despite my valiant efforts, I just could not bring myself to bid him farewell. Finally, I could no longer control myself and as soon as he was about to reach the outskirts of Vrindavan, I broke down.

Seeing me so distraught, he stroked my hair and said, “Kanhaiya! As I leave, let me give you my final but most important lesson; please listen to it carefully. You should never get so attached to anyone in life that you are compelled to endure the pain of separation from them. Meeting and parting are a part of life for the person who continues to progress and evolve; therefore, you should never cling to the pain of separation, whether it is from a material object or a person. Remember, a perennially dejected person can never go far in life. Kanhaiya, understand that a man comes alone into this world and goes alone. Meeting and parting is just a game played in the interim, so there is no need to take it so seriously. Remember, we are all travellers here; only a traveller who has stopped advancing gets dejected by separation. And you have to become a traveller who does not walk but runs; so do not get attached to anything in life, just keep moving ahead.”

Acharya’s last lesson was even more insightful; it got instantly absorbed into my consciousness. As long as there is life, this meeting and parting with people will continue; then why needlessly hold on to the burden of sorrow? And besides, I had to make tremendous progress in life. Acharya had spoken nothing but the truth; how can a dejected person grow and prosper in life? No, no! Irrespective of the circumstances, I had to remain cheerful in life, and scale unprecedented heights of progress and success. No sooner did this positive thought spring up in my mind, all my despondency vanished into thin air. It was bound to, for my learning was never superficial. For me, learning always meant ‘transformation of the mind’. And the proof of it was, the very next moment, I smiled and happily bid him farewell.

Well, Acharya had departed but before leaving, he had certainly penned the most wonderful chapter of my life. Really, I had been thoroughly transformed in these three months of learning! Not only had the seeds of several new talents sprouted

within me but some of them had even begun to enchant others. And several of my existing talents too were incredibly enhanced. Truly! Essential education, which has a profound and lasting impact on one's life, is completed in a matter of moments, days or at the most, months; perhaps, it must be futile learnings and education which stretches over a span of many years!

I was indebted to Acharya from the core of my being. He had laid the foundation, of not only my becoming a master of many talents, but also that of my extraordinary future. These three months of learning had thoroughly transformed me internally as well as externally.

Truly, Kanhaiya had finally transformed into 'Krishna'.

END OF CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 5

The First Enchanting Meeting with Radha

After having written the greatest chapter of my life, Acharya had left, and I had resumed my daily duties - going to the forest with the cowherd boys to graze the cows, gather fruits and flowers and so on. Although everything was just the same on the face of it, still, everything appeared very different. Earlier, it was Kanhaiya who would go out to graze the cows; now, only the task of grazing the cows was being carried out. Meaning, my concentration was becoming so intense that I would be thoroughly absorbed in any task that I performed now. To tell you the truth, because of this, every activity that I performed in life now had become a celebration. Truly, when only the act remains and the doer disappears, the joy of living acquires a new meaning.

Indeed, I had transformed from within but my transformation did not have any impact on the life in Vrindavan. Here, everything was going on in the same old, staid manner; toiling all day long with reprieve at night in the form of celebration, or a gathering of friends. But yes, a few changes had definitely taken place around me. For instance, my flute playing had become an integral part of the celebrations at night. Oh yes! There was another change too! The gopis, who had already had a special affection for me in their hearts, were so smitten by the melody of my flute, that now they sought me out day and night. Why should I lie

to you; I too had grown to enjoy their attention and company, although in a different manner now; and this was one fundamental change that had occurred in my life. In Gokula, I would play with the gopis all day long but after coming to Vrindavan, we had not spent much time together. For, after coming here, I had established a far greater rapport with the gopas, as we had been working together for a long time now. Nevertheless, now my flute had once again brought me close to the gopis. It was a win-win situation; they were enjoying the mellifluous notes of my flute and I, the artist, was deriving joy in flaunting my artistry before them. So, thanks to the flute, Kanhaiya had once again become the darling of the gopis. The situation had come to such a pass that now they would accost me anytime they found the opportunity, and would not leave me until I played them a melody on my flute. Often, in the middle of the day, they would forcibly take me to the banks of the Yamuna or to the nearby lake, and what to say, I could not put up much of a fight either. After all, what else can you expect from a tender-hearted artist? To put it candidly, the gopis were getting bolder by the day, and reciprocally, I was becoming more and more co-operative. You may have surmised that as a result, we were getting rather intimate.

Gradually, a day arrived when they were left completely enchanted by the magical spell cast by my flute and I too found no greater joy than to play the flute for them. These dalliances had so captivated my heart that now, I rarely went out to graze the cows or gather fruit. In short, the duty-conscious Krishna's 'duty' was defeated by the 'love' for the gopis. To put it differently, thanks to the increasing presence of the gopis in my life, 'duty' was now fast being replaced by 'love'. This significant change can most definitely be attributed to my flute. Indeed, art is the manifestation of love, and perhaps, this is why women are more impressed and attracted by the magic of art than by beauty or physical appearance. Of course, it is also entirely possible that my growing intimacy with the gopis, was the result of my approaching youth. Whatever the reason, my closeness to the gopis was a sweet reality which I cherished with all my heart.

And the closeness was incredible! Strolling in the gopis' company on the banks of the Yamuna, roaming around the lake, plucking fruits for them, playing the flute at their behest; with the passage of time, this had become a daily routine for '*Karmaveer* Krishna.' Incidentally, this chapter of my life had an embarrassing aspect to it too; I was the only cowherd boy who roamed around with the gopis, whereas, bhaiya used to roam around only with the gopas. In fact, he did not even approve of my roaming around with the gopis. So what? Why would I stop living my life because of bhaiya's likes and dislikes, or just because it was

against the prevalent social norms? This was something that Kanhaiya had never learnt. Consequently, the quality of brazenness was fast becoming an integral part of my nature.

Though brazenness had surely sunk in, in truth, I had still not become the leader of brazen people! Soon, an incident occurred which proved to be an acid test of my newly acquired brazenness. One evening, as per my daily routine, I was reclining beneath a Peepal tree, playing my flute; needless to say, I was surrounded by gopis, when a group of young cowherd boys led by bhaiya reached there. Upon seeing them so unexpectedly, I was flustered for a moment. However, I soon regained my composure and thought to myself, 'I was lounging peacefully, surrounded by the gopis and look! He has come to harass me even here! Who told him about my whereabouts?' Though the scene was pleasing to the eye, it did not leave me any scope to look someone in the eye. So what? Was I any less of an actor? Ignoring them, I peacefully continued to play the flute with my eyes closed. The whole gang of cowherd boys including bhaiya was stunned on witnessing this scene. How else could they react? The scene was so astonishing! Numerous gopis, all swooning in rapture, sat surrounding Kanhaiya, who was majestically lounging with his eyes closed. Well, this was how it was and if they had seen me like this, so be it; but I had decided that under no condition would I make eye contact with those scoundrels, the cowherd boys, while I was lounging in this manner. So, I began pretending to be deeply engrossed in playing the flute, and feigned complete ignorance about the presence of the cowherd boys. For, I had thought, upon seeing me so absorbed, they would leave the place soon. But alas, no! What difference could my positive thinking make to them? After all, bhaiya was not the one to be outwitted. He not only remained standing there, but also continued watching this spectacle with everyone, enjoying every bit of it. And what do I tell you about my situation! I had never even imagined that I would ever have to play my favourite flute in such trying circumstances too! It did not matter; I thought, 'Let me see how long does all this last. Now neither will I open my eyes, nor will I stop playing the flute.' With the strength of my new-found brazenness, I thought, 'Let me see for how long these people can hang in here.' Finally, bhaiya ran out of patience; he did not leave, but on a peculiar whim, he forcibly shook me. I was helpless as now it was impossible to ignore their presence. I had no option but to pretend that I had just come out of my rhapsody, and opened my eyes in a theatrical gesture, feigning surprise. And needless to say, the first thing I saw was bhaiya's livid face. He was so angry that in front of everybody he lashed out at me with biting sarcasm, "If prancing around with the gopis interests you so much, why

don't you also wear a skirt and blouse?"

Upon hearing this, all the cowherd boys broke into peals of laughter. I was quite flustered; now what was the need for such a biting sarcasm? Was it really needed? All my newly acquired brazenness was rendered useless; I was so deeply embarrassed that I sat quietly with a downcast face. To add to the disgrace, now that bhaiya had broached the topic, everybody ensured that it did not end soon. Expectedly, the moment their hearty laughter subsided, a gopi, with her tongue firmly in her cheek, said, "Balarama has made a pertinent point. Our Kanhaiya will indeed look very attractive in a skirt and blouse." Upon hearing this, uncontrolled giggles and laughter instantly erupted again all around. Everyone had a good laugh at my expense but I was disgraced! What did I gain by playing the flute for these worthless gopis? I was enraged at their duplicity. Did I play the flute for these treacherous gopis? And this is what I received in return? I thought, 'Go on! Don't you want to play it some more?' Then another thought crossed my mind, 'Ah, forget it! When your own people have betrayed you, why complain about others?' I somehow composed myself with these thoughts and with a sullen face, silently left for home. Henceforth, I did not want to have anything to do with those scoundrels!

But then, it was best to let bygones be bygones. It was a matter of a day or two; did it make sense to give up joy fearing snide remarks of people? And besides, it is better to live brazenly than to die of shame! In short, despite enduring so much humiliation and such embarrassment, I remained unfazed and my daily activities remained unchanged. It could not stop me from roaming about hand-in-hand with the gopis. Not only that, I also resumed my visits to the banks of the Yamuna and playing the flute for them. This was the peculiarity of my nature. Irrespective of the circumstances, I lived my life to the fullest considering it to be a golden opportunity to attain ultimate bliss and happiness; consequently, I indulged in only those activities which provided me joy. I never changed my ways to suit other people's suggestions, opinions or perceptions. Obviously, if I worried about the absurd comments made by others, I alone would stand to lose. After all, it was my happiness that was at stake. Was I out of my mind to bother about someone else's sarcasm at the cost of my own happiness? This surely would amount to an expensive deal. In other words, although I had been wounded once, at least now I had completely cloaked myself with shamelessness. Well, better late than never, and it soon bore a positive outcome too; finally, everybody's sarcasm, including that of bhaiya's was vanquished by my brazenness. The ultimate defeat was certainly theirs; it was bound to be.

Ultimately, the zestful Kanhaiya had to win, especially when he had cloaked himself in a thick garb of brazenness. In short, though I was going through a turbulent phase and things did go awry for a brief period, now everything continued as before. Most of my time was still spent with the gopis. And the positive fallout of this indulgence was, due to long hours of playing the flute for them, I was becoming an expert flautist.

But the fact of life is, everything cannot continue perennially in the same manner. If external circumstances do not change for long then an inner change takes place, and the same was the case with me too. It was summer and nothing interested me anymore. Summer was not the season of my choice anyway. Undoubtedly, my favourite season was the monsoon. My dislike for summer may have been either due to the heat or my age, but I now loved spending time with myself. And you know that ever since I was a child, it was in my nature to follow the dictates of my mind. If something caught my fancy, then I just had to do it. Then neither was I interested in fathoming the reason behind the action nor did I think about the consequences. And at present, my mind was thoroughly enjoying itself, whether I sat alone under the Peepal tree, strolled alone by the banks of the Yamuna or played the flute in solitude. Besides, I derived a great sense of peace and contentment from these acts. This is the advantage of following one's mind; it leads to an instant attainment of both peace and happiness. Acting against one's mind is the root cause of all problems. And these days, I was following my mind so devoutly that I had stopped roaming around with bhaiya too. Though I had been mostly roaming around with bhaiya since childhood, these days wandering with him also did not interest me much. There were mainly two reasons for this: one was my companionship with the gopis and the other was bhaiya's nature. What I mean to say is, even as bhaiya and I were growing up, our personalities were growing quite different. Bhaiya was more inclined towards playing all day long, indulging in mischief and wandering about with the cowherd boys. His favourite weapons were the mace and the plough. Not only in his appearance but also in strength, bhaiya was far ahead of me as he looked much bigger and much stronger than me. As far as I was concerned, I need not say much; you already know, I was a lover of arts and naughty by nature; and importantly, I was far from mischief involving physical strength and weapons. Yes, I surely knew wrestling and had also learned to wield the chakra, but here, I am referring to our temperaments and differences in nature. However, in spite of all these differences, we had one interest in common, bathing in the river; both of us truly loved to bathe in the Yamuna. In fact, I thoroughly enjoyed swimming in the river. And for your information, I

was the best swimmer among all. Although bhaiya was also a good swimmer, swimming was not his preferred sport.

In short, though the companionship of bhaiya and the gopis had become a thing of the past on account of my love for solitude, my routine of swimming in the Yamuna with bhaiya and the other cowherd boys still remained unchanged. Indeed, the pleasure of bathing and having fun in the water with companions of the same age was divine; so there was no question of my newly acquired love of solitude becoming an impediment to it. Let me narrate an interesting incident that occurred on one of those days. I had gone to the Yamuna for a bath with all the cowherd boys and needless to say, together we had indulged in heaps of fun in the water. After all, was there anything better than bathing in the cool waters of the Yamuna in the hot summer days? Additionally, on that day, I was at my naughtiest best. Carried away by the mood for frolicking, I had suddenly swam out quite far into the distance. Just then, a large sedge of cranes descended into the water to play. Perhaps, these beautiful white cranes were troubled by the scorching heat of the summer and had come to play and find relief from the heat

in the water.²⁶ I was really enjoying the sight of the cranes playing in the water; they were swimming so smoothly that they seemed to glide over it. I never thought that swimming could be so effortless too. Truly, their swimming skills had left even an accomplished swimmer like me thoroughly mesmerised. Among these birds, there was a very beautiful baby crane too; incredibly small, white and adorable. I could not help but be drawn towards it; suddenly I was seized by an irresistible desire to catch the bird. And these days, as I was following my mind, I quickly dived into the water in the direction where that baby bird was swimming. As soon as I jumped in, most of the cranes instantly flew out of the water. But the poor baby crane was left bewildered as it was too inexperienced to be able to escape immediately. It was after all, very tiny and besides, it was at my target; so in no time, it was in my arms. I could not contain my joy of having captured the bird. Gripped by joy, I held it carefully in the nook of my arm and swam towards the shore where all the gopas were bathing. Just then, I felt as if someone had shoved me violently from the back. The push was so strong that I suddenly plunged under water. Fortunately, as I had said, I was a good swimmer, so I was able to resurface immediately. The moment I raised my head out of the water, a giant crane attacked me, flapping its wings wildly; I instantly dived under water again. Indeed, had I not done so, it would have probably plucked my eyes out. Yet, it had managed to cause me severe injury with its very first assault. Such was the sharpness of its beak that in a single blow, it had made a deep wound on my back and blood was spurting from it.

I could cope up with the wound but the trouble was, the crane was still in an aggressive mood and so was I. If I was not getting any respite from its attack, I too did not offer any to the crane either. I did not lag behind in giving it a fierce fight. In spite of its powerful assaults, the baby crane was still in the nook of my arm, which perhaps was the reason behind the attack. But I was not the one to be outdone either; in spite of moaning in pain, I did not let the baby crane go. As you must have noted, right from childhood, it was not in my nature to shy away from a fight. The true joy of life indeed lies in the struggles and I have never turned my back on this truth; this was the reason why I was still fighting hard. I had resolved, 'I will not let the baby crane go, come what may!' I was hiding under the water, with the baby crane still ensconced in the nook of my arm, with only my hair showing out of the water where the crane was repeatedly trying to attack. Not just trying, in fact, it had even managed to inflict quite a few wounds, but I still refused to budge and release the baby crane - the reason behind this fierce fight. Had I released it now, the struggle would have been rendered futile. Unfortunately, I had only one hand free to defend myself; in spite of this, whenever it attacked me, I made a fist of my free hand and relentlessly kept on counterattacking the huge crane. By now, bhaiya had noticed this struggle, and he had also seen the blood oozing from the wound on my back. That was it! In a flash, he tore through the water and reached by my side. Do I need to elaborate anything more? Bhaiya launched straight into action from the moment he reached me. Firstly, both of his hands were free and secondly, he was stronger than me; so the battle was now between him and the crane. It was attacking bhaiya and he was relentlessly raining blows in return. Finally after some time, both the crane and I began to wear out, but bhaiya did not. He was in great form; he continued attacking the crane ferociously. And even I was attacking the crane whenever I got the chance. As a result of this two-pronged attack, the crane was soon gravely wounded. The poor thing was now no longer in a condition to even fly. Taking advantage of the opportunity, bhaiya immediately caught it by the neck and strangled it; within moments, life slipped out of the crane's body. Seeing this, I became euphoric; a smile of victory instantly flashed across my face. Like victorious warriors, we both swam proudly towards the shore, holding the baby crane in our arms all the while. On reaching the shore, I took the baby crane out from under my arm. But what was this? The poor thing had died a long time back. All the other boys were standing at a distance, watching this drama unfold. They had watched this entire fight as mere spectators, but then, there was nothing new about this. Crowds can never be more than mere spectators anyway!

All in all, today my day was spent in exuberance, whereas for bhaiya, the day had transpired as per his liking. He had a great time during the evening get-together at the village ground. He was busy narrating the incident of killing the giant crane, exaggerating many aspects of the story. Whoever heard the story marvelled at our bravery. However, as it was not in my nature to brag about in this manner, I kept myself away from bhaiya's boastful chatter. To tell you the truth, later when I reflected upon the different aspects of the incident, I felt sad; had the situation been different, I might have joined bhaiya in raving about our feat, but not in this case. In fact, while returning from the Yamuna, I had come strutting with victorious pride all the way home. Bhaiya and I had been so overwhelmed with excitement, that I had held the dead baby crane in my hands and bhaiya too had dragged the giant crane home. Not only that, we had also come dancing and rejoicing all the way, as if it was our victory march. But upon reaching home, when I went for a bath, my analytical mind began to ponder on the different aspects of this incident. It just kept flashing in my mind, and my conscience began to niggle. In fact, at this time, I did not even feel like sitting with anyone. And it is difficult to believe, but quite exhausted after the fight, I even went to sleep, leaving bhaiya to his bragging. However, the incident still refused to give me any respite. Perhaps, my analytical mind was not going to allow me to sleep peacefully without an in-depth analysis of this event. It was understandable; the crane was so helpless, yet, it had shown such tremendous courage! And finally, it had given up its own life to save its baby, in spite of the fact that it had so many children and I had caught only one! Were children really so dear to their parents? Contemplating thus, my analysis took another course. Suddenly mother Devaki's face began to repeatedly flash before my eyes. I began to think about the anguish my parents must have endured, when Kansa had killed not one, but eight of their children. This certainly was an unimaginably brutal act that Uncle Kansa had committed; he had so grievously hurt a poor, helpless mother. As soon as this thought flashed through my mind, my facial expression changed. I became suffused with anger and my eyes began to glow like red hot embers, and my body began to burn with rage. This was not all; in my half-asleep state, I even began to babble, "I will not spare Uncle Kansa! I will definitely kill him! Under no circumstances will I spare him!" Then abruptly, I began to calm down on my own. And surprisingly, as soon as I regained composure, Mathura, as described by Acharya Shrutiketu, started flashing before my eyes...big city, wide roads, grand houses, magnificent palace and huge marketplaces stocked with a variety of goods...As soon as Mathura's grandeur occupied my mind, all other thoughts disappeared, including those of the crane's love for its child, the desire to kill my uncle and also those of my

mother's suffering! My mind was lost in the crowded markets of Mathura. I did not even realise when I fell asleep dreaming about the city.

With time, this incident soon became a thing of the past. And speaking of Mathura, let me brief you about the developments that had taken place so far. Kansa had returned to Mathura and the good news was, he was totally at peace now. Indeed, the entire royal palace could feel the calming effect of Kansa's sound mental health. Meaning, Jarasandha had successfully convinced Kansa that we were the same cowherds who, terrified by the rampaging wolves had fled to Vrindavan, leaving our well-established settlement in Gokula. So why should a brave King fear people like us? These encouraging words by Jarasandha must have proven to be the Brahmastra in restoring Kansa's confidence. If you view this development in the context of my life, then Jarasandha had not only rescued Kansa who was on the verge of insanity, but he had also done a great favour to my life.

Speaking of myself, my nature which had already started becoming calmer had become even more introverted, since the time I had realised the agony of mother Devaki's suffering. Consequently, I often found myself lost in the world of thoughts. Perhaps, it was not in my nature to remain pensive, or to stay in such a depressed state for long. Probably, that is why something wonderful suddenly occurred in my life and filled my whole being with joy. Assuredly, this single incident brought about a complete transformation in my personality. In fact, this incident had laid another stone in the foundation of my becoming Krishna.

I do not know how should I begin to narrate this incident, which was so overwhelming in nature, that it sets my heart tingling even now. You would say, "Kanha, even if it tingles you, at least tell us what happened, will you?" Well, here it goes! During that same period, when in a pensive state, my mind was seeking solitude. Following the impulse of my mind, I had set out alone for a walk. Strolling for a while in this sombre mood, I soon reached my favourite lakeside. Encircled by **Tamala**²⁷ trees, the lake in the centre was breathtakingly beautiful; and shrouded in lush green vegetation; it looked equally enchanting from the outside too. Perhaps this was the reason why this lake was a favourite spot, not just for me but also for the entire populace of Vrindavan.

The thick trees enveloped the lake with their boughs in such a manner, that the outside world was oblivious of its existence - the reason why I had loved it all the more! Returning to the incident, I had just begun to admire the beauty of the lake when I noticed a boulder at some distance. What I saw next left me

transfixed; I had goose bumps all over. Many young gopis were bathing together near a huge rock. This fascinating scene left me utterly dumbfounded. My ability to think or act seemed to have frozen. My thoughts seemed to have been paralysed. All that I could understand was, I wanted to feast my eyes on this scene to my heart's content. I was so mesmerised watching the gopis thus, that no words would ever be enough to describe my experience. And since I was deriving such immense pleasure from it, I had no option but to follow my mind; hence, I quietly hid behind a tree and began to gape wide-eyed at the scene unfolding before me. Often, on hearing my flute, people would get so absorbed that they would forget themselves; but these moments were so enchanting that they had made me forget my flute, even while it was in my hand. Why just the flute, I had forgotten my very existence; my gaze was riveted to the scene of the bathing gopis. Suddenly, the hand in which I was holding the flute moved...or was it the flute in my hand that moved? I do not know; but it had inadvertently made a sound and with a resounding splash, all the gopis instantly dived under water. For the first time in my life, I was angry with my flute. Ahh! The game was over. All the gopis had plunged into the water. Look at the audacity of the flute! The very same flute which had made the gopis go weak in their knees, had at this time, caused the bathing gopis to disappear from the most marvellous scene of my life. The wretched flute had caused the bathing gopis to vanish! I just stood there quietly for a while, cursing my flute. Just then a head slowly rose out of the water; it looked all around and said, "Hey! There is nobody here." "Perhaps, it was just an animal," another added.

And giggling away simultaneously, all the heads again emerged out of the water, just like blooming flowers. A couple of them even came out and sat arm-in-arm on the boulder by the shore. I was ecstatic! I was once again able to ogle at them. My gaze may have continued to traverse slowly over their bodies but at the same time, the voice of that one gopi certainly kept ringing in my ears, "Perhaps, it was an animal..." Analysis and reflection had since long been an integral part of my nature. I thought, 'What she had said was probably true. Hiding and watching the gopis in this manner was indeed the act of an animal.' Greatly embarrassed, I quietly slinked away from the lake. Just see! My embarrassment had dragged me away from such a pleasurable scene. I was in a strange predicament. Though I had walked away, my mind was still fixated on the enchanting scene of the bathing gopis. I walked a little distance and sat down quietly under a tree. What could I do? Such was my condition that I had lost the power to think and understand; perhaps I had lost my mind. I simply could not comprehend what was happening to me. Certainly, it was not good for me to remain in this

confused state of mind for long. But who else was there to wriggle me out of this predicament? Under such circumstances, who else could I rely on other than my flute? So, I quietly sought refuge in the flute and started playing it. But everything was in vain; today, neither could I absorb myself in playing the flute nor did it give me any pleasure; my mind was still ensnared in those scenes. Whenever I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate on playing the flute, the vision of the bathing gopis would surface before my eyes. Truly, the gopis, who were smitten by my flute, had today defeated the very same flute. Finally, realising the futility of my attempts, I decided to give up and return home. But restlessness had still held me in its grip. My mind was just refusing to focus on anything. Finally, when I could not think of anything else, in order to find a reprieve from this restlessness, I went off to bed early. But even sleep was eluding me today. As I tried to sleep, the vision of the bathing gopis would drift before my eyes. Needless to say, I spent the entire night tossing and turning in bed.

The next day I woke up early...woke up? I had been awake all night! I had barely wound up my morning ablutions when, before I could realise it, my feet dragged me back to that lake. So what? Fortunately, just like the day before, I found the gopis bathing and frolicking in the water. Indeed, it was just to witness this very scene that my feet had dragged me here yet again. And honestly speaking, at this moment, this scene appeared even more pleasurable than the previous day. It was bound to; for, the previous day, I had merely chanced upon it, but today I had come prepared to enjoy this scene with full awareness and of my own volition.

How can I describe the upheaval of my emotions! My mind was going out of control as I continued ogling at this stunning sight. My heart wished that the gopis could keep bathing eternally and I could go on watching it forever! Suddenly, my feet began to advance towards the boulder where the gopis had left their clothes. I stood there, with my gaze switching between the clothes and the bathing gopis. It had indeed become difficult for me to comprehend the reason behind my actions and the surge of emotions that I was experiencing; my mind was baffled. In this state, I did not even realise when I had picked up their clothes, thrust my flute into my waistband and climbed up a giant **Kadamba** tree.²⁸

Sitting high up on the tree, I had a far better view of the bathing scene unfolding below. Watching the spectacular scene, I seemed to have frozen; I kept staring without even blinking an eye. Great, pulsating waves began coursing through my mind. Most importantly, as I had all their clothes with me, how could this play

end now? I may have done it unconsciously, but I must have picked up the clothes for this reason alone. Well! After watching the fun and frolic for quite some time, I do not know what struck me but I quickly pulled out my flute and began playing the sweet notes of the Raag²⁹ Bhairavi. The moment they heard my flute, all the gopis froze. Needless to add, the sweetness of my flute had betrayed my presence yet again. Still, in order to be certain, they looked all around, intently searching for me. And as soon as they saw me sitting up on the tree, their suspicions were confirmed. Utterly shocked, they all plunged back into the water with a resounding splash. My flute had once again let me down. But before the gopis could decide on their further course of action, their eyes fell on the boulder. When they found their clothes missing from there and hanging up on the tree, they became all the more serious. This meant that the matter had now gone beyond being a mere spectator. Indeed, the gopis were too stunned to comprehend as to what was happening. Kanhaiya was up on the tree, their clothes were with him and they were in the water. Something had to be done, but what? Was it so easy to find a solution to this? Finally, fed up, out of sheer helplessness, the gopis began to beg for their clothes.

“Shyam, do not be so audacious!” someone said.

“We did not expect such behaviour from you, Kanhaiya!” said another. “Please return our clothes!”

I found their helpless pleas indeed very appealing. Not only was I enjoying it, it was also driving me absolutely ecstatic. The situation was such, that some of them, driven by their shyness, stayed in the water, whereas the others were begging and pleading with me as I continued to enjoy watching their sheer helplessness. But I refused to budge from my stance. Finally exhausted, they surrendered; all of them looked so powerless and forlorn! Of course, by now they had realised that Kanhaiya was not going to return their clothes easily.

As for me, I was ecstatic; I had all the reasons to be happy. Whether it was Gokula or Vrindavan, the gopis had always remained helpless against the might of Krishna and would always be. Had they spared any effort in saving themselves from me and my ire? They had complained to mother, they had even attempted to pacify me, but to no avail. These simple gopis did not know that there was only one person who could save them from Krishna's mischief – and that was Krishna himself! Suddenly, I laughed when it dawned on me that the gopis must be thinking, ‘this rogue, Kanhaiya, has made great progress; from stealing butter he has graduated to stealing clothes!’ And how right they were!

Taking such a giant leap in such a short time was certainly no child's play. Finally, when all their appeals and efforts to appease me were rendered futile, one of the women, gauging the seriousness of the situation, slowly and shyly emerged half out of the water. With this, her body up to her waist was now out of the water. She gave me a piercing glance and then continued to look intently into my eyes. Truly, the magic in her eyes was so spellbinding! Locking her gaze with mine, she fluttered her eyelashes very enchantingly and asked, "Are you not going to return our clothes, my Kanhaiya?"

She had poured an ocean of nectar into the words, "My Kanhaiya". Its sweetness seeped into the core of my being. She then repeatedly used the words, 'my Kanhaiya, my Kanhaiya' while addressing me and the sweet melody of her voice coursed through my entire body like lightning piercing the crust of the earth. I did not realise when some of the clothes slipped from my hand and fell to the ground. Incredibly, the bunch of clothes that I had dropped had her clothes too. But what was more remarkable was her attitude, her persona; she did not bend down to pick up her clothes but instead, she gazed at me even more piercingly.

Without thinking, I blurted out, "I have already thrown your clothes down."

She still continued to stare imperiously at me. But why? I really could not understand. Well, after a while, still speaking in that softly enchanting voice, she said, "But I will not wear them, my Kanhaiya!"

Now what could I say! The way she addressed me as 'my Kanhaiya' left me thoroughly mesmerised. I was rooted to the spot. Still, I composed myself with an effort and diffidently asked, "Why?"

She said, "How can I wear clothes while my friends remain naked? It is impossible, my Kanhaiya," she cooed sweetly.

To tell you the truth, I was getting ensnared by her brashness, her manner of glancing at me and especially her overpoweringly affectionate manner in which she said, 'My Kanhaiya'. After a few moments of silence, she spoke again, "My dear Kanhaiya! Please throw everybody's clothes down...please!"

On hearing this, I do not know how and when all the clothes slipped down from my hands. Without a doubt, I was now completely under her spell. Do you know who she was? The name of this enchantress was Radha. I was elated beyond words after this meeting. All my sadness, my solitude vanished into thin air. I was cavorting all the way back home and it seemed as if my feet had taken on wings. All through the day, I remained thrilled; however, at night, the thrill

turned into gloom and despair. As soon as I tossed over in bed, Radha's voice sweetly echoed in my ears, "My Kanhaiya!" Whenever I tried to sleep, Radha's impishness would flash before my eyes. Yesterday it was the sight of the bathing gopis that did not allow me to sleep; perhaps, today, it was Radha's bewitching eyes that had kept me awake, leaving me tossing and turning at night. Well, what did anyone else stand to lose? Ultimately, it was my sleep that had all but disappeared. In spite of great effort when I could not sleep for a long time, I thought, 'Now that I have to stay awake all night, let me at least analyse the incident.' And within no time, I was absorbed in the analysis of the events that had transpired during the day. There were many questions to which answers needed to be found. I was a young boy, but still, why were the gopis feeling so shy before me? Besides, why was I so fascinated by all this? What was so special about the scene of the bathing gopis that I was still enraptured by it? Why was I still under the magical spell of Radha's eyes? After reflecting upon it for a while, I could find only one answer to all these questions; this was the attraction between a man and a woman and it did not take me long to comprehend it. But was it so powerful, so wonderful? Was it so enthralling that it bestowed infinite joy and yet robbed you of your sleep? Perhaps, considering that it was the first day of my contemplation on this matter, I had drawn a fairly accurate conclusion. And once the conclusion was drawn, sleep overtook me. I thought I was free. But no... the main problem was yet unresolved. As soon as I slipped deep into my slumber, Radha's face began to flash before my eyes. Surprisingly, this was turning out to be more of a punishment than pleasure. But what could I do? There was no way out of this sweet affliction. I was compelled to spend the entire night restlessly tossing and turning in bed.

The night had somehow passed but Radha was still hovering in my mind. Coincidentally, Radha also lived in Vrindavan but I had not really met her until now. I had never even seen her visiting our house. At times, we used to just pass by each other on the street, and that was all. But after this incident, she began to visit our house rather frequently on one pretext or the other, and I too liked her frequent visits. Not only did I like them but to tell you the truth, I now also began to anxiously look forward to her arrival. However, Radha was a married woman; naturally, she was much older than me. As she was unduly harassed by her husband Karma, she had returned home and was now living with her mother. But, unfortunately for her, she did not find peace in her maternal home either, because her mother, Kirtikumari was a very short-tempered woman. All day long, she would keep venting out all her anger and frustration on poor Radha. Ah yes! I just remembered; once, very long ago, I had visited her house with my

parents Nanda and Yashoda to celebrate Holi, the festival of colours. I remembered very well, on that day, she had made me sit on her lap and applied colour on me. And at that time too, I had enjoyed the affectionate manner in which she had coloured me.

Now on one hand, there was her temperamental mother and on the other, there was the rift with her estranged husband. Perhaps, this was the reason why Radha was gradually drawn towards me. And with every meeting, I too was becoming more and more sympathetic towards her. At this time, I was about thirteen years old and Radha was about twenty-three. But this difference in age was merely physical, not mental at all; for my mind was as mature as that of a twenty-three-year-old. You might remember that my mind had become active the moment Narada had made his prophecy regarding Devaki's eighth child, though I had to wait for an additional ten years just to gain a physical body. Speaking of Radha, she seemed much more sensible in comparison to the other gopis. Perhaps, her maturity could be attributed to her years of experience. We were well-matched; I was charming, she was experienced; I was tired of solitude and she was fed up of her husband. Thus, sooner or later we were bound to come closer. However, I did not even realise when this closeness blossomed into love. Perhaps, it was attraction at first sight which had metamorphosed into love in no time. Actually, the events had transpired so fast, that rather than gradually growing intimate with each other, we had instantly fallen head over heels in love.

By now, I was in seventh heaven. Every activity appeared to be a hundred times more enjoyable as Radha's love had given me wings. It did not take me long to comprehend that the love between a man and woman is the world's most powerful source of energy and also the primary reason for a person's happiness. Most certainly, this is the biggest boon bestowed by Nature on man; for, in thirteen years of my life, I had never experienced so much joy and enthusiasm ever before, and that too, at a time when I was going through a melancholic phase in my life. As love had blossomed between Radha and me, I had completely forgotten about my mother's pain, Kansa's atrocities and Mathura's grandeur. All that had remained was Radha. She was the centre around which my life revolved. On top of it, the good news was, now she visited our house every morning or evening. On a few occasions when she was unable to come home, I would pay a visit to her house to see her on some pretext or the other. Meaning, in a short while, our mutual attraction had grown so powerful that neither of us could stay without seeing each other even for a day. However, because of her mother's peevish nature, Radha did not want me to visit her

home. But these instances were few, for most often she would visit my house by evening. And, I would also be waiting for her, attired in fine clothes every day. Moreover, at the evening gatherings of the gopas and gopis, she would make it a point to sit by my side. Quite often, she would casually take my hand in hers and at times, during the course of our conversation, she would even seat me on her lap. For some reason, being ensconced in her lap invariably sent me into raptures. Actually, the difference in our age was so great that nobody could comprehend our relationship as no one in Vrindavan had such an insight or the keen eye that could discern the depth of our relationship. Everyone assumed that Radha's love for me was the kind that people had for children. In a way, this was good because it provided us complete freedom to spend time in each other's company. I was already adept at exploiting every situation; and at this time, I was taking optimum advantage of people's naivety.

It was amazing! Until just a few days ago, I had not even known Radha, and now, I could not even imagine living without her! Really, how did all this transpire so fast? Perhaps, the spark was ignited at the moment when our eyes had met for the first time. But how did it happen? How did I get so smitten by her, despite such a huge difference in our age? This was the question troubling me day and night these days. But I was so absorbed in Radha's love that I could not even contemplate over this issue; my mind just refused to think about anything but Radha. But for how long could this continue? I had to unravel this mystery of how, despite such a huge age difference, I had become so enchanted by Radha at such a young age. Finally one night, I could engage myself in introspection and began to dwell on the reasons which had left me so utterly smitten by Radha. Now, the mind is like a mirror which clearly reflects everything as it is, thus, the mystery soon unravelled itself. Actually, my mind was unblemished; and on that pristine mind, when a woman, repeatedly and ever so sweetly etched the words, 'My Kanhaiya', for the first time, it was but natural for it to become flustered. In short, it was my unblemished mind and my immaturity, which were entirely at fault. But then, how can I term it as a fault? It was a blessing bestowed upon me, thanks to my untainted mind. For, at present, what did I possess other than Radha's love? I had long since forgotten everything else in my love for her.

And, since I had nothing in life apart from my love for Radha, let me dwell further on our evolving relationship. These days, I was so smitten by her love that every evening I played the flute exclusively for her. The melodies of the flute would send Radha's love soaring to newer heights, and seeing her so

enchanted, my excitement would turn into exhilaration. Meaning, both of us had left no stone unturned in intensifying each other's passion and consequently, our love was crossing all its boundaries. In fact, now she had even begun to groom and dress me up. I too had surrendered myself completely to her; hence, I thoroughly enjoyed whatever she did for me. Radha liked the colour yellow, so it now became the predominant shade in my attire, along with pink hues. Not only that; Radha had categorically instructed me not to braid my hair. Perhaps, in her view, the braids looked too childish. And, as her wish was my command, I made sure that my curly locks were left open and I never braided them again. I must admit that to some extent, it did give me a mature look. Moreover, Radha had even taught me to tie a waistband, and had decided that my flute would be placed there at a rakish angle. But yes, she did not meddle with the peacock feather adornment in my hair. Thus, Radha's Kanhaiya was now ready in his new look. Needless to add, for the rest of my life, my style of dressing revolved around this new look that Radha had fashioned for me...and my life revolved around her! All in all, each day in my life was now like the Diwali festival. The very thought of Radha's name sent sparks flying through my body. The melody of my flute had grown infinitely sweeter; in fact, it was becoming increasingly enchanting! And now my flute playing enchanted not just Radha but it had learned to tug at the gopis' heartstrings too. Not only that, my entire being was steeped in such joy that the pleasure I derived from every activity had immensely grown, or had rather grown manifold. On the other hand, my love had made even Radha forget all her sorrows and become absorbed in the same bliss as I was.

Had I not told you that Radha was older and more mature than me? And as proof, on her insistence, I once again began to go out to graze the cows. As a result, my meetings with Radha were now confined to the evenings. Thus, with the passage of time, our love was growing mature, which in turn, not only made me grow up quickly but also led me to become increasingly duty-conscious and responsible. Now I was performing all the tasks with much greater efficiency, ease, absorption and enjoyment than before. For, these days, on the outside, there was the joy of performing the tasks and within, there was bliss of Radha's love; indeed the confluence was truly magical. Undoubtedly, the joy that I was experiencing on attaining Radha's love was difficult to express in words. And you must be aware that quite often, happiness beyond a point transforms into blitheness, and this was exactly what was gradually happening with me as well. Having attained the love of Radha, who was ten years older than me, had certainly bolstered my self-confidence and fostered my courage too. And when

courage crosses its limit, it is called audacity, and I had become audacious in every sense of the word. My flippancy and blitheness were such that at any time, they could cross the limits of audacity too; all that was needed was a challenge! And it is also important to understand the reason behind all these changes that were occurring. It was because, Radha was persistently working towards making an adolescent who loved her grow mature, and he, realising and respecting her heartfelt desire, was endeavouring hard to attain maturity as quickly as possible. So, it can be said that Radha was impatient to make me compatible to her and I was even more eager to become worthy of her. With this objective in mind, I had now even resumed my daily practice of wrestling. I generally preferred a bout with bhaiya because the other young cowherd boys would be knocked out in just a round or two. However, I must admit that bhaiya was a master in the art of wrestling. It was only on rare occasions that I could defeat bhaiya. On several occasions, Radha would turn up at the wrestling arena to watch us practice, and naturally, when she would see me being vanquished by bhaiya, she would feel dejected but whenever I managed to knock bhaiya to the ground, she would clap her hands with childlike delight. But bhaiya, as was his nature, would become extremely annoyed with Radha's behaviour. Meaning, poor Kanhaiya was caught in a double bind. If I was defeated, I had to endure the pain of seeing her depressed, and if I won, I had to face bhaiya's ire. But it did not matter; as it is a part and parcel of love and one cannot expect only sweetness in love.

Having said that, now whether it was sweet or bitter, I savoured everything I received in the wake of Radha's love. And caught in its whirl, I could neither understand what I was doing nor could I comprehend where time was flying. The ebullience of Radha's companionship had permeated my being to such an extent that both, time and I, seemed to have taken on wings. My enthusiasm had also soared so high, that now I had begun to challenge the older cowherd boys. This was not all; owing to Radha's encouragement, I had now become so proficient in wrestling that gradually, I had begun to overthrow twenty-twenty-five-year-old herdsmen as well! My victories had made Radha feel so proud of me! Well, I too was striving hard only to impress her. She was after all, ten years older than me. I did not ever want her to think, 'Oh, why have I fallen in love with a child?' What if I lost the love that I had gained by chance? Thus, to make sure I did not lose her, my courage continued to prompt me to constantly seek opportunities to impress her. I wanted to do something that would leave her so stunned that she would no longer feel the difference in our age.

Time passed as I went through this rigmarole, and in deference to my desire,

Nature soon provided me with a fabulous opportunity. Vrindavan suddenly found itself in grave danger. From deep within the forest that encircled us, a wild, raging bull barged into the village.³⁰ Not only had it made life miserable for the animals, it was terrorising the Brijwasis as well. Hey, do not be surprised, we lovingly referred to our dear Vrindavan as 'Brij' and its inhabitants, Brijwasis. Very soon, the terror of this bull had spread to such an extent that the gopis had stopped visiting the lake altogether. Even the elders had stopped venturing to the banks of the Yamuna. This raging bull was so powerful that it brought down the animals grazing outside the houses in a single blow. If any of us dared to cross its path, it would fling the person right up into the air with its horns! Thus, within a few days of its arrival, it had majorly disrupted the normal life in Vrindavan. This rampaging bull was very strong indeed. In view of its incredible ferocity, the Brijwasis had named it 'Arishta'. Even physically, this bull was much larger in size than the bulls in general. Its horns were quite huge and sharp. And when it charged, its speed was far greater than any horse! It could generally be found wandering along the banks of the Yamuna or by the side of the lake. Such was the terror spread by the bull that gradually, the Brijwasis had now stopped stepping out of the settlement.

But considering the kind of life we led, we could not afford to stay cooped up at home for long. We had to bring fruits, flowers and firewood; besides, the cattle could not be deprived of grazing for too long. Fruits and flowers was our staple diet, and the curd and butter that we churned from the cattle's milk was the source of our livelihood. As a result, in a matter of days, we were on the verge of starvation. The situation was quite grim; we could not starve to death and if we ventured out, the bull was waiting to kill us! Finally mustering courage, we took the cows out for grazing. Bhaiya and I also went along with the cowherds. But that day, in our absence, who knows what struck the bull, that in a frenzy of brutal destruction, it broke down the main gate and barged into the village. Was it fed up of waiting for us to come out? Or perhaps it wanted to give us a demonstration of its strength! Whatever may have been the reason but that day, it created such havoc in the village that it remained indelibly etched in our minds as a horrific memory. It injured several cows; the poor animals were so mortified by it that many of them even delivered premature calves! And several of them died as soon as they were born. But the bull's fury refused to abate even after causing such devastation. So it then began destroying the verandas of the houses; many passersby in these lanes inadvertently found themselves in the path of the rampaging bull. On the other hand, the gopis panicked on witnessing this scene, leaving their pots shattered into pieces. The poor women found themselves

drenched in curd and butter. The bull had devastated the entire village. Surprisingly, it had caused all this destruction in less than just an hour and that too, all by itself!

When I returned home in the evening and saw the mayhem that the bull had wreaked upon the village, I too was terribly shocked. I had never seen such a massive devastation before. The settlement appeared completely disfigured. In just a day, the lively settlement looked barren. All that one could see was wounded animals, weeping people, uprooted trees, broken courtyards and heaps of fodder lying in disarray everywhere. Our efforts to bring fruits and flowers had been rendered futile; fear had made everybody's hunger and thirst evaporate. I just could not comprehend how one bull could wreak such a havoc and cause such a large scale destruction. It seemed as if scores of robbers had first pillaged the settlement and then destroyed it collectively. Truly, Arishta had proven to be strong beyond imagination. This destruction had plunged the entire settlement into such an abyss of despair that I just did not know whom to console and how. On the other hand, a nagging anxiety gripped me that now since the bull had found its way into the village, it could attack us repeatedly! For, if once someone has tasted blood then one does not go back to eating grass! And if this indeed were the case, then in a matter of few attacks, it would turn the entire settlement into a ruin. Being herdsmen, we were compelled to live in the forests, and consequently, we were destined to face the danger of wild animals. But the reality was, as herdsmen, neither could we free ourselves from the complexities associated with being herdsmen, nor could we alter our destiny.

I was engrossed in these thoughts when I suddenly remembered the words of Acharya Shrutiketu, "Human life is very precious. Therefore, it is the primary duty of a human being to protect his own life and that of others." Instantly, my whole being was electrified. Since a long time, I was on the lookout for an opportunity to impress Radha, and now I even had Acharya's teachings to support me in my endeavour. Moreover, it was the question of the very existence of my dear Brij and the Brijwasis. Meaning, fighting the bull was necessary for the sake of Vrindavan, and it could augur well for me too! For, upon killing the bull, Radha would get the clear message that her Kanhaiya was now no longer a child, and on the other hand, Vrindavan, too would be relieved from the menace of this bull. That was it! In my heart of hearts, I resolved to kill the bull and in keeping with this resolve, the very next day, I feigned illness and avoided going to graze the cows. On the other hand, in the settlement, people were so scared after the previous day's rampage that they all had tied their cattle in their

backyards. In short, everybody had taken preventive measures to save themselves from yet another bull-rampage that might occur in the future, but no one had devised a strategy to deal with the menace! However, I had realised the simple truth that there is only one way to save oneself from a problem – confront it and defeat it anyhow. Of course, considering the bull's strength, my move could certainly be termed as audacious; it could well prove to be a misadventure and mark an end of my life too. I was very young but my courage was tremendous. In any case, is it ever possible to achieve anything in life without courage?

By now, the herdsmen had left to graze the cows and bhaiya had also gone along with them. As for the others, they were all cooped up in their homes, cowering in fear of the raging bull. Since I had stayed home on the pretext of being unwell, for some time I remained sitting in the veranda of our house. The problem was, on hearing the news of my indisposition, Radha had arrived home and her arrival was certainly going to create a hindrance in my ambitious plan. And on top of it, there was mother, needlessly mollicoddling me. However, I soon managed to free myself from both of them and reached the centre of our settlement. The intensity of the terror of the mad bull could well be gauged by the ominous silence that pervaded the entire village; and here I was, pacing up and down in that silence, awaiting my own death. Everything was quiet for some time, but then, Radha's sharp mind could not digest my pacing for long.

So, aided and abetted by my mother, she began calling out to me to return home. But now there was no chance for their desperate calls to disrupt my unwavering intentions. I continued pacing to and fro without pausing on the pretext that I was bored of sitting at home. When the bull did not appear even by the afternoon, I took the opportunity to dash home for a quick meal. After all, I needed both the courage as well as the strength to grapple with the raging bull; besides, I could never remain hungry for long.

However, after lunch I did not have to wait for long. As the afternoon wore out, the bull veered towards the settlement. It was charging towards Vrindavan like a tornado. And believe it or not, the ferocious bull was raising so much dust that it was lost in its own dust-cloud. For a moment, I too was aghast on seeing its incredible speed and strength. It was a 'storm' personified! Even though I was seeing it from a distance, it was quite clear that the fight would be much more difficult than what I had anticipated. But there was no question of backtracking now; this fight had to take place, regardless of the outcome! I instantly mustered the strength of my resolve and simultaneously, assured myself of my own

strength. Indeed, at this moment I sorely needed the strength of my resolve and faith in my own ability. And as soon as I had mentally prepared myself for the fight, I quickly ran and stood in front of a stone wall. Death was hurtling towards me with the speed of a tornado. On one hand was the raging bull on a rampage charging towards me with incredible fury and on the other, facing it was I, an innocent little child. It was akin to a fight between a little lamp and a hurricane! And what do I say about the hurricane? It not only came thundering towards me like a bolt of lightning but when it found me standing in its path, its ferocity also increased a notch higher! Of course, so far, it had only seen people scampering away from its path in terror; so this was altogether an unforeseen scenario for the bull. This had now become a prestige issue for it! Perhaps, its bovine pride could not tolerate my confronting it with my chest drawn out. So, it charged at me with a stunning burst of speed. So?! With an agility almost equalling that of the formidable beast, I leaped out of its path. After all, my standing there was part of my plan and just as I had envisaged, the poor bull rammed into the stone wall at great speed. The impact not only created a hole in the wall but also got the bull severely wounded. So, my first subterfuge had proved successful. Excited and enthused, I once again came and stood before the wall. The injured bull, now incensed at my temerity, came charging at me with greater ferocity than before. Once again, I nimbly evaded its attack. And soon, this became a repetitive pattern. In its raging frenzy, the bull continued to charge at me repeatedly at a lightning speed, so much so that its own pace failed at times, and it even stumbled and fell on the ground. But this only managed to fuel its fury further and remarkably, it was injuring itself at twice the pace of its rising ire.

Everybody was witnessing this great duel from their windows. They were repeatedly crying out to me to flee from the ground. Some had even ventured out and were standing in their verandas. Mother and Radha had come right outside the veranda, and needless to say, weeping in despair, both were desperately calling out to me. As for the rest, seeing this dreadful fight, they were obviously too terrified to utter even a word. Ignoring all their cries and commotion, I remained steadfastly focussed on the battle. Immensely enthused on seeing the bull repeatedly wounding itself, I grabbed another opportunity that came my way and stood before the stone wall once again. As soon as the bull attacked me, I stepped away deftly and it again rammed into the wall. This time, it had crashed into the wall so forcefully that the wall crumbled down in a heap. And the bull's constant collisions with the wall had severed one of its horns; blood had begun to ooze out of it. It could now be said that my courage and resolve both had proved successful. Incidentally, this is the only way to defeat powerful animals -

first enrage them, and then tire them out. While exhaustion drains them of their strength, their wild rage proves to be their own nemesis, because anger, after all, is one's own enemy. If you observe closely, this was precisely the strategy I had employed while tackling this wild bull. Soon, the bull was completely worn out and although it was several times more powerful than me in terms of strength, there was still a crucial difference between the intelligence of a human and that of an animal. I was fighting with my intelligence whereas the bull, in a fit of rage, was fighting like an insane creature.

In short, this was the only opportunity for me to launch a counter-attack on the wounded and infuriated bull. So when it charged at me again, I leaped quickly, caught it by the horns and flung myself onto its back. Finding me on its back, the bull began frothing with insane rage. This was a big defeat for it but how did it matter to me; as it was a great victory for me. Enthused, I began to wrench the broken horn off the bull's head with all my strength. In a short while, its broken horn came off in my hand and a fountain of blood gushed forth from its head. Now, the pain had become unbearable for the bull and even as it desperately attempted to resume its attack, it suddenly stumbled; and unable to fight any longer, it soon collapsed. I was exhausted too; my clothes were torn and I was drenched in sweat. Meaning, I too was certainly not in a condition to continue the fight; but still, I was aware that even a bit of laxity on my part could easily overturn my victory into defeat. Thus, without pausing even for a moment, I began to attack the fallen bull with its own sharp horn. Within no time, it was mortally wounded and covered in blood; twitching and trembling, it finally died right there. But I still continued my attacks and kept stabbing it until the bull's body lay in shreds, for, even though I was exhausted to the bone, I wanted to ensure that it was really dead, never to rise again.

The bull now lay dead and my condition too was far from that of a living person. I was so exhausted that let alone standing, I could not even manage to sit on my own. Soaked in blood, I too collapsed near the dead bull. Yet remarkably, even after so much had transpired, I was still clenching the bull's broken horn in my hand. Meanwhile, as soon as the bull died, the entire village descended upon the ground in sheer joy, with everyone congratulating me. But as for mother and Radha, they were in radically different states of mind. On seeing me in such a grave condition, they just couldn't help but sob inconsolably. Finally, some gopas carried me home on their shoulders and bathed me in the veranda itself. Mother and Radha continued to weep, while they simultaneously kept fetching water from the house for my bath. Our veranda on all sides was surrounded by

villagers. As for me, even while I was moaning with pain, somewhere in a corner of my heart, there was the satisfaction of having braved the storm. However, extremely drained of energy, I was not in a condition to either eat or speak; I fell unconscious right there in the verandah. Of course, Radha and Mother Yashoda were still wailing inconsolably on watching this dreadful scene. They had neither been able to watch the fight nor could they now bear to see me so drained and terribly wounded. Owing to their incessant sobbing, a pall of gloom had descended all over the place. And the situation worsened when the gopas, who had gone to the forest with bhaiya, returned. They could not understand whether to celebrate the death of Arishta or shed tears over my fragile condition. And bhaiya's mental state was the most woebegone. Radha, on the other hand, was so traumatised, so upset that she decided to stay back that night. This was but natural; how could she leave me in such a painful condition and go home? All night long, the poor girl kept applying medicinal herbs on my wounds while I kept moaning in pain. I was so grievously wounded that it certainly seemed to be my night of reckoning; like every night, this night too passed, but with the greatest of difficulties.

You will not believe but it took me an entire week to heal completely and needless to add, Radha and Mother Yashoda waited on me with inordinate care all through this period. And fortunately, this provided me the opportunity to discover yet another facet of Radha's love. But what was this? As soon as I was healed, a third facet of Radha's love was revealed to me! No sooner had I recovered than she reprimanded me severely. I felt as if she had just been biding her time till I recouped my health. She then unleashed a barrage of questions at me that left me utterly speechless. Almost pinning me down with her piercing gaze, she lashed out, "What was the need to fight with that wild bull? Is it solely your responsibility to look after the entire village? What if something had happened to you?" Phew! Compared to this, I was better off being unwell! It seemed as if all of Radha's tender, loving care was the means to hasten my recovery so that she could scold me to her heart's content! To tell you the truth, I was laughing within, especially in view of the manner in which she was screaming at me and reprimanding me. Of course, openly laughing at this time would have been like battling with a she-elephant that had gone berserk! I had just seen the consequences of a duel with a wild bull; could I even think of challenging a demented she-elephant now? God forbid! My latest experience would just not allow it. Thus, like an obedient boy, with downcast eyes and a mask of seriousness on my face, I sat there quietly, listening to her tirade. Meaning, today the tiny lamp had surrendered completely to the full blast of the raging storm. But, so what? This storm was quite lovable! Fortunately, mother

was content that Radha had given me such a thorough dressing down, so she did not feel the need to reprimand me separately. However, father had been silent at the time of the fight, he had not uttered a single word even after seeing me wounded, and to my surprise he did not break his silence even now when I had recovered. Undoubtedly, he was a bit too dependent on God! But yes, when the cowherd boys heard of my recovery, they arrived in a group to raise my spirits. They not only congratulated me for such a splendid display of courage, but they appeared to be quite excited as well. But, unfortunately, their enthusiasm did not last for long. Mother, who had been quiet until now, vented out all her fury on the poor cowherd boys. “Don’t you dare instigate my son!” she shouted. The poor boys were stunned. What else could they do? Did they have an option other than to endure my share of mother’s scolding? After all, they were my friends; so they had to pay the debt of friendship. Truly! A mother will always be a mother.

Thus, in the midst of such tender care and reprimand, ten-fifteen days also passed. I had recovered fully and had even started venturing out once again. In the meantime, my favourite season, the monsoon³¹ had also arrived. Indeed, this time, the rainy season held a special significance for me. For, not only had I grown up now, but this monsoon I also had Radha as a companion. Besides, bathing in the river Yamuna in the company of the gopas, and indulging in all kinds of mischief while getting drenched in the rains also had its own unique charm. There was another reason why this season set our hearts aflutter with delight; an endless variety of wild fruits and flowers which we had never savoured before were now available for us. Meaning, in the monsoon, our minds were brimming over with joy, our bodies were well taken care of and our souls were satiated. But yes, there was one problem that we invariably faced during this season. The pathways would be mired in wet mud, soiling our clothes often. Well, one cannot expect everything to be perfect always. So for now, let me discuss the rainy season which had just arrived. For me, the greatest advantage of this season was, I could spend the entire day in Radha’s company, because in the monsoons, we did not have to take the cows out for grazing. Plenty of grass was readily available just outside the settlement, which provided ample fodder for the animals. At the same time, plenty of fruits and flowers were available near the banks of the Yamuna itself. So, if viewed from this perspective, we herdsmen enjoyed quite an easy and relaxed life in the monsoons. Thus, during this wonderful season, our days were spent in fun and frolic, laughing, singing, indulging in various kinds of mischief, and for me, in addition to all the fun, I also had Radha’s company to enjoy.

Suddenly, one evening, a heavy downpour took us by surprise. At that time, we were all sitting at home; there was quite a large gathering at our house. As usual, a few of our cowherd friends had gathered and Radha was also present with us. As father also had his friends over at home, he was busy chatting with them. As a result, our veranda was packed with people. Indeed, sitting at home enjoying the company of friends and feasting on delicious food is precisely what makes monsoon a wonderful season. Anyway, the elders sat for a while and then left for their homes but bhaiya and I were still happily chatting with our friends. But honestly speaking, all my attention was fixated on Radha who was engaged in an animated conversation with mother. And frankly, I do not know why, but that day, I just could not bear to be away from her even for a moment. You can say that I was on the lookout for some golden opportunity to get close to her. Then, for some reason, Radha suddenly rose from her seat, went outside and sat on the swing. As she sashayed out, she did not forget to beckon me with her eyes. Perhaps, she too had been waiting for an opportune moment to be alone with me. In any case, my wish was fulfilled. As it was, I was yearning for such an opportunity; so I instantly jumped up and perched myself alongside her on the swing. Then, hand in hand, we both began to swing blissfully. Needless to say, the joy of swinging with Radha to the sweet music of the heavy downpour was nothing short of divine. We were not conversing; perhaps, words would have spoiled the ethereal beauty of the moment. But yes! Our hearts were definitely beating in harmony, longing to become one. However, I have only narrated the romantic scene of which we two were a part; the rest of the scenario was no less enchanting either. On one side, mother and father were animatedly chatting with each other, and on the other, bhaiya was still engaged in banter with his cowherd friends. And both these scenes were pricking me like thorns. However, as the night advanced, these thorns had also gradually begun to vanish on their own. The first ones to take leave were of course, our cowherd friends. Then, after glaring at me a couple of times, bhaiya too went off to sleep. I do not know why, but bhaiya would invariably get annoyed whenever he saw me with Radha. So what? I had an entire life ahead of me to think of such things. At the moment, I just wanted to enjoy this heavenly bliss, and thinking thus, I once again shifted my focus back to Radha. As soon as we were alone, or rather, as soon as we were free of major distractions, both of us sat very close to each other. It was still raining very heavily, and to tell you the truth, the torrential showers had ignited such a raging fire in our hearts, that we both yearned to become one with each other as soon as we could. Neither did Radha want to return home, nor was I willing to let her go. But how would that be possible? Mother Yashoda would

have never permitted her to stay over without any reason, nor would Radha's mother have let me enter their house. But what was impossible for Kanha? If a person can not even fulfil his own desires, then what is the use of his intelligence? My mind immediately conceived a plan; though the plan was good, father could perhaps act as an obstacle to it. Therefore, in order to execute my plan, I had to wait for father to go off to sleep. So, all I needed was a little patience to avail Radha's companionship; could the deal be any better? And, I did not have to wait for long; the final hurdle was also removed; extremely exhausted, at last, father went off to sleep. Now, Radha, mother and I were the only ones to remain awake. All the hurdles had vanished one by one; now, did it really matter whether my beloved mother was present or not? Meaning, I could easily put my plan into action now, so why delay something so positive? I immediately went to mother and said, "Mother! May I accompany Radha to her home? How will she go home all by herself on such a stormy night?"

Mother immediately said, "What is the need for her to go home so late at night and especially when it is raining so heavily? She can sleep with me. "

There! Half my work was done at the very first stroke. But today, Kanhaiya had planned to fly really high. He was not going to be satiated with the job half done. Thus, before Radha could utter anything and ruin my plans, I instantly replied, "But mother! She will have to go home. You are well aware of her mother's nature; Radha will unnecessarily get reprimanded. It is better that I drop her home." Saying thus, I quickly caught hold of Radha's hand and dragged her out of the house. I did not even want to wait for mother's consent or refusal. Why disobey her needlessly? But yes, while leaving, I did say to her, "Mother, you go to sleep; do not wait for me. I will return quickly and go to bed." At this time, I was about fourteen years old.

Just imagine...I was sauntering through the quiet lanes of Vrindavan, getting drenched in the enchanting rain in my beloved Radha's company! Could there be greater happiness than this in life? From my experience until then, I had seen that rain quickly douses a fire. But that day, I realised that rain could just as easily ignite a fire and that too of a kind that could never be extinguished easily!

Well, at this moment, Radha and I were walking hand in hand. As per my plan, I was taking Radha in the opposite direction from her house. Tonight, I just could not think of getting separated from her, and perhaps, so did she. In short, the fire had turned into an inferno on both sides. Nevertheless, when she realised that we were moving in the opposite direction from her house, the clever Radha finally

enquired, "Where are we going, Kanhaiya?" Of course, she had asked this question just for the sake of it.

I replied, "Away from the settlement, to the banks of the Yamuna. We will spend our entire night just roaming around in each other's company."

On hearing this, Radha was speechless. Perhaps, she did not expect such an answer from a boy of my age. It was amazing! Yes, the boy was brave but curiously, Radha became serious. "Then what will we tell people at home?" she asked a trifle question nervously.

This undoubtedly implied that she was ready to go. I smiled and taking her in my arms, I said, "O dearest! If your mother asks, all you will have to say is, you were at Kanhaiya's place!"

Somewhat surprised, she asked, "And you?"

I replied, "If they ask me, I will obviously say I was at your place! Why do you worry unnecessarily when Kanhaiya is around?"

Radha had understood my plan to some extent. But at present, her attention was focussed more on my companionship than on my words, so she did not ask any more questions. At this time, not only was I speaking beyond my years, but my behaviour had also crossed all boundaries of age. You will be surprised to know that we strolled around for quite a while, embracing and kissing each other. The rain was bearing down on us incessantly, refusing to let up. Possibly, even this downpour was committed to accompany and assist us in every possible way. You will not believe that our stroll had taken us well outside the main gate of our village which was quite a distance away from the settlement. Due to the incessant heavy downpour, the ground had turned very slippery and difficult to walk on. In fact, we had slipped and fallen a number of times. But we still continued walking, going farther from our village. However, the question was, for how long could we roam about in a torrential rain like this? So, dead tired, we finally took shelter under a dense Peepal tree. At this time, a storm of ecstasy was raging through our very beings. As we came closer to each other, the downpour was becoming fiercer, or should I say, it rather seemed to. Needless to say, as the showers intensified, so did our passionate desires. Finally, as the night came calling, we surrendered ourselves completely to each other. This certainly was the sweetest experience of my life until now. Immersed in the joy of Radha's company, I did not realise when sunrise had quietly sneaked in upon us. Perhaps,

this was the shortest night of my life, or at least it seemed to be so. Fortunately, by early morning, the rains had stopped, and the golden rays of the sun had begun to sprinkle its golden rays upon us. Naturally, we were both very tired and our clothes too were soaked in mud. In fact, we could barely even lift our feet. However, what was a little fatigue compared to the unforgettable, enchanting night that we had just spent together? I could deal with the exhaustion but what could I do about my heart which just did not want to part with Radha even now? However, the reality was, both of us had to reach our respective homes before the day dawned. Finally, with a heavy heart, I parted with Radha some distance away from her house. For, if Radha's mother had seen me there with her, we both would have been doomed. In all of Vrindavan, she was the only person who could not even stand the sight of me.

Oh well! As soon as Radha left, exhaustion crept up on me. Taking even a single step was proving to be an uphill task. Somehow, I braced myself for the arduous trek and continued to trudge homewards; I just had to reach home as soon as possible. Truly speaking, this was the only reason why I could somehow manage to drag myself forward. Amazingly! I had not felt so exhausted even after my duel with the wild bull!

However, upon reaching home, the sight before me made me feel as if the rug was pulled away from under my feet. All my heady feelings vanished in an instant. My parents were waiting for me right there on the veranda. The scene indeed looked quite intimidating; while mother looked worried, father seemed to be enraged. Needless to add, my father's furious expression made all my exhaustion vanish instantly. In moments of danger, one's awareness inevitably reaches its peak, so I too immediately bolstered my self-confidence. Cautiously, I did whatever I could to prepare myself for the impending storm. But before I could fully compose myself and be prepared, father asked irately, "Where were you all night?"

I nervously replied, "Father, I had fallen asleep at Radha's house."

"Why?" he asked, rather furiously.

Pretending to be a little shaken, I answered in a timid voice, "I did not want to stay but because of the stormy rain, Radha did not have the heart to let me return. She was worried that some wild animal might attack me, finding me alone in the dark, blustery night."

I could see that my reply had instantaneously softened my mother's stance. Meaning, I had successfully won her sympathy at the very first attempt. Father also appeared to be suddenly immersed in some thought. Now I was assured, for I could see the situation coming under control. Indeed, was there anyone smarter than me when it came to wriggling out of adverse circumstances like this? No sooner did I see a ray of hope, than my enthusiasm soared and I took my act to the next level, "I had beseeched Radha to let me go. I even told her that more than myself, I was worried about father; I explained to her that you would get unnecessarily stressed. But Radha just refused to pay heed to anything I said, so I had no option but to stay back." Then I gazed at my mother, feigning complete innocence and helplessness. Seeing such a pitiable expression on her darling's face, she could no longer control her emotions. I sensed the opportunity and immediately putting on an expression of complete despair, I asked mother, "Why dear mother, did I do anything wrong?"

The moment I lovingly addressed my mother, she immediately came to my rescue. She was bound to; after all, it was her dear Kanhaiya who had called out to her for help. Now, my battle was mother's battle. Directing her ire at father, or, to put it more accurately, scolding him, she said, "Can you not see how concerned he is about you? In spite of his exhaustion, he has returned so early in the morning, just so that you do not get unduly worried. See...the poor boy's clothes are also soaked in mud. And you! At the slightest opportunity, you instantly pounce upon my darling boy!" Saying thus, mother caught hold of my hand and took me indoors. That is to say, I once again escaped unscathed. Poor father was left scratching his head in bewilderment. After all, was it easy to trap Kanhaiya? Well, soon after escaping from the clutches of father, I took a bath and when I felt a little refreshed, I felt the gnawing pangs of hunger in my stomach. Mother lovingly laid out a sumptuous meal for me. I was already fatigued and now that I had devoured such a delicious meal, I quietly went off to sleep.

However, as soon as I lay down, mother's innocent face flashed in front of my eyes, and I began to reflect on how she had come to my rescue and saved me. I thought, 'The nature of a mother's love is truly unparalleled! No matter how many times you fool her, no matter how much advantage you take of her love, due or undue, yet it never wanes; nor does her trust in you ever break. You can seek her help even in the most trying times and she will never disappoint you or betray you. In this world, can there be a God greater than a mother?'

So this was how a mother's love had saved a son that day. On the other hand, just a few days had passed after the onset of monsoon, when to put an end to our fun and frolic, a giant serpent called Kaaliya³² arrived on the banks of the Yamuna to live with scores of its female mates. The serpent was so venomous, that within a few days of its arrival, it had poisoned the waters of the Yamuna in that region. I was shocked and dejected as well; perhaps Nature was not inclined to let Radha and me enjoy the monsoon. I felt as if it was green with envy on seeing us so happy together. Otherwise, why would Kaaliya the serpent make the banks of Yamuna its abode, when it was not yet time for serpents to surface?

You already know that for us, the Yamuna was the life of the monsoon. Bathing in the Yamuna, with the rain beating down upon us was the greatest joy of this season. But with the arrival of this wicked serpent Kaaliya, forget bathing in the river, we could not even venture near it! Gradually, the terror spread by the serpent's presence had begun affecting the lives of the animals as well as the innocent Brijwasis. The poisonous waters of the Yamuna had claimed the lives of several animals in the past few days. Consequently, we now had to take our cattle much farther up the river to quench their thirst. Moreover, the gopis too had to trudge a great distance to fetch drinking water. With the sludge everywhere, when it was so difficult to walk during the monsoons, how could they endure the strain of a long trek for water? All in all, this calamity which had struck Vrindavan out of the blue, had thrown our life into a complete disarray. Yet surprisingly, the herdsmen had one strange but peculiar trait of their own; they accepted problems without any complaint as they were of the belief that such dangers and risks were an integral part of the lives of herdsmen and those who lived in the jungle. They lived in acceptance of the fact that in a herdsman's life, it was but natural for new difficulties and calamities to crop up every day. Leading a very ordinary life in spite of their hard toil and living amidst constant danger was something that they had come to accept as an unalterable reality of their lives.

However, my perspective was entirely different from theirs. In my opinion, our settlement, the Yamuna, the Govardhana, the greenery and of course, our cows were our very lifeline. If any of these were attacked or their existence threatened, then it was a direct attack on our lives and it is our prime duty to foil each and every such attack. Meaning, we were fated to confront and conquer every difficulty that we encountered, rather than meekly accept and resign to it. It was my firm belief that resigning to fate was merely a lame excuse to escape from confronting the difficulty. And this indeed was the reason why no one other than

me was giving the issue of the serpent its due importance. Neither did they have any qualms about the increased hard work this problem had brought in its wake, nor did they grieve over the death of their animals. But I had a hunch that if this problem persisted and not addressed well in time, then the issue could assume dangerous proportions. The Yamuna's waters, to which we were entitled, were now being denied to us. Moreover, for how long could the inhabitants of Vrindavan bear the burden of additional toil and disruption in their lives? I was particularly worried about the gopas and gopis whose energy and time was being unnecessarily frittered away. However, one could not really expect these simple herdsmen to comprehend the mechanics of energy or time. They had never viewed any problem from this perspective before, nor was there a chance that they ever would. But my sharp intelligence could discern that wastage of energy and time has a direct effect on the quality of human life. I felt that after toiling hard all day, a person should have some leisure time left for himself, i.e. for his enjoyment and festivities; and it was his birthright too! I also firmly believed that slogging hard for two square meals cannot be the goal of human life as that would amount to leading a life similar to that of animals. And let alone everyone else, why did I need to unnecessarily slog in this monsoon season and be deprived of the beautiful companionship of Radha? Why not indulge in merrymaking with my cowherd friends in the Yamuna? Thinking thus, deep down, I resolved to kill the giant serpent, Kaaliya. Meaning, in due process of life, gradually I was emerging as the savior of Vrindavan. After all, noble deeds are not meant to be assigned but to be assumed and taken upon oneself.

So much for my intentions, but after having single-handedly fought the wild bull, now if I returned to the Yamuna alone, my intentions would surely be revealed to all. In addition, it was essential for me to gauge the strength of the serpent before launching a frontal attack on it, and this was not possible without venturing to the banks of the river Yamuna. After ruminating over it for a couple of days, I found a way to accomplish my mission. I began venturing to the banks of Yamuna daily for a stroll with a few cowherd boys. I would have come under suspicion only if I went alone, right? However, the terror of Kaaliya Serpent was such that all we could do was just stand and gaze longingly at the river from a distance. Now, there is no need to explain to you how heart-wrenching it must have been to gaze at our beloved Yamuna from a distance, especially during the enchanting monsoon season. Memories of the fun and frolic we indulged in, while bathing in the Yamuna, were repeatedly flashing in my mind. But because of the fiendish serpent, Kaaliya, all such enjoyments had become a distant dream. Never mind; it was precisely with the aim of eliminating this particular

problem that I had started visiting the river bank daily with my gopa friends. A few days later, our regular strolls along the river became even more enjoyable as even Radha began accompanying us. After all, how could she stay away from her Kanhaiya in this magnificent monsoon? Following her footsteps, the gopis also joined us on our trips to the river. Thus, in a matter of days, our strolls to the Yamuna had transformed into daily outings. However, despite the companionship of Radha and the fun and frolic which had now become an integral feature of these trips, I had not digressed from my aim. Yes, I continued gazing at the Yamuna from a distance even while playing hide-and-seek and running and catching with everyone else; secretly, I was observing Kaaliya's movements minutely. Unfortunately, one day Radha cottoned on to my ploy of carefully observing the activities of the serpent, Kaaliya. My fight with the wild bull was still fresh in her mind and this is where the trouble began to brew. Radha may not have been very bright but as far as matters related to me were concerned, she was very sharp indeed. Thus, gradually she was convinced that I was repeatedly visiting the Yamuna with the clear intention of confronting the wicked serpent; though, as of now, she did not really expect me to indulge in such foolhardiness. Nevertheless, as a safety measure, she began to accompany us every day. Although she did not utter a single word about it, it was quite evident to me that deep within, she was riddled with anxiety. And because of her constant scrutiny, Radha's company, which I usually yearned for, was now proving to be a hindrance to me. All in all, her presence had become an obstacle to my plan, because now, I was compelled to exercise extreme caution while observing the activities of the serpent, as I feared that if she discovered my plan, then I would be at the receiving end of her fury. Yet, the greater trouble was, she had now begun to lovingly coax me to not indulge in this misadventure. She repeatedly kept reminding me of the power and ferocity of the Kaaliya Serpent. But what recourse did I have? Initially, I kept nodding in agreement to everything that she said but when this became a daily occurrence, I began pretending to take it lightly and would laugh the matter off. However, this only served to confirm her suspicion. And ultimately, seeing that I was not taking her seriously, she warned me clearly that if I did not desist from my chosen course of action, then she would spill the beans to mother.

I was shocked; Radha had come to know me so well, in such a short span of time! Indeed, she had her finger on my pulse. I, who was often amazed by her simple-mindedness, was now annoyed by her smartness. For, Radha could still be convinced, but if she informed mother, I would certainly not be allowed to even step out of the house. The moment I heard Radha's warning, I completely

surrendered to her and attempting to explain the facts to her, I said, "Believe me Radha, I have no intentions of provoking Kaaliya. Do you think I am crazy to deliberately walk into the jaws of death?" However, my drama did not prove successful before Radha. Her closeness to me had made her very astute; consequently, she did not believe even a word uttered by me. Meaning, I was getting a taste of my own medicine; I was paying a hefty price for what I myself had taught her. But I knew one thing for sure; unless she knew for certain that something unusual was happening, she would not involve mother. She was mature enough not to indulge in something as naive as this. But still, the situation had become complicated. Thus, on one hand, I had to persistently make an effort to convince Radha, while on the other, I had to secretly maintain a close watch on Kaaliya Serpent. However, her scrutiny was so sharp that quite a few times she had managed to catch me red-handed in my attempts. Finally, Radha ran out of her patience; and realising her inability to restrain me, she decided to resort to her ultimate weapon. She became extremely upset with me; in fact, she even threatened me that she would not meet me anymore. Well, she could stop meeting me if she so desired; I did not care! At this moment, my priority was to kill the Kaaliya serpent. But the problem was, if Radha realised that her ploy was proving to be ineffective, she would not hesitate to use her Brahmastra, her deadliest weapon. As a last resort, she would inform mother of my intentions; hence, she had to be handled calmly while there was still time, otherwise possibly, she could ruin everything.

And then, was it difficult to convince Radha? So what if she had access to one Brahmastra against me? I possessed several Brahmastras which I could unleash against her. That was it; I instantly launched the first of my invincible weapons and that same day, holding her hand, I took her outside the village for a stroll. Soon, we took shelter beneath a Peepal tree. Of course, Radha was unable to understand the secret behind my changed demeanour; but the very reason I had brought her this far was to reveal this secret. I quickly embraced her and then stroking her hair lovingly, I cooed, "Why do you not believe me? Why are you unnecessarily annoyed with your Kanha, these days? Do you think I would rather fight with Kaaliya, the serpent, than sit by your side?" Saying thus, I sat on her lap with feigned ardour, continuing to shower my affection upon her; and within no time, my sweet Radha had forgotten Kaaliya and was completely engrossed in her Kanhaiya; now I could say that she had fallen under my spell and was completely in control. But just to be doubly sure, I suddenly feigned deep anguish and said with sheer innocence, "Do you know Radha, when you get annoyed with me or reprimand me, I feel as if life is just not worth living!"

That clinched it; she was on the verge of tears. Gently stroking my head, she began apologising to me. And while returning home, if nothing else, I at least promised her a thousand times that for the sake of my love, I would not unnecessarily meddle with Kaaliya, or anyone else for that matter. Admittedly, it was Radha's love that had compelled me to say all this, but I was not so weak to be bound by the feeble threads of a thousand promises! I was certainly not the one to sacrifice or compromise the future of Vrindavan due to someone's personal weakness or selfish interest. Still, I was satisfied that for the time being, the danger had been averted. No sooner had I convinced Radha, than once again, I began to snoop on Kaaliya Serpent, now without any obstacle. See how I had convinced Radha!

Well, after carefully observing the serpent for many days, I had reached the conclusion that Kaaliya was extremely strong and bloodthirsty. And as far as its venom was concerned, the toxic waters of the Yamuna were enough testimony of the fact. So, seemingly I was prepared to enter the jaws of death determinedly! Regardless of the outcome, our clash was certain. And now that I had decided to confront the serpent, it was better to accurately gauge the opponent's strength before the battle; and this was precisely what I was doing at this time. By now, through my close and persistent observation, I had understood the serpent's behaviour and movements. I had made an accurate assessment of its strengths, weaknesses, the risks of confronting it, and the opportunities that I would need for the same. That is to say, from my side, I was now fully prepared for this great battle; all that I was waiting for was the opportune moment to strike.

Very soon, as expected, the right moment arrived! In keeping with our new daily routine, that day too, I was strolling near the banks of the Yamuna with my cowherd friends, and fortunately, that day Radha had not accompanied us. As usual, we were playing our favourite game, hide-and-seek. Additionally, let me tell you one more thing, I was the best among all as far as hiding was concerned. Having said this, allow me to add one more detail. Though it seemed as if I was playing, my concentration was in fact focused on the serpent, Kaaliya. I had noticed that today it was hissing much more than usual. Seeing it in this fearsome form, all the herdsmen were alarmed and although we were playing some distance away from the river bank, we had moved even further off upon seeing Kaaliya in its frightening form. I too was moving away along with the others, but my attention was still focused on the activities of that huge serpent. In my mind, I thought, the manner in which he was hissing today, it must have expended a considerable amount of energy. I surmised that if in some way it

could be angered even more, then its energy could further be drained. In short, I realised that today with a few simple steps, an opportunity to kill the serpent could easily be created. Secondly, as I had mentioned earlier, Radha was not with us on this day; otherwise, half of my energy would have been exhausted in arguing with her, trying to convince her and in fighting with her. And the third propitious thing was, like the past few days, today too, I had come fully prepared. Meaning, not only had I tied a long rope around my waist but I also carried a small sharp dagger which could be used to cut the rope if necessary. Since, the moment for action seemed right in every way, I resolved to fight with Kaaliya serpent today itself. Though, I was standing along with the gopas near the bank, I was earnestly waiting for the right time to strike. However, I first needed to get away from my gopa friends and bhaiya. So, to solve this predicament, I started playing run and catch. Everyone joined me in the game, and soon I found my opportunity. What happened was, while playing, it was my turn to run and one of our gopa friend Shripad's turn to catch me. Using this as an excuse, I began to run towards the bank and that too so fast that I stopped just a few feet away from the water's edge. Naturally, fearing the serpent, everyone stopped at the river bank itself instead of chasing me. By now, I had chalked out a clear-cut strategy to attack Kaaliya Serpent; accordingly, as the first step of my plan, I began collecting many big and small stones.

Seeing me come closer, Kaaliya began to hiss even more fiercely. Good for me! At least by doing this, it was draining its energy more and more. Bhaiya and my friends had realised by now that I had rushed to the river bank, not because I did not want to be caught, but rather to fight with the serpent, or at the least, to provoke it. Obviously, everybody was terrified on witnessing this frightening scene. Although fearing Kaaliya, no one came close to me, they certainly did call out to me repeatedly from afar, imploring me to come back. Ignoring all their pleas, I had focused all my attention on Kaaliya. It was still hissing away, and meanwhile, standing near the bank, I began to pile up all the stones that I had gathered around me. Don't you think, my courage should be admired for facing Kaaliya in such an audacious manner? And, now that I had shown so much courage, I had to fight it off and be done with it. Indeed, only a person who has conquered the fear of death will have the courage to stand so bravely before Kaaliya. And it is also true that only a person who is devoted to his duty can rise above the fear of death. And you are well aware that at this time, my heart was throbbing for only one mission and that was to save Vrindavan from the impending doom.

Once I had collected all the necessary stones, I immediately began to hurl them at Kaaliya, as was my plan. The big stones with sharp edges were definitely causing the desired damage and wounding it severely. Gradually, I made my attacks so fierce that it became infuriated. This unexpected attack of mine had fuelled its anger to the point of frenzy. Perhaps, this was the first time that someone had dared to attack Kaaliya, and undoubtedly, it was becoming impossible for its ego to tolerate this. Its anger was increasing with every salvo of my attack, and with its anger intensifying, I could say that my strategy of draining its energy by enraging it had proved successful. Meaning, its anger had only managed to fuel my enthusiasm. Encouraged by this, I now made my attacks fiercer and began to throw bigger stones at it. As soon as a big stone hit its hood, it would hiss with double the ferocity. But look at its obstinacy! It was still not taking refuge in the water and continued waiting there with its hood raised. Well, how did it matter to me? Gradually, my stone-pelting had become so fierce that it had no option but to take refuge in the water. Thanks to my regular fruit-picking in the forest, I had become adept at the art of hurling stones, and every third or fourth stone was finding its mark on Kaaliya's hood. It could be said that in the battle raging between the two of us, the serpent had to face the first defeat. Interestingly, I was leading in the second round of the battle as well. Bhaiya and the herdsmen were repeatedly calling out to me, to return to the river bank. They had a valid reason to be worried but it was all futile, because today, I was absolutely determined to fight Kaaliya off and emerge a winner anyhow, and so far in this battle, it was I who had emerged victorious.

By now, my relentless stone-pelting had caused severe injuries to Kaaliya. So, I stopped pelting it with stones to goad him to come out of the water. Naturally, as I had anticipated, on emerging from the water it was like a wounded tiger and it began hissing even more aggressively than ever. By this time, its rage had indeed assumed a monstrous form; but it hardly mattered to me. To give you a fair idea of my state of my mind at that time, as its hissing increased, so did my enthusiasm. Please note, it was my enthusiasm and not fear that was on the rise. And fortunately, my rising enthusiasm only managed to strengthen my determination to fight and finish Kaaliya. Truly speaking, I was no match for Kaaliya; forget about reaching and killing Kaaliya, even drinking the water of the Yamuna was enough to kill me for certain. Considering the foolhardiness which I was indulging in at present, it can be said that I was living the last day of my life. But remember, this was not the case of helplessness, but one of choice. Incidentally, did you ever think why I had agreed to this madness? It was because neither could I live my life in fear nor could I see anybody else leading a

life of helplessness, and needless to say, it was just this thought that had landed me here today. I firmly believed that instead of living in the constant fear of death, it is better to die, and that too after a prodigious battle; not because of fear or while trying to escape from it. Perhaps, I would not be able to kill Kaaliya, but I would at least die a hero's death and improve my next life. And if nothing else, it would at least encourage the inhabitants of Vrindavan to challenge and fight with the circumstances rather than surrender and succumb to them, without even putting up a fight. Besides, if the soul itself dies out, then what is the use of living? According to me, leading a life in this manner was far more dangerous than dying a million deaths.

Anyway, let us forget all this, because now, Kaaliya had once again surfaced out of the water with its hood flared. But now there was no sense in pelting stones. It was time for the final, decisive battle. I immediately checked the rope around my waist and tightened it further. The rope was so long that one of its ends was dangling on the ground. Did you notice? I had come fully prepared to fight, for I was not here to die. I had come here determined to confront Kaaliya. Yes, in a battle fought with utmost honesty, diligence and intelligence, even if death were to come, how would it matter? But to recklessly jump into a battlefield in a fit of madness is not courage, but an act of suicide. And I was not here to commit suicide but to wage a war. In other words, I was now determined to fight to the finish, and mentally prepared for it, I jumped into the water, right in front of Kaaliya. Seeing me dive right in front of the great serpent, there was pandemonium among the cowherd boys. Some of them even ran towards the settlement. Perhaps, they immediately wanted to convey the news of my foolish act to everyone. It was only now that everyone had realised that I had approached the river bank not to merely harass the serpent, but to actually fight it off. When bhaiya saw what I had done, he almost died of anxiety and apprehension. He was now desperately trying to come to my aid but he was helpless. All the remaining cowherd boys had got together and were stoutly restraining him.

Here, the Kaaliya serpent and I were face to face. Naturally, seeing its enemy standing before it, the enraged serpent was raring to sink its fangs into me. It even attacked me a number of times but whenever it raised its hood to strike, I would dive under water. It would then strike the water where I had dived, but to no avail. I too was anyway trying to deliver a hard blow on its hood but it was difficult to do so while in the water. In other words, it was not easy for either of us to attack the other, but still, both were persevering in their attempts. While

this terrible battle was heating up, all of Kaaliya's female companions had fled to a distance. Perhaps, like the cowherd boys, they too had thought it prudent to watch the battle from a safe distance. So what was wrong with that? It was good, as animals too had learnt to watch the spectacle unfold from a safe distance now, much like their human counterparts! Returning to the ongoing battle, not being able to attack me, Kaaliya had taken on an extremely ferocious form. To tell you the truth, if seen from up close, the serpent's fully flared hood made it seem as if it had ten hoods. The scene was bizarre; I was swimming right in front of it in the flowing waters of the Yamuna, yet, as soon as it attempted to attack me, I would dive into the water and not miss a single chance to punch it hard. The attempts continued from both the sides, yet both were failing. From the ensuing struggle, I realised that Kaaliya was unassailable in water. Meaning, to kill it, I would have to somehow lure it to the shore. Lost in these thoughts, I became a little lax and lost focus for a moment. And Kaaliya was not going to miss this opportunity, was it? The serpent, which was long waiting for such a slip, flew out at me and rendered a ferocious blow. The strike was so powerful that I lost my balance and fell into the water. With my fall, the situation turned very terrifying indeed and before I could get up, Kaaliya had enthusiastically shot forward and was now dangerously poised to strike me hard upon my chest. Now it was only a matter of a moment or two. Life was just about to ebb away from my body.

Meanwhile in Vrindavan, all hell broke loose when my village mates heard about my fight with Kaaliya. All of them immediately dropped their respective tasks and rushed to the river bank. Needless to say, mother, father and Radha were the first to arrive. Soon, all the inhabitants had gathered at the spot. Mother and Radha, already weak from sobbing ever since they had heard the news, immediately fainted on seeing me fallen down before Kaaliya, whereas Father Nanda just could not comprehend the situation. As for the rest, some were crying and others were screaming. That is to say, an atmosphere of mourning pervaded all around. Everybody was convinced that their dear Kanhaiya was done for - he had left them forever. Nobody had any hopes that I would make a comeback. Moreover, many elders had even started praying. It was astounding! Of what use could prayers be at this critical hour? Perhaps, praying was discovered by those fearful people who were unable to perform actions. Truly, action is a sign of courage and intelligence; why would a person of action - a true *Karmaveer*, need to pray?

However, first let me talk about my imminent death which had towered over me

with its hood flared. As such, it is a well-known truth that when threatened with extreme danger, a person's awareness reaches its zenith and this was exactly what had happened with me as well. Thinking that it was a now-or-never battle, my mind too focused all its strength on this fight to the finish. When one acts with due diligence, the results are bound to follow. Using all my strength and rapidly flailing my arms and legs, I somehow managed to dive under water. Unbelievably, all this happened in a fraction of a moment. Well! Then, death was also just a moment away from me. The very next second, as this danger was averted, I swam rapidly to the shore in a single breath and stopped only when I had reached the bank. As it is, when the enemy is strong and bearing down heavily on you, then it is wise to retreat. All is well only if it ends well, so Kanhaiya wisely retreated to the banks of the river. But I had still not managed to put sufficient distance between me and Kaaliya; meaning, as long as I did not reach the land, my life was still in danger. Seeing that I had safely reached the river bank, the spectators standing far away felt life course back into their bodies. Naturally, everybody breathed a collective sigh of relief. The foolish elders were considering this a result of their prayers, while in truth, it was my agility that had saved my life. Meaning, ignoring and undermining my action, all the credit was given to their prayers.

Be that as it may! Here I was, still stuck in troubled waters, meaning I still held my ground firmly on the river bank. On the other hand, for some time, the clever Kaaliya waited for me to go back to it but when I did not budge, it swam a little towards me. But when its move did not fetch the desired reaction, that is, when I did not run away nor go to fight it, the serpent began hissing to challenge me. Let it challenge, Kanhaiya was not going to fall into its trap and grapple with it in the water for a second time, for I had already seen the result of battling it in the river. Now, in order to finish it off, I had no option but to draw it out of the water, on to the land. And seen from this perspective, it could be said that death was what had drawn Kaaliya to the banks of the river. Sighting the opportune moment, I tightened the rope that I had tied around my waist and on the other end of the rope, I made a large noose. Now I was fully prepared for the final phase of this battle because the hissing Kaaliya was not very far from my reach. Quickly, swirling my rope overhead, I began with my attempt to lasso the serpent with it. Kaaliya was hissing very loudly, brazenly goading me on, or should I say, it was inviting me or rather provoking me to enter the water somehow. In short, the battle was at a bizarre stand-off. Kaaliya wanted me to dive into the water once again to fight it, and I was trying to fight this final battle on land. Anyway, this game continued for quite some time. I was certainly not a

fool to dive once again into the water for a duel with it. Even Kaaliya was so cunning, that despite being extremely furious, it was not venturing towards the land, for it had already suffered my stone pelting from the bank. However in the meantime, my efforts finally paid off. The lasso fell around its neck. And with my lasso tightened around it, the foundation of my victory was laid. Now one end of the rope was tightened around Kaaliya's neck, and the other was tied tightly around my waist. Meaning, we both were bound at either ends of the same rope. It was now certain that only the death of one of us would sever this bond. However, the rope was so short that I too was dragged towards the water's edge along with it. Meaning, despite the foundation being strong, Kaaliya's strength was not permitting an easy accomplishment of the goal.

Now, with the battle in its final stage, once again the same tug of war started between us. It was trying its best to drag me into the water and I was pulling it with all my strength towards the land. The only difference was, this time we had no choice. Being bound by the same rope, one of us was certain to succeed in their endeavour. Now neither could I run away from the battle, nor could Kaaliya. One thing was certain, that if it succeeded in dragging me into the water then it would mean inevitable death for me, and I did not want such an end to my life. Hence, I was putting all my energy into staying firmly rooted on the bank. It was time for a real test of our respective strengths and this tug of war of life and death continued between the two of us. But to tell you the truth, at first glance, it appeared that Kaaliya was indeed winning. This tug of war certainly lasted for a considerably long time. But perhaps, it was the result of my firm resolve that in the end, I successfully managed to drag Kaaliya to the shore. Yet, success could not be termed decisive because firstly, this struggle had severely sapped my energy. Secondly, the rope had chafed my waist so badly that it was severely bruised and blood had started gushing from the wounds. For that matter, even Kaaliya was exhausted, but my condition was definitely worse than that of the serpent. Simply put, with the battle in its final stage, both of us were at the critical now-or-never stage and unfortunately, my body was betraying me at this crucial hour. Still, I had no option, but to fight. If my physical strength was failing me, then I had to pull it off with my mental strength. If I was not able to kill Kaaliya even after bringing it on my home turf, then taking such a life-threatening risk would have been rendered futile. So, untying the rope off my waist, I wound it on my right hand and with my left hand, I once again began pelting stones on Kaaliya's hood. Suddenly, because of the relentless assaults and its neck stuck in the noose, Kaaliya was rendered helpless. With the rope off my waist, I too felt quite relieved. As a result, I could pour renewed energy in

my attacks. Soon, the serpent's fighting ability dwindled. This was not all; the constant attacks had also made numerous fountains of blood spurt from its mouth. Finally, helpless against my resolute determination and fighting prowess, it surrendered and collapsed. As soon as the serpent collapsed, I dragged it to the land. Now, I mustered my courage, moved closer to it and began to directly attack its hood with big stones. And with these quick, powerful strikes, very soon its writhing came to rest. Perhaps it had died, but my attacks continued until its head was reduced to a pulp. Well! With Kaaliya's death, I finally heaved a huge sigh of relief. Another good news was, with the serpent's death, all its female companions had fled into the forest. To tell you the truth, had they all decided to take revenge on me now, it would have become impossible for me to survive. This was not because the female serpents were stronger than Kaaliya, but because I was so exhausted now, that I did not have the strength to fight even an ant. However, I too was quite amazing! Even in my exhausted state, I continued with my assaults on Kaaliya as I did not want to take a chance. What if it was not yet dead? It is all the more dangerous to leave a serpent in a wounded state. So, ultimately, I stopped only after I had smashed its body into several pieces.

Seeing that Kaaliya had been pounded to bits and pieces, everyone gradually began to approach the water's edge. I need not tell you that everyone was immensely relieved, for it was all over, and Kaaliya, who had made everyone's lives miserable was now lying dead before them. Everybody was dumbfounded. No one could believe that such a small boy could single-handedly kill a large and dangerous serpent like Kaaliya and everywhere voices of people singing my praises could be heard. The first to arrive were of course, bhaiya and the gopas and they were literally dancing with joy. Certainly, there were two reasons for their happiness: one, I had come out alive and two, Kaaliya was now dead. Upon hearing the commotion, mother and Radha had also regained consciousness, and needless to add, when they saw me alive and Kaaliya dead, they began to shed copious streams of tears. And now that Kaaliya was dead, everyone seemed to have come alive again, but I was nearly half dead. At present, I was so drained of energy that I could barely stand. By the time everyone reached me, I had collapsed and fallen to the ground. Fortunately, along with everyone else, mother had also reached by my side. Indeed, she could not bear to see me in such a miserable condition and weeping inconsolably, she took me in her lap, held me close to her bosom and covered me with her drape. Seeing me in this state, everyone else's excitement had also petered out and do not even ask of Radha's condition! For a change, father too was in quite a grave state.

And what can I say of my condition; it was just inexplicable. Not only were the blood stains clotted all over my body, but the wounds had also turned nearly blue. I was lying in a semi-conscious state on my mother's lap. I cannot recall when and how I was brought home. You can gauge my condition from the fact that even in this semi-conscious state, I was moaning in pain. There was no doctor in Vrindavan. I just had mother's and Radha's love and care to see me through. Many of the elders were suggesting home remedies but how effective could they be in my present condition? So, for a number of days, my wounds were tended to in the most caring manner. Needless to say, Radha and mother, both looked after me day and night. Radha did not go home even for a day. It took about fifteen days or so for me to recover. To tell you the truth, my recovery was possible only due to my extraordinary zest for life and firm determination to survive; otherwise in a way, Kaaliya had more or less finished me off. Indeed, in my healing, one could certainly not ignore or undermine the contribution of the tender care of mother and Radha either. So, these days too passed somehow, but upon my recovering, all my well-wishers literally attacked me with good counsel. Mother and Radha once again strictly warned me not to engage in such misadventures ever again. Their reprimands were expected, but surprisingly, for the first time, father too had displayed great anger. And to tell you the truth, I had liked the fact that father had gotten so worked up, for he rarely displayed his emotions. But because of this incident, at least his hidden love for me had surfaced. I, on the contrary, was very elated. For, before the serpent Kaaliya could destroy all of Vrindavan, I had managed to annihilate it.

On the other hand, frankly speaking, I was a little surprised by the behaviour of the people of Vrindavan. True, they were all singing my praises, but no one was interested in learning a lesson from my deeds. By killing the wild bull and Kaaliya serpent, I had proved the fact that life is just another name of struggle for survival. Along with, I had also proved that one can survive only by confronting and defeating difficulties, instead of resigning to them. Unfortunately, despite this, it did not appear as if it had made any major difference in their disposition or their outlook towards life. Everybody wants to live, but no one wants to fight against the odds to live! Surprising...isn't it?

- END OF CHAPTER 5 -

CHAPTER 6

Putting an End to the Much Popular Indrapuja

Though I had always been the apple of everyone's eyes, the killing of Kaaliya had elevated my stature to the leading light of Vrindavan. The respect I carried reflected in their eyes and even in their behaviour towards me. However, I was not comfortable with this special treatment meted out to me, for I had merely done my duty. I was still their very own Kanhaiya, their little Kanhaa; I did not consider myself special at all. I wondered how discharging one's duty could make one special. And unlike others, I was not saying this just to portray myself modest; it was amply evident from my simple demeanour as well. While we are discussing this topic, it is imperative for you to understand that once a person develops a sense of being special, then he finds it difficult to be simple in his conduct. In spite of his efforts to conceal it, the arrogance of being special inevitably reflects in his behaviour. If truth be told, under such circumstances, his simple demeanour also becomes a reflection of his ego.

However, at present, let me apprise you of a rather odd development; as something quite astonishing transpired in the wake of this special treatment. People's deference towards me did not affect me in any manner but it certainly affected bhaiya adversely. He could not tolerate the fact that all of Vrindavan held only his younger brother in high esteem, talked about him day in and day out, and treated him alone with such reverence. In a sense, bhaiya had every right to take offense at this. For, in terms of strength and talent, he was no less than me in any respect; and when it came to physical strength, he certainly was much stronger than me. A predominant characteristic of bhaiya was that he weighed everything only in terms of physical strength. Hence, it was but natural for him to feel the way he did. And if you were to understand the deep underlying cause of his pain, you would find that his wounds were not new but very old indeed. Right from childhood, everyone had loved me more than him, and now they were giving me greater respect as well. Naturally, for how long could poor bhaiya endure all this? His youthful ego was bound to get hurt. Astute as I was, I could understand his agony very well and realising this, I started giving him more importance. So much so, that now, I began to push him to the forefront in all matters. Whenever someone broached the topic of Kaaliya's killing, I would immediately describe bhaiya's heroic feat of killing

the big crane. That was it; bhaiya would be pleased and quickly launch into an exaggerated version of the story, proudly narrating it to all and sundry.

Another significant development was, with the passage of time, the intimacy between Radha and me had grown to such an extent that two people could not possibly get any closer! We were two bodies but our heart was one. Indeed, it was as if, we were two bodies with one soul, in every sense of the word. Thanks to our growing intimacy, it indeed had become very difficult for us to stay apart, and on top of it, Radha had altogether stopped leaving me alone after the killing of Kaaliya serpent. It was all for the best; even if it was meant to keep an eye on me, at least she now stayed by my side all the time. And did I ever want to be separated from her even for a moment? Yet, let me point out a fundamental difference between my love and that of Radha, owing to which, a silent conflict always simmered between the two of us. Actually, now Radha just could not tolerate my mind wandering off from her to something else. Consequently, the moment I focussed my attention on something else— whether it was merely going off to graze the cows, chatting with bhaiya or the gopis or resolving some issue related to Brij—she would become annoyed. Radha wanted Kanhaiya's exclusive and unwavering attention. That is to say, in a way, she was too possessive in love, which did not suit my nature. As a matter of fact, my love was of the free-spirited kind which neither knew bonds nor boundaries; I was a free bird by nature. However, this certainly did not mean that my love for Radha was not deep enough; she was my life in every respect. It was her love alone that had helped me kill the Kaaliya serpent, and it was only my love for her which led me to carry myself neatly in fine dresses, looking handsome. Besides, it was the magic of her love that every activity I now engaged myself in gave me infinitely greater joy than it did earlier. To tell you the truth, love, for me was the name of an energy, which renders man the ability to scale all possible heights in life. Meaning, love, for Radha, was merely the name of the happiness shared between two people, but for me, our love was synonymous with the life of the entire Vrindavan. And because of this sole disparity in understanding, I invariably ended up doing something that would leave my dear Radha deeply annoyed. However, by now, I had become mature enough to easily discern the underlying naivety beneath her ire. So, instead of trying to pacify her, I would merely smile when she got annoyed. My smile would leave her so incensed, that it would become even more difficult to handle her.

All in all, my life was passing thus; irritating Radha, mollifying her, dancing and singing with her, while she found another obvious reason to be annoyed with me.

Now, right from the very beginning, gopis were extremely fond of me and had always been close to me. But now that they had grown up, naturally their feelings for me had changed; a paradigm shift had taken place in the way they felt for me. In fact, there was such a fierce competition among the gopis for me that at times, fights would break out among them over me! But I was so mature even at this young age that I could very well comprehend their feelings. I was dark and handsome, intelligent, playful, valiant and an accomplished flautist! To top it, I was the son of Nanda, the most prominent among the village elite. Certainly, the gopis had numerous reasons to fall head over heels for me. So, in my view, the gopis' love for me ought to be considered simple and innocent. It was nothing but the demand of their age and circumstances. But surprisingly, Radha began to harbour resentment against them! Now, propelled by such feelings, it was wrong on the part of Radha to be furious with the gopis; I expected far more mature behaviour from her. Forget this, if I were to tell you the truth of my heart, then I was not in the least drawn to any of the other gopis, perhaps because we were not mentally compatible by any stretch of imagination. Yet, neither did I wish to ignore them and hurt their feelings nor did I want them to feel any affection and fuel their expectations. So my playing and wandering about with them continued as before; but at the same time, I also made it a point to balance my behaviour to avoid giving out any wrong signals. That is to say, during these days, all my time was being spent in balancing my behaviour with the gopis and mollifying the sulking Radha.

All these trifling trials were going on when a new difficulty came knocking at my door. All of Vrindavan found a new topic to discuss - the relationship between me and Radha. It is said that love and anger can never remain hidden, no matter how hard one tries to hide it. And this is precisely what had happened in our case as well. I was sixteen and all of Vrindavan had by now begun to gauge the love between Radha and me. Everybody had realised that the bond of love between Radha and Kanhaiya was far from the kind of love an adult would share with a child. Well, if it was not infantile love, so be it. The problem was, bhaiya and Father Nanda were not in the least happy with this relationship. But yes, mother did not have any objections; her happiness lay in the happiness of her dear child. Do I not often say, I was very fortunate for having a wonderful mother like Yashoda? Oh yes, I was, but I have to admit that my life was indeed very strange. I invariably found myself facing one difficulty after another. On one hand, being an ordinary herdsman, our occupational hazards would demand my attention, and on the other, being a duty-conscious herdsman, I invited some of the troubles upon myself. And because of all these difficulties falling my way,

constant struggle was becoming a way of life for me. But then, I did not have any objection to any of this either, for these struggles were meant to sustain and nurture life; whether it was the arduous task of taking the cows for grazing to Govardhana, or battling with the mad bull or Kaaliya. But, what could I do about these growing mental struggles in my life, and that too, mental conflicts of such magnitude! I had not chosen them, but they were thrust upon me by life.

As you are already aware, ever since I had fallen in love with Radha, I had been facing and coping with her tantrums. Her annoyance and my placating her had become a daily routine from then onwards. Additionally, I also had to maintain a delicate balance between the gopis and Radha, who were always at loggerheads. Not only that, time and again, I also had to endure the biting frostiness of the cold war between bhaiya and Radha. And as I loved to play with the cowherd boys as well as the gopis, I had been performing a balancing act between the boys and the girls for quite a long time. However, my emotional stress did not quite end here. After the relationship between me and Radha had become known, the mental and emotional conflicts in my life had grown exponentially. Now, besides bhaiya and father, I had to face the angry, oblique glances of the elders as well; and then there was Radha's mother! Hearing her vitriolic abuses had now become a daily occurrence of our life. In short, as I grew up, the difficulties, the conflicts and the struggles inflicted upon me by life were turning me into an expert at dealing with not just physical conflicts but also the mental ones. This was just as well, for this was at least enhancing my mental endurance and capabilities. Truly speaking, gradually I was also becoming habituated to living amidst conflicts; as a matter of fact, I was growing to enjoy living with these struggles. In fact, is there any game better than relentless struggle in life? Why do you forget that struggle is the only challenging game, in which a person pours all his energies? After all, it is the struggle that provides opportunities and teaches a man to put his life at stake for something if need be. Please note, here I am referring to the conflicts such as killing Kaaliya and battling the mad bull and it does not have any connection to the advent of this beautiful new struggle called 'Radha's love' in my life, as this particular struggle was not teaching me how to pour all my energies or put my life at stake for the betterment of all. On the contrary, it was training me in the art of donning the garb of brazenness! This was proving to be such a multi-faceted struggle which had left tongues wagging all over Vrindavan. Some said, "We knew from the beginning that Radha and Kanhaiya were playing a big game." Others said, "Kanhaiya is just a child, at least Radha ought to have used some sense." There were still others, like bhaiya and father who were disgruntled with both of us. And interestingly, though all of

them were against our love, we could not afford to fight with them. Neither could we respond sharply to them, nor could their wagging tongues be silenced. Forsaking my love for Radha, just out of their fear was something I could not even imagine. So, brazenly ignoring everyone, I continued soaring high in love with Radha, just like before. And if truth be told, on the contrary, all these factors merely proved to be strengthening agents in my ever growing bond of love with Radha. Thanks to all this negativity around us, we were scaling even greater heights of love. Right from the very beginning, I had hardly ever cared for what people had to say or think. It was good that gradually, my brazenness was rubbing off on Radha as well. Both of us had thoroughly realised that there is just one Brahmastra to deal with almost every type of mental or emotional struggle in life and that is 'brazenness', and as soon as this brazenness comes to the fore, the struggle vanishes of its own accord. We had realised this ourselves, and you also must realise this, because all of life's physical struggles are external; so any difficulty faced externally cannot be ignored and will have to be dealt with. Mental problems, on the other hand, arise within oneself and the best way to deal with them is to ignore them completely. I did not care in the least if there were quarrels between the gopis and Radha; I was least bothered if bhaiya and Radha continued to fight, nor did I care about the villagers' comments. If Radha was angry, so be it. Why lose my happiness because of them? I had done my best to resolve these conflicts; so what was the need to become morose because of them? In fact, I would say, the exceptional evolvment of my mind can also well be accredited to these very struggles. As a matter of fact, how can a person grow in life without going through the grind? Take my example for instance. Life for me was no longer limited to my desires and Radha's love, nor was it meant to revolve around my mother's love or the aspirations of the gopis. These numerous struggles had helped me raise my life far above all these considerations. Life for me was now synonymous with collective joy, prosperity and the welfare of Vrindavan. It was with the sole intention of improving their quality of life that I had suggested that the inhabitants of Gokula should migrate from the village. Why just that, I had killed the raging bull Arishta and the deadly serpent Kaaliya too for the very same purpose. In short, what I mean to say is, a person becomes great by shouldering great responsibilities and now, propelled by my instincts, I had taken it upon myself to make myself great. And the truth is, no one else can help you become great anyway.

Oh well, enough discussions of my struggles; now let us talk about an incident that occurred during this time which relieved me to no end. In other words, this event freed me from great mental turmoil. It so happened that on the outskirts of

our settlement, before the river Yamuna, there were eight-ten luscious guava trees, the fruits of which were not only sweet and juicy, but were also the first choice of the herdsmen. However, for the past few days, the herdsmen were being deprived of its sweet fruits as a group of wild monkeys had established their reign in that region. The terror of the monkeys was so prevalent, that out of fear, the herdsmen had stopped plucking these sweet guavas. Even if someone mustered courage and dared to approach these trees, this monkey brigade would instantly open a frontal attack and injure him gravely. Now, being deprived of such luscious fruits, it was but natural for the herdsmen to be very unhappy these days. However, the matter came to a head only when bhaiya was irked by this incident. A diehard foodie, bhaiya naturally loved these guavas and consequently, he could not bear being deprived of these sweet fruits for long. So one day, on a whim, bhaiya armed with sturdy sticks, set off towards these guava trees in the company of a handful of herdsmen. I understood that they were all going to fight the monkeys to the finish. I was happy as bhaiya was rarely so aggrieved by something, but I suppose the usurping of his favourite meal by the monkeys definitely called for a radical reaction on his part. However, upon reaching those trees, as soon as bhaiya tried to pluck the fruits, the wild monkeys instantly attacked him.

Bhaiya had very well anticipated this reaction and had come fully prepared for it; he, at once, attacked the monkeys with his stick. In a short while, he killed a number of monkeys and wounded as many. That is to say, bhaiya's single attack had created panic among the monkeys. That was it! My excited brother began shaking the trees, compelling the monkeys to either run away or be beaten to death, and soon he once again regained his hold on the guava trees. I, of course knew that bhaiya was very strong but I had never seen him so angry, so valiant. As such, I had full confidence in bhaiya's strength and valour and knew that he could single-handedly defeat the entire monkey brigade, but the good news for me was, my trust in his ability had proved to be right. I had purposely distanced myself from this entire incident. I did not want my name to be attached to this brave deed in any way. I truly wanted bhaiya to get full credit for this act of valour, so that the whole of Vrindavan would resound with praises of his valour and grant him his much deserved respect. For, as you know, bhaiya's happiness was my happiness, and his honour was my honour. And that is exactly what happened; all of Vrindavan began discussing bhaiya's valour and singing his praises. As if this was not enough, bhaiya began blowing his own trumpet and became busy narrating this incident with embellishments and exaggerations, as was his nature. And this was precisely what I wanted; after this incident, the

ongoing cold war between the two of us came to an end. For, he too was now getting well-deserved respect from the people of Vrindavan. So, all in all, he had found his praise and I had found my relief.

With this incident, not only was I relieved, but even Vrindavan experienced a peace as never before. Life in Vrindavan was scaling newer heights every day. All the Brijwasis were now finding spare time to rest and respite from their daily grind. This in turn, not only provided us with ample time to hold more festivities but also to have loads of fun, frolicking and games. We mostly played the same old games such as hide-and-seek and tag, and they were fun too. These games were the speciality of herdsmen and also their compulsion! For, there was no scope or opportunity to do anything remotely new. And you can well understand this from the fact that even at the age of sixteen, I was playing the very same games that I used to play when I was eight. Perhaps, this was the reason why the mental development of the herdsmen did not commensurate with their physical age. In this respect, I was an exception among the herdsmen, for my mental growth was certainly astonishing enough. And in my opinion, the entire credit for this astounding growth should be given to my habit of being consistently observant. Also, it ought not to be forgotten that I learnt in a trice all that was worth learning and grasping. As you know, we were not being educated here in Vrindavan; nevertheless, I just continued to grasp anything worth learning that I came across. To tell you the truth, my experience until now was amply making it clear to me that there can be no teacher in life greater than life itself. And perhaps, this was why I had evolved my own system to learn and understand, in which I myself was the teacher and I myself, the student, and life itself, my glorious school. And today, upon seeing my progress, I can assertively state that life in itself is the best school provided by Nature to learn, grasp and grow. Just see, how much I had learnt from life! You might remember that even when I was fighting the Serpent Kaaliya in the interests of the Brijwasis, there were quite a few people standing on the banks of the Yamuna and praying, while others were merely watching. I was about to die but no one had come forward to help me. It was all very well to say that I was very dear to all the inhabitants of Vrindavan and was their darling, but then why did no one step forward to help me? However, even at that time, it had not taken me long to find the answer to this ‘why’; I had understood that though they loved me a lot, I was not so dear to them that they would risk their own lives for me. Thereafter, never in my life did I expect someone to put their life at stake for me. And funnily enough, everybody was praying for me, but no one was trying to save me. In short, the feelings were there but the action was missing. I learnt a lesson from this

experience as well; from that day onwards, I did not care for feelings that did not translate into an action. Why just this, right from the moment when I had fallen head over heels in love with Radha, I had discerned that the attraction between man and woman is the most natural attraction created by Nature, and perhaps that was the reason, this attraction was so overbearing in nature. From then on, I stopped questioning anyone in this matter. Let me tell you one more thing, Radha's love had not only given me immense strength but had also transformed my personality. Meaning, her love had transformed the naughty Kanhaiya into the mature Krishna and I had immediately realised that in this world, there is nothing more potent and powerful than love. Thus, in my case, whatever I learned once, I learnt it forever. And this was the supreme quality of mine that was making my personality scale unprecedented heights with the passage of time.

Nevertheless, such occurrences were an integral part of my life. So, now let me narrate to you an incident which brought to light the most profound aspect of my personality. One day, all of us herdsmen had ventured to Govardhana to graze the cows. Like always, after our siesta, we all were happily engaged in playing different games. Suddenly, I witnessed the scene which led to this significant incident which I am about to narrate now. Truly speaking, my reflection on this episode strengthened the foundation of 'Krishna' to become great. And once the seed of greatness has been sown, how can it be stopped from fructification? What happened was, I saw a very old, frail man with a heavy basket on his head walking on the road to Mathura. He was tottering severely; his condition appeared as if he would collapse to the ground. I was so moved that I could not stop myself and quickly ran to him. I instantly recognised him, he was uncle Amad. He lived in Vrindavan and had no family to speak of. He did not even have any cows and this poverty and helplessness clearly reflected on his face. I quickly unloaded the heavy basket from his head and advised him to take some rest. As soon as he sat down to rest beneath a tree, I swiftly brought some fruits for him to eat. He certainly seemed a bit refreshed after eating, and as soon as he returned to normalcy, I asked him, "Uncle, where were you going with such a heavy basket on your head, especially when you are so tired?"

He replied, "Son! I am going to sell fish in Mathura because 'Indrapuja'³³ is right around the corner. And you know, how important and holy it is to pay the tax for the demigod Indra."

By now, all the herdsmen had gathered around, and surprisingly, even without

using their senses, all of them nodded their head in agreement to what he was saying. But I did not agree at all, so I remained silent. After resting for a while, he once again set off for Mathura. On hearing the term 'Indrapuja' mentioned by Uncle Amad, all the herdsman's attention was diverted from the games and was focused on Indra's festival; soon, they all were engaged in an intense discussion about this festival. In contrast to them, my entire being was overcome by sadness. In fact, I could not reconcile myself to the helplessness of such an old man. To be honest, I had the disconcerting feeling that somehow, somewhere, something was terribly wrong. Irrespective of the perspective from which I viewed the situation, my mind was still unable to agree in the least with the old man's words. An unknown apprehension had begun to perplex me, and also, the helplessness on the old man's face was repeatedly flashing before my eyes. But, for now, I remained silent and returned home quietly with everybody else. However, I could not sleep at night; as my mind was time and again getting drawn to this topic. As such, the Indrapuja was an extensive affair organised every year in Vrindavan. Indeed, for this festival, a special fire altar was also constructed for a ³⁴yagya. Needless to add, after the fire altar was built, many kilograms of grains and ghee (clarified butter) were put in the fire as offerings; to an extent, even animals were sacrificed. I had no idea when and how had this practice begun and for how long it had prevailed, but from every single household, a levy for the festival was collected. For that matter, even I had always enjoyed this festival because it had everything, a special feast, dance and games. What else could a young boy want?

But today, my contemplation had transcended food and games and was diverted to focus on its sensitive aspect. The truth was, today, for the first time, my consciousness could notice the hidden, alarming aspect of this festival. Is it necessary for an old man to undergo such incredible hardship just to pay the tax for this festival? Is the Indrapuja festival meant to render someone helpless and destitute? But then, why celebrate such a festival in the first place? Just to appease 'Indra'? And why was it necessary to appease Indra? To please him so that he would give us good rains? Really?! How could that be? Rain is a part of Nature's cycle. Can there be a demigod in charge of it? Can anyone have a monopoly over rain too? Caught up in these questions, my mind was ceaselessly tormented. For all these questions, the one clear answer that continuously sprung forth from my consciousness was, 'No! Rain, fire, wind, all these are gifts of Nature. There cannot be any demigod anywhere in charge of them. Why just rain, fire and wind, everything including the sun, moon and the space are all blessings bestowed upon living beings by Nature, over which everyone has an

equal right. How can anyone claim ownership over all these elements?' Then suddenly, my thoughts turned into another direction. 'Okay, for a moment, even if one agreed that there really was a demigod who controlled all these elements, was it necessary to worship him? And if one did not worship him, would he get angry and rain trouble upon us? Would he then deprive us of this gift bestowed by Nature? If an evil person really has taken rain under his control and, gripped by ego, has proclaimed himself as god, and under the spell of terror wants us to worship him, then how can such a lowly being be considered a demigod? I believe that human beings are the most beautiful and powerful creation of Nature, and the one who troubles humans ought to be considered a demon and not a demigod! Such a cruel, lowly and ungodly demon ought to be destroyed!' You may not believe it but these thoughts had so charged me up that I began to rant loudly, "Where is this Indra? Who is this Indra? Come forward, if you really exist! Why should there be any worship or taxes for the ones like you?"

That is to say, reflecting upon Indra and all the ramifications of Indrapuja, my conclusion in this matter was clear: there was no Indra anywhere and even if there was, he ought to be destroyed. As such, by now, my mind was absolutely sure that there was no Indra anywhere. He was merely a figment of imagination of weak-minded people. I had also understood that the fight with the wild bull and with Kaaliya the serpent was a battle of physical prowess and intelligence, which were easy to win. But defying Indra would be battling a tradition. So if I indeed intended to fight this battle, then it would have to be an ideological one, which would require not only physical strength but great mental energy as well. All in all, as this battle would have to be fought with my own people, it would not be that easy to win. At the same time, I also knew that breaking a long-standing tradition was a complex issue which could not be accomplished in a day; for it takes years to change an ordinary human being. Thus, my mind was repeatedly getting centred only on one question and that is how to make the innocent, simple-minded people of Vrindavan realise the futility of this tradition. That was because if Indrapuja was to be stopped, the fight with Indra was merely a play of words. The real battle would have to be fought with the mindsets and the ideologies of these foolish people; and there were not just one, but several such fools. So what? If you have many enemies, then they have to be vanquished one at a time. So I thought it best to start with my gang of cowherd boys. For, if I could not convince them, it would be pointless to even start with the elders. But if I could make my gopa friends realise the futility of the Indrapuja, then the avenue to convincing the elders would automatically open; for then, I would have my own group to engage in a battle and tackle them. And anyway, the

principles of warfare dictate that if the army of the enemy is many times larger and stronger, then it is best to cause a rift in the force and turn a part of that army over to your side. So, instead of battling with all of Brij at a time by myself, it was best that I bring the cowherd boys on my side. The battle would automatically become much easier.

After a long night spent in deep contemplation, the situation had become clear and my strategy was also prepared. Then why wait now? The very next day, to put my battle plan into action, I convened a meeting of the cowherd boys and gopas on the banks of the river Yamuna. Though, I had addressed many meetings before, this one was special as well as crucial. As at this time, the scenario here was quite unique. I was standing with my back to a big tree, waiting to address everyone. The Yamuna was flowing behind me and some twenty five to thirty cowherd boys were sitting in front of me. Some ten to fifteen gopa brothers were also standing there. Their excitement was such that it seemed as if they would lift the whole of Vrindavan on their heads! All of them were under the impression that I had called this meeting to allocate responsibilities amongst them for the upcoming Indrapuja. Little did they know that it was not in Krishna's nature to live up to others' expectations.

However, I was in such a hurry, that without standing on ceremony, I immediately began to explain to them the futility of Indrapuja. I said, "All of you would remember that only yesterday, we saw the elderly uncle Amad enduring so much hardship to pay the tax for the Indrapuja. Certainly, there must be many like him in Vrindavan, who are similarly troubled by this levy. Rains are certainly a blessing for our life. But just think, can the rains be controlled by someone?"

At this point, no one understood my statement or the message underlying it. But then again, what was their fault? The subject that I had broached upon was absolutely unexpected and new to them. Besides, I was far from finished and had only just begun. I thought, 'Before I finish, I will explain everything to them.' So I continued to speak, "We are poor herdsmen. We must bear in mind that the misuse of food grains, wealth and other goods can push our life towards hell. Now, in such a situation, where we are already experiencing a shortage of goods, if we waste these precious resources out of fear to appease an unknown, unseen demigod, will it not amount to anything but sheer foolishness on our part? It clearly indicates a major lack in our intelligence and therefore, I think we should discontinue this Indrapuja. But all this will be possible only if you have

understood my perspective on this issue and are on board with me."

With this, my address had come to an end. I was standing there quietly observing everyone's reactions. To tell you the truth, it did not seem as if anyone had fully comprehended the essence of my point. But then, no one was opposing it either. Perhaps, everyone had understood it to some extent, and were trying to fathom the rest of it. Or perhaps, influenced by my feats till now, they were in favour of placing their trust in me. Whatever the reason, the silence of contemplation certainly fell upon the meeting and this was the first sign of victory achieved by my splendid address. I too was completely silent; I thought, 'Let them think at length. If and when a query is raised, then the meeting could be directed accordingly.' Then suddenly, one of them asked, "Kanhaiya, if we do not hold Indrapuja this year, then who will we worship?" Now, as you know, it never took me longer than a moment to grasp the crux of any issue. I immediately realised that the Indrapuja can indeed be stopped, but I would have to give these fools something else to worship. Meaning, the big devil could be killed, but only if it was substituted with a smaller devil, as at present, they were not psychologically prepared to live without a devil. However, my life's experiences up to this point were screaming out to me, that the reins of our life are in our own hands, and everything is solely dependent on us alone. We ourselves have to fight the Serpent Kaaliya and the wild bulls. It is we who have to discern the changing circumstances of Gokula, and it is we who have to use our foresight and decide to migrate from Gokula to Vrindavan. Till date, I had never seen any demigods, prayers or miracles ever coming to our aid during the time of difficulties. And this was indeed the reason why I was against any form of worship. As it is, 'worship' and 'action' can never go hand in hand. But today, the pointlessness of worship was not the subject of my contemplation. My main concern at present was to stop the Indrapuja. And given the circumstances, I did not have any qualms in embracing a smaller wrong in order to stop a bigger wrong, so I instantly proclaimed, "This year we will worship Govardhana. It will be just a small festival of a day and we will certainly not misuse any materials and goods in this festival. The best part is, for a small festival such as this, there will be no need for collections or contributions. Everyone will be free to help according to their capacity."

My words at this point had a profound effect. Not only did everyone agree with what I had said, but also accepted my proposal as it was. And with this, I won the first round of the greatest battle of my life until now. Upon acceptance of my proposal, the meeting took a different turn. Now everybody began to worry if the

elders would agree to break a custom that had been practiced since ages. What can I say? But this was my concern as well. Yet, I was happy with everyone's mature way of thinking. For, they had at least started thinking in the right direction. This also implied that they had agreed with me only after dwelling on the matter; they had not acted in blind trust. And when support is extended after a thorough understanding of an issue, the association certainly lasts for long, whereas the roots of blind faith always prove to be weak and shallow. This is why, before I could broach the topic, just see, everyone in the meeting had of their own accord raised the query - 'will the elders agree?' Now whether the elders agreed or not, I had full faith in myself; now that I had decided to stall the Indrapuja, I would not rest until it had come to a grinding halt! All I needed was the support of the cowherd boys and a few gopas, which thankfully, I had won over. While the rest were still lost in thoughts, brimming with enthusiasm in my mind, I immediately resolved that regardless of the extent of efforts it required, I would stop the Indrapuja at any cost. Since it was my proposal, naturally, the responsibility of convincing the elders was also mine. Though the task was difficult, it had to be accomplished. Thus, when nobody could think of a solution, I concluded the meeting, giving strong assurances of convincing the elders myself.

The very next day, a meeting of all the elders was convened at Nanda's house. Like the gopas, they too were under the impression that we cowherd boys had convened a meet, to take upon ourselves the responsibilities for the preparation of the forthcoming Indrapuja festival. But when they eventually realised that I had no intention of celebrating the Indrapuja festival, and was instead proposing the worship of Govardhana, all of them, without exception, were enraged. Though I had presented the same arguments against Indrapuja with which I had easily convinced the cowherd boys before, with elders, it was all in vain. I further said that if anything was worth worshipping here, it was the Govardhana Hill, for it had always been protecting us from gales, storms, harsh sun and unseasonal rains. And then, for us herdsmen, the cows and the river Yamuna were far more worthy of our reverence, than an irrelevant demigod called Indra. I also explained to them that misuse of grains and goods could eventually destroy our life. I even said that rains are a gift of Nature and there can never be a demigod controlling any element of Nature. In the end, to boost their faith, I also said, "Even if there is really a demigod in charge of the rains, then believe me, I will not only fight him, but also defeat him at all costs!" Unfortunately, all my arguments, all my logical explanations proved futile in the end. The obstinacy of the elders had foiled my entire plan. This was not all, quite a few

elders including father Nanda became upset with me. One elder even remarked, "After killing Kaaliya, this lad has become quite presumptuous! He does not have any idea of Indra's power. If he is enraged, Indra will destroy the whole Vrindavan in a moment!"

Indeed upon hearing all this, my ego was terribly hurt. 'Fine, if you do not want to accept my proposal then leave it. Why are you hurting my ego?' I was so angry that I promptly concluded that it was only the result of this orthodox thinking of the elders that we are born as herdsmen and will also die as herdsmen! The ones, whom we consider as our respected elders, are in fact the people, who are the real stumbling blocks in our path to progress. They just could not comprehend my simple and straightforward arguments! But then, what is wrong is wrong. Come what may, Indrapuja would not take place! Firstly, the matter was very simple, with no scope for ambiguity, and on top of it, my ego had also been bruised. I was so enraged that not just me, even the analyst in me was seething with anger. Also, I wondered, 'Are these elders really our enemies that they are fearfully carrying the burden of traditions and are creating hurdles in our path to progress? Of course, they are! Anyone who creates obstacles in the path of human progress is not just my enemy but the enemy of the entire human race!' In short, in no time, my bruised ego sent my temper soaring; and the fact that at present I was considering them as my enemies, was a clear testimony to the depth of my anger. And why do you forget that I always had great faith in my observations. Thus, reluctantly, I just lost my self-control and shouted, "Where is Indra? If he has courage, let him come in front of me! If he really does and I do not destroy him forever, then my name is not Kanhaiya!"

Upon hearing this, all the elders literally began to tremble with fright. Let alone becoming free from the fear of Indra, after my strong challenge, they all began to apologise to him for my brashness. Seeing how deep their fear of Indra was, I was even more astonished; for I had never even imagined that anyone can be so fearful. In terms of intelligence, I was currently observing three categories of people. On the first rung there was me, who upon seeing an old man struggle to meet the requirements for the Indrapuja—and after a thorough analysis and close observation of the situation—had immediately come to the firm conclusion that the Indrapuja was utter nonsense. On the second rung were the cowherd boys, who had not understood the situation upon seeing that old man struggle, but did however understand when I explained the facts of the matter to them. And on the third rung were these utterly foolish elders who failed to understand this, even though they were burdening themselves and others with hardships caused by this

festival. And remarkably, they refused to understand it even upon my explaining it to them!

I was lost in these thoughts, when a village elder, trying to instigate the herdsmen against me, or should I say to openly threaten them, said, "Kanhaiya has lost his mind. But have you all also taken leave of your senses that you are listening to this madman asking us to stop the Indrapuja? Have you no shame to oppose a tradition that has been prevalent through ages?" Then another village elder taunted, "What does this young fool know about Indra's wrath and power? He thinks he is a great challenger! Does he? He will be squashed like a bug in a matter of moments." Upon hearing this, I became even more incensed. To begin with, they had called a thoughtful person like me a madman! And as if this was not enough, they had all but refused to acknowledge the very person who was responsible for killing the raging bull Arishta and the Serpent Kaaliya. This severely wounded my ego indeed. How could I tolerate this verbal assault and attempt to vanquish my very identity, and that too, in my own presence? True, but the question was, what more could I do now? Meaning, while I was still raging with fury, now I was gripped with worry too. For, if I did not immediately launch a strong counter-attack against the elders, then whatever ground I had gained till now would be lost. The simple-minded cowherd boys too, would then turn against me and join them. And if that were to happen, then I would be all alone once again, in which case Indrapuja would definitely take place, and that in turn would mean a full stop to my very identity. This was not all; it would also mean a resounding defeat for me. Never! I could tolerate anything, but defeat! In my heart, the determination to win became even stronger. In other words, I was now resolute in my determination to not just stop the Indrapuja, but to also save my identity and emerge victorious. And now that I was determined to win, what was the need for anger? Anger can become a stumbling block and ruin even a winning situation. When the battle is between ideologies, is it not best to seek refuge in thinking coolly? From all my experiences so far, I knew one thing for sure, that for every problem there is always a solution, because no problem can ever crop up without having a solution.

And soon, I found a solution to the current problem too! Did you see how I benefitted instantly by controlling my anger and taking refuge in deep contemplation? Not just benefitted, see, I had gotten hold of a veritable Brahmastra. And when I had this ultimate weapon in hand, why delay launching it? Indrapuja had to be stopped at any cost! This indeed was my remarkable speciality; once I was determined to do something, I could not sit and relax until

the task was successfully executed. In other words, I performed every task that came my way with such precision and perfection that gradually, success was fast becoming my destiny. Well, enough of blowing my own trumpet; let me now tell you something about my Brahmastra too. The essence of my reflection so far was, neither anger nor explanation could work in this case. But one strong intimidation, which contained both fear and love would definitely do the trick, and this was my Brahmastra in this case. Thus, releasing my ultimate weapon, I said in a firm tone, "If you elders do not listen to us, then all of us cowherd boys will leave Vrindavan forever. Then you can call your Indra. Henceforth, he alone will save you from calamities such as Kaaliya Serpent and the wild bull."

Needless to say, this was my threat and of course, my theatrics too! Obviously, I was not going to turn any such threat into reality, and I would not be able to do it either. Leaving alone was one thing, but going away with all the cowherd boys in tow! Do you think it was a joke? Not at all! I cannot even think about it! But I had said it with such conviction that it seemed as if we were all just about to leave! This too was my unique characteristic that my acting appeared to be even more natural than most of my natural acts! And besides, indulging in theatrics has a clear advantage, as the focus is always maintained on the objective. Whereas, when one is really angry, the focus remains on the anger, not on the objective, which in turn leads to straying from the objective. And because I was just acting, even while delivering this threat, my attention was focussed on father's reaction and his body language. And from the change in his demeanour, I could well comprehend that my Brahmastra had found its mark. That was it! Seeing my weapon yielding its desired effect, I masked my histrionics in the garb of a threat, and gathering all the cowherd boys, stomped right out. For, I anyway had to give them time for discussion among themselves. Secondly, father knew quite well how stubborn I was. Meaning, he was aware that once if I said something, I meant it and would do it anyhow. Did you understand? I was trying to use the impression people had for me in general, to the best of my advantage. As such, I also knew that the others may well be able to stay without their sons by their side, but father could never survive without me. And even if father mustered the courage for a stern action such as this, mother could not even imagine her life without me. For my sake, she would put an end to thousands of such Indrapujas. To tell you the truth, this great threat tossed by me was solely based on the strength of my innocent mother. Nevertheless, there was one more facet to it; I knew that just like iron cuts iron, it is only fear that can kill fear. Thus, while departing, I had also unleashed on them the spectre of another Kaaliya serpent in the future. For in our absence, the fear—who would rescue

them from dangers like Kaaliya— would also haunt them for sure. And they would also have to take into account the scenario, how barren the village would seem without us youngsters. In short, I was positive, for some point of my multi-pronged Brahmastra would definitely find its mark.

And as anticipated, it was decided to celebrate the Govardhana Puja instead. The collection for Indrapuja was stopped with immediate effect and the sums already collected were returned. As soon as the cowherd boys heard this news, they were pleasantly surprised. Indeed, they considered it as one of their greatest victories, and consequently, all of Vrindavan reverberated with the sound of their drums. Contrary to their reaction, to me, it was work that provided me a real high; victory rarely went to my head. I do not know why, but ever since childhood, it was ‘action’ that used to give me greater joy than its fruits. And now, obviously our group had shouldered the responsibility of preparing for the Govardhana Puja. All of us were enthusiastically engaged in the preparations for the festival. Interestingly, the frightened elders had kept themselves away from the festival and its preparations. What if they incurred Indra’s wrath? Let them stay away if they wished so. At our end, special care was being taken to ensure that grains and other materials were not wasted in the preparation. Essentially, this misuse of materials and foodstuff was actually at the core of the discord and the very objective of this struggle was to prevent this misuse.

But most importantly, it was not in Vrindavan alone that such upheavals were taking place, a set of strange events had begun to rapidly unfold in Mathura too. Actually, since the time Jarasandha had advised Kansa, no trouble had been unleashed upon Vrindavan or me. In fact, Jarasandha’s advice had worked magic on Kansa, and as a result, he was now busy ruling Mathura with an absolutely relaxed mind. But how could Nature be happy with such a peaceful development? While we were busy preparing for the Govardhana Puja, Kansa had retired to his forest retreat with his two wives for some rest and rejuvenation. What better news could there be for Vrindavan, than to know that Kansa was away in the forest for some rest? Just then, an incident occurred which did not take time for this good news to turn into bad news. Wandering around, as was his wont, Narada also wended his way to the same forest. Upon running into Kansa, out of seeming curiosity, Narada enquired about Kansa’s well-being. Though Jarasandha had explained to Kansa that a good King should not give undue importance to wandering holy men, Kansa’s ego began to rear its ugly head on seeing Narada. Having heeded Narada’s words the last time, Kansa had to face great humiliation in front of Jarasandha. And because of that, Kansa

was already simmering with anger at Narada. Thus, in a very cold manner and with complete indifference, Kansa said, "You will be unhappy to learn that I have killed all the eight children of Devaki, and proved your prophecy wrong. For your information, my nemesis, that is, Devaki's eighth child has died long back."

Narada's ego, which was already piqued by Kansa's cold and rude behaviour, was now badly bruised, when Kansa put a question mark on his very powers of reckoning. As such, being free from ego is considered the mark of a saintly person. But unfortunately, at that time, ego had caught Narada in its vice-like grip. Naturally, the moment he was gripped by ego, his saintliness vanished into thin air. This is the difference between an ordinary man and a saint; man is the embodiment of ego, whereas a saint is devoid of ego. Nevertheless, the end result was, Narada, who should have ignored Kansa's sarcastic demeanour and smilingly carried on, lost his temper driven by ego. It is a well known fact that anger corrupts intelligence; this was exactly what had happened with Narada too. Not only did he lose his mental equilibrium, but raging with fury, he also blazed, "Listen to me, Kansa! Prophecies are often proved false, but calculations...they can never go wrong. And, I am not a prophet but a supremely accomplished reckoner. So, open your ears and listen! Devaki's eighth son is not only alive but he is happily growing up in Vrindavan as Nanda's son." Of course, Narada's words were true. He had not prophesied; for that matter, no one can predict the future. Everybody knows very well that past, present and future; all three are facets of time, meaning everything is time itself. And when everything is time, he who knows the mechanics of time can also accurately calculate it. And one who can accurately calculate time, can not only make the future, but if he so desires, can mar it too.

And there were no two opinions about the fact that Narada was an accomplished master of such mechanics. But unfortunately, such a master of calculations was also gripped by ego, and induced thus, he had revealed what should have never been revealed. Though dialogues were being exchanged between Kansa and Narada, ironically, it was my future that was being put at stake. That is to say, one was being arrogant and the other was being foolish, but the life endangered in the bargain was mine. Anyway, upon hearing Narada's revelations, Kansa had but naturally become speechless. Indeed, upon hearing that I was alive and well, he was shaken from his slumber. He cut short his sojourn and immediately set forth for his capital, Mathura. Upon reaching Mathura, he designated two spies to keep a vigil on me, so that he could get every piece of vital information

concerning me well in time. In other words, I was all set to face troubling times once again. However, at that time, unaware of all this, I was engrossed in the preparations for the Govardhana puja³⁵.

When Kansa was informed by his spies that I had stalled the Indrapuja festival and was preparing to wage a war against Indra, he let out a thunderous laugh. After guffawing for a while, rather pleased, he said, "It is good that my enemy is about to confront Indra in a battle. One might as well consider him vanquished. This menace will be rooted out once and for all." As such, Kansa's thinking was right in its own way; for, I might as well tell you that the Indrapuja was a unanimously acknowledged obligation not just in Vrindavan, but in the whole of Aryavrata. I was the first one who had resolved to stop this grand festival in Vrindavan, whereas all across Aryavrata, Indra's might was still celebrated with much fanfare. And as the reverence for Indra had spread across Aryavrata, it was but natural that the fallout of my deed would not be limited to Vrindavan or Mathura alone. When the issue was so important and without a precedent, the end result too could be expected to be momentous and new; and that was exactly what happened. Gradually, with the passage of time, this news began to spread across Aryavrata like wildfire, and needless to add, it made Vrindavan, a small village in the Kingdom of Mathura, famous among the Aryan territories overnight. To tell you the truth, more than Vrindavan, this event had made me famous, as the news spread by word of mouth was, "There is this lad Krishna from Vrindavan who is about to challenge Lord Indra." And then there were many aspects to these discussions. "How powerful is this boy? Will Indra spare his life?" Those who asked these questions were fools, and those who answered them were even greater fools! All said and done, the positive outcome of this foolishness was, an ordinary boy from Vrindavan, called Kanhaiya, was being endlessly discussed as the heroic Krishna across Aryavrata! I could have never envisaged that I would rise to such a historic fame just by putting an end to the practice of Indrapuja. Then suddenly, it dawned on me! This incident had given me the guiding philosophy of my life - if one is hundred percent focused on one's goal or the task at hand without any expectation of rewards, then the fruit of that action will invariably be a thousand times greater than imagined. Conversely, if the focus is on the fruits of the action, then the action itself is rendered futile.

Well! Not just Kansa, but all of Aryavrata was now anxiously waiting for the day of the Indrapuja festival. Everyone was curious to know about the outcome of the battle between Krishna and Indra. And as for Kansa, this day held far greater

significance than mere curiosity; it was but natural as his entire life hinged upon the outcome of this battle. Meanwhile, the discussions across Aryavrata had taken on bizarre proportions. To make things more exciting, some people were spreading a highly exaggerated version of the Kaaliya killing incident. Indeed, it seemed as if there was a competition going on across Aryavrata in the art of glorifying and extolling my strengths! Obviously, it was only by drawing parallels between my strength and that of Indra, that the excitement over the battle could be generated. Therefore, these insipid people, whose own lives were anyway so dull and mundane, would spice up every event of their own accord. Gradually, the number of people spreading an exaggerated version of the events that had led to the deaths of Putana and Shatak was also growing by leaps and bounds. Thus, these dramatised stories soon transformed the ordinary Kanhaa of Vrindavan into the most powerful man in Aryavrata, called Krishna. It can be said that the Indrapuja incident had laid the foundation for my fame spreading through Aryavrata. Someone has rightly stated, 'Nature works in unique ways, and this is why it is impossible to comprehend the ubiquity of its acts and plays. I had stopped the Indrapuja so as to prevent wastage of food and water. How would I have ever known that this one deed would make my fabled powers famous across the whole of Aryavrata?

By now, this news had spread far and wide and reached many of the Kings and Kingdoms of this region. Indeed, there was no King in Aryavrata who was not eager to learn more about this Krishna of Vrindavan. As the day of the Indrapuja festival drew closer, everyone's curiosity had roused and so did Kansa's inquisitiveness, which of course knew no bounds; because just like mine, his life also depended heavily on the outcome of this battle. Finally, the day of the Govardhana Puja arrived. Before the break of dawn, all of us gathered at the festival ground. The excitement of the cowherd boys had to be seen to be believed. However, in contrast to this, the elders were still in a gloomy and apprehensive frame of mind. Perhaps, the fear of the looming spectre of Indra was still haunting them. Anyway, we reached the Govardhana Hill dancing and cavorting while the elders were still brooding over the matter. Finally, we performed the Govardhana Puja and not the Indrapuja. After the worship, all of us devoured delicious fruits; curd and butter were especially consumed in great quantities. Not just this, in the afternoon, games, dances and other festivities too followed with much merriment. All in all, the festival had been magnificent and by evening, everyone returned happily to Vrindavan. No Indra had come to stop the Govardhana festival. He would have come only if he had existed, right?

Well, taking advantage of this fact, our gang began shouting in my praise, "Just see, frightened of Kanhaiya, Indra did not even turn up to show his face!" Upon reaching Vrindavan safely, the elders too felt a load off their chest. After all, they had allowed the Govardhana worship just because we had threatened to leave Vrindavan for good. But the fear of Indra's wrath was still persistent in their mind. However, since everyone had reached Vrindavan safe and sound, even the elders seemed to have had their strength and courage restored. Surprisingly, now they too began to fearlessly voice their agreement with the cowherd boys. One or two elders even remarked, "We knew from the very beginning that our Kanhaiya was very talented and powerful. How could Indra face him?" To tell you the truth, I thought it beneath me to even listen to their drivel. I was just content that I was able to stop the transgressions being committed in the name of Indrapuja. Actually, in my heart of hearts, I was very happy and enthusiastic and justifiably so! At such a young age, what could be a greater victory for an ordinary cowherd boy than the fact that overnight, he had emerged as the most powerful person in all of Aryavrata? That is to say, both I and the villagers were excited. The only difference was, they were assuming it to be physical strength, whereas in reality, the battle was purely psychological.

But see the twist of fate! It could not bear to see us, the cowherd boys, so happy. Fate had anyway never been fair with me, but this time it made one extremely diabolic move against me. As the night set in, it began to rain heavily with stormy winds. The rain was so heavy, that by morning the whole of Vrindavan was in knee-deep water. Pandemonium broke out in the entire village. Even I was dumfounded. Overnight, the situation had escalated to such an extent, that all the elders had started gathering at our house one after another. Seeing Nature's fury take its toll, some of my young friends had also come running. The wind had turned so ferocious, that the torches were snuffed out as soon as they were lit, giving a much eerier look to the entire scene. Indeed, the night had just refused to pass. The rains lashing down together with the thunderous gale had severely shaken everyone. Meanwhile, the perplexity of the fearful elders who were on the lookout for an opportunity to blame me, swiftly turned into anger. They were convinced that this heavy rain and flood was Indra's wrath being directed at us in its furious form. One elder also said, "We had lost our mind that we got influenced by the glib words of this immature lad!"

Another elder added, "It would have been better if we ourselves had banished this brash youngster from our village!" So, while the previous evening had everyone singing my praises, by morning, there was a queue of people baying

for my blood; the cowherd boys and the elders put together, the crowd was around fifty people strong. Someone has rightly stated that it is not the man, but his time and circumstances that are more powerful. It was good that I had not accepted their appreciation earlier; indeed, I was wise not to have let the compliments sink into my head, which had enabled me to easily ignore their taunts as well. For I knew well, that just like their praises, even their present hecklings were a manifestation of their weak minds. So, though I stood in firm denial of their taunts and adverse comments, seeing the heavy rains, I too was baffled. To tell you the truth, I had never seen such a heavy downpour before. I knew that these rains were merely a coincidence, but what could I say? Who could I say this to? At this juncture, who would pay heed to me? There was no question of anyone believing me even for a moment. For, as far as they were concerned, this calamity had struck upon them because of me. These rains had made my position so awkward in Vrindavan that I could barely look anyone in the eye. All the elders were glaring and gnawing at me as if I had perpetrated a sin or committed some major crime. Nanda too was very saddened, unfortunately, his thinking too did not differ from that of the rest of the elders. All of them were constantly repeating just one thing, "Indra's fury shall abate only after he has destroyed us all."

Though I could hear all of them speaking, I could not understand even a bit of what they were saying. All I could comprehend was, an immediate action was the need of the hour. It was imperative that we somehow worked out an immediate solution to rescue everyone from these terrifying rains and naturally, this issue required a discussion and deliberation, which certainly was not happening; instead, all of them were still engaged in flinging curses at me. The problem was grave. The elders could not really do anything and they would not let me do anything either! The rains too were not showing any signs of relenting. Meaning, our escape was fast becoming a remote possibility. I was worried and so were the rest. Still, there was a difference; while I was deliberating upon finding a solution, the others were just busy cursing me.

By morning, after their hearts were content with venting out on me a fair share of their worries in the form of curses; tired, they began thinking of a way out. And they came up with a solution listening to which my head began to spin. As is well known, the moment any misfortune strikes a fearful person, he immediately seeks refuge in prayers and this was exactly what the elders did! They were all engaged in asking Indra for pardon; wherever one looked, there were prayer meetings being held in full swing. Everyone was engaged in

propitiating and somehow trying to pacify the displeased Indra! Seeing this, I was shaken to the very core of my being. My downcast eyes refused to look up and I cannot even describe the state of my mind. All my energy seemed to have drained out of my body. Seeing my condition, the enthusiasm of the poor cowherd boys had also turned into gloom. In such a state, it was futile to expect any help from them. On the other hand, the prayers of the elders had put a question mark on my very existence. Meaning, now there was no question of my saying anything further. It was good that my ego had been weak since the beginning, besides, this was hardly the time to pamper it. That is why, even after so much humiliation, I had managed to keep my mind calm. However, the calmness of my mind was having no effect on the ferocity of the rains. The rain was gradually taking on a deadly form; it did not show even the slightest signs of abating. Honestly speaking, this coincidence was now becoming very difficult to handle. The conditions were deteriorating so rapidly that water was now beginning to fill up in the ground as well. Along with this, the utensils and other small household goods were also beginning to float out as water had entered the houses. And in a short while, the water in the settlement had risen above the knees. To top it, unbearable cold had begun to seep into the settlement; all the elders were shivering. Still, in my opinion, more than the cold, it was fear that was responsible for their shivering. It was also clear that if some drastic steps were not taken immediately, all of Vrindavan would be submerged under water. And to my agony, I would be blamed for this destruction.

Yet, the most surprising facet of this entire incident for me was, in spite of this calamity striking right in front of their eyes, neither was anyone deliberating upon the rescue plan, nor were they discussing the problem seriously. All that was going on were intense prayers! In other words, these fools were pinning all their hopes on their prayers; and it is a well known truth that a person who cherishes a vain hope, certainly shirks from taking an assertive action. They were under the impression that, 'Sooner or later, Indra's anger will be appeased and as soon as it subsides, he will stop the rains.' But I could not see this happening anytime soon, as no one was about to take any affirmative action; in short, relief and rescue was nowhere in sight. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to doubt their maturity as well; how can anyone live with such futile hopes in the first place? I had learned from life that calamities can be confronted only by taking appropriate action, as I knew that the only way to escape danger unharmed is to confront it with intelligent action, which indeed is a man's duty; without affirmative action, how can a man save himself from a catastrophe? I failed to comprehend what exactly these people intended to do, or what they

truly desired. Internally, I was deeply aggrieved by this inaction, but what could I do? I, presumably their greatest enemy, was being sidelined and totally ignored. Indeed, this was the first time in my life when I had found myself stuck in a situation, without having any Brahmastra. I would at times look up at the incessant rains pouring from the sky and would then lower my gaze on seeing everyone sitting so helplessly. What could I do? Such was the twist of fate that I, who was the apple of everyone's eyes a day earlier, was now like an irksome speck of dust in those very eyes. Though externally I had maintained a calm demeanor, within me, there were many storms raging. My dilemma now was, neither did I want to die for no reason nor could I bear to see the dear inhabitants of Vrindavan perish in this manner. Hence, as the rains increased, so did my inner turmoil. Frankly, I had never found myself in such a helpless situation before. But for how long could I sit and watch this inane drama? Finally, I gathered courage and took a firm step towards concerted action. By now, the long night had passed and it was morning. Meaning, now was the time to take action. The torrential rain had been unable to open these elders' eyes, nor was the vigil of the entire night able to help them channelise their thoughts in the right direction. The situation had worsened to such an extent, that there was utter chaos even among the animals. The water was now up to the underbellies of the cows and buffaloes. The condition of the houses was no different. The water had crossed the verandas and had even started flooding the houses, which obviously had got the womenfolk worrying about the safety of their children. The most shocking part was, even with all this taking place right in front of their eyes, the elders were still busy in their prayers! Anyway, I had decided to take an affirmative action; hence, first of all, I started gathering my cowherd friends one by one. At this time they alone were my ray of hope. I had to first take them into confidence, maybe then things could be taken forward.

There was already the night-long vigil, and on top of it, my ears were aching on hearing the taunts of the elders. The situation outside was also not conducive enough to roam anywhere, but still, I somehow managed to gather all of them. All the elders had assembled at our house, so to hold our discussion we had to take refuge elsewhere. Finally, we converted the veranda of an empty house into our meeting place. I then began explaining the situation to them in detail, saying, "These rains are a mere coincidence; they have no connection with Indra. And when it has nothing to do with Indra's fury, then it is futile to ask Indra for pardon. So we need to think of a solution to save ourselves. However, these foolish elders think that they can appease Indra with prayers and he will stop the rains; but nothing of this sort is going to happen. I do not see this rain relenting

any time soon. Without a doubt, if we don't think of a rescue plan to save ourselves from this situation, then soon, right before our eyes, all of Vrindavan, including us, will get washed away. And I am sure none of you would want that to happen. Thus, I seek your co-operation in accomplishing this seemingly arduous task." And as I had expected, the cowherd boys agreed and fulfilled their duties as friends, and rallied around me. Even after so much had transpired, they still showed their faith in me. Now, I do not know to what extent they had understood, but at this time, more than understanding, it was their faith that was important, and that I had definitely secured. That was it; with my cowherd friends in my support, I was once again fired with enthusiasm. Of course, it was I who had to suggest a way out as I always did, and I had already thought of a rescue plan. Fortunately, before I got up to make an unsolicited suggestion, they themselves asked, "Kanhaiya, please tell us, what should be done now? How should we save ourselves from this dreadful calamity?"

Well, anxious and eager as I was to begin, the moment I heard their question, I stood up right there, where I was sitting, and enthusiastically, said, "In my opinion we ought to take shelter of the very same Govardhana that we had worshipped yesterday. But unfortunately, no one will heed my advice, so all of you will have to try and convince everyone. However, it will not be easy even for you to make them understand, so it is better that first of all, we move the animals out of the settlement. Once we successfully transport all the animals, then the elders will certainly feel confident of escaping safely from the settlement. And then, you will not find it very difficult to convince them too."

Everybody more or less agreed with my suggestion, and we began this exercise right away. I was glad that we had once again resorted to concrete positive action – 'karma'. However, I was still surprised at the elders' stubbornness, fear and ignorance. Such was the height of their foolishness that the village was nearly under water and we were compelled to save the animals first, because these obdurate people refused to budge! To tell you the truth, I was amused by the outcome of their foolishness. This incident had established the fact that animals were more important than terrified humans! Anyway, in a short while we had managed to transport all the animals from the flooded settlement. Incredibly, even though we had now proved that we could safely escape, the cowherd boys were still having a lot of trouble convincing the elders to follow suit. Fortunately, the elders finally agreed to our suggestion and ventured out. As is well known, a drowning man will clutch even at a straw! Well, the cowherd boys were enthused when the elders agreed to follow our plan and soon, we succeeded in

transporting everybody out from the flooded settlement.

Needless to say, in view of the fact that finally everyone's safety was ensured and they were now out of the settlement, a big load came off my chest, because moving out of the flooded village was the most difficult part of the exercise. And now that we had managed to come out unscathed, the danger to life and property was averted to a great extent. The probability of the water rising as fast outside the settlement was almost nil. Fortunately, we did not suffer any loss of life and property while venturing out of the settlement. I breathed a sigh of relief; for I was certain to be blamed for every loss that we encountered now. However, leaving such trivial matters aside if I return to the present, our caravan comprising villagers and cattle was gradually moving towards the Govardhana Hill. But this journey too was not easy. While there was sludge on all sides, the rains were still pouring down heavily on us. Meaning, though we had left a certain death behind, the difficulties had now grown exponentially. Sure enough, such a journey could have been undertaken only by hardworking herdsmen like us, and we were rightly doing so. Finally by afternoon, we somehow managed to reach Govardhana.

Given the circumstances, reaching Govardhana was certainly no less of an accomplishment either. Once we reached the hill, it became certain that our lives had been saved. Needless to add, with this, both, my enthusiasm and self-confidence had returned, and I then instructed the cowherd boys to first take the children and the elders up the hill. At this time, my sense of duty was at an all-time high. As it is, success inevitably tends to fuel one's enthusiasm. On the other hand, seeing that all lives were safe now, everybody's trust in me was restored again and I need not tell you that at this point in time, their growing trust in me was increasing my self-confidence manifold. Unbelievably, once again, direct communication was established between me and them. Otherwise, the cowherd boys acted as a transporting medium of instructions between me and the elders. I would first convince them and they, in turn would explain it to the elders. Well! In spite of putting in the best of our efforts, owing to lack of food and energy, it was only by evening that we had safely reached the top of the hill. Fortunately, we had set our domestic animals free midway up the hill into an open space, otherwise we might not have succeeded in climbing the hill at all. For, it was not just the fatigue, but also the fierce downpour and the biting cold, which were proving to be great hurdles to our climb. Now the task that lay ahead seemed to be far more difficult than what I had anticipated. For, upon reaching up the Govardhana hill, we had escaped the flood, but death in many different

forms appeared to be still lurking around us. Admittedly, these heavy rains had nearly defeated my intelligence and even now death was staring at us; the only difference was, it had now changed its form. Meaning, now, it had appeared before us in the form of torrential rains and cold. I was completely taken aback. It had even become difficult to say how many lives these heavy, incessant rains and cold would take by morning. It indeed was similar to falling from the frying pan into the fire. For, we had sought shelter on Govardhana to escape the fury of the flood, but upon reaching here, we had realised that rain with numbing cold was dangling like a sword of Damocles over our heads. Though this was the harsh reality, I had to find a solution for this, and I did. If we took shelter in the caves of the Govardhana hill, we could save ourselves from both the cold and the rain. With the help of the cowherd boys, I quickly began to hunt for these caves. There were a number of caves in Govardhana, but considering the wind and heavy rains, we needed to find the deeper and more secure ones. And what can diligence not do? By nightfall, all of us were securely ensconced in caves, and with this an arduous task had come to an end. Indeed, at present, these caves were providing us with adequate protection from the life-threatening rains and cold, and they seemed no less comfortable than a royal palace.

Although we were now safe after having taken refuge in the caves, the rains were still not showing any signs of relenting its fury. The water had now reached up to the knees even at the foot of the Govardhana hill. This meant that our settlement in Vrindavan had certainly been completely submerged. If it had, so be it, but at the moment, having taken shelter in the caves, there was an expression of elation at having defeated death. I do not know about others, but my happiness did not last for long. For, suddenly, my mind was entangled in the second set of problems staring at us. Firstly, nobody had eaten anything since the previous night. Besides, we had to face incessant struggle to reach Govardhana and consequently, everyone was extremely exhausted. Evidently, the only sign of life among people was the fact that they were breathing. Moreover, I could see that the rainfall was not going to subside soon. It also seemed certain that if the stormy rains and biting cold continued, then some people would die of starvation and others of cold.

Summing up, at this point in time, these were the issues that had become the cause of my relentless worry. In short, if food and firewood were not obtained quickly, then we might as well assume that quite a few people would soon die of hunger and the remaining, from cold. And if that happened, all the attempts made so far at battling this calamity, would be rendered futile. Under such

circumstances, I believed, it was better to die doing my duty fearlessly than give up. Thinking thus, I gathered a few cowherd boys and in spite of the stormy rain, went to pluck fruits and gather some firewood. The rains were so heavy that one could not even see one's own hands. Snakes and wild animals too were displaced and posed great danger. Still, I thought it was better to die in the open, performing one's duty, than to rot and die inside the caves. Though that was the right thing to do, in reality, it was extremely difficult to pluck fruits and gather firewood in this darkness and stormy rains. However, if one's inclination is strong and heart pure, then even the most difficult task can be accomplished with ease; thinking thus, we persevered in our task. At this time, lightning emerged as our greatest help as it kept piercing through dark clouds every once in a while. But such was the situation that we were hardly able to find any fruits and firewood. On the contrary, dealing with the wild animals around us was consuming most of our time. We lost count of how many animals we had killed up till now. The task we had set out to accomplish was not easy anyway; in fact, the growing darkness and the heavy downpour were proving to be great obstacles in our task. Yes, the intermittent flashes of lightning were lighting up the forest and thereby, indeed doing us a great favour. Still, all in all, the situation was such that we were stuck in a deep sea of troubles, and to add to our woes, death kept rearing its ugly head every now and then in newer and different forms. At first, I had thought that if we could manage to move out of the settlement and reach on top of the Govardhana hill, then we would be safe. But with incessant rain, death had taken on the new form of biting cold. Then I thought if we take refuge in caves we would be saved. But the caves were able to protect us only from the rain; the shivering due to the cold still persisted. And now, death was stalking us in the form of hunger. However, the gratifying fact at present was, we had gained partial victory in the mission which we had set out to achieve, and under these circumstances, even a partial victory was no less of an accomplishment. True, we had not managed to gather enough fruits or firewood for everybody to eat their fill and warm themselves adequately. Even so, it did serve to alleviate a part of the misery.

Considering the trying circumstances, most people were astonished that we could gather even the small quantity of fruit and firewood that we had managed to bring. Most of the elders were in tears while eating the fruits; perhaps their whimpers were a sign of their repentance. The fruits everyone ate that day must have definitely tasted the sweetest of the fruits they had had so far. Indeed, much of the sweetness could be attributed to extreme hunger and the paucity of food. Anyway, can the excess of anything give as much pleasure as its paucity does?

Besides, who would have even expected to get anything to eat with Nature's fury unleashed upon us? And now when something you like unexpectedly falls into your lap, and that too when it is most needed, the pleasure is bound to reach its zenith. Incidentally, because of the small quantity of fruits, we cowherd boys had to stay hungry. Moreover, there was no question of us getting any sleep either, for, the fear of a sudden attack by wild animals also prevailed in the caves. It was good that Radha and some of the gopis had kept us company in this night vigil. This at least kept our mind occupied, while we could feel the gnawing hunger pangs. But the heavy rain was severely testing our courage and sense of duty. And its ferocity did not last merely for one day, but for three full days. During this time, we gathered fruits and firewood in the daytime and at night, we kept fires burning in the caves of the children and elders so that they could stay protected from the biting cold and hunger.

Finally, on the fourth day, the downpour stopped. The rainclouds began to clear. And soon, the sun too came out in all its youthful splendour. But, it could be said that this rain had truly proved to be a grueling test of our capabilities before it had finally stopped. And as soon as the deluge stopped, the elders were elated and the gopis began to dance; everyone found their groove. Now that all of us had escaped alive, I had once again become their valorous Kanhaiya. With the rising of the sun, my life had taken a new turn. Once again, odes to my heroism were sung and I was being praised to the skies. But was I the one to get affected by either honour or insult? For me, honour and dishonour were one and the same. I was just content with being able to perform my duty well. For, in my view, honour and dishonour both were certificates given by others based on their own worthiness, understanding and circumstances, which have little to do with the real personality and the actual capabilities of the person it is meant for. This is why I say, only the one for whom respect and disrespect are equal can perform result-oriented, effective action.³⁶ You will recall that much later, I had also repeatedly said this to Arjuna while reciting the Gita.

Anyway, supposedly, the danger had been averted, and everyone was happy, but I could foresee an even greater danger lurking. Meaning, the shadow of death had not completely disappeared as yet. It had merely changed its form and once again it was staring at us in the face. I could clearly foresee that such torrential downpour must have devastated our settlement. Meaning, it would take months of unrelenting work to restore our village to its former condition. In short, life would once again become worse than the one we had experienced at Gokula.

All in all, the scenario was such that while everyone was celebrating, I was seriously preparing myself for the daunting task that lay ahead. Nevertheless, we had started to climb down the hill. Even descending was not that easy anymore; the rains had created potholes and all the pathways had become quite slippery. But for us, this did not pose a great problem; as we were herdsmen by nature, did we ever get anything easily in life? So, holding each other's hands, we were slowly climbing down. The animals that we had brought along with us had climbed down on their own as soon as the rains had stopped. To our relief, now, the water had receded even from the ground below Govardhana. Still, we were able to reach the settlement at a very slow pace. We had departed from the hill in the morning, but we were able to set sight on our settlement only by the evening. But then was there anything left in the settlement worth seeing? The condition of our settlement can be gauged by the fact that upon reaching, for two days we had to wait outside the settlement for the water level to recede, and only on the third day could we enter. So, my concerns were well placed.

The problems did not end here. Seeing the condition of the settlement, I was left dumbfounded. The condition was much worse than I had anticipated; my mind began to whirl. The settlement had turned into such a wreck, that for a moment it looked like a ruin that was vaguely familiar. Is this really the same place where we had been dwelling for the last so many years? Truly, seeing my own house today, I felt that I had seen this heap of rubble somewhere before.

Everyone was stunned upon seeing this devastation, and as for the elders, they were inconsolable. But for me, this was neither the time to be dismayed nor dejected, for time was clearly demanding an acid test of action and hard work. Merely dilapidated walls remained where once stood beautiful homes. In the name of roofs, all that was left was open skies. Meaning, to spread out as sheets there was slush and to cover us there was a sky full of rain. Certainly, life could not have been more difficult. Death was at our door in its most horrifying form, and to live, we had no other option but to battle it head on.

When this was how it was; all that could be done was to think ahead and find a solution as soon as possible. So, I immediately took refuge in 'action'. To raise everyone's enthusiasm, I straight away called for a meeting of the cowherd boys and gopas and launched into an inspirational speech right there in front of everyone. In a way, what was there to talk about? The condition of the settlement was evident to one and all. And now instead of being disappointed, the need of the hour was to engage ourselves in work with complete diligence and build the

settlement once again. Hence, I pumped enough enthusiasm into everyone and motivated them to bring this arduous task to fruition. To me, if a person succumbs and surrenders to a situation, then what is he worth? And after the speech, we were ready to tackle the tasks that lay ahead. I, along with the cowherd boys and the herdsmen, promptly engaged ourselves in the work at hand. Right away, I split the group into two teams. In the first team there were around twenty cowherd boys, who were charged with the responsibility of collecting fruits and firewood. The second team was bigger and had about fifty gopas who were assigned with the responsibility of the renovation and repair work.

Naturally, collecting the materials for construction was also their responsibility. Though we were diligently engaged in our endeavour, this time, the task was indeed very difficult. Firstly, we did not have anything to even lie on or cover ourselves with, and to add to our woes, it was the rainy season. To spend such difficult times in the forests was possible only for us, the herdsmen. Under such circumstances, we had to carry out the construction work and at the same time, also arrange for everyone's meals! It was really the most daunting challenge that we had encountered so far. The sporadic rains had not missed a single opportunity to create hurdles in our work. Truly, the monsoon, which was my favourite season, had wreaked such havoc this time, that the very term 'rain' had now begun to unnerve me. The downpour that once used to enchant me, was now driving me mad with its unrelenting ferocity. In such a situation, gathering fruits and flowers was still manageable, but the construction work was not a matter of just a few days or even weeks. And on top of that, we had to set up our camp on a big hillock outside our village. As if life was not already punishing us enough, now, because of constantly living in the open without any protection against the rains and the cold, we had to continually battle with various illnesses as well. This was, beyond any doubt, the most demanding phase of my life up till now. But forget my problems; for the Brijwasis, it had become incredibly difficult to sail through this phase. Yet, in order to survive, one has no option but to brave through the toughest of times. However, if one has a zest for life and is not afraid of hard work, does it take long for a difficult phase to pass?

And the same was the case with us too. After about a month of hard work, we were able to reconstruct four large houses. First of all, women, children and elders were sheltered in these houses; well, truly speaking we had to actually stuff them into these houses. Be that as it may; after the children, women and elders were housed, we could breathe easy. The poor people had endured

difficulties much beyond their normal capacity. As for us, the young boys and gopis, it did not matter. Our young age was meant to endure difficulties and grow stronger. But I must mention a word of appreciation for Radha and the gopis, who were working equally hard with us in every area. Fortunately, now the rains had completely stopped, and this in turn, had helped us accelerate the pace of the construction work. The positive outcome of this was, by the end of another two months of tireless work, the settlement had once again regained its former glory. Here, a reality of life must be accepted that repeatedly having to live out in the open and having to struggle merely to survive was the feat sealed for us cowherds. And in my view, the elders and their orthodox ways were partially responsible for this bizarre fate of ours. Anyway! The settlement was once again thriving but I was feeling completely worn out. To tell you the truth, this time the rain seemed to have drained me out, reducing me to half of my former self. For the first time in my life, I was feeling so exhausted. But fortunately, it was not in my nature to remain sad, depressed or exhausted for long; so for the next one month, I focused on only three things; rest, exercise, eating regular meals and that too eating voraciously. And within a month, I was back to being 'Krishna', my former strong and robust self. Incidentally, another positive development was, by now, everybody had come to realise that had we not taken shelter in Govardhana, then all would have been lost. Had we merely taken refuge in prayers, then certainly we and our beloved Vrindavan both would have been wiped out in no time. Well, no pain, no gain! And with this incident, the gain was the newly found confidence – the confidence that Krishna's words will now never go unheeded.

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- END OF CHAPTER 6 -

CHAPTER 7

The Much Talked About Unforgettable Raasleela

As I was growing up, the attraction of the gopis towards me was also growing. Incidentally, at this juncture in their lives, they all, driven by their youthful desires, were subconsciously dreaming of having me as their husband³⁷. This was a new predicament that had fallen my way; although it was a pleasant trouble, trouble it certainly was! Yet, how could I find a solution to such a sweet predicament? Neither could I fool them by giving false hopes, nor could I disappoint them and distance myself from them. Poor me...inspite of being fully aware of their feelings, I had to pretend as if I was ignorant of their attraction and desire. What could I do? My life was taking such a strange course, that acting was fast becoming an integral feature of my life; even if I wanted to do good unto someone, I had to pretend and act. But yes, the positive fallout of this for me was, gradually, I was becoming an accomplished actor and this talent that I had acquired in the due process of life proved to be very useful later. Since we are on this topic, let me reveal an important fact to you; honestly speaking, these poor gopis were more impressed and attracted by my dancing skills and my prowess with the flute, rather than my looks and heroic deeds. Yet, I could not abandon my flute playing and dancing, merely because it was attracting the gopis, and in turn, was leading them astray. Besides, how can I forget that the gopis had found me very attractive and captivating right since my childhood days? It was these wretched gopis who had given me one of my many names, 'Mohan', the one who captivates the heart and mind; so was there anything new about this now? However, the new development was, not only had we grown up, but with age, their perspective had also changed. But, when I was just the same, why would it bother me?

Well, time was flitting by thus, when one day, a few gopis came to me and requested me to arrange the Raasleela dance for the forthcoming full moon festival of winter called Sharad Purnima. As I had always loved the full moon night and over and above that, it was a singing and dancing program, and that too with the gopis! Was there any scope for refusal? So it was decided that the Raasleela with the gopis would be held on the forthcoming Sharad Purnima. Among the gopas and gopis, whoever had heard the news, had become overwhelmed with joy. But to my utter surprise, when I excitedly broke out the same news to Radha, she became angry instead of being pleased. There were

two reasons behind her anger; one, the celebration was planned without consulting her, and two, the gopis who were making her jealous these days were participating in the event. Well, if she was angry, so be it. It did not matter; frequent bouts of anger were a part of her nature, but ironically, this time, she was hell-bent on sabotaging the event itself. She was insistent on getting the Raasleela dance cancelled. Now, what kind of a demand was this? I tried my best to mollify her and reason out with her, but she refused to budge from her stance. However, was Krishna going to be affected by such negativities? The festival was so grand that it had not only gladdened my heart but had also made the gopas and the gopis ecstatic; then to cancel it just to appease Radha's petty ego, was beyond my comprehension. So, there was no question of my giving in to her ignoble demands. Unfortunately, Radha could not tolerate my indifference and the fact that I was disagreeing with her, made her all the more determined to stop the Raasleela dance festival. Day and night, she tried everything in her capacity to stop the festival by hook or by crook. But what could not be done, just could not be done. I was not going to budge and succumb to any of her pressure tactics. On the other hand, Radha too was not the kind to give up so easily. Meaning, a sweet conflict had once again erupted between us. Finally, having no other option at her disposal, she used her ultimate weapon. Disappointed and disgruntled, Radha resorted to threatening me that if the festival was held against her wishes, she would not participate in it.

The poor girl must have thought that if she did not participate, neither would I, and if I did not participate then the other gopas and gopis would also be forced to cancel it, and the festival would automatically fall apart. She had played a great move but unfortunately for her, it was me she was contending with. And with me at the helm of organising the festivities, could a fine festival such as this ever be cancelled? Perhaps, Radha had forgotten that no one could use such a Brahmastra – the ultimate weapon on me; no such weapon would ever work on me. I surely had an arsenal of thousands of such weapons to deal with everyone and these weapons had never failed me at the opportune time. But if I allowed someone else's Brahmastra to work on me, then what would be the point of my existence? For, the ultimate weapon follows but one law; it never works on an egoless person. At the same time, another peculiar quality of the Brahmastra is that only an egoless person has ample of such weapons at his disposal to use in each and every kind of situation. In short, this weapon works only on a person who has an ego. In fact, the very meaning of Brahmastra is, taking advantage of people's weaknesses, which I did not have any. I was of the firm belief: What has to be done, has to be done anyhow, at any cost. So Radha's Brahmastra

failed to yield any effect on me; on the contrary, I became very angry with her for using such an unwarranted, underhand weapon against me. I told her clearly, "If you do not wish to join us, then please don't. The Raasleela dance festival is not dependent on whether you join us or not. But keep in mind, the festival will be quite magnificent. And on that day, the Raasleela I'll perform will be enshrined in people's minds forever." Seeing my enthusiasm for the festival and the blatant manner in which I ignored her pleas, Radha's ego was terribly hurt. This is the speciality of ego; if it grows, it gives pain and when it is shattered, it causes tremendous pain. This is why it is said that egoistic people are destined to cry and suffer regardless of the circumstances.

To our dismay, the Sharad Purnima festival was still a fortnight away. But our excitement was such that day in and day out, we were engrossed in preparing for the festival. Every evening we had a meeting to discuss the preparations. Of course, Radha did not attend any of the meetings, which did not matter in the least. The rest of us were very excited. For the Raasleela, we had selected a small clearing enclosed by trees, situated beside the lake. The excitement for the festival was such that great attention was being paid to the smallest of the details. Newer ways to add to the enjoyment, liven up the celebration and decorate the venue were being explored. So much so, that we had even tied swings on the four large trees that surrounded the festival area. Not only this, the swings and the ropes were all wreathed with Kadambari flowers. As if this was not enough, we had also made a carpet of fragrant white Kadambari flowers over the green grass in the dancing ring. Along with decoration of the venue and planning of the fun and frolic, great attention was paid to the dinner menu. Different kinds of fruits, sweetened curd, butter and other food items were arranged well in advance. Naturally, for us, just like dancing, music, and games, food too was an integral and essential part of the festivities. As this was how we were and accordingly this was our preparation for the festival.

On another note, Radha still continued to amaze me with her incomprehensible behaviour. If she was not willing to attend the meetings related to the festival, so be it; but seeing me enthusiastically participating in the festive arrangements in the company of numerous gopis, poor Radha was fuming with jealousy. To tell you the truth, I was pleased to see her being tormented by envy; for, I viewed it as an apt punishment for her ego. And becoming the medium for the punishment of someone's ego has an altogether different pleasure. What was it, if not a grave sin to try and scuttle a festival that would bring joy to many people? This was, in fact, the most perverted form of ego. What is human life meant for? It is meant

for experiencing joy; how does it matter who derives the joy and in which way? Ultimately, joy is joy! Therefore, please note, the one who loses the opportunity to enjoy and celebrate, can never comprehend the significance human life holds. In my view, there cannot be a greater enemy of Nature than the one who hinders people from deriving joy, or the one who feels jealous of others' pleasure on account of some philosophy, belief or self-centered, ulterior motives. So, you can well understand how exasperated I was with Radha at this point of time.

On one hand, our preparations for the festival were being carried out at a feverish pitch and on the other, Radha's jealousy and annoyance continued to rise unabatedly. And while this game carried on with its interesting twists and turns, the day of the festival was upon us without us even realising it. Right from the break of dawn, overwhelmed with enthusiasm, we were eagerly looking forward to the festival;³⁸ it had indeed become difficult for us to wait for the evening. Finally, when the sun bid us farewell for the day, about forty of us, gopas and gopis, reached the Raasleela ground, dancing and singing all the way. Incidentally, Radha, driven by her obstinacy, did not show up, and to my surprise, she was nowhere to be seen since morning. But was I any less obstinate? I did not make even the slightest effort to mollify her or plead with her to come! It was not in my nature to yield to someone's ego or pamper it; for, ego does not just sink itself, but it is so cruel, that it also leads to the downfall of the person who attempts to free the one suffering from this affliction. So let us leave it at that; amusingly, a matter of great excitement for us was, there were just ten or twelve gopas and the rest were all gopis. Certainly, a good news for us gopa brothers! But perhaps for Radha, there could not have been anything more painful than this.

On reaching the mangrove, our dancing venue, all of us, gopas and gopis went berserk with excitement. To add to it, the full moon suffused the mangrove with its shimmering, magical moonbeams softly lighting it up, unveiling such empyreal beauty that we were spellbound. Amidst the enclosure of lush green trees, the swings adorned with garlands of the exquisite white Kadambari flowers were imparting a surreal ambience to the venue. And the dancing arena, covered by a thick layer of highly fragrant Kadambari flowers, appeared as if it was swathed in snow with the moonlight giving it an ethereal lustre. Steeped as it was in the cool moonbeams, the ground in the mangrove seemed to glow with an iridescent sheen. In short, the fragrant white Kadambari flowers, combined with the full moon night, enthralled everyone and set their spirits soaring so high, that a wave of festivity and zeal seemed to surge through the entire

mangrove. In this mood of exuberance, the decorated swings seemed to irresistibly beckon everyone into their intimate embrace. Everyone scrambled for the swings. Most of the gopis wanted to swing with me. In twos and threes, they even began taking turns to swing with me. But would anyone ever get enough of swinging with me? And besides, who would lose this wonderful opportunity of coming so close to me? But this was not a festival where we only played on the swings. There were many more fascinating activities planned for tonight, and this was just the beginning! So, we soon stopped playing on the swings and sat in a circle on the ground to discuss our next activity. But before we could even begin our discussion, everyone wanted to grab something to eat; I do not know whether it was because of our youth or just our gluttony! So, first of all, we devoured some fruits. As soon as we were satiated, our young minds were drawn towards some tomfoolery. We wanted to play a game that called for immense energy. There were some strong bulls standing by, so we got them to fight with one another; and for some time, we enjoyed this duel. Perhaps, the full moon had made even these bulls go wild; for, I had never seen the bulls fight so fiercely before. Watching their fight, we became way too excited, and no sooner had the bulls got exhausted and their fighting ceased, than we turned towards the cows. We chased them around until they went berserk, and in no time, they were running wildly across the ground, sending everyone scrambling for cover. This pandemonium really thrilled us, but the gopis, frightened by the cows darting around, hid behind the swings. Running around for quite a while, even the cows were exhausted. We were of course, mere spectators. And it is well known to all, that spectators never get fatigued. In fact, the truth is, spectators enjoy nothing more than instigating others to fight.

By now, the bulls and the cows, both were exhausted. For some time, when we could not think of what to do next, we thought, 'After the cows and bulls, let us try our hand at this game. After all, we were also growing adolescents, we too needed to display our strength and impress the gopis. Thus, we began to play a rough game of run-and-catch among ourselves. The gopis did participate in this game, but due to their lack of experience, they were all caught in no time. Consequently, utterly exhausted, they made an early exit from the game. But then, this defeated the very purpose of the festival! It was held precisely to increase our proximity to the gopis and mingle with them. We, thus, stopped playing run-and-catch and switched over to hide-and-seek, and soon the tables were turned on us. We gopas were being caught in our hiding spots almost instantly, whereas the gopis turned out to be experts at hiding. Besides, they were very pleased with the fact that they were trouncing us repeatedly. This was

even better for us, for, it was their happiness alone that could bring them closer to us. It indeed helped them shed their inhibitions to a great extent and finally, this game too ended. Now, what next? The night had just begun; so all of us gopas gathered in the centre of the grove to deliberate upon our next game. Sighting an opportunity, the gopis once again sprinted towards the swings. It did not matter, for we gopas had indulged in enough mischief by now. We had played several games already and were now not quite sure what to do next; hence, all of us were still huddled in the centre of the grove. Noticing our confusion, the gopis on the swing began to tease us. As I listened to their persistent banter, I thought, 'This was the right opportunity. Why not play a game that would impress the gopis?' So, we now launched into an impromptu wrestling match. Seeing their dear gopa friends locked in a wrestling bout, the gopis were delighted. At every good move, they began rewarding us with gleeful applause which managed to fuel our zeal further. These wrestling matches were imbued with a different kind of joy; everyone was using all their might in their attempt to win the bout as well as the applause and a smile from the gopis. Obviously, no one wanted to lose their face in front of them. But after just a few rounds of our wrestling matches, all of us were exhausted. We were bound to be; after all, ever since we had reached here, we had been upto some mischief or the other. Now our stomachs had also begun to growl. Once again, we huddled up at the centre of the grove. All of us, gopas and gopis, devoured butter and curd with great gusto. Thereafter, we sat around in a circle and chatted leisurely for a while. But it was such an enchanting moonlit night! For how long could we fritter it away in an idle conversation? We all desired a nice, languorous bath in the river. That was it; all of us raced and plunged into the cool waters of the Yamuna. This was the first time I was bathing with so many gopis and naturally, all of them were vying with each other to give me a bath. And my joy knew no bounds on seeing this competition heating up among them; indeed, time had changed so swiftly. There was a time, when even watching gopis bathe from a distance, I used to lose my mind, and now, here I was, blissfully bathing in their company!

All of us were now engaged in splashing water over each other. The moonlight was so luminous that everything was clearly visible. The lake ensconced amidst majestic trees looked like an alluring pond of milk. Not only did we splash water on each other, but we also dived and hid under water occasionally. Needless to say, I was the best swimmer and I was certainly not going to miss this opportunity to flaunt my incredible swimming prowess before the gopis. But for how long could this continue? Finally, fed up of frolicking in the water, all of us

emerged out. The long, leisurely swim had left us feeling refreshed and brimming with energy once again. The fun and frolic in the water had reinvigorated the gopis too. Thereafter, on a sudden whim, they all began demanding that I play the flute. I was of course, ready to play and besides, this night was exclusively dedicated to the gopis. So there was no scope of refusing any request made by them. Moreover, I too did not want to miss out on the chance of playing the flute on this beautiful full moon night. And then, why forget that this was after all, a wonderful opportunity to drive the gopis wild with joy? I stood leaning against a Peepal tree and at once played a haunting melody. As its mellifluous notes wafted, all the gopis nearly went into a swoon. Some of them began to spontaneously dance the Raasleela with each other while others came and stood around me. And enjoying thus, we did not even realise when it was midnight. The moon was at the peak of its effulgent splendour, and the entire grove was swaying to the haunting melody of my flute. As for me, I was so immersed in playing the flute that I did not realise for how long I played. Seeing me so engrossed, as if in a trance, the excited and enchanted gopis became extremely eager to perform the Raasleela. Now, they were repeatedly beckoning me to join them. Finally, bowing to their wishes, I stopped playing the flute and we quickly began to form pairs. All the gopis desired to pair with me which obviously was not possible. Still, twelve gopis did get the opportunity to dance with me. I would have anyway danced with nearly the same number of gopis, for, as I had mentioned earlier, the gopis far outnumbered the gopas. And because of this, there was no grave injustice done to anyone. The other gopas also got the opportunity to dance with at least two gopis each. I was the one who initiated and whipped up the excitement for the Raas dance; after all, I was an expert when it came to accomplishing such tasks. But yes, the entire credit for my expertise went to Radha and the moment I thought of her, I began missing her. Really, if she too had been here on this ethereal night, the experience would have been so magical!

However, for how long could I mourn about it amidst such beautiful ambience? So, no sooner had I put the thoughts of Radha behind me and joined the dance than all the gopis gravitated towards me and formed a circle around me. Initially, while dancing, I was taking turns with all the gopis. Needless to mention, all of them had gone berserk as it was becoming increasingly difficult for them to contain their joy. Their ebullient mood was driving me beyond the boundaries of excitement. The continuous dancing had charged up the gopis too and even their excitement was touching the skies. But why blame only them? I too was quite charged up. To tell you the truth, the ethereal full moon night, and the enchanting

mood that had set in was more to blame for this than our exuberant youth. The romantic weather, the enchanting atmosphere, the full moon night, and above all, our tender age had created such a heady concoction that it was but natural for all of us to lose control over ourselves. In fact, it would have been surprising if we had not. And see the quirk of Nature, I suddenly tripped and fell while dancing and instantly, all the excited gopis surrounded me. They became eager to surrender themselves to me, and as a result, we all lost control and surrendered ourselves, and finally merged with one another. And lost in this heady enjoyment, we did not realise when the night had given way to the soft golden hues of dawn. Our pleasure was at its zenith, but now, every one of us was exhausted. Moreover, it was time we all returned home, and with this, such a magnificent festival came to an end. Not only I, but all the gopas and gopis had also experienced the most pleasurable moments of their lives. I was of course elated, but for most of the others, this experience was the first of its kind. So it was not difficult to imagine the height of their joy. And as far as I was concerned, seeking joy was intrinsic to my nature. Though making the most of the opportunity and relishing it to the fullest was a quality peculiar to me, I had not imagined such pleasure even in the wildest of my dreams. Now you can imagine how successful the event had been!

All is well that ends well; the event was a runaway success and everyone had experienced the ultimate heights of joy that a human being could experience, but for the next few days, I kept reflecting upon how an ordinary cowherd boy had the wonderful and incomparable pleasure of dancing the Raasleela with twelve beautiful gopis. To what could I credit the supreme pleasure that I had just experienced? Could I credit it to my dark and handsome features or my heroic deeds? Was it my enchanting flute, or was it my dance that had led me to this heavenly experience? Or did I need to thank my unabashed nature which permitted me to seek such unbounded pleasure? Or was it the culmination of all these factors? Well, irrespective of the factors I attribute this pleasure to, the fact is, the pleasure I had experienced was solely mine, and the experience was long over, hence, I put all these thoughts to rest. Nevertheless, this in no way had any effect on the exhilarating and ecstatic mood set by the festival, the hangover of which persisted for a few days. On the other hand, do not even ask about the anguish suffered by Radha. On hearing a detailed account of the Raas dance, and how I had enjoyed with twelve gopis, she was going green with envy; it was truly amazing. Radha, for whom the very word 'love' meant Kanhaiya's happiness, was now seething and burning with jealousy for the fact that he had experienced unprecedented joy and bliss, perhaps never to be experienced again!

Frankly speaking, this form of Radha's love was beyond my comprehension. If one truly loves the other, one ought to derive pleasure from everything that gives joy to one's beloved. This is why I was unable to comprehend the strange manner in which Radha loved me. Anyway, forget it; let us talk about the Raasleela. Certainly, it was just not possible to hold a better Raasleela than this; it had permeated every pore of our being. And not just us, Radha too would have enjoyed it immensely, if she had kept her ego at bay and participated in the festival. But look at the outcome of her action; instead of pleasure, she was suffering pain! Who could explain to her that such Raasleelas just happen; they could not be pre-planned. It had happened in the flow of life and that was all there was to it. What had transpired, had already transpired. This is why I say, wisdom lies in making the optimum use of such opportunities that arrive of their own accord.

However, let us leave this Raasleela aside for now and return to Mathura. When Kansa, who was waiting impatiently for the outcome of the battle between me and Indra, learned that Indra was defeated, he just could not believe it. He was waiting eagerly to hear of my defeat and death, but instead, the spies brought him the news of my spectacular victory! It was just impossible for him to believe it, as the poor fellow was living in the hope that Indra would eliminate me in a single blow. Truly, even in the worst of his nightmares, never did he expect the news of my triumph over Indra; but when he kept hearing the very same news from various quarters, he had no option but to accept it as the truth. And once the realisation sunk into his mind that Krishna had beaten and chased off Indra, Kansa's fear drove him over the edge. He could see his own death rapidly closing in on him. 'The one who has beaten and chased off Indra will certainly kill me!' This thought continued to nag him, repeatedly and relentlessly, increasing his psychosis by the day. Meaning, he was once again sinking rapidly into his earlier state of dementia. Nevertheless, not just Kansa but the whole of Aryavrata was keen to know the outcome of the clash between me and Indra. And for an entire year after the Indrapuja event, the news of this confrontation continued to spread to the farthest corners of Aryavrata. Of course, the number of versions of the story continued to grow along with the number of people narrating it; with each new version sounding more colourful and more bizarre! Nevertheless, the gist of all versions was, Indra had attacked Krishna with all his fury but Krishna had defeated him with the help of the Govardhana hill. And finally, a helpless Indra had to beat a hasty retreat. According to these dimwits, it was for the first time that someone had gained victory over Indra and consequently, innumerable versions of the tales of my heroic deeds resounded

through the entire Aryavrata belt. Just see the advantage of working for the betterment of all. Almost overnight, this valorous Kanhā from a small village called Vrindavan, had risen up and transformed into the fabled and powerful Krishna of the Aryavrata belt. There is a peculiar quality that fools are endowed with; when they set their minds on idolising someone, they do not hesitate to elevate that person even to the status of God! Similarly, when they are gripped by a different kind of fanaticism, they have no qualms about tormenting this ‘God’, as if he was the devil himself!

As for me, the pedestal on which I was being placed upon in Aryavrata was certainly not an achievement by fluke and surely not the gesture of someone’s benevolence. Actually, I had attained this stature with the power of my intelligence and my strength and by selflessly and relentlessly performing my duty for the common good. In other words, this eminence was the result of my own perseverance and hard work. And, it was in my nature - to have my ego analyse such facets of life, when there was no major task at hand. This way, my ego would at least get an opportunity to exercise itself and be satiated.

Truly speaking, it is only now that I am able to say all this to you; at that time, unaware of all that was transpiring, I was happily wandering around in Vrindavan. All these facts came to light only much later. But yes, with growing age, I was fast becoming committed to addressing the security concerns of Vrindavan and ensuring its progress. To tell you the truth, this was the only aim of my life at this point in time, and that was the way it ought to be. After all, it is our paramount duty to address the security concerns of the place we live in and ensure the progress of the people we live with. And these days, in order to attain this very objective, I often found myself in deep contemplation. That is to say, the saviour of Vrindavan had now awakened within me.

You will not believe, but for the past several days, I was closely observing all the major and minor activities taking place in Vrindavan. Not only was I keenly observing them, but was also simultaneously indulging in a spot analysis of these activities. All this analysis resulted in my clear-cut comprehension of the dynamics of Vrindavan’s economy. Our core activity was cattle rearing, grazing them, obtaining the maximum possible output of milk and producing milk products such as curd and butter. This curd and butter formed the staple diet of Vrindavan along with locally available fruits and flowers. The remaining curd and butter would then be sent to Kansa’s palace in Mathura. There, half of the quantity sent was consumed in lieu of taxes that we owed to the royal palace,

and the remaining quantity was bought off from us at prices lower than the market price. The sale proceedings were used to buy our other essentials such as clothes, utensils and so on. Over and above this, Nanda had to pay an annual tax for the cows, because the cattle, after all, were the property of the palace. In short, all I mean to tell you is, I had now grown old enough to fully comprehend the entire economic system, and also perfectly analyse the current situation and its state of affairs. However, the sphere of my activity was not limited to just analysing and estimating but had expanded to reflecting on the improvement of the state of affairs in Vrindavan. To this end, I began to consider the royal palace as a beacon of hope. To tell you the truth, after I had successfully eliminated the practice of Indrapuja, I found myself capable of defying any form of exploitation and injustice. Frankly speaking, no matter how prominent and powerful the enemy was, to me, he appeared puny. And the result of such thinking is in front of your eyes. However, as soon as I grasped the crux of the analysis, I set my sights first on the royal palace, as in my view, the palace was doing injustice to us. We not only had to pay the levy for the cows, but we also had to deposit butter against taxes. I found it difficult to accept both these levies being imposed concurrently. Over and above that, I simply could not tolerate the fact that we were selling butter to the palace at half the market price. Indeed, instead of looking after us, the palace was actually exploiting us! I was now fully convinced that if this exploitation by the palace, which was rampant, could be stemmed somehow, then Vrindavan's standard of living could be drastically improved.

Firstly, I was very clear in my mind with regards to the prevalent system and situation, and secondly, my enthusiasm was at its peak, so I decided to end this practice of injustice being perpetrated by the royal palace and bring justice. And frankly, in my view, there was only one solution - either stop the free butter given in lieu of taxes to the palace, or Nanda had to stop paying the annual levy for the cows to the palace. For, it was this double taxation that was proving debilitating for Vrindavan. As for the butter, it was ours; it was the fruit of our labour. Why should we sell it to the royal palace at half the price? I certainly had a strong argument as far as the butter was concerned, either the royal palace should pay us the full market price, or allow us to sell it in the open market. Admittedly, we had taken the cows from the palace which made us liable to pay the charge on the animals. My objection was merely to the double taxation. If this revolution could be brought about somehow, the standard of living in Vrindavan could be changed for the better overnight. We ourselves were well off, relatively wealthy. Nanda was after all the village headman and he managed

to save a substantial amount. We could also afford to wear good clothes, but what about the condition of the ordinary Brijwasis? They barely had anything to cover themselves with. They had about two sets of clothes with which they had to make do for the whole year. They had to make daily trips to Govardhana in the same pairs of clothes and toil hard. Honestly speaking, I had mostly found gopas wearing tattered clothes.

Indeed, a ray of hope had emerged from my contemplation. My conclusions were accurate and line of thinking, result-oriented. But the moot question was, how was one to implement it? As always, I thought it prudent to first explain this issue to the gopas. Hence, in the evening, I called for a meeting of all my gopa friends. Now, there was no point in procrastinating after the problem had been identified. I had prepared well, and had so skilfully explained the issue to my gopa friends that they understood the crux of the issue almost instantly. The matter, as such, was absolutely simple and crystal clear. Moreover, these boys had stood firmly in my support earlier when I wanted to stop the Indrapuja, and this time too, they had approached the issue with the same sensibility and trust. I knew from the beginning that they would not disappoint me even this time. On garnering the gopas' unconditional support, I became very enthusiastic, but this was not enough. The real problem still persisted, for Nanda was the one who had to understand this issue and take a stand. After all, he was the one who liaised with the royal palace.

With gopas convinced and standing by my side, when the first step was successful, so would the last step be. Hoping thus, two days later, I called for a meeting of the village elders. Quite understandably, all of them were astonished, as they were not able to comprehend the purpose of the meeting at this hour. There was no calamity set to befall Vrindavan now, nor was there a festival to organise; so it was but natural for them to be bewildered. I explained to the village elders all that I had earlier explained to the gopas. But these elders were a weird lot. It was really a daunting task to make things sink into their heads. Hearing my proposal, quite a few elders shot up in their seats and said, "Day by day, this lad is getting a bit too audacious."

Another said, "Just because we agreed to a few of his suggestions, he has now started coming up with new proposals every time."

Now when everyone was voicing their objections, why would Nanda lag behind and remain quiet? He too followed suit. But thankfully, he chose to adopt a conciliatory tone and said, "Look, Kanhaiya, in the past we have agreed to a

number of your suggestions. It is also true that many a times your advice has been sound too. It is a fact that on many occasions you have saved Vrindavan and its inhabitants from various calamities. But this is a business matter. You are not mature enough to understand such complex issues. And most importantly, our business arrangement cannot survive the wrath of the palace. Thus, we cannot afford to enter into arguments of fair price and jeopardise our existing straight and simple arrangement with the palace.” And then, suddenly, Nanda became angry and said, “And before suggesting any such proposal, did you even stop to think what would happen, if the palace, angered by our demands, were to take back all the cows?”

Upon hearing this, I got a little irritated and countered, “What makes you think that only we need their cows? Why do you not think that the royal palace also needs people to tend to their cows?” I had made a pertinent point, but for lack of preparedness to listen, it did not seem to permeate anyone. The result was, though the matter was plain and simple, they did not want to agree to my proposal, and they did not. For a moment, even I became dejected. For, under these circumstances, what could I do now? But then, a voice within me retorted, ‘What are you saying? You can do a lot if you really wish to. Are you the one to give up so easily?’ All of a sudden, I remembered an important facet of my nature that once I had decided something, it just had to be accomplished. And especially when it was for the betterment of all, it had to be done anyhow. And you already know that in such situations, I was always ready to make renewed efforts, with double the enthusiasm, to accomplish my goals. Frankly, I did not understand at all, why the elders were so afraid of confronting the royal palace, especially when our demands were legitimate and we clearly stood to gain from it. For, it was nothing but a demand for justice. In fact, the question that had perplexed the elders was, ‘Will the palace snatch away the cows?’ Now, how nonsensical was that! Why did the elders not understand the simple fact that more than us, it was they who needed our services! And besides, to move ahead in life, one has to show courage and take risks. After all, what is life if not an endless series of gains and losses? And when life itself is a gamble, why are these elders so afraid of gambling? You would remember that many years later, Arjuna was faced with a similar predicament. He wanted to regain his Kingdom but was not prepared to be killed while fighting. You might recall, what I had then said to him in the Gita, “Among deceivers, consider me to be the gambler³⁹.” It is not necessary that you lose one thing to gain another in life. Nevertheless, one does have to be mentally prepared to lose something in the pursuit of that gain. Being mentally prepared for this loss is what I term as

'gamble'. Meaning, to think of gaining something without being mentally prepared to suffer a loss is nothing but utter foolishness.

Returning to the present, you are all aware that I had always been stubborn, and fortunately, I had taken a determined stance now. Meaning, whether the elders stood in my support or not, I was certain to take a stand against the palace. One cannot afford to ignore an issue, especially when it concerns the betterment of all. So, early next morning, I once again called for a meeting of my cowherd friends; this time, indeed, I had called the meeting to sound the clarion call for a rebellion. Thus, at the very outset, I incited them by saying, "Our elders are accustomed to lead the same mundane life. Neither can they think of innovative ideas, nor can they grasp them. Besides, they have already lived the better part of their lives and are now past their prime. But our future lies ahead of us; for our lives have just begun. So, we not only need to aspire for a better quality of life, but should also be prepared to leave no stone unturned in our attempt to achieve it. If we do not shoulder the responsibility of bettering our own lives, who else will? And if someone tries to impede our progress, then they should be opposed forcefully, even if they are our elders." And with this, I concluded my address.

Indeed, my objective was to incite these simple-hearted herdsmen to revolt, and having grasped my point of view, they were now ready to rebel. But the question was, could their mere understanding or assent help us accomplish such an arduous task? One question had thrown us into tizzy, how could we do anything without the co-operation of the elders? After all, it was only the elders and Nanda in particular, who had to communicate and negotiate with the royal palace. And the attitude of the elders made it amply evident that they could not be easily persuaded to negotiate with the palace authorities. So the biggest challenge was, how to make them accede to our demand. The problem was challenging indeed; but as I have said many times before, there always exists a solution to every problem, and sure enough, there emerged a feasible solution to this issue as well. Besides, my provocative address amply provided the cowherd boys with the courage needed to implement the plan, and now, they were fuelled with the spirit of defiance. Hence, explaining the issue in detail I said, "I agree, it is the elders who will have to ultimately negotiate with the palace authorities. And admittedly, they will refuse to raise this issue. But we can still compel them to engage the palace authorities in a dialogue." Amazed by this, they all asked in unison, "But how?"

Everyone had pricked up their ears on hearing the word 'compel'. And this time, I replied with absolute firmness, "There is just one way out. We will have to stop

the butter from being taken to Mathura. And for this, we need to stop eating fruits so that we end up devouring more butter and curd. Butter can be taken to Mathura only if we do not consume it all, right?”

Upon hearing my proposition, a very young cowherd boy asked, “What if we cannot eat all the butter and curd?”

I laughed at his innocent query and instantly came up with a mischievous solution. Laughingly, I said, “If we are unable to consume all of it, then obviously we will have to render the butter unusable; we will have to break the pots while the gopis are carrying them. Additionally, we will also have to steal the butter that is stored in our own homes.”

Hearing this, another cowherd boy asked with a puzzled look on his face, “But what do we stand to gain from this? On the contrary, we will just end up wasting the butter.”

I replied calmly, “The benefit will become evident once the butter stops reaching Mathura.”

That was it; immediately, all the gopas swung into action; in fact, they were ecstatic! Which young boy could let go of such an opportunity to create mischief, break pots, harass the gopis and devour prodigious quantities of curd and butter? I was clear in my mind; if the butter did not reach Mathura, the palace would become anxious because the cows they had given to us for tending were meant to serve their need for butter. And if there was a long delay in the supply of butter to Mathura, the palace would certainly summon Nanda to discuss the issue. In that case, he would have no choice but to go and thrash out the matter. At any rate, for how long could Vrindavan survive without selling its butter? It was our lifeline; including clothes, all our needs were being taken care of by the sale proceeds of butter. Meaning, the consequence of stopping the supply of butter to Mathura was certain; the very elders who were now determined not to discuss the matter with the palace, would be compelled to do so, whether they did it of their own accord or waited to be summoned by the palace. And once a discussion took place, a solution would emerge too. So, on the wings of this hope, we had started gulping down butter and curd in large quantities. At any rate, we loved to feast on fresh, thick curd and delicious, soft butter. And especially under the present circumstances, the joy of eating curd and butter was an altogether different experience; for this time around, our gluttony was linked to duty! But unfortunately, in spite of our unrelenting efforts

to wipe it off, we were unable to consume the entire quantity of butter and curd. As a result, the great pride we took in our voracious appetite was shattered! So, we soon found a solution to this problem as well. It was decided that if we could not polish it off, we would spill it all! And we loved this game even more; within two days, we had made scores of slingshots and all the gopas were allotted one each. Now, all the gopis who paraded about with pots full of butter on their heads became our targets. The moment we saw a gopi, carrying a butter pot, pass by, we broke it from a distance. For the poor gopis, the attack was completely unexpected and additionally, all their hard work was now literally going down the drain, leaving the poor girls soaked to the skin in butter! Gradually, our terror was so widespread that all the gopis were left utterly petrified. First they tried to cajole us out of our mischief, but finding it ineffective, they resorted to complaining to the elders; nevertheless it was all in vain. When the rebellion itself was against the elders, what could they do? Besides, this game was so much fun, that it was just not possible for us to end it so soon. From early morning itself, we would be on the lookout for our targets, often hiding behind trees or anything that could provide us cover. The poor gopis would walk slowly and with great caution, but unfortunately, they could neither escape from our sight nor could they dodge our aim. Finally, capitulating to us, the gopis stopped carrying butter altogether. Although we had emerged victorious, it had left us feeling disappointed because their precautionary measure had put an end to a game that had become an interesting entertainment for us! Nevertheless, we did have the satisfaction that at least our plan had proved effective. Although the gopis had stopped carrying butter, they were still making it; and how could we allow that to happen? So, suffused with renewed vigour, we then began attacking their homes. We started sneaking away with the pots of butter and curd stored in the house. We would eat as much as we could, and then, throw the rest away. As expected, this soon created pandemonium in the whole of Vrindavan. Indeed, this was our second victory. Thanks to our roguish activities, our group of gopas soon became infamous as the 'gang of butter thieves and pot breakers'. Moreover, all these activities had also exposed the helplessness of the elders. For all they could do was try and persuade us, reason it out with us or at best, scold us. But did they have the strength and energy to physically stop a large band of youthful boys? This rebellion went on for almost a month. And you will not believe that during this entire period, we did not let even a dollop of butter reach the palace.

Now the problem had been nipped in the bud. The gopis had now stopped churning butter and curd, so there was no question of transporting it. Though this

was certainly a huge victory for us, it had rendered us idle. We were neither getting any pots to break, nor were we plucking fruits or taking the cows out for grazing. However, I was content with the fact that I was able to get my gopa brothers to experience the same joy which I had experienced in childhood while stealing butter and breaking pots, even if it was only for a few days. For now, everyone including the elders and the gopis had conceded defeat after our month-long, mild rebellion. After all, who could defy insolent youths and for how long? As soon as everyone conceded defeat, my cowherd friends wholeheartedly indulged in victory celebrations. As for me, on one hand, I was pleased with my victory, and on the other, I was surprised by the elders' inability to put up strong resistance. When engaged in a battle, could one afford to surrender so quickly? In my view, avoiding conflict is a sign of intelligence, however, once you have entered the arena, then capitulating so quickly is certainly not a sign of strength. At present, I can assertively state that this poor fighting spirit of the elders was the root cause of all our problems. If viewed from this perspective, you can say that even though I was one of them, I was quite different; for, once if I was determined to do something, I would not rest until I had successfully accomplished my mission. At first, I would try to make the opposite person see reason and if that failed, I would use force. And if force also failed, then I would employ terror tactics. But I would not sit quietly until I had accomplished my goal, what I had set out to achieve. If everything else failed, then I would even trick them into conceding defeat, but at all costs, I had to achieve my intended objective. Of course, the important point to note here was, it alone was the betterment of all which lied at the centre of all my actions; it was my sole objective. You are all well aware that none of my action was ever driven by any selfish motive. Perhaps, this was the reason why I inevitably received the requisite power from Nature to accomplish my selfless mission.

And now that everyone had surrendered, our 'steal the butter, break the pot' rebellion had ended by itself. To the best of our knowledge, no butter and curd was being made anywhere in Vrindavan. Still, as a precaution, we maintained a strict vigil to ensure that the butter and curd did not reach Mathura. However, the downside to this episode was, our attacks had made the atmosphere in Vrindavan very tense. The elders and the gopis were now united; anytime they passed by us, they gave us angry, sullen looks. There was a standoff between us; neither was there any communication, nor were we showing any inclination to converse with them. However, the positive fallout of this impasse was, it rendered me the much needed opportunity to spend most of my time in the company of gopas. Away from the Raasleelas, I was at least able to experience the spirit of true

friendship and the warmth of real friends. Perhaps, it was from this point onwards that I started yearning for good friends in life.

With no butter being supplied to Mathura for months on end, the situation had indeed turned chaotic. A paucity of butter and curd hit the markets of Mathura, and consequently, the prices had begun to soar. This scarcity of butter accompanied by rising prices had become a matter of great concern for the royal palace. Earlier, Kansa himself attended to such matters, but as he was in a semi-demented state of mind these days, all such affairs were being managed by his advisors. And this change of hands in administration indeed proved favourable for us. Seeing the chaos in the markets of Mathura, these inexperienced advisors immediately summoned father Nanda to the capital. Nanda on the other hand, was obviously scared on receiving this summons. Frightened out of his wits, he immediately called for a meeting of the village elders. Needless to add, all of us gopas were also invited to participate in the meeting, because after all, we were at the epicentre of this upheaval!

Finally, our strategy yielded the desired results and victory came knocking at our door. First, there was a summons for Nanda from the palace, followed by Nanda's invitation for us to participate in the meeting. Now, it was time for the final blow. I did not know why the elders had called us to the meeting; but I was clear in my mind with regards to my agenda. Butter would reach Mathura only if they agreed to our new terms and conditions. Meaning, Nanda had no option but to discuss this matter with the palace. With this firm resolve, I reached the meeting on time with my band of cowherd boys. This time, instead of our house, the meeting was held at the festival ground, and all the gopas and elders were present at the venue. It could be said that both the factions had poured all their strength into this struggle. And the atmosphere of the meeting was such that while all the elders looked perplexed, we were as chirpy as ever. In fact, Nanda was the one who appeared most anxious. After all, it was he who would have to face the wrath of the palace. Expectedly, as soon as the meeting commenced, the elders began to vent their ire on me without leaving a single opportunity. The mood during the meeting was tense to begin with, and now, the foolishness of the elders had fuelled the tension and made it all the more stressful. Of course, I was sitting, seemingly calm, in my seat for the sake of decorum, but I was seething with rage from within; what else could I do? The discussion had taken the wrong course from the very beginning. Someone commented, "Kanhaiya's growing enthusiasm has destroyed Vrindavan!" Another one rejoined, "The truth is that his gallivanting with the gopis has reduced the level of his intelligence to

that of an infant!" I realised that as these people had nothing to say really, they were just blowing off the steam. Their course of cursing me persisted for quite some time but as I said, they did not have a single important point to share concerning the real issue. The only thing I could see in their acerbic comments was their thinly veiled fear of the royal palace. In short, all their arguments were nothing but utter nonsense!

When everyone had derided me to their heart's content, it was Nanda's turn. In a pained voice, he said, "It is true that Krishna's immaturity has put us in the dock for questioning by the royal palace. Enough! This juvenile behaviour cannot be tolerated for long. I will not only have to go to the palace and deliver butter but will also have to apologise for our misconduct so far and promise regular delivery of butter to Mathura in the future. And if the issue is still not resolved, then what option do we have other than agreeing to anything else they say? Truly, these boys, under the influence of Kanhaiya, have got us ruined!"

As expected, all the elders unanimously agreed with Nanda's decision. Naturally, they had to; they were all nothing but the slaves of their feeble minds. I, who was already seething with anger from within, now raged with fury on hearing father Nanda's proposal. Soon, both factions had taken an obstinate stand against each other and a showdown became unavoidable. Would butter reach Mathura, and that too, while Krishna was still present? Certainly not! Under no circumstances would I allow it to happen! Now I was truly incensed; opposing the decision, I declared, "At no cost will butter go to Mathura!" Hearing this, father who was already furious became livid with rage and yelled at me, "Your childishness will not be tolerated anymore! Butter will definitely be sent to Mathura!"

Now, Nanda had asserted this just as firmly as I had. But still, I could sense a slight lack of self-confidence in his voice. To tell you the truth, on hearing him, I could not help but laugh. Still chortling, I said, "If you could have taken butter to Mathura, it would have reached Mathura long back. You are well aware that without our co-operation, the butter just cannot reach Mathura. And let me tell you clearly that it is pointless to expect any kind of assistance from us in this matter."

Perhaps, Nanda may not have expected such a determined stance from me; this is why, all the elders, including him, were left utterly stunned upon listening to my reply. Needless to add, in the wake of my statement and firmness, they all had suddenly realised their helplessness. With the clash between two sides with

determined stances, a deathly silence fell over the entire assembly, and the tension in the air became palpable. Both refused to budge from their respective stands; no co-operation was possible and no compromise seemed to be in sight. Finally, a thought struck Nanda and he broke the silence with a sweet intimidation, "If Kanhaiya does not abide by my decision, I will abstain from food from today!" The moment I heard this, my mind was swirled into a whirlpool of despair. Why was everyone so keen on wielding the Brahmastra against Kanhaiya these days? Nevertheless, I was glad to know that even father Nanda had such a unique and ultimate weapon in his arsenal. However, I quickly controlled myself; this certainly was not the time to praise or be impressed by father's intelligence. I realised that if I were to give in to emotions now, I would lose the edge that I had gained with great difficulty. Hence, reigning in my emotions was the need of the hour. Indeed, if I allowed others' Brahmastras to work on me, then all would be lost. And the loss of this battle would mark an end to my existence, my very identity; then everyone would be able to make me dance to their tunes whenever they wished to. No! I could not let this happen; but one thing was certain; Nanda's Brahmastra could be countered and destroyed only by another, more powerful Brahmastra, and then, did I ever run short of such weapons? I retorted icily, "Whether you want to fast or not is your choice, it is your personal affair. You have all the right to take decisions for your life. But whether butter is to be delivered to Mathura or not is not your personal matter. This is an issue that concerns all of Vrindavan. Therefore, butter will certainly not be sent to Mathura. And if you do not have the nerve to go to Mathura and negotiate this issue with the palace, then I will be forced to go and discuss the matter directly with our King Kansa!"

That was it! The Great Brahmastra had been launched. After all, my meeting with Kansa in Mathura was like a death knell. And just as I had expected, the moment Nanda heard my sweet intimidation, he capitulated completely. After all, the main aim of his life or rather the very purpose of his life was to keep me safe and away from Kansa. Thus, there was no question of him allowing me to appear before Kansa. He knew only too well that if he did not agree with me, I would certainly land up in Kansa's court. There was no need to provide him an additional proof of my obstinacy or determination. He had raised me from my birth and was familiar with every cell of my being. Ultimately, he was bound to concede to my demands and the poor man finally did just that. In spite of the stiff opposition from the elders, Nanda bowed down to my wishes. He meekly agreed to go to Mathura without taking the butter. And as far as the elders were concerned, what could they do? They were not privy to the truth about me and

my life. How were they to know that I was Devaki's eighth son, and that Kansa was my mortal enemy? Though everything was settled now, to tell you the truth, I felt great pity for Nanda. Poor man, he had tried to use the Brahmastra against me; me, of all people! He was unaware that emotional blackmail was a weapon invented by me, and that I was the only expert in using it. This poor, innocent man did not know how many times I had used this weapon on him! But then, how could he know that I was a master at wielding this weapon, while he was still a mere novice? Why did people have to try to act smart with Krishna, only to regret it later?!

Returning to the situation in Mathura, the scarcity of butter had created a commotion in the palace and now, the soaring prices of butter in the market had left the people of the city greatly annoyed with the palace. As said earlier, interestingly, the responsibility of managing this crisis that had greatly plagued Mathura, rested with Kansa's advisors; and they were already so terrified by him, that they would shake in their boots merely on hearing Kansa's name. As a consequence, the poor, terror-stricken advisors were only too keen to resolve the issue of butter scarcity as quickly as possible, to avoid facing Kansa's fury. Unaware of all these developments, Nanda had set out to Mathura in a dejected state of mind, and that too without the butter, bracing himself to be on the receiving end of the palace's wrath. His wretchedness defied description. Now what could he do and who could he blame? He himself had made a choice to go instead of sending me; all I had said was, "Either you go or I will!" And promptly, he chose to go! Oh my poor father, Nanda! He had been hopelessly trapped by his own son. The situation was such, that on one hand, the royal palace was frantic, and on the other, Nanda was doleful. The palace was displeased with Nanda and he was terrified of the palace. Finally, a meeting was held between the frightened Nanda and the terrified advisory committee. But once it began, Nanda performed wonderfully well at the meeting; and though it was out of compulsion, Nanda had to be applauded, for he had firmly placed all the demands of Vrindavan before the advisory committee. Nevertheless, my contribution to this development was no less either. Nanda was well-acquainted with my determination and stubbornness. He knew very well that if he hemmed and hawed while presenting the case, I would certainly reach the palace for a no-holds-barred negotiation. And to keep me safe from Kansa was not just his foremost duty, but also the compulsion of a loving father; undoubtedly ensuring my safety and protecting me had become the sole aim of his life. Another good news was, as surprising as Nanda's altered stance was, the behaviour of the royal palace was even more so. For, the committee agreed to most of Nanda's

demands without any objection. Although they chose not to change the annual levy for the cows, the obligatory handing over of the butter to the palace was done away with. Not only that, Vrindavan was also given the freedom to sell the same butter and curd in the open market of Mathura at market prices. However, the practice of delivering butter to the palace during major festivals remained unchanged. But that was required merely three-four times a year, and this, in any case, was the palaces' rightful share. Besides, how could I forget that after all, the palace belonged to my very own uncle?

A jubilant Nanda could neither believe his luck, nor the fact that my plan had actually worked. It was beyond his comprehension, how Kansa's royal palace had bowed down in front of ordinary herdsmen! Of course, much more than my plan, it was the prevalent chaos in Mathura that was responsible for Vrindavan's unexpected victory. For, had Kansa not been indisposed, and been present to oversee the negotiations, then he may never have agreed to Vrindavan's demands. But living under tremendous pressure, these poor advisors had no option but to accede to Vrindavan's demands; or else the common people of Mathura would have certainly put their lives in grave danger; and on recovering from illness, even Kansa would not have spared them for mishandling the situation. On this day, Nanda almost danced his way back to Vrindavan, with his mood swinging between excitement and boundless joy. As soon as he reached and broke the good news in Vrindavan, people became overjoyed and made a beeline to congratulate me. I too was overjoyed. The cowherd boys were thrilled and proud on hearing the news. Certainly, they had every right to be excited, for, they too had played an equal part in this victory. Although everyone was happy, Nanda's exuberance knew no bounds. This was but natural; for, this was his first victory in a fight, and moreover, he had won in a tussle with no less than the royal palace of Mathura!

Tonight was the night of celebration. And needless to say, Vrindavan did not celebrate it on an ordinary scale but on a splendidly grand one. There were innumerable rounds of singing and dancing. I held Nanda's hand and made him dance too. The merrymaking continued well through the night; however, even the whole night was not sufficient for such a celebration and joyous occasion. It was for the first time that Vrindavan had taken a firm stand and a bold step towards a bright future. Indeed, the cause was just and the atmosphere most conducive to a celebration. As for me, I was really beside myself with joy! To tell you the truth, I considered this as the greatest achievement of my life so far. To make the royal palace accede to our wishes was no child's play. However, it

was not about making the palace kneel before us; the main objective was a brighter future for the people of Vrindavan. Even now, I could not help but chuckle when I thought about the manner in which I had compelled Nanda to agree to negotiate with the palace, using the Great Brahmastra...! Truly, with the passage of time, I was indeed becoming very dangerous. But I certainly had no objection to this, especially because I always worked in the interest of the greater good, and never for personal gain!

We gopas had now completely stopped feasting on butter and curd. We had already devoured butter and curd in such large quantities, that we had gained a lot of weight. Also, there was no dearth of fruits in Vrindavan, so why eat butter and waste it unnecessarily? And as you know, propitious thoughts and propitious deeds always beget propitious results. So, as soon as we stopped gulping down butter and curd, Vrindavan immediately experienced the wonderful results it yielded. Now, all those who went to Mathura to sell butter, returned loaded with clothes and other essential goods for their family. Father too did not lag behind in such matters; he gifted me a new flute and bhaiya, a splendid plough. We were delighted on receiving these gifts and the gopis too could not contain their joy on getting new clothes, wearing which they pranced around all day.

As for Radha, her strutting about was not merely confined to her getting new clothes. Rightfully, the fact that truly excited her was, it was her Kanhaiya, who was performing unprecedentedly daring feats every time. Actually it was Radha's love which was the driving force behind all my daring feats. In fact, even if I gave her all the credit for my success, it would still not suffice to express the significance her support held for me.

Having said that, I was very pleased with my growing self-confidence and the precision of my analytical skills. To tell you the truth, I could barely contain my happiness. What a perfect plan I had made! More than a plan, it was a simple, straightforward calculation. The royal palace had entrusted about 300 cattle to Vrindavan for tending. This fact itself made it amply evident, how heavily Mathura relied on Vrindavan for curd and butter. All that was needed was the realisation of this fact and manoeuvring it to our advantage, which was precisely what I had done. Anyway, let me stop giving Radha the credit for this and praise myself a little. To tell you the truth, for me, a matter of immense joy was the fact that this strategic thinking of mine had breathed a new life into Vrindavan. A mood of festivity now pervaded the entire village and celebrations became

almost a daily occurrence. There were no words that could describe my happiness at this moment!

Lush green cover on all sides...

Such a breathtakingly beautiful place...

A well-knit community living in great peace and harmony...

The picturesque banks of the flowing river Yamuna...

An enchanting lake...

The Govardhana hill...

...food in the form of butter and curd, different kinds of sweet fruits and flowers...and somewhere in the midst of these... was Krishna's contribution!

- End of CHAPTER 7 -

CHAPTER 8

The Killing of Keshi

While life was flourishing in Vrindavan, the situation was taking an ugly turn in Mathura. My growing fame and influence, accompanied by Narada's prophecy had intensified Kansa's fear so much, that upon recovering slightly from his illness, the first step he took was, to forge out a plan to have me killed. Not just this, he poured all his experience to bring this task to fruition as soon as possible. To ensure the success of his maleficent scheme this time around, he devised a two-pronged strategy. He first summoned Keshi - the demon, who was his most trusted confidant. Actually, Keshi lived in the forest behind Govardhana, but since we never needed to venture into that part of the forest, we were unaware of his existence. Keshi was an extremely mighty cannibal who had a very aggressive but obedient horse. Such was Keshi's might, that twice or thrice a year, Kansa would call Keshi with his dreaded horse to terrorise the inhabitants of Mathura. In fact, it was the fear of Keshi and the dread spread by him that had made the inhabitants of Mathura so subservient to Kansa. In a sense, Kansa's oppressive rule could largely be credited to the enormous power and strength of Keshi. And the very fact that Kansa had engaged a terrible demon like him to kill me, showed how determined Kansa was to eliminate me! As soon as Keshi arrived, Kansa, in his terrified state, instructed him to spread terror in all of Vrindavan, and also eliminate me at the first available opportunity. As Keshi was Kansa's obedient servant, for him, Kansa's wish was his command. So, as soon as he received the command, he shifted from his part of the forest to the other side of Govardhana, which was closer to Vrindavan, and stationed himself inside a huge cave.

Did I not say that a sudden surge of sheer joy in my life was merely a harbinger of some new trouble? You may find it difficult to believe, but Keshi was so strong and cruel that he was counted amongst the most ferocious demons, not just in Mathura but across the Aryavrata belt. In other words, this time Kansa had pulled out all stops to annihilate me. And, though he had engaged Keshi to kill me, he was not satisfied with it alone. To make doubly sure that this time I did not escape the jaws of death and surely meet my end, he had simultaneously devised another diabolic plan. However, the implementation of this second plan was not so easy, because its success depended on the co-operation of the local

Yadavas⁴⁰. But how will you understand the complexity of this issue until I first apprise you of the political scenario in Mathura? The fact that I had been safely smuggled out of the dungeon situated right inside his palace had put Kansa in a quandary; he could no longer trust anyone in the palace now. And unfortunately for him, he did not have any Mathura-based Yadava well-wisher in his support either. That was because Kansa had neither given any respect or importance to the Yadava community leaders, nor had he ever made an effort to garner their trust or support. He had always ruled the Kingdom with the help of his very own advisors and his trusted and obedient posse of demons. Of course, Kansa had a very legitimate reason for his conduct too. Though, he himself belonged to the Yadava community, he had never considered himself a true Yadava. Ostensibly, Kansa was the son of the former King Ugrasena; but in reality, he was not his biological offspring. It is said that one day, Kansa's mother was out on an excursion into a forest along with her retinue of maidservants. It was the romantic monsoon season and she was unable to reign in her amorous desires. In the meantime, during her visit, a demon King called Drumil had also come to the same forest to hunt. They happened to meet, and unwittingly got carried away by their passion. Apparently, Kansa was the offspring of the demon, King Drumil. It is said that when King Ugrasena discovered the truth, he began ignoring Kansa. Now, ignoring a child invariably brings dangerous results in its wake and that was precisely what had happened in Kansa's case as well. When the emotionally disturbed Kansa grew up and discovered that he was not King Ugrasena's son, he imprisoned the King with the help of his father-in-law Jarasandha and crowned himself as the King of Mathura. Ever since then, he had developed hatred for not just Ugrasena, but for the entire Yadava community. However, Kansa ignored the fact that the Yadavas were the predominant community in Mathura. And as it is said, when one is living in a pond, it is not wise to be hostile to a float of crocodiles. However, advantageously for Kansa, there was no unity among the Yadavas. In Mathura, they were divided into several factions, with each one having its own leader. When Ugrasena was King, leaders of these Yadava factions were given a lot of importance. But Kansa, during his rule, always gave these leaders short shrift. However, now, when he had no one he could possibly trust in his own palace, he naturally felt the need to re-establish his links with these leaders for the implementation of his new stratagem. In short, though the strategy was quite brilliant, it was not easy for Kansa to placate the Yadava leaders and implement the plan, because of his own past track record. Moreover, the constant agonising over these matters was deluding Kansa into believing that he was surrounded by enemies. On one hand, his nemesis Krishna

was performing unprecedented feats of valour in Vrindavan, and on the other, his palace was teeming with traitors; and the Yadava leaders, as it is, did not support him from the very beginning. But now, since his goal was to eliminate me, he realised the need to garner the support of either the palace or the Yadava leaders. And since his earlier experience with the royal palace had not been favourable, he decided to mollify the Yadava leaders instead. To implement this admirable political plan, it was essential to unify them and take them into confidence. But this was seemingly an impossible task, for Kansa had ascended the throne in an unjust manner, by imprisoning his father. Besides, he had treated the Yadava leaders with disdain for a long time. Given the conditions, swaying them to his side appeared to be an uphill task for Kansa. But when a person considers an issue to be a matter of his life and death, he inevitably finds solutions in keeping with his own thinking and nature. Hence, to take Yadavas into confidence, Kansa announced a conclave of the Yadavas. Astutely, he decided to release Ugrasena from the prison for the time being and bring him to the meeting, for he felt that the former King's presence would be helpful in rallying the Yadavas around to his point of view. Now the very fact that an arrogant King like Kansa was stooping down to appease the Yadava leaders, whom he had treated with disdain until now, showed the sheer intensity of his impatience and desperation to have me killed. Otherwise, would Kansa ever fall on his knees before anyone? Never! He was so crafty, that he maintained the secrecy of his plan that he had already ordered Keshi to kill me. Meaning, only he and Keshi knew of this diabolic plan!

Presently, Kansa focused all his attention on making the Yadava conclave a success. And to fulfill this objective, he had invited all the Yadava leaders to the meeting, which besides the former King Ugrasena also included men like father Vasudeva, the great Vikadru, Saatyaki, Daruka, Kritverma, Bhuriteja, Bhurishrava and so on. Kansa had organised the conclave in the huge open garden of the royal palace. Not just this, he addressed the conclave in a very diplomatic and dramatic language. From his speech, no one could discern that he was mentally disturbed. Perhaps, excessive fear makes a man very shrewd! Irrespective of the reason, Kansa masterfully began with his address,⁴¹ “Dear Yadava leaders, I sincerely welcome you all, including my father King Ugrasena, to this meeting. All of you are not only erudite scholars from distinguished gurukuls but are also experts in politics and the science of warfare. At the same time, you all are experts at strategising, policy making and saving your King from various possible adverse circumstances. And why just Mathura's royal court, in my opinion, you are all fit enough to grace, and indeed enhance, the glory of the royal courts in heaven as well. It is therefore hard to understand, in

spite of the presence of wise and capable people such as you in the Kingdom why your King is plagued by troubles! I do not know why you all are neglecting me. It is the King's duty to honour and protect such distinguished people of the Kingdom, and I have always discharged this duty of mine with utmost diligence. Similarly, it is also the duty of prominent people like you to not only protect, but also assist your King in every possible way. All of you are well aware of Narada's prophecy that Devaki's eighth child would be my nemesis. As all the scriptures unanimously suggest and undoubtedly, you too will agree that in the event of a King facing a threat from someone, his potential enemy should be eliminated at all costs. All of you must appreciate the fact that keeping the best interests of Mathura in mind, I chose to fulfill my duty towards the Kingdom, and did not fall prey to attachment towards my sister and nephews. But unfortunately, even after being such a conscientious King, I still face a threat because of the malicious designs of this man, Vasudeva! Bound by attachment for his child, this silver-tongued, depraved Vasudeva, somehow saved his eighth child by deception! However, the matter did not end there; he then had the temerity to entrust that child to my very own servant, Nanda, to raise!"

This vitriolic tirade left the entire gathering numb with shock; a pall of deathly silence fell over the assembly. The very fact that a child could actually be smuggled from right under the nose of the evil Kansa, had stunned the Yadava chieftains. The devastating effect that Kansa's invective had on Vasudeva, Gargacharya and Anart's state of mind defied description. Kansa was becoming increasingly furious even as he continued with his diatribe. Vasudeva's astuteness and the treachery committed by the royal palace aides had inflamed his rage. Giving vent to that ire, he fumed, "Vasudeva forgot all that I had done for him and ignoring my obligations, instead, he became a traitor. In view of his age and seniority, I had always treated him with respect; but he has ruined it all. He is not only an enemy of the Kingdom of Mathura but also of the entire Yadava clan. Though this malevolent Vasudeva is well-educated, he does not understand the essence of the scriptures. His hair has turned grey but his desires are still blazing like a devastating fire. It pains me to inform you, that as I speak, the harbinger of my death is fast growing up in the village of Vrindavan and his name is Krishna. He has grown up to become exceptionally strong and powerful, which of course, I cherish, as he is my nephew. But what saddens me is that this vile Vasudeva has poisoned his ears against me. Consequently, he is now thirsty for my blood. You are all well aware of my incredible strength as well. So, what until recently was a minor problem, has now assumed humongous proportions, thanks to this debased Vasudeva. And, now the situation has come to such a

pass, that a pitched battle between two mighty powers has become inevitable. As all of you know very well that such a battle does not end until it draws the blood of the combatants, and it inevitably results in the death of one. You all are probably familiar with the fact that when two great warriors clash, not only do they endure what they must for the course they have taken; but unfortunately, many of their well-wishers and detractors also get unnecessarily killed in the wake of such a conflict. And quite often, it is also possible that these powerful opponents might not fight at all, but instead reach an amicable agreement, either before or during the battle. Since Krishna is actually my nephew and a bright, shining beacon of this royal family, I do not desire misfortune either for him or any one of you, or for myself. But merely desiring does not suffice. So, all I mean to say is, this evil-minded Vasudeva has single-handedly put us all in danger.” Hearing this, the entire assembly began deriding Vasudeva. It was not their fault either, for everything that Kansa had said was in sync with the scriptures. And this is the beauty of these texts; they perpetuate all kinds of wicked acts, but all in the name of religion and morality! Meaning, these texts had served Kansa’s purpose. Now, would Kansa – a student from a very distinguished gurukul and also extremely well-versed with the scriptures - let go of such an opportunity? And since all those present in the assembly were also learned scholars from various gurukuls, they too subscribed to the same school of thought. So, at this point in time, everyone had begun to consider Vasudeva as an enemy. Poor Vasudeva was being severely humiliated for no fault of his. In his heart of hearts, Kansa was obviously very pleased with this development. Admittedly, he had not only made great use of his eloquence but had also put his finger right on the pulse of the assembly, and without a doubt, success for him, seemed close at hand. The game was set, he was right on target, it just required a couple of blows to turn his success to reality. And waiting to seal his success, he immediately continued with the speech, "As you all know, I do not act against the scriptures. According to the scriptures, an elderly person cannot be killed; that is why, despite all that has happened, I have not put Vasudeva to death until now.”

Now what did this mean? Why would he kill Vasudeva without any reason? However, at present, scriptures were exerting an overbearing influence over the assembly. Had Kansa not ensnared them by calling them the masters of scriptures? Hearing all this, the entire assembly praised him for his magnanimity. All around, people could be heard chanting ‘Hail to the King! Hail to the King!’ And hearing these words, Kansa’s enthusiasm soared to its peak. Then, with double the zeal he continued, "However, you need not worry. I am your King

and it is my duty to save you all from troubles that befall you. I have already found a solution for this problem. Krishna is my own nephew and I do not desire to kill my heroic nephew. Hence, I am willing to make a pact with him. I am thinking of holding a grand archery competition in Mathura, in which, all the gopas including Krishna will be invited. They should all come here dressed in their finest attires and enjoy the city of Mathura and its marketplace to their heart's content. I have heard that Krishna and his brother Balarama are robust wrestlers. So, a wrestling competition will be held in their honour too, and both the brothers will be given an opportunity to display their prowess. And as for Krishna, I will personally host him in the palace. After all, he is not an ordinary cowherd, but King Kansa's nephew. Thus, the animosity between us will be put to rest and peace and prosperity will always prevail among the Yadavas." Kansa had to be appreciated for the tactfulness and immaculateness with which he was presenting his point of view, and very soon, he had managed to garner the support of the entire assembly. His declaration that he would make a pact with me was also perceived as a King's well-meaning gesture towards his subjects. Why would they suffer in a battle between an uncle and his nephew? For them, it was good that their King was relieving them of all the undue hassles. But Kansa's farce did not end here. Appearing extremely grave and despondent, he took a deep breath and began the next part of his address, "But what can I do? This evil Vasudeva has already poisoned the minds of Nanda and Krishna against me. So, they will not believe a single word I say. Therefore, I want Akrura to be the bearer of this invitation and personally hand over the invitation to them on behalf of the palace. One cannot afford to ignore or disbelieve him, for he is, after all, a very respectable and honourable elder. Besides, I expect Nanda to observe protocol and accept the invitation. And as for Akrura, if he conducts this task successfully, he will forever be considered as one among the favourites of the palace." Upon hearing this, Akrura readily agreed to go to Vrindavan. Why would he let go of this opportunity to endear himself to Kansa? Seeing Akrura's readiness to follow his command, Kansa was very pleased. In fact, Kansa had very astutely laid the bait to trap Akrura into carrying out this deed, but the plan could be considered successful only if Akrura walked into the trap. For, Kansa knew only too well that if anyone other than Akrura went with the invitation, Nanda would definitely not agree to send Krishna to Mathura. With everything falling into place as per his plan, Kansa was now absolutely relaxed. If the truth be told, this whole charade of the Yadava assembly was orchestrated with the explicit intent of getting Akrura trapped into delivering the invitation to Vrindavan. Having artfully accomplished that, the King personally instructed Akrura, "You will go to Vrindavan and honourably invite Krishna, his

brother Balarama and all the cowherds on behalf of the royal palace. Along with that, also instruct Nanda to carry the due balance of the outstanding taxes and also bring generous quantities of curd and butter as a gift for this grand festival." Though the entire plan was chalked out in detail, Kansa was still not sure whether I would come to Mathura. Perhaps, it was for this reason that he, who had so far made his requests with great diplomacy, committed a blunder and blurted out, "And, if that impudent boy does not come willingly, then I will tie him up with ropes and forcefully drag him here all the way!" So, in the end, he had revealed the nefarious thoughts that were actually on his mind, but unfortunately, no one gave importance to these utterances.

When Kansa was about to happily conclude the meeting, one of the Yadava elite, Andhak⁴² suddenly stood up to speak. Unlike everyone else present there, he was looking absolutely furious. Addressing Kansa directly, he said in a dry tone, "Kansa, we are all aware of the fact that you have never considered yourself a true Yadava. We do not want to forcibly make you a Yadava either. That is your personal problem anyway. But today, you have unjustly humiliated a simple and venerable person like Vasudeva. How could you term it as a crime if all he has done, is to save his son? He has merely honoured his duty as a father. You have no right to unnecessarily humiliate and disrespect him in this manner. Now, whether you want to make a pact with Krishna or fight with him, that is entirely your decision, but kindly do not drag the Yadavas into this imbroglio!"

This unexpected verbal assault by Andhak certainly flustered Kansa, but he still did not utter a word. On the contrary, he quietly concluded the meeting and went away. Kansa was very shrewd. He was very well aware that Andhak had stated nothing, but the truth. But he certainly was not going to let Andhak lead the assembly against him, especially after he had so skillfully orchestrated the plan and brought them on his side. What if the tide turned against him? After all, Akrura had readily agreed to go to Vrindavan. Meaning, his plan had anyway succeeded; see how cunningly he had managed to implement one more diabolic plan against me. Why would he foolishly ruin it all by retorting to Andhak's verbal assault?

Well, so much for Kansa's astuteness and the success he had accomplished so far. On the other hand, after the demon Keshi⁴³ and his wild horse had moved close to the village, a dark shadow of impending trouble began to loom large over Vrindavan. An obedient Keshi had immediately engaged himself in the job as soon as he had shifted his base in Vrindavan. And unfortunately for us, the

place where he had set up his new camp, was the area where we currently grazed our cows. Meaning, without even planning, Keshi had managed to land exactly where he needed to be. Indeed, we were unwittingly advancing towards him at a pace faster than he was approaching us. Keshi unleashed such devastation, that in just fifteen days, he had single-handedly uprooted all the trees in and around Govardhana, and even all the grass in the vicinity. Moreover, he had also killed and devoured many of our animals that grazed in that region. In just a few days of his arrival, he had successfully managed to create an atmosphere of fear and panic in Vrindavan. He had not only succeeded in making us feel his presence and power, but in a very short time, he had also created the same conditions that had existed in Gokula, which had eventually forced us to migrate to Vrindavan. By now, all of Vrindavan had become well aware of the fact that Keshi had shifted his base to this side of the hill that was closer to our village. The fact in our favour was, we knew of this shift beforehand and thus, we were able to avert a major loss to our lives and cattle. Under the circumstances, that too was of little help, but as a precautionary measure, we had changed the route which took us through this area. All the credit for this goes to Nanda, who was not only well-acquainted with Keshi's might but as soon as he was notified of Keshi's arrival, he had specifically cautioned all the herdsmen against venturing towards Govardhana. Indeed, had Nanda not warned us in time, an unfortunate eventuality could have surely occurred. Incidentally, everybody, including Nanda, had assumed that Keshi's arrival to our side of the forest was merely a coincidence. Meaning, at that time, nobody had realised that it was part of a plot hatched by Kansa. But regardless of whether his arrival here was planned or a coincidence, we were suffering heavy losses as a consequence. Presently, whether it was for grazing cattle or gathering fruits and firewood, our walks were restricted to the banks of the Yamuna for the fear of Keshi. However, this could not be a permanent solution to the problem. The summer season was at its peak and the paucity of fruits and flowers could already be felt in the region. Let alone Yamuna, we were unable to manage even with the fruits and flowers on this side of Govardhana, which was compelling us to go far. But now, because of the fear of Keshi, we had stopped venturing towards Govardhana altogether, and had confined our walks to the river Yamuna. However, this region did not have enough forest cover to provide even one meal for our large population and all of our cattle. Consequently, we soon began to fall severely short of fodder for the animals, and fruits and flowers for ourselves. As a result, the herdsmen, who were used to having three square meals a day, were now getting to eat barely one decent meal. For that matter, even our cows and buffaloes had become weak for want of grass, and deprived of nutrition; some of them had even stopped

lactating. Now, under the circumstances, producing curd and butter was out of the question. Forget Vrindavan and its inhabitants, how could this poor Kanhaiya survive without butter and curd for so long?

On the other hand, since we had stopped venturing towards Govardhana, the infuriated Keshi, with his horse, had begun to make vicious incursions upto the river Yamuna. His intentions were clear: 'Either you come or I will; but we just have to meet!' And the impact of these intrusions was so devastating, that with just a few attacks, Keshi had not only managed to uproot all the trees alongside the banks of the river Yamuna, but had also destroyed all the grass there! As it is, we herdsmen were hardly getting any food, and now, whatever little was available, was also being snatched away from us! As for me, I was utterly dumbfounded; my brain refused to function. What did the future have in store for us herdsmen? Were we not destined to even die a natural death? To tell you the truth, this unexpected calamity that had befallen us had befuddled even my intelligence. Perhaps, it was the result of these endless series of troubles cropping up one after another that had exhausted me to the bone; now I was no more in the condition to act or reflect upon anything. Several times, I had risked my very life while dealing with newer problems and calamities that befell us, each time thinking that it would be the last. But this time, it seemed that these never-ending troubles had even managed to dampen the spirit of an indefatigable warrior like me. Not once, but a number of times, I had tried to rescue Vrindavan from such disasters. In fact, I had even taken on the royal palace in an attempt to improve the living standard of people in Vrindavan. But just see the results! Instead of improving, the standard of living had plummeted and the calamities had mounted to the levels that had once prevailed in Gokula! I could not understand this; was life for us herdsmen only meant to revolve around hard labour, struggle and suffering? This time, I, the one who had invariably found the solution to every problem, had surprisingly lost all hope and had become despondent. 'Should I do something or not? If I should, what should I do and how? My mind was totally blank; for some unknown reason, the only thing I was able to understand at this time was, even if I did something, what difference would it make? Another great trouble would be waiting to befall us soon! Meaning, contrary to my nature, I was caught in a whirlpool of despair. However, this was my predicament; on the other hand, Nanda's state of mind, surprisingly, was radically different from mine. In fact, he had even called for an emergency meeting at our house to address this problem. Naturally, I was present at this meeting. Fortunately, in the interest of all, it was good that at least the village headman was alert and his mind was functioning well. I felt a little

relieved and assumed that Nanda, with years of experience behind him, would have come up with a sound plan of action. Besides, the elders were also present in the meeting to give valuable suggestions. The need of the hour was, Vrindavan had to be saved; it did not matter who the saviour was.

Following my lead, naturally, some gopa brothers had also arrived to attend the meeting. But admittedly, an atmosphere of dread pervaded the meeting. And surprisingly, Nanda did not offer any solution to the problem that stared us in our face. He merely expressed his concern about the present circumstances and sat down. Yes, the elders did offer some suggestions, but unfortunately, all their suggestions were centered around prayers, offering sacrifices to the fire, so on and so forth. Meaning, a meeting had been called, but all that they had managed to do was spread panic in the name of work. On seeing this foolishness, I completely lost my cool. And, the positive fallout of this rage was, my power of thinking returned. I began to wonder how prayers and fire rituals held in the village could kill the demon Keshi, who was comfortably ensconced in a cave in Govardhana! The current problem could only be resolved by killing Keshi or chasing him off from Govardhana. The problem demanded Karma – the action, and not Dharma – the religion. As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I became livid with anger and my despondency evaporated in an instant. It was bound to; for, as stated earlier, remaining despondent or depressed for long was not in my nature. Now this may have been a temporary state of mind, but I had surely realised that it would be better, if I never experienced this dejection again. For I had realised, despondency is just another name for death. In other words, I had decided that from this day onwards, I would never become miserable or depressed. Even if I could not think of a solution, I would still continue to focus on the problem at hand. And most importantly, from now on, even mistakenly, I would not commit the mistake of ignoring calamities that struck Vrindavan. With this, I resolved once again to become the saviour of Vrindavan. And needless to say, as soon as I resolved, the real ‘Krishna’ within me surged forth.

The real Krishna had returned, but the problem was these nonsensical suggestions of the elders, which were still beyond my comprehension. Any solution that prescribed shirking of concerted or discreet action was beyond my comprehension. Besides, according to me, human life was an endless series of karmas - actions. So where was the scope for running away from it? Therefore, throughout the meeting, I remained quiet. When I could not comprehend the ridiculous solutions that were being discussed, why participate in it? To everyone's surprise, even when the meeting was finally about to peter out, I did

not break my silence. Perhaps, this meeting had been convened in the hope that I would come up with yet another brilliant solution to save Vrindavan. And as a testimony to this fact, before the end of the meeting, Nanda finally asked, "I am really astonished Kanhaiya! Why are you not giving any suggestions in these moments of grave crisis?"

Now that he had pointedly asked me, I had to break my silence and respond. I immediately retorted in an extremely miserable tone, "Now, what can I say? Your discussions and suggestions are not in sync with my thinking. To tell you the truth, I am feeling utterly dejected on hearing such futile discussions. So, I think it is best for me to remain quiet."

On hearing my reply, the entire assembly was taken aback. The elders simply could not understand what was it that they had said, that had distressed me so deeply. Deathly silence prevailed over the assembly for a while. The silence was broken by Nanda himself. Scratching his head, he asked, "Kanhaiya, if you can kindly elaborate a bit, then perhaps we will understand."

Well, if they were ready to understand, I was impatient to explain. So, speaking with great firmness, I began, "Our problem is the demon Keshi, which implies that it is he, whom we will have to counter. And, why do we forget that for us herdsmen, life is synonymous with constant struggle for survival? Keshi first ruined Govardhana, and now he has reached the Yamuna. It clearly indicates that his next round of attacks would be aimed at the settlement itself. Considering the speed with which he has uprooted the green cover in and around Govardhana and Yamuna, it is amply evident that it will take barely three or four attacks for him to devastate our village, while we will still be praying and conducting fire rituals! Even animals fight till their last breath in order to survive! To save their lives, they use all the means and energy that Nature has provided them with. Neither do they seek refuge in anybody, nor do they pray to anyone! They have not discovered or invented a God in order to escape karma, the action. To lead their life with dignity, they instead fight their battles themselves until their last breath. We too will have to leave these futile solutions aside and use our intelligence to formulate a strategic plan, which enables us to confront Keshi with all our might. Otherwise, our annihilation is certain; for, according to me, he is the biggest menace that has befallen us until now. And if he is not confronted while we still have time, then it will only culminate with our annihilation."

My words had certainly shaken them from their stupor. Truly, if people are

awakened from their deep slumber, how can there be any troubles left? On hearing my words, all my gopa friends vehemently supported me. As a matter of fact, by now, I had regained my strength and was now in my great form. Propelled by their support, I continued in a louder voice, "In case we fail to solve this problem and you finally decide to migrate from Vrindavan, then too, we must bear it in mind that to escape from Vrindavan, we will have to pass through the Yamuna and Govardhana. And if, fearing Keshi, we stay put in Vrindavan, expect him to land up at our settlement soon. In that case, what effective protection can the settlement provide? It is a matter of just a few attacks by a strong adversary like him and everything will be destroyed.

In short, let us be clear that a confrontation with Keshi is unavoidable and inevitable. And that being the case, it is better to die fighting rather than to surrender to him. By fighting, we can at least hope to win. In my opinion, one must always have a positive approach in life, and moreover, why do we not think that nobody is immortal? It is quite possible that it is Keshi's impending death which has brought him to Vrindavan."

Well, my arguments were sound and clear, but still, for some reason, the elders were even more terrified. Nanda, in fact, was infuriated with me. Scolding me, he said, "Perhaps you have no idea of Keshi's strength. He is the strongest and most feared demon of Kansa. Your plotting against him or even thinking of clashing with him, just shows how immature you still are! I am strictly ordering everyone not to venture out of the settlement! And remember, that applies to you as well! We will have to be patient and tolerant. I am certain that prayers and fire rituals will bring about a solution to this problem."

On hearing this, my anger rose a notch higher and turned into rage. I quickly realised that these terrified people, who believed in shirking from action, were not going to pay heed to any of my words today; hence it was pointless to argue with them. On the other hand, it was certain that if they did not listen to me, Keshi would kill us all, one by one. My problem was, I could just not be a silent spectator to the devastation of the beautiful Vrindavan of my dreams, and neither could I stay cooped in the settlement cowering in fear like the others and wait for my impending death. Of course, I could not blatantly defy Nanda's order - to not step out of Vrindavan either. In short, I was cornered; so, seeking flexibility in the orders, I said, "Your orders will be obeyed, but some of us will still have to go up to the Yamuna, for if we stop venturing out of the settlement, Keshi will become impatient and will be left with no option but to attack the settlement. In

short, if we stop venturing out at all, it would tantamount to instigating Keshi to attack the settlement. Besides, without stepping out, we cannot arrange for food either, in which case, we will all die of starvation. Therefore, we have no option but to venture out. In fact, it will be better if some of the armed gopas go up to Govardhana just so that Keshi does not feel the need to come near the Yamuna.

Fortunately, everyone readily understood these arguments. As a result, under my leadership, some of the herdsmen were allowed to venture out, but only with a strict warning to exercise extreme caution. I was pleased, for I had already decided what my plan of action would be. Although I had not allowed this to be revealed to anyone then, I will tell you now; deep down, I had decided to confront Keshi. And yes, I was also aware of the fact that if I made a plan with other herdsmen, he could surely be killed. I also knew that it would not be easy to attack him all by myself; but what could I do? No one had left me with any other option; and I was well aware of the fact that it is always better to confront death head on, rather than die a little every day, awaiting it. Besides, it was also possible that if I challenged him alone and died, it might inspire the village folk to combine forces, kill the demon and save themselves from this danger. Why not? Inspiration can make anything possible for a man!

Besides, it was also possible that I might even succeed in killing Keshi. Why not? This probability too stood a fair chance. Meaning, from any perspective or angle you see, my decision was right.

However, let us leave the future to itself. For now, I had begun to cautiously venture out to graze the cows with a selected group of cowherd boys. And you are all aware that grazing the cows was merely a ruse. Actually, I was going out there to gauge Keshi's strength and keep a track of his activities. So, whenever I sighted an opportunity, I would spy on his movements from another cave quite far from his. Unaware of my intentions, the rest of the cowherd boys would go about the business of grazing the cows as quickly as possible. As a matter of fact, this was not the only difference between me and them; even though different cowherd boys took turns to come with me every day, unlike me, all of them would remain gripped by abject fear until they safely reached home. However, I failed to fathom the difference between living life with such fear and dying. As for me, I believed in dying once, in one glorious moment!

Truly speaking, upon regular observation of Keshi's movements, my death seemed nearer to me. Keshi had already displayed his might by turning the green cover, from Govardhana to Yamuna, into barrenness. And now, upon seeing

Keshi's horse, its speed and frightening looks coupled with its incredible strength, I was completely astounded. Truly, it was beyond imagination that an animal could be so powerful! And as for Keshi's strength and his physical features; he was so huge, dark, dangerous, terrifying and powerful, that it had to be seen to be believed. He could uproot the largest of trees with just one hand and fling it in a split second! Meaning, after witnessing the incredible strength of both these adversaries, it was certain that if I did not quickly change my intention of clashing with them, these days could certainly be considered the last few days of my life! All in all, the situation was such that on one hand, confronting him was like being devoured by death in a flash and on the other, I could not see our lives being saved even if I chose to avoid an encounter with him. True, by opting not to fight, I would surely live a little longer, but then, I would also have to accept the death of a coward. Human life has always been about making choices and at this time, in spite of Keshi's incredible powers, accosting him was emerging as the best possible option from every perspective. And if one has to wage a battle, then why not do it like a daredevil? Even the opponent must enjoy the fight...Right? Thinking thus, in spite of such adverse circumstances, I continued my mission with spying on Keshi's activities.

And when one performs karma, the results are bound to follow, and that is precisely what had happened here as well! After my close and continuous observation of Keshi's activities, I had found several facts in my favour. For instance, both the horse and the master did not stay together all the time. Moreover, Keshi not only consumed large quantities of liquor but along with, he also gorged on incredibly large quantities of raw meat, because of which, he would sometimes sleep for two full days at a stretch. And most importantly, when he slept, his horse would quietly guard the entrance to the cave. So, needless to say, my exuberance had soared on discovering these few weaknesses of Keshi, and enthusiasm, as you know, is the key to success. Thus, my enthusiasm stimulated my thinking further and I began to contemplate on a plan to tackle Keshi. After persistent observation, analysis and deliberation, I conceived a plan in my mind. No sooner had I hatched the plan, than my confidence bolstered; I began to feel that both the master and his terrible beast could indeed be killed. I always believed that no one was immortal and unassailable. If one's intentions are pure, resolve firm and mind equanimous, then even death can be defeated.

The essence of the plan was, when Keshi was knocked out after having drunk far too much, both could be attacked one after the other. Meaning, I would deal with

the horse first and then think about Keshi later. Once the plan was ready, so was Krishna! From the very next day, I began to venture out fully prepared for a combat. For, the golden opportunity to attack the horse could suddenly crop up anytime. Perhaps, you must be wondering what kind of preparation am I talking about...Wait...I will tell you! Around my wrist, I had tied a cloth with very sharp thorns protruding from it. And around my waist, I had started tying a waistband in which I had begun to smuggle my chakra or discus weapon. But I might as well tell you now that I had hidden the discus not to fool Keshi, but to dodge Nanda. For, had I been caught even mistakenly with the discus weapon, I would have been forbidden from even stepping out of the settlement!

Now whenever I went upto Govardhana, I was fully prepared, and soon, I found the opportunity that I had been waiting for all along. As I said earlier, that day too, after having consumed a humongous quantity of liquor, Keshi was in deep sleep, and the sound of his snores could be heard reverberating around the Govardhana Hill! And as usual, his horse was guarding the mouth of the cave. So, both, the opportunity and the time was ripe, and it was pointless to think of anything else. As the crying need was instant action, I sprinted towards the cave without wasting even a moment. Seeing me suddenly rush towards Keshi's cave, the cowherds, my fellow companions on the trip that day, became extremely terrified. But at present, I was not going to worry about their fear. Incidentally, on this day, the circumstances were extremely favourable and the biggest proof of this was, bhaiya was not with us! So, I was moving towards the cave without any impediment. The terrified cowherds were shouting, "Kanhaiya! Don't go there! Kanhaiya! Don't do this!" But ignoring their cries and sprinting all the way, I had already reached near the horse by that time.

When the terrifying sharp-toothed horse suddenly saw me appear before it, it began to neigh very loudly. The scene was bizarre; on one hand, upon seeing me stand tall in front of it, the horse guarding the mouth of the cave had become agitated, and on the other, I was standing in style a few feet away from it, with both hands on my waist, in a challenging posture. Furious and irate on seeing my challenging posture, the horse neighed so loudly that the cowherds froze to the ground on hearing its sound. I may not have been scared stiff, but the horse neighed so angrily and explosively, that I was fully covered with its toxic spittle. And its saliva was so lethal that it instantly began to coagulate my blood on the spots where it fell. I suddenly began to feel dizzy and wondered, 'If its spit is so poisonous, then how dangerous would the beast itself be!' No matter how menacing it was, this was not the time to waste even a moment in such futile

thoughts. It was time to muster all my strength, hold my ground and fight. Hence, in spite of such adverse conditions, I did not falter, but stood my ground, summoning all my strength. But before I could fully gather my wits, the horse, neighing dreadfully, tore towards me with every intention of mauling me. I instantly managed to get out of its path and evade its attack, but in the process I tripped and fell to the ground. Truly, the horse was extraordinarily agile. Despite my efforts to hold my ground and stand, it had knocked me down to the ground! And before I could stand or try to save myself, it landed both its forelegs on my chest with brutal force. My life nearly gushed out from my body. I felt as if the horse had buried me inside the ground. And so vicious it was that at the first opportunity, the horse bit me hard on my hand too!

I screamed because of the pain and viewing this deadly scene from a distance, the herdsmen nearly fainted. For, those poor boys thought, I was done for! They all began to scream; after all, what else could my poor, helpless companions do but scream? But, before I could once again assume a fighting stance, the horse enthusiastically backed up for another attack. Kanhaiya was badly stuck and outmatched. This was my last opportunity, for I did not have the strength to endure another assault by the frenzied horse. The situation had come to such a pass that I had to either evade this blow or bid adieu to this world forever! Realising this as my last chance, I somehow mustered all my strength and stood up. To tell you the truth, at this time, I was standing on my feet because of the strength of my mind and will alone. Had I relied on my body, I would have still been lying there on the ground, and the horse would have pounded me to death. But, let me talk about what had happened and not about what did not. Just as the horse turned for its next assault, I was up and ready for it. As soon as it reached me and opened its mouth to neigh, in keeping with my plan, I instantly raised my hand wrapped in the cloth with the thorns embedded in it, and forcibly rammed it deep into its throat. And with this, my work was done; the thorns started pricking the horse, causing it severe pain. With its sharp, big teeth, it tried its best to bite off my arm stuck in its jaws, in order to protect itself from the painful thorns. But it could not do so, as the thorns around my wrist were piercing it severely. My tight fist was stuck in its throat. Meaning, let alone biting me, the horse could not even close its mouth! The scene was such that I was standing firmly in my place with my knees bent, my hand was thrust in its jaws, and the horse was desperately trying to bite off my hand with all its strength. I was determined not to move even an inch from my position or pull back my hand from its jaws. On the other hand, the horse could save itself only if it succeeded in biting off my hand. But that could happen only if I would let its jaws close,

right? Since I had the body of an athlete, my hand was quite muscular and my clenched fist remained firmly stuck in its throat. So, all its desperate attempts to bite my hand proved futile. However, with this relentless struggle, blood had now started oozing out from the horse's jaws. Gradually, even breathing was becoming difficult for it; soon it began writhing desperately. Moreover, blood had now started streaming forth from its gums as well and its condition was fast deteriorating. In fact, it was not just the horse; I was writhing in pain too. But my situation was such that if I wanted to stay alive, I had no other option but to endure this excruciating pain at present. However, at this juncture, a fact in my favour was, the horse was gradually losing its capacity to fight. Its entire mouth was one terrible mess of torn flesh and blood. Its body shook as its feet faltered; this meant that its throat was seriously wounded now. It could barely breathe and in a short while, it died writhing in pain.

As soon as the horse fell dead, first of all, I pulled out my hand that was stuck deep in its throat. Needless to say, my hand was terribly wounded. Still, when I pulled it out of the horse's throat, I can't tell you what a relief it was! But this was not the time to feel relieved. For, I still had to deal with the horse's master, the extremely powerful demon Keshi. But then, I did not really need a plan to fight him. I quickly affixed my discus weapon on my finger and entered the cave where Keshi was sleeping. Obviously, as he was in a deep slumber, I was not much worried about him. The one who did not wake up, despite such a loud and terrible battle being fought outside his cave, was least likely to wake up now. Actually, killing someone while he is asleep is against the principles of warfare. But as I have said earlier, life is all about choices made on the basis of present circumstances and not by the rules prescribed in books or the dictates of scriptures. The choice was clear before me; stay alive or abide by ethics, and naturally, I chose to stay alive! And in the bargain, principles got rescinded. However, please note, I did not abandon them, they had automatically been discarded in keeping with the need of the time and circumstances. Nevertheless, setting these things aside for now, using my chakra, I began to inflict wounds, one by one, on every limb of the sleeping Keshi. Actually, I was so exhausted that my hands were unable to even lift the chakra. Meaning, even in the current circumstances, the power of the mind was the sole driving force behind my carrying out such an arduous task. And unbelievably, even though I was drained of energy, I had flung my disc innumerable times on Keshi's body! The situation was such that, though he had died a while ago, I still continued to flail him with my chakra. Mind well, my repeated attacks on Keshi were not indicative of my bravery; on the contrary, they spoke volumes about my fear! So be it; finally,

only when his body was chopped into several pieces, did I relent in my attack. With the death of Keshi, I became ecstatic! Every pore of my body was overwhelmed with joy, but unfortunately, at this time, I did not have enough strength left to even feel elated; still I somehow managed to drag myself out of the cave. I could hardly walk; my body was severely bruised. Wounds and deep cuts were visible all over my body. In a way, it seemed as if I had bathed in blood. I had killed Keshi and his horse, but given the condition I was in, if I wanted to save myself from imminent death, the only alternative was to somehow reach my cowherd friends standing outside at the earliest.

Fortunately, as soon as the horse had died, all the cowherd boys had gathered outside the entrance of the cave. Seeing me finally straggle out alive, they let out whoops of joy. But I was in such a pitiable condition, that as soon as I stepped out of the cave, I collapsed. Upon seeing my grave condition, all their elation vanished in an instant. Anxious, they hauled me up on their shoulders and rushed to the settlement. Meaning, the journey to save me had begun, but I was still moaning, writhing in pain. The excruciating pain had become unbearable now. To tell you the truth, the very fact that I was still alive was a miracle in itself.

Fortunately, the cowherd boys, making an intelligent move, had first bathed me in the cool waters of the Yamuna before taking me to the village. Being bathed in the cool waters of the Yamuna had alleviated my pain and had brought me an immense relief. Earlier, my body writhed as if it had been pierced by a thousand arrows. Even after bathing me well, congealed blood could still be seen over my entire body. This in itself was enough for anyone to gauge the deadly battle of blood that I had fought. The pain in my arms was so intense that even the softly blowing breeze seemed to have a piercing effect on me. To tell you the truth, had it not been for my earnest desire to see the unbridled joy of my magnificent victory on the faces of my Brijwasis, I would have lost consciousness long back.

Finally, carrying me on their shoulders, the gopas reached Vrindavan. Now, even generally, whenever we set out from the village on our daily routine, all the villagers would have their hearts in their mouths. All of them would huddle together and wait there until we returned. And now, when they saw me being brought back on the shoulders of the cowherd boys, certainly in a miserable state, all of them began to weep inconsolably.

Finding me in this grave condition again, Radha and mother Yashoda nearly collapsed. However, when the cowherd boys described my killing of Keshi in

detail, everybody felt greatly relieved, so much so that they became delirious with joy. Seeing the elation on everyone's faces, I could now say that my learning to wield the chakra had proved fruitful and certainly effective too! And no matter how much credit I gave to Acharya Shrutiketu for this, it would still not be enough. After all, it was he who had insisted on teaching me the use of this wonderful weapon that had now saved all of Vrindavan. But Nanda and a few other elders could still not believe that Keshi was no more. However, my condition and the cowherd boys' graphic accounts of the incident finally compelled everybody to believe it. With Keshi's demise, once again, all of them became great admirers of my courage and intelligence. Indeed, they were bound to be impressed, and they ought to be, after all, I had accomplished a task that was truly exemplary. But what about the serious condition that I was in? Well, I was helpless in this situation, as all that was necessary to be done, had to be done by others. However, the treatment for my wounds began immediately. But unfortunately, this time, even after a month of nursing and care, I had not yet fully regained my earlier health and strength. Needless to say, once again, it was Radha and mother Yashoda who had shouldered the responsibility to nurse me back to health.

Soon, I had recuperated at least to a level where I could talk about something. But I knew that irrespective of the topic I broached, it would invariably veer back to Keshi. After all, the task that I had accomplished was indeed quite spectacular; so why talk about anything else? Incidentally, this was the first time that I had killed anybody with the discus weapon. While the killing of Keshi had saved Vrindavan from a certain doom, it had also brought to light many truths about human life. First and foremost, it had been proved that if one's determination is strong and one has an intelligent plan in place, even the greatest of difficulties in life can be easily overcome or rather conquered. Truly, if one rises above useless arguments and selfishness, and uses one's intelligence and energy for the good of all, then what is it that a man cannot accomplish? I do not know about others but after killing Arishta, Kaaliya and Keshi, I had surely and swiftly set off on this path to fight and do anything for the betterment of all, even if it meant risking my life. And with sheer willpower and the support of the love that mother Yashoda and Radha had showered upon me, I had gradually regained my health in its totality. After this episode, I reveled in the pleasure of having once again saved my dear Vrindavan from impending disaster. Though I was rejoicing heartily ever since I had killed Keshi, my body was not yet co-operating. But, there were no hindrances now. Post this episode, the development that had brought me sheer delight was, upon my recovery, neither did Radha

express any anger nor did mother offer me any advice. And to my great astonishment, there was no reaction from father too. So, no one obstructed the flow of bliss I was experiencing now. This simply meant that everybody had now accepted me as an extraordinarily powerful person. And they were right too; now what was the point in advising, or expressing anger against someone who was so intelligent and powerful, and has rightly proved so? Great! Had I known all this before, I would have regained my health much earlier! I probably had taken so long to recuperate because I was afraid of facing Radha's censuring and mother's advice, on recovering. Besides, I was also fearful about having to encounter father's anger.

After the killing of Keshi, my stature in Vrindavan rose to that of a prince. Moreover, once recovered, I was not only felicitated at a special function, but also a celebration was organised in my honour. Right at the start of the function, everybody came forward and lavished their praises on me, spoke highly of my heroic deeds and also thanked me profusely. A step further; everybody vowed to agree with every suggestion that I would make in the future, without any arguments!

The immense love and admiration that had blossomed for me was plainly evident in everyone's eyes including that of the elders. Being showered with so much of love and respect was an entirely new experience for me. In my mind, I know, I truly deserved this honour; and this was the reason why my ego just could not contain its joy at this moment. Surprisingly enough, the 'karma' had been performed by the consciousness and see, who was feeling satiated...the ego! Be that as it may, but today's celebration had become a truly memorable one for me.

END OF CHAPTER 8

CHAPTER 9

The Separation from Gopis

When the news of Keshi's killing reached Kansa, he could very well foresee his impending doom approaching him soon. Terrified, he thought, 'First, Indra was defeated, and now, Keshi has also been killed.' He could now see his death inexorably drawing close. 'Why would the one, who could vanquish Indra and eliminate Keshi, ever spare him?' His obsession with this thought was driving him beyond the limits of insanity. Cleverly, Kansa had already prepared his backup plan too. And admittedly, inspite of all his pawns been defeated one after the other, he had been able to maintain his equanimity and had immediately sent Akrura to Vrindavan to invite us for the archery competition. Indeed, taking recourse to his backup plan was the only alternative left with Kansa. For, in spite of his unrelenting efforts, he had been unable to cause me any harm while I was still in Vrindavan. So, his rationale behind this well calculated move was, if I were to be called to Mathura somehow, he could use his unlimited resources and finish me off by hook or by crook. And perhaps, it was merely this hope which had somehow helped him maintain his equilibrium; else he would have died the death of insanity long back. His desperation to ensure my acceptance of the invitation was evident from the fact that Akrura, a respectable member of the Yadava community, was chosen as the bearer of the invitation. He knew all too well that father would never refuse an invitation extended by Akrura.

Akrura, with the intention of obeying Kansa's command and ingratiating himself with his King, reached Vrindavan the very next day.⁴⁴ For father, a visit by a prominent person such as Akrura to a small village like Vrindavan was indeed an unprecedented event. So, the awestricken Nanda and Yashoda received him with great reverence. I was not at home when Akrura arrived but when I returned home in the evening, I saw an elderly person, dressed in rich, splendid attire, sitting in the veranda. And before I could express my surprise, or understand anything, father introduced me to him. To seek his blessings, I immediately touched his feet. He glanced at me from head to toe and then very respectfully, seated me near him. I was extremely happy to just sit beside him. Actually, this was the first time that a dignitary from Mathura was visiting our house as a guest; else, who really cared about the people of Vrindavan? Until now, only enemies had been appearing in Vrindavan in the guise of guests! Thus, not only

father Nanda and mother Yashoda, but all of Vrindavan was busy attending to this highly revered guest. To cut a long story short, no one wanted to lose out on the opportunity of serving such a prominent visitor from Mathura. As for me, even though I had reached home a long time back, I was still sitting at Akrura's feet. The very fact that someone as restless as me, was still sitting there, was enough to prove the power exuded by his personality. Why just me, father Nanda, mother Yashoda, bhaiya, mother Rohini and Subhadra too were seated around him. Several elders were also sitting at the feet of Akrura, who was seated on a pedestal. And outside, there was a throng of people waiting to see him. There seemed to be hordes of people seeking his blessings. Well, this was as far as the others were concerned. As for me, my condition was entirely different and strange. Poor me!...I, who was so fond of dressing and adorning myself, was lost in the magnificence of his attire and his glittering jewels. I had never even imagined that clothes could be so gorgeous! And the jewellery, what can I say about it? I just wanted to etch their exquisite image in my eyes forever!

However, the crowd gathered outside soon dispersed with Nanda's intervention, and finally, Akrura too found some time to rest. The grand dinner, hosted in his honour, was also conducted in a truly majestic style. After dinner, when we all were calmly sitting around him in the veranda, he explained the purpose for his visit, and said to Nanda, "A grand archery competition has been arranged in Mathura. Princes from the entire Aryavrata belt have been sent invitations to participate in this competition. There will be a wrestling competition as well, and the good news is that King Kansa has personally invited Krishna and Balaram along with all the gopas to Mathura to enjoy this festival. It is his earnest desire that everybody should come dressed in their finest attires and enjoy the sights and the scenic beauty of the city. Incidentally, the King has personally proposed the names of Krishna and Balaram in the wrestling competition. Not only this, the King has also made arrangements for the stay of both his nephews in the royal palace itself, with full honours befitting royal guests! And it is on his special command that I have come here to invite them for the competition."

You can understand how much stress each word uttered by Akrura must have exerted on Nanda. And as for mother, when she heard these words, she almost fainted. But did Akrura need to bother about the effect of his words on my poor parents? He had come with a predetermined purpose; so, ignoring their reactions, he continued to speak. This time, he addressed Nanda directly and said, "The King has also sent a special message for you. He has expressly requested you to send your balance tax collection and generous quantities of

butter and curd with the gopas."

Even as Akrura continued to speak, mother's heart kept sinking. Finally, she lost her control and screamed, "My son will not go to Mathura!" In fact, even father was very distressed but he chose to be silent. For that matter, even I had remained quiet, but in stark contrast to them, I was dancing in my heart of hearts, just at the thought of seeing the city of Mathura. But alas, mother was still firmly opposed to the idea. She was determined to snuff out my rising hopes! For, as a mother, she did have her reasons to be so adamant. How could the poor woman agree to send her dear son into the jaws of a certain death? This tug of war continued for sometime and eventually, Akrura lost his patience. He was well aware of the consequences of failing in his mission and he certainly did not want to bear the brunt of Kansa's wrath. So finally, he dropped all pretence and addressed Nanda in a very grave tone. He said, "Please bear in mind that an uncle has invited his nephews and so has a King his subjects. And Nanda, you know very well that disobeying the King's order is impossible." Then looking at me, he said, "Krishna, you too have certain duties towards your own parents. If you are not aware, let me tell you that they are still living in the palace almost like Kansa's prisoners. Just recently, Kansa had humiliated your father in the assembly in the presence of all Yadava leaders. Is it right that they face such humiliation, when they have a heroic son like you? This is certainly disgraceful for a dutiful and valorous son like you!"

With this emotional appeal, Akrura probably hoped to ensure my visit to Mathura. But there was absolutely no need for it; I was already excited and eager to visit Mathura. I was so enthralled with the idea of visiting the city that I was already daydreaming of being in such a magnificent city! To tell you the truth, ever since Acharya Shrutiketu had generously described the wide roads, grand marketplaces and huge grounds of Mathura, I had been fantasising about visiting Mathura someday. And finally, now, I was getting an opportunity to visit the grand city. To tell you the truth, although my parents' opposition to my visit was in the interest of me and the safety of my life, I found it quite frustrating. All in all, I was far more eager to go to Mathura than my uncle was to invite me there! Meaning, the yearning was mutual! Honestly speaking, even Nanda was fully aware of the dire consequences of disobeying the royal command. He only knew it well that this alone would be reason enough for Kansa to inflict endless troubles on Vrindavan. In other words, he was aware that disobeying the royal order would mean giving Kansa an open invitation to get me killed. In short, it was implied that if Krishna was sent to Mathura, it would mean a disaster, and if

not, it would mean a catastrophe! Ruminating over all this, Nanda had become silent while mother's opposition had gradually weakened. I was almost dancing with joy and bhaiya too seemed to be ecstatic.

By the break of dawn, this news had spread like a wildfire across Vrindavan. It was a small village, and especially when the big news concerned their very own Kanhaiya, how long would it take for it to spread? As soon as the gopas heard the news, they began to sing and dance with delight. Indeed, they seemed to be on cloud nine. However, the gopis were unhappy, as they were not invited by the royal palace. All was well so far, but as soon as this news fell on Radha's ears, she went completely berserk. She stomped the ground several times in frustration and anger. And in that state of fury, she came running to me and began yelling, the moment she saw me. Actually, there was no reason for the squabble; it was just an excuse to vent out her unhappiness and anger, "You are going to Mathura and you have not even informed me?! How will you go without me, my Kanhaiya?" She went on with her inane diatribe. But it hardly mattered to me. I was so lost in my thoughts about Mathura at this time, that neither did her displeasure nor did her emotional tirade affect me in any manner. Instead, I felt like laughing! Moreover, in my deliriously happy state of mind, do you know what I said in reply to her question? Perhaps, my answer itself would be enough for you to understand how euphoric I was. I replied airily, "What do you mean, how will I go? I will go in a chariot!" And you can well imagine what catastrophic effect this answer would have had on her! Yes, she became extremely furious, and very soon, she was raging with fury. There were two basic reasons for her rage; firstly, I had not personally informed her that I was going, and second, she could not come to terms with my happiness at this point of time. Radha probably believed that Krishna cannot even imagine going to Mathura without her. So, in keeping with her nature, she must have been under the impression that poor Kanhaiya would be sad at the very thought of going to Mathura alone. However, my reaction and behaviour did not fall in line with her expectations. Forget being unhappy, on the contrary, she found that I was supremely excited about going to Mathura! That was it; it was this effrontery of mine that was tearing through her heart like a flaming arrow! She was so enraged at my indifference to her emotional reaction that she stomped out and left immediately. And I shamelessly watched her go! Neither did I call out to stop her, nor did I try to console or explain my stand to her.

Even while leaving, she did not fail to vent out her ire. She said, "Sure, but I would like to see, how long you will be able to stay without me! If you do not

come running back to me in two days with that forlorn look, then remember, I will change my name! Wants to go to Mathura...huh!" I thought, 'Well, blabber away, say what you want.' The truth was, at this time, neither did I feel like stopping her nor did I pay any heed to her utterances. This too was a peculiarity of my nature.

Whenever I got immersed in performing a task or pondering over something, I would be so deeply absorbed in it, that I would tend to forget everything automatically. And at this moment, I was engrossed in dreaming of Mathura, its marketplaces, its gardens ... Ah! They had stolen my mind, my heart, my very being away! And there was no need for Radha's presence in these dreams. In fact, Radha's arrival at this time, felt like a hindrance to my dreams. Meaning, I was so engrossed in fantasising about Mathura, that Radha, who was like the sweetest flower in my life, felt like an irritating thorn in my flesh today! At this juncture, it was just me and my excitement of roaming around in Mathura! I wanted to see that great city just once, feast my eyes on its sights to my heart's content. And then, I would be ready for anything; if Kansa wanted to kill me, so be it. If Radha wanted to part ways with me, then well, that too was acceptable; it did not make any difference to me. But I hoped nothing would come between me and my dream on this day! And when I was in such a euphoric, carefree state of mind, for how long could Radha linger in there? She had to leave after venting out her frustration; and so she did.

Well, by now, the visit to Mathura had drawn close. For, early next day, we were to leave for Mathura. But, Akrura made some last minute changes in the plan; now, only bhaiya and I were to leave early next morning with Akrura, and the rest of the cowherd boys were to come by themselves after a few days. That is to say, their trip to Mathura was postponed by a few days.

However, this, in no way, made the slightest difference to me. As long as my visit was certain, nothing else mattered to me; I was so enraptured by the thought of going to Mathura, that even if bhaiya did not come, it would have still made no difference to me. Indeed, I was so enthusiastic about my impending visit that all day I was busy preparing for it. Truly, in my life so far, I had never been so enthused about anything. I was taking all my new clothes, both of my flutes, my chakra, many peacock feathers, various adornments and numerous other things with me. It was, after all, a big city. The Mighty Krishna of Vrindavan had to look impressive! And bhaiya was no less excited either. He too was taking along his plough and mace. In our excitement, we did not even realise when the

twilight had set in. I quickly bathed and got ready.

As the evening set in, the entire village had assembled at our place. Strangely however, everybody appeared rather downcast. I had not seen such a mood of dejection and misery all around even when Keshi was bearing down on us! While the gopis were crying inconsolably, mother and father were even more distraught. Yet, none of these could ebb my enthusiasm in any way. However, my enthusiasm couldn't last long! The entire village was there but Radha was nowhere to be seen. By now I had long forgotten my behaviour towards her the other day, but perhaps, she, as was her nature, still remembered everything! When she did not make an appearance even after I had waited for a long time, I became restless. To tell you the truth, I was filled with regret for having ignored her, and getting carried away as I was by my happiness. Now the situation was such that everyone had come to meet me but I could not focus my mind on anyone. After waiting for a while, I became very uneasy. Perhaps, she had stayed away to make me realise her importance in my life. I will have to admit; I might ignore her completely, deny it a thousand times over, become immersed in the ocean of ecstasy but I could never be free from Radha's magical spell. And at this moment, I was realising her importance in full measure, for Radha's mere absence had badly shaken me up. After just a short wait, I had realised that unless I pacified Radha, I would not be able to be at peace in Mathura. In the core of my heart, I was frightened by this thought a little. Actually, I had placated her on many such occasions. Indeed, I was well-experienced at this task but today the matter was more complicated, for, this time she had a genuine reason to be upset with me. Ever since it was decided that I would be going to Mathura, I had been ignoring her without really intending to do so. Still, this was no reason for her to be so angry with me. When the whole of Vrindavan had gathered to see me off, she should have been there too! Now, whatever may have been the case, but Radha had cast such a magical spell on me that I could not bear her absence and my feet involuntarily made their way to her house. Everyone was surprised. "Where is Kanhaiya going at this time?" But how could they understand the condition of this lovelorn boy? They did not know that Radha had ensnared me in her web of enchantment. I had shamelessly set off without having a word with anyone, while the three hundred odd people who had gathered, stared with their mouths agape as I left. Even the despondent gopis were stunned. "Where is Kanhaiya off to, leaving us here at this time?" My gopa brothers were also perplexed, wondering what had happened to me suddenly. But when I myself was not able to comprehend anything, how could they?

There I saw her! Radha was sitting in the veranda of her house with a forlorn look on her face. It was clear from her swollen eyes that she had been crying copiously all night. I could not understand the reason behind such erratic behaviour on her part, and why was she inflicting so much trouble on herself and in turn on me?! I made a thousand attempts to talk to her, to pacify her; but all to no avail. She was not even willing to speak to me. Let alone talk, she was not even ready to look at me! The situation was such that she was sitting on the high veranda with her knees raised and I was standing on the ground with folded hands, trying desperately to make eye contact with her and communicate with her. But the stubborn Radha would not budge even a bit! Poor Kanhaiya was really trapped! On one hand, the entire Vrindavan had come to see me off, and on the other, Radha was not ready to listen to me or even look at me! It was not easy for me to leave Radha in such a melancholic state, nor was it right to keep the people gathered at my home waiting. However, this was not a new situation for me, as life had always been throwing me into all different kinds of quandaries; but this time, the dilemma was such that neither side could be neglected. So, I decided to deal with Radha first and then deal with the people of Vrindavan. But alas, from Radha's behaviour so far, it was clear that she was not going to be easily pacified. This meant that I would have to use my *Brahmastra* to handle the situation. So be it! Was I ever short of *Brahmastras*? Never! And to put it to good use; I held her hands and literally dragged her to the banks of the river Yamuna. There could not be a lovelier place than this to mollify my dearest Radha. On reaching the riverside, I made my weapon more powerful. I lay down with my head on her lap and quietly took out my flute and played the most melodious tune I knew. But wonder of wonders! At this time, neither my lying down on her lap nor my playing the flute was working its magic. Callous that she had become, it looked as if she had left her sentiments behind at home and had come just to accompany me. I had never even imagined Radha could have such a facet to her character. Krishna's flute failed to cast a spell on Radha! How did this happen? In fact, this time around, her anger had even rendered my ultimate weapon useless! I began to think, 'This cannot be just plain anger, perhaps it was tinged with genuine sadness. Was she gripped by the pain of separation from me? But what is the need to be so unhappy about this? I was not going away forever. And if I was excited about visiting Mathura, then instead of being sad, she should have been happy for me and rather encouraged me.' I tried to reason it out with her, but I was helpless; she was not at all willing to listen to me.

Finally, my patience wore out; for how long could I pacify her? I had done

whatever I could to mollify her. If Radha could not be appeased, then so be it. I gave up. She was older than me and yet she was behaving in such an obstinate manner...then why should I trouble myself over her? And since my ultimate weapon too had failed, I decided that there was no sense in lingering around with her any longer. The least that I could do was to go back and attend to the people of Vrindavan. With this thought, I got up, held Radha's hand to make her stand up and we set off towards her house. And unbelievably, she did not utter even a single word on the way back either. Well, there was nothing more that I could do; instead, I was getting annoyed by her stony silence. Nevertheless, on the way back I made yet another attempt to reason out with her. Why leave defeated and depressed, especially when the matter concerned Radha, who was dearer to me than life itself. Moreover, we had passed the Yamuna long back and were just about to enter the village, which meant that it was a 'now or never' situation. With this thought, I gently stroked her hair and said, "Radha! You know that my love for you is boundless. You also know that since my uncle has sent an invitation for me to visit Mathura and participate in the competition, I have no option but to go. Besides, you should be happy that your Kanhaiya is getting an opportunity to visit such a big city. And why are you forgetting that I will bring you many beautiful clothes from there? Forget all that, but at least try to understand that unless you send me off lovingly I will remain dejected and will just roam around the new city like a madman! Hence, it will be better if you send me off with a beautiful smile!"

But on that day my placating was not having any effect on Radha, and now we had reached her house. Before leaving, I once again made one final attempt to reason out with her. Even now, I did not feel like leaving her unhappy. And, you know that conceding defeat was not in my nature. However, I was well aware that if there was anyone in this world who could defeat me, it was Radha. And perhaps, on this day she was determined to make me experience defeat for once in my life. Yet, compelled by my nature, I made one final attempt to win and said, "Tomorrow, early morning I have to leave for Mathura. The entire village will be present to see me off. I want you to come and say goodbye to me at least then. I will wait for you." Then, very lovingly, I ran my hands across her cheeks and said, "If possible, send me off with a smile. But if you do not, then I will just be roaming about the streets of Mathura, bereft of my senses. And, that will surely disgrace your name. For, everybody will say that, "Radha's Kanhaiya has lost his mind!"

Incredibly, when I said "Radha's Kanhaiya", it brought her some relief. She

nodded her head in agreement; a proof that she had softened a little. On availing her acknowledgement to come tomorrow, I felt as if life force had returned to my body. Instantly, I was filled with renewed hopes and energy. I had to accept that Radha pervaded my entire being! Some of the gopis always teased me by asking questions such as, “Have you seen Radha’s Kishan?” “What is Radha’s Kishan doing?” “What has Radha’s Kishan eaten?” And they were not wrong; I, truly, was Radha’s Kishan!

At present, taking leave of Radha, I quickly ran home happily. I was exultant beyond words and suddenly my feet seemed to have found wings! At the same time, I also began to worry about the crowd that had been waiting for me at home since a long time. I wished I did not have to face a barrage of questions there as well. I hoped there was no new battle awaiting me at home. Driven by much enthusiasm as well as uneasiness, it did not take me long to reach home. As expected, all of them were still impatiently waiting for me. The veranda was packed with people and now even the adjoining courtyard was full. Everybody’s desire to see me off was quite understandable, but the gloom which pervaded the atmosphere was beyond my comprehension. Everybody was dejected at the prospect of my leaving, as if I was leaving forever! While mother was still crying, for the first time in my life, I was seeing father morose. Moreover, the gopis had spread such bleakness that it seemed as if I was caught in some big trouble with no hope of return! But before I could sink in to the prevailing mood, I was unwittingly at the receiving end of bhaiya’s ire. He was so angry with me for having left abruptly that he exploded right in front of everyone, and that too, in such a manner, that all my elation evaporated. But fortunately for me, I still moved around cloaked in shamelessness, otherwise imagine?! Forget that, just hear what bhaiya said. On top of his voice, he angrily asked me in front of everyone, “If you are so anxious, then why do you not take her along too?” I could bear this taunt but the matter did not end here. On hearing this, even the gopis who were sitting gloomily, burst out laughing. Their laughter embarrassed even a brazen person like me, because the loud chuckles of the gopis had attracted even the elders’ attention. For no fault of mine I had become a subject of ridicule; I was greatly annoyed with Radha. ‘Wow, Radha! Your immaturity has led me to become a laughing stock!’ And I was so mortified that all the while, I sat quietly without uttering a single word. As it is, facing such ridicule is a routine affair for true lovers. Adding insult to the injury, the gathering dispersed only by midnight, so until then, I too had to continue sitting there with a long face. We were able to go to bed only by midnight; but my problem did not end with this. Sleep eluded me the entire night and needless to add, the thoughts

of Mathura haunted me all through the night. I was so excited that I woke up well before dawn. And now that I was up, I quickly performed my morning ablutions and was ready in a jiffy. To my surprise, the day dawned well after I was ready. And it was only at daybreak that I realised that in the sheer excitement of visiting Mathura, I had woken up much too early. Mother too had woken up early. It seemed that she too had not been able to sleep all night. Perhaps, the fear of being separated from her darling son forever had robbed her of sleep. Energised, enthused and ready to leave, I was pacing in the veranda; the moment my poor mother saw me, she embraced me tightly. And as for her tears, they were incessantly flowing with no signs of stopping. She was repeating only one thing, "Son, be very careful! As soon as the festival gets over, please come back home forthwith." For that matter, even father appeared very anxious from the time he had woken up, but as usual, he was not saying much even now. This was the characteristic of his nature; he was such an introvert. Most of the time, I had to discern what he exactly desired to convey, from his eyes and his body language. He was not happy for my relationship with Radha; still, he had never said anything. I had to discern even this disapproval from his eyes. Or, consider this particular instance; he also wanted to advise me to be very careful while in Mathura, but I had to read, even this, from his facial expressions and body language.

By morning, the entire village had gathered at our house. Everyone had come to bid adieu to me, their darling with heavy hearts. As for the gopis, they were disconsolate. But oblivious to all this, my eyes were anxiously waiting only for Radha. There also lurked a fear in my heart: what if she did not show up? The scenario was strange indeed. Everyone was yearning to meet me, talk to me, and I was running away from everyone, with my eyes fervently looking for Radha. The crowd had swelled so much that now, there was no space left for people to even stand in our courtyard. The situation was such that while some people were giving solace to Nanda and Yashoda, the gopis were busy consoling each other. But all this held no meaning for my audacious eyes and racing heart; I was waiting only for my Radha. And I was deeply indebted to her for she did not make me wait for too long. She came on time. Her eyes showed that she too had not been able to sleep all night. But in spite of that, it had no effect on her anger; she was still incensed. Moreover, she was still not in the mood to break her silence. But that did not matter; I was always prepared for defeat at her hands. At any rate, having made me her ardent lover, she had already vanquished me forever. So, ultimately without hesitation, I broke the ice and took the initiative to begin a conversation. Lovingly speaking to her, I said, "Do one thing, come to

Mathura along with the gopas. By that time, I will make some arrangements for your stay over there. Together we will roam around the streets of Mathura; we will have so much fun! And if possible, also bring some gopis along with you, so that even when I am busy elsewhere, you will have company.”

Strangely, she did not pay much heed even to this interesting proposal. Instead, all that she airily whispered into my ears was, "Only if you come back and take me with you, will I come!" As soon as I heard this, I was annoyed. How could I come back from Mathura to take her? Either she had gone crazy or she was trying to drive me crazy! Whatever it was, I had at least understood that she was not going to see me off with a smile. So, if I had to happily depart for Mathura, or if I had to peacefully roam about in Mathura, then I would have to break out of Radha's spell. So how much time did I need to do that? There, I snapped out of it! Well, while I was busy doing all this, Akrura's magnificent chariot had arrived. And even as I looked on, he went and sat in the chariot. Naturally, my parents and a few other people walked with him to the chariot. Bhaiya also immediately mounted on the chariot. Now he could very well sit; after all, he had not nurtured a trouble called Radha, had he? Even though he had not, it was definitely troubling him as well. While Radha and I were whispering to each other, he was glaring at me with ill-concealed disapproval. Meaning, he may not have been upset with Radha, but our companionship certainly irked him. However, ignorant of all this at this moment, I looked lovingly at Radha for the last time and swiftly ran towards the chariot. Before ascending, first of all I touched my parents' feet; then raising my hand, I bid farewell to everyone and quietly mounted the chariot with my luggage.

As soon as I sat in the chariot, the crowd clustered around the chariot and the mood all around suddenly became very grave and gloomy.⁴⁵ Apart from the gopas, everyone else was sad and dejected. And why would they be sad anyway? After all, they too were soon coming to Mathura. Still, Shripad and Udhava seemed a little depressed; perhaps because I sauntered about with them more often than the others. Be that as it may; bhaiya and I were extremely happy. I was so enthusiastic that I could barely contain my excitement. In fact I was euphoric and why would I not be? This was the first time that I was sitting in a chariot and heading on such a long journey, and that too, in a truly elegant and magnificent chariot. I began to think, 'If a chariot from Mathura was so majestic, then how grand and enchanting Mathura must be!' As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I was once again lost in daydreaming about Mathura. Thus, while on one hand, everybody was crying, on the other, I was overwhelmed with

enthusiasm at the thought of visiting Mathura. Of course, I did understand their pain; I was not a callous person. It was just that I did not care to dampen the happiness that pervaded my entire being. What could I do? My nature was such that right now, all I wanted to do was to be immersed in the joy of visiting a grand city like Mathura. And one of my unique qualities was, the emotions I experienced within, inevitably reflected in my demeanour. Everyone was sad, and I, the one whose departure had made them so despondent, was sitting on the chariot, overflowing with joy. And how! With my chest puffed up, I was seated with bhaiya on the back seat of the chariot, as if a prince was setting off on a grand adventure! Nobody wanted me to leave, but I was yearning to go, and the truth was, I had to leave for Mathura and I could not afford to wait any longer as Akrura had climbed onto the chariot quite a while back. After all, for how long could one make such a distinguished person wait? Besides, the grief of the people gathered here was growing deeper and deeper with every passing moment. Mother and the gopis could just not hold back their tears. Even the elders were misty-eyed. Yet, among all, mother's condition was extremely pitiable. Fortunately, many women were holding her, else she would have collapsed a while ago. Radha, on the other hand, was not crying at all; she just stood there frozen like a statue. But the colour of her face clearly showed that she was saddened the most; the pain she was experiencing was so deep and intense, that mere tears were not enough to express it. And my poor father stood next to Akrura, leaning on the chariot. He was so distraught that he was answering all of Akrura's queries, with a brief yes or no.

So much anguish! So much sadness! I found this surprising! I was going to be away for just a few days. I was not parting from them forever. The love and affection of the people of Vrindavan was certainly unique and wonderful, especially so because I had never experienced so much love in all the eighteen years that I had lived here. Perhaps, separation is essential for one to be able to truly realise the depth of love. Fortunately, at least on this pretext, I was able to experience the abundance of love that the people of Vrindavan had for me in their heart. Finally, Akrura ran out of patience and instructed the charioteer to take the chariot forward. As the chariot moved, mother collapsed on the ground. And the gopis! The poor things came running after the chariot. They all even began to wail. In between great sobs, they were crying out, "Kanhaiya! Kanhaiya!" Only one sound echoed all around, "Kanhaiya, please do not go! Kanhaiya, please come back!" In contrast to all this, Radha stood there transfixed like a statue and just stared at the moving wheels of the chariot. Neither were there tears in her eyes, nor was there any expression on her face.

And unmindful of all this, I was immersed in thoughts of Mathura as soon as the chariot was set in motion. So much so, that my face was lit up with the joy effectuated by the dreams of Mathura. I was neither sad about leaving Vrindavan nor about having to part with Radha or mother. Right now, my mind was just filled with the joy of visiting Mathura. But for some unknown reason, the happiness that shone on my face did not go down well with the gopis who were running barefoot behind the chariot; they were completely shattered by my joyful expression. But what could I do about this? It was not in my nature to feign, not even sadness.

The scene had turned so strange that I was not able to withhold my shameless smile, and my indifference was making them even more miserable. Suddenly, they felt as if I never really belonged to them; I was just acting all this while. How surprising! The very smile which had enchanted the gopis until yesterday was suddenly causing them great distress today! Now, what would you term it if not a weakness of their minds? Krishna's smile was the same; it was their behaviour that had undergone a major change. Gripped by attachment, they were all acting selfishly. Otherwise, wouldn't they all be happy in the happiness of their Kanha? Ah!...forget about them...here our chariot was slowly but steadily pulling ahead. The elders and the womenfolk could not be seen anymore, the chariot had moved out of the village. On having crossed the village, the gopas had fallen behind but the gopis were still running barefoot behind the chariot. Seeing this, I turned towards them on the chariot and a couple of times, even tried telling them to return, but they refused to budge. By now, hardly eight or ten gopis were following the chariot. However, thoughts of my beloved Radha still lingered in my mind; in what condition was she at the moment? Was she still standing there like an inanimate object? What did she stand to lose if she had sent me off with a smile? But, it's fine, since she would be visiting Mathura soon. With this thought, I immediately snapped out of the trance called 'Radha' which I had momentarily fallen into.

Meanwhile, the chariot was moving at a great speed and the gopis could obviously not match their pace with it; as a result, they were left way behind the chariot. Certainly, the grief, and the gloomy atmosphere was proof of the boundless love that the people of Vrindavan had in their hearts for me; but there was nothing about all of this that overly impressed me. On the contrary, their innocent love and the resultant weakness greatly amused me. While these thoughts ran through my mind, I realised that now our chariot, leaving everyone behind had moved far ahead. In these eighteen years of my life, this was the first

time that I was being separated from my parents. Not just that, this would be the first night in eighteen years that I would spend without the people of Vrindavan, and they, without me. However, while all these thoughts were running through my mind, the scene outside became very alluring. Our chariot had crossed the Yamuna and the lake, and had now reached Govardhana. Surprisingly enough, though I had seen the Yamuna and Govardhana innumerable times before, at present, they appeared to be very different. It was the same Vrindavan where I had spent many years of my life, yet, every nook and corner now appeared so different. Indeed, it almost seemed as if the trees, the river, the lake, the pathways, and Govardhana had all become depressed on witnessing my departure. To tell you the truth, Vrindavan, where mornings were always cheerful, appeared quite dejected at this time. It seemed as if the waters of the Yamuna had become still. Indeed, the river appeared to be voicing her grief, "Why should I flow now and for whom?" And as for Govardhana, it seemed so dejected by my departure that it appeared to be shedding rivulets of tears which trickled down the hillside. While I was left agape looking at the despondency spread all around, our chariot had crossed the Govardhana as well. Once we had crossed Govardhana, the charioteer swiftly steered the chariot onto the path that led to Mathura. You will not believe that in spite of Vrindavan's proximity to Mathura, I had never set foot on this path before. Truly, our life in Vrindavan was so confined! After living for ten years in Vrindavan and despite roaming about all day, this was the first time that I had ventured on the path that led to Mathura! And what was even more surprising was, if we gopas, who roamed around all day, had not laid eyes on this road then what is left to be said of the women and elders? Well, what can I say of the landscape? Our chariot was moving forward at a consistent speed, piercing the wind and racing between the trees and foliage as we moved on. Sometimes, we would see a grove of dense lush green trees and sometimes, big and small enchanting lakes!

However, leaving this topic aside, if I speak of myself, then what was my life for the past eighteen years, if not relentless toil? My entire childhood had been spent in the shadow of death, struggling with unprecedented troubles that kept cropping up in my way. Yes, during this time, whenever life accorded me the opportunity to learn, I learnt it well and whenever it spared me an opportunity to laugh, I laughed as well. Still, all in all, life was nothing more than an endless series of struggles. In fact, even this thought was nothing but merely another perspective of looking at life. But if I viewed my life from an entirely different perspective, then what was it that I did not have in my life? Extremely loving and generous parents, my dear Radha, the naughty gopis, the mischievous gopas,

I had everything. While I was lost in all these thoughts, the chariot kept to its steady pace and in a short while, it reached the main high road to Mathura. As soon as it reached the main high road, the speed it gained thrilled me to bits. Moreover, I was intoxicated by the cool breeze wafting in from outside. And as the intoxication set in, Vrindavan drifted away from my mind; soon I forgot about it completely. At present, for me, it was only this beautiful journey that was on my mind. However, I will speak about the journey later, but first let me reveal an interesting fact about our companion on this travel. Interestingly, Akrura was addressed as uncle by everyone in Mathura and even though he was our distant relative, he surely was our uncle. So naturally, we also addressed him as Uncle Akrura. And needless to add, by now, a good rapport was established with him; as a result, our chatting seemed endless. However, it was mostly bhaiya and he, who were engaged in a conversation, for I was frequently lost in my own thoughts. To tell you the truth, my mind frequently wandered to Acharya Shrutiketu's wondrous description of Mathura every now and then. If you recollect, he had said, as far as grandeur and progress were concerned, Mathura was one of the best cities of the Aryavrata belt, with large shops, marketplaces, the royal palace, festival grounds, wide roads, gardens, crowds and the constant hustle-bustle. Tell me, now after recalling such a wondrous description of Mathura, wouldn't this simple cowherd boy be lost in the reverie of touring this beautiful city? And then, what was the harm in dreaming? But even dreaming was not so easy, as I was constantly struggling to imagine what the shops and marketplaces must look like, but unbelievably, even though I was eighteen years old, I still could not even begin to imagine what a marketplace looked like!

Nevertheless, why should I discuss the details of our backwardness here? For now, let me talk about our chariot which was racing its way down the main high road to Mathura. Everything was not only absolutely new for me, but also truly marvellous. So naturally, like a small child, I was busy gaping at the sights all along the way. My excitement would soar whenever I spotted a new animal or a bird I had never seen before. Whenever I saw a beautiful pond or a lake, excited, I would clap my hands. In other words, this wonderful journey had brought out the child in me. Certainly, this is the benefit of growing up in a small village; in spite of growing age, the mind is still able to enjoy the smallest of things with childlike enthusiasm. And perhaps, it was because of this childlike nature that undue seriousness could never even touch me. Honestly speaking, I had never experienced such immense joy before. However, I had the same thought in my childhood, when mother had captured the moon in a plate for me. I had

experienced the same degree of pure happiness when, seated on the shoulders of the cowherd boys, I had gone to Govardhana for the very first time. I had also experienced this unbridled happiness when I had met Radha for the very first time. And why just that, even when I had performed the Raas dance with the gopis, I had thought that I had never experienced such pure bliss before! Perhaps, after each new happy occurrence in one's life, one feels much greater happiness than the one previously felt, just as every new difficulty seems much greater and more insurmountable than the ones encountered before. But how can I forget that my personality had enhanced manifold, every time I encountered newer difficulties and emerged victorious. How can I forget that ultimately, all the difficulties that I had faced had actually helped me hone my skills. Incidentally, every time I courted trouble, an opportunity for pleasure followed, and whenever I sought opportunities for pleasure, problems came knocking into my life. Was it just the story of my life, or was this the very process of life? And if it was the latter, could it be possible that the great happiness that I was experiencing now was the harbinger of a great trouble waiting to hit me? I thought, 'If it is, so be it; let the greatest of troubles befall me. I am ready to face it head on.' If this was the process of life, then Kanhaiya was ready for this too; at the very least, encountering and enduring troubles has always strengthened me as an individual and helped me enhance my personality.

Even as I was mulling over all this, suddenly for no reason, my thoughts drifted to Vrindavan. Just as suddenly, my entire life until now flashed in front of my eyes, as if I was reliving it. I was born in a dungeon, and my survival itself was a big question then. Fortunately, I was saved, but how can I forget that I had to pay a heavy price for it, by being separated from my parents on the day of my birth itself. However, the very next day, I had not only gained the unbridled affection of my new parents Nanda and Yashoda but, I had also received their boundless unconditional love, which had made my childhood truly meaningful. So, could my extreme naughtiness and stubbornness be attributed to the abundant love that they had showered upon me? But all children are showered with love by their parents, so how did I become exceedingly intelligent, compared to the others? Perhaps, it was my mother who was different as she had fulfilled all my wishes regardless of the circumstances, and had never ever felt enervated in spite of my innumerable mischievous antics. From the very beginning, it was surely the love and freedom granted by my mother that had laid the foundation of my becoming better than the other cowherd boys. Viewed from this perspective, it is really a mother who is primarily responsible for the growth and development of a child. As such, love and freedom are the only two boons which have made this

universe and the entire cosmos flourish; so, if I had blossomed on being blessed with the same boons by my mother, what was the big deal about it? So far, this was in the context of my mother's blessings, but if I looked closely at my own life, it had always been caught between two conflicting streams. On one hand, there was the joy of playing with bhaiya and the gopas, performing the Raas dance with the gopis and enjoying the festivities, while on the other, the shadow of death was always looming large over my head, sometimes in the form of Putana and sometimes, in the form of Shatak.

And now that we are on this topic, let me share one more thing with you. Constantly mulling over my childhood, I came to the conclusion that at the time of birth, there is hardly any difference among children. The difference comes with the love and freedom they receive during their upbringing; the difference comes with the child's own devotion, dedication and grasping ability. This is why, in spite of growing up with other cowherd boys, I went on to become truly exceptional because of my mother's love and my own concentration, courage and analytical skills. Meaning, as these traits developed in me, my personality gradually began to evolve and enhance. You might recall that I was very young when I had suggested migration from Gokula to Vrindavan; and despite my age, I had given such a sensible advice. Well, I was able to give such a sound advice because I was always well aware of everything happening around me, and was in the habit of constantly analysing every object, incident and situation very carefully, and grasping the subsequent effects they bring in its wake. I have been giving credit to my mother's love and my own intelligence for the blossoming of my personality, but how did I forget to mention the next link in the chain? Yes, in this regard, I just cannot forget to mention Radha. To have gained Radha's love at such a young age was undoubtedly the greatest achievement of my life. It was solely the strength of Radha's love because of which I was able to fight with the mad bull and even battle the fierce serpent, Kaaliya. And putting an end to Indrapuja, that is to say, stopping the unnecessary and exploitative practice of Indra worship was perhaps the greatest achievement of my life. Meaning, once Radha held my hand, there was no looking back for me. You may also remember that this face-off with Indra had elevated my status in the entire Aryavrata belt from Kanhaa to that of the Mighty Krishna. Likewise, the killing of Keshi was the greatest achievement of my selflessness, strategic planning and courage. In fact, even the invitation extended by my uncle to visit Mathura was the wonderful consequence of killing Keshi.

Now that I am bent on singing my own praises, how can I forget to discuss my

joyous nature and my celebratory demeanour? In my opinion, only a seeker of joy can scale the summits of success in life. That is why, I not only enjoyed racing competitions, wrestling matches and swimming contests with the cowherd boys but also derived equal pleasure in performing the Raas dance with the gopis, swinging and playing hide-and-seek with them. This was my predominant trait; I never missed any opportunity to enjoy myself, and in fact, I was always on the lookout for the reasons to celebrate. I also had another special quality, and that was, my absolute belief in Karma – the action. Whether it was taking the cows to graze or plucking fruits, you know that I performed every task with utmost concentration and to the best of my ability.

Why just this, I had always kept myself away from petty, worthless ego. I never allowed my ego to overpower me and lead me to think, why should the immensely powerful and intelligent Krishna—who had killed the serpent Kaaliya, stopped the worship of Indra and killed the demon Keshi—now perform a menial task like grazing the cows? No! Whether the task was small or big, I had always accorded it the same importance. For, I firmly believed that each task is important in its own way; it is never big or small. If I were to be asked that among all these qualities, which one I considered to be my best, then my instant reply would be ‘freedom’. In fact, it was my consistent efforts to always have absolute freedom that had largely contributed to the all-round development of my personality. I was never bound by anything, nor could anything ever bind me. I would either do what I believed was the right thing to do, or I would simply follow the dictates of my mind. Tasks such as killing the Kaaliya serpent and the Keshi demon were the acts I considered worth doing, whereas stopping the worship of Indra, I believed, was my primary duty. However, irrespective of the Karma or the reasons behind it, I could never allow myself to be bound by anything. As you are aware that even while putting an end to the worship of Indra, the shackles of tradition could not bind me; neither could religious scriptures nor moral principles stop me from killing Keshi. Similarly, could the fear of death stop me from killing Kaaliya? Perhaps, even Nature would never be able to bind me in its shackles. To tell you the truth, it was because of my sense of absolute freedom that every action of mine brought about effective results.

To sum it up, I had always put my heart and soul into any task that I carried out and boldly performed the deeds that my mind and heart wished to pursue. You have seen it for yourself; neither could Radha’s jealousy nor could bhaiya’s displeasure or the sarcasm of the gopas stop me from playing with the gopis.

Likewise, neither the envy of the gopis nor bhaiya's and father's displeasure, or the opposition from Radha's mother had ever been able to stop me from loving Radha. So much so that even social taboos could not stop me from performing the Raas dance on the breezy, full moon night of the Sharad Purnima with the gopis. In short, what I mean to say is, I had lived a life of absolute physical and mental freedom. I had always soared in the sky like a free bird, which had made me realise that absolute freedom is another name for joy.

How astonishing it was! My eyes hungrily feasted on the beautiful scenery, and while my heart rejoiced, my mind was lost in the thoughts of Vrindavan. But suddenly, I began to miss my sister Subhadra. She took such good care of me! She was the only one who had helped me balance my relationship with Radha and that with the gopis. When I departed from Vrindavan, she did not have tears in her eyes. Still, her pain was different from that of all others. As such, she was bhaiya's sister but she shared a better rapport with me. Bhaiya would always scold her at the slightest opportunity. He would keep bullying her for no reason like ordinarily an elder brother would. Maybe he was directing the simmering anger in his heart for me towards her; because she would always stand firmly in support of my relationship with Radha. And so boundless was her love for me that the poor thing would bear everything just for my sake. How much pain she must have endured while seeing us off! After all, she had seen off not one, but both her brothers. Still, she was standing quietly in a corner to avoid showing her sad face and distress us.

See, even as I reflected on my sister's sorrow, Radha's face began to flash in front of my eyes. Ah! Radha! There was something truly special about her. There had to be, after all, she was my lifeline. For me, she was a flowing river of love, with an abundance of several good qualities. She had only one shortcoming; she was very stubborn. This was the reason, though she could cherish the joy of love, she had to endure the pain of meeting and parting as well. On the other hand, I was a man of a different mettle. For me, love had only one dimension to it, and it was joy. If one had to nurse sorrows even in love, then what was the point of being in love? Just see, although Radha knew that my leaving for Mathura was inevitable, yet, she was harbouring so much sorrow. Instead, if we had enjoyed our moments of togetherness last night, immersed in love—when we had gone to the banks of river Yamuna and I had laid my head in her lap—then would they not have turned out to be the most memorable moments of our life? Would not the sweet notes of the flute, I played as I reclined on her lap, have become immortalised? Would that one melody not have

captured the passion of our lives? Those moments had now been lost! And has anybody ever been able to bring back the past moments? But how could anyone explain all this to my naive, beloved Radha? This is exactly why I say, ego is an expert at unnecessarily wasting the precious few moments of pleasure that life accords us with great difficulty. And probably this is why egoistic people are fated to lament over every trivial matter. I was lost in these thoughts and this analysis, when the chariot suddenly came to a halt on the banks of a river, and with it, my reflections too came to a halt.

It was afternoon now and the sun was shining ever so brightly, but this thoughtful Kanhaiya was oblivious to all of this. As soon as the chariot stopped, Uncle Akrura alighted and following him, we descended too. Obviously, we had not reached our destination; it was just a break on our long journey. For, there was no settlement visible as far as our eyes could see. But we could surely see a river gurgling ahead of us. The mere sight of the undulating river elated us and we were tempted to take a dip. But our hunger was so overpowering at the moment that the beauty of the river and the desire to plunge in it paled into insignificance. However, Uncle Akrura was not as troubled by hunger as much as we were. He bade us to eat while he quickly went off to swim in the river. And while he dived into the water, we pounced upon the food. We had brought along sufficient butter with us from Vrindavan. So, we first treated ourselves to it. Although the butter provided us some relief, our hunger was not yet satiated. Immediately, bhaiya and I started plucking fruits from nearby trees. We gorged on a variety of fruits, and could still manage to keep quite a few of them for Uncle Akrura. While we plucked the fruits and polished off so much of it, Uncle Akrura was still swimming. In spite of his advanced years, he appeared to be a good swimmer. At this time, bhaiya and I were strolling on the banks of the river, waiting for him. We had eaten so much that laziness began to creep in and the temptation of swimming automatically vanished into thin air. Uncle Akrura continued bathing in the water for a long time, while we sat waiting on the banks yawning, with our eyes heavy with sleep. We even thought, 'Is this his once-in-a-lifetime bath?' But it was understandable, as after entering the cool water in the scorching heat, who would want to get out of it hurriedly? Whenever we entered the river, we too would spend a great many hours splashing in it. But today, there were two reasons why it seemed so unusually long. First, I was not swimming, and second, I was probably in a hurry to reach Mathura as soon as possible. But how did it matter if I was in a hurry? Uncle certainly was not, and he came out of the water only by the evening. As soon as he stepped out of the water, he decided to spend the night at the nearest rest house. And with this, our

travel time was extended by another day! As such, it was only a day's journey but we were already late; first by the prolonged and sad farewell at Vrindavan and then by uncle's unusually long bath in the river. However, I consoled myself with the fact that we had already set out for Mathura, so, it was only a matter of time before we would reach there. My enthusiasm was slightly dampened, but it was all right.

The kind of welcome we received at the rest house made it amply evident that Uncle Akrura was a highly respected person of Mathura. His eminence became obvious when the dinner was served in ornate plates. So many different kinds of delectable dishes were served in the meal that we were dumbfounded; till date, we had not even imagined that a meal could comprise so many varieties too! It was for the first time in our life that we were getting an opportunity to eat such a sumptuous meal. Bhaiya and I pounced on it so hungrily, that we must have devoured enough food for a week! Indeed, this royal meal became one of the most memorable feasts of my life. It was for the first time in eighteen years of my life that I came to know about thousands of food items other than butter and fruits that were cooked and served, and were pleasing to the palate as well. The experience of this grand meal truly opened up new avenues of progress for me. When there was such exquisite cuisine available, how could one live on just butter and fruits? I wondered and realised that the moon and the stars anyway do not need any food for sustenance. And as far as the animals are concerned, they eat just to fill their stomachs. So, it is only a human being who can truly relish different varieties of food. This implies that to savour good food is not just a privilege but also our 'duty' as a human being. With these thoughts, I began mulling over the joys of human life. Truly, if one really knows how to derive pleasure, then there was so much to enjoy in human life; the indulgence of eating, the pleasure of dressing up and adorning oneself with accessories and ornaments, the happiness derived from growth and development, the joy of bathing and playing. To add to it, were the greater joys of life, such as the joy of soaring to new highs in love, the sweet experience of music, the highs and lows of relationships and the opportunity to see and experience new things all the time. To top it, there was the satisfaction that is derived from having done one's duty, when ever an opportunity arises. If one truly learns to live, then human life is nothing but an endless series of pleasant and joyful experiences. Still, one wonders why human life has become a never-ending cycle of sorrows. Perhaps, because of the ego...as it is the ego that is the main obstacle to the simple joys of human life. Obstinacy, attachment, jealousy, anger, fear, customs and traditions, are all nothing but various forms of ego. In fact, it is these very offshoots of ego

that induce a man to become his own enemy as well as that of others.

Delightfully, I was enjoying myself engrossed in these dreams of a beautiful life, when my own reflections began to barge in. Suddenly, forgetting the joys and pleasures of life, I was caught up in an entirely different set of worries and thoughts. It so happened that after gorging ourselves on food, bhैया and I were lazing in our room when Uncle Akrura came to call me and I immediately set off with him. He took me right outside the rest house for a stroll and in moments of privacy, he discussed in detail the cruelty of Kansa, the killing of my brothers and the agony of father Vasudeva and mother Devaki. Perhaps, the objective of all that he had said was to instigate me against Kansa. And if that indeed was his purpose, then I can say that yes, he had achieved his objective. Indeed, he had successfully managed to provoke me and ignite fury in me against Kansa. Until this point, neither Yashoda nor Nanda or even Vasudeva for that matter, had ever mentioned Kansa in my presence; nor did any of us know till date that Putana and Keshi had been sent by Kansa specifically to kill me. At least, I was absolutely unaware of this fact. It was only now that it was revealed to me for the first time by Uncle Akrura. Now I did not know to what extent it was true. I was suspicious about him, because if he was our true well-wisher and if he was aware of Kansa's malicious intentions, then why had he come to escort me to Kansa?

Irrespective of what the fact of the matter was, but by revealing the facts hidden from me for years, Uncle Akrura had put me in a strange predicament. Once, during my childhood, when I had recollected the days of the dungeon, certainly a desire to kill Kansa had kindled in me, but ever since then, never had I thought of him even once. Though I was not able to understand it then, I now knew for sure that it was all a part of his plan. Uncle Akrura, had purposely instigated me against Kansa; in fact, this was his nature. When Ugrasena, Kansa's father was the King, Akrura had been his chief advisor, and when Kansa captured and imprisoned Ugrasena, switching the side, he had moved on to become Kansa's close aide. Interestingly, now, on the very same Kansa's instructions, he had come to take us to Mathura to ensure himself an entry in the good books of Kansa forever. And now, by inciting us, Akrura wanted to sail in two boats at the same time, that is, he wanted to prove that he was our well-wisher as well. For, he thought, what if we might really clash with Kansa? What if Narada's prophecy turned out to be true and his manoeuvrings effective? What if the reins of Mathura possibly fell into our hands?! In short, maintaining proximity to those in power and being in their good books was inherent to Akrura's nature.

After instigating me against Kansa, Uncle Akrura went off to sleep, but his words ensured that I would stay wide awake! All night long, I remained caught up in the whirlpool of various thoughts and analysis. Fortunately, the result of the night-long contemplation was, the anger that had surged towards Kansa at night had dissipated, and once again I was lost in dreams of Mathura. Besides, I was not a fool to blindly believe Uncle Akrura's words. But yes, from all the information gathered so far, I had certainly become very wary of my dear Uncle Kansa!

Somehow the night had passed and the day was about to dawn. Everyone had risen early and we immediately went for a bath in the river Yamuna. Bathed and ready by sunrise, we resumed our journey to Mathura. As we approached the city, the road began to get wider, and with the widening of the road, needless to add, my excitement also continued to grow. Finally, by afternoon we entered Mathura, the city of my dreams. The beauty and grandeur of the city defied description; the city's grandeur spoke volumes for itself. Long wide roads, huge and spacious houses and such magnificently dressed people! To tell you the truth, more than the splendour of the city, I was attracted by the fashionable attire of the people of Mathura. Clothes were anyway my weakness and funnily enough, the fancy clothes in which I strutted about in Vrindavan paled into insignificance the moment I arrived in Mathura. In short, along with Mathura's grandeur, the dressing of people here had also made a lasting impression on my personality. Although my heart was prancing about with joy upon seeing such a grand city, unfortunately, or should I say thanks to Uncle Akrura, at this time, my contemplation was split into two different streams. When I had left from Vrindavan, my mind was engrossed in the beautiful marketplaces and gardens that I longed to see in Mathura city. At that time, my sole objective was to explore and take in the sights of Mathura. But the anguish, which Uncle Akrura had triggered in me with the description of the cruelties of Kansa, the killing of my innocent brothers, the agony of my mother, the helplessness of my father and his humiliation in the assembly, refused to be blotted away, and thus, my mind remained incessantly entangled in it. And because of these developments, one part of my mind was exercising extreme caution as well. Incidentally, Akrura also happened to inform me that during the meeting with the Yadava leaders, Kansa had mentioned Narada's prediction as well as the possibility of a confrontation between him and me. On the other hand, he had praised my strength and fighting prowess too! And in spite of all this, according to Uncle Akrura, the only reason Kansa was inviting me to Mathura was to make a peace pact with me! Now, all this ambiguity around Kansa's invitation had put me in a

strange predicament. While the chariot was racing on the streets of Mathura, my mind was once again lost in contemplation. As such, on reviewing the facts that Uncle Akrura had revealed to me, several aspects of the situation were becoming clear in my mind. To begin with, by referring to Narada's prediction, Kansa had dug his own grave. By unnecessarily bringing this up, he had rekindled the dimmed hopes of the people of Mathura. For, though people may not express their sentiments in the presence of a tyrant, indisputably the truth is, everyone desires an end to the atrocities and life of such a tyrant. Secondly, the manner in which Kansa had described my power and valour in front of the entire assembly clearly indicated that the news of my killing of Kaaliya, my confrontation with Indra, and the killing of the Keshi demon had spread throughout Mathura. Meaning, I was entering Mathura not as the Kanha of Vrindavan but as the mighty Krishna of Aryavrata. Thirdly and most importantly, Kansa had called me here with the objective of negotiating a peace pact with me, which obviously meant that he considered me an opponent of equal strength; because peace treaties, after all, are only signed between equal rivals, and this certainly was a positive sign for me. And fortunately, the most important and favourable fallout was, now, Kansa could not openly attack me. For, if he did so, he would face the wrath of the people of Mathura. Indeed, if he were to commit such an audacious act, it might even jeopardise his reign as the King of Mathura. In view of all these aspects, it was clear that Kansa would not openly dare to harm me. However, he would certainly have no qualms about plotting to have me killed by foul means, for, there was no question of sparing the one, for whom, he had killed eight others. One more fact that came to the fore with this analysis was, Kansa was very scared of Narada's prediction and my heroic deeds. And this was dangerous for me, as a frightened person always tends to plot and scheme. Meaning, regardless of whether my contemplation had been in the right direction or not, I had to be constantly on guard against my uncle at all times.

Let's leave this long discussion aside; all in all, the most important development was, when I had left for Mathura, I was just an ordinary cowherd boy. But on reaching here, I had come to know that I was actually the Mighty Hero Krishna, who was known to all of Mathura, so much so that even the King was afraid of my heroic deeds. And, if the King of Mathura had invited me for a peace treaty, then indeed, I was a very important guest of Mathura. Now, if all this was true, then were the people of Mathura, in their heart of hearts, expecting me to put an end to Kansa's tyranny?

To the best of my understanding, I was right in my analysis of the situation, but

to tell you the truth, there was one thing that I still could not understand, and that was, Kansa calling me here to negotiate a peace pact with him. For, even by applying a little common sense I could discern that a peace pact needs to be negotiated only with someone with whom you have a conflict. But as such, there was no conflict between Kansa and me. True, he had killed my seven brothers but that was history now. Mother Devaki herself had forgiven Kansa for his barbaric acts. Moreover, at present, mother and father were living with him in the royal palace. Then what was the need for a peace treaty? This clearly meant that there definitely was something else that Kansa knew, which I was unaware of. Could it be true that Putana, Shatak and Keshi were not mere coincidences but had been actually sent by Kansa to kill me as suggested by Akrura? And if this indeed was the case, then it meant that from his end, Kansa had waged a war against me a long time ago. Then the proposal of negotiating a peace treaty from his end was indeed justified. Even otherwise, this seemed to be the only legitimate reason for his desiring a peace pact, and with this conclusion drawn, an unresolved problem was solved. But the implications of this inference were very dangerous. For this also meant that the grand festival was just an excuse to drag me to Mathura. Even now, Kansa obviously wanted to send me to the company of my seven deceased siblings! Be that as it may; I would cross that bridge when I came to it. Presently, I decided to exercise extreme caution and remain alert at all times. Besides, was there anything new for me in having the shadow of death hovering above my head? So forgetting about all these issues, at present, I was lost in enjoying the city of my dreams!

- End of CHAPTER 9 -

CHAPTER 10

Setting Foot in Mathura

I had decided, regardless of Kansa's intentions, I was going to enjoy the sights of Mathura; of course, I had to exercise caution which I would. Having grasped the circumstances well, it was now just a matter of adapting myself to them accordingly. My mind was immersed in these thoughts and analysis as the chariot raced towards the city of my dreams, Mathura. Now, I could see settlements on both sides of the road; an indication that we had entered the city limits. So, I thought why not prepare myself for it? Hence, on the basis of the conclusion drawn from my analysis, I brought one immediate change within myself. The moment I entered Mathura, I adopted the demeanour of the Mighty Krishna. Now I was no more a stranger over here; thanks to my uncle, regardless of whether I knew anyone in Mathura or not, everyone knew me for sure. Thus, I thought it wise to appear in the form they could recognise me in, meaning, that of 'The Valorous Krishna.' And if I had to masquerade as 'The Valorous Krishna', then I needed to exhibit self-confidence to the fullest, right? So! That was not a problem! But what if because of Narada's predictions, some people started seeing me as their 'saviour'? In that case, it was my duty to create such a powerful impression, that they could see their 'Redeemer' in me. And when, I, Krishna, was present, why should anyone be disappointed? As it is, I had been acting ever since I was a child. So, if life had a role cut out for me, why would I, an accomplished actor, shy away from it? At any rate, what was human birth, if not an elaborate act? And besides, owing to my daring, unprecedented feats coupled with vision and selflessness, I was already established as the founder of Vrindavan. Also, I was the most remarkable and splendidly unique among all. However, it was a different matter that I had neither considered myself special in comparison to other Brijwasis, nor had I ever flaunted my superiority before them. And how could I, when I didn't feel any? But the situation in Mathura demanded a radically different approach. Here, I needed to portray myself as being better than even what I actually was. So what? What was not done in Vrindavan would be done in Mathura; as always even this need of time would be adequately fulfilled. Thus, despite being absolutely egoless, I became prepared to project myself as supremely arrogant, in keeping with the demand of the situation!

To tell you the truth, although I had firmly made up my mind, the implementation was not going to be that easy. Indeed, at present, time was demanding a rigorous test of my ability to concentrate. Until now I had learnt just one aspect of concentration, and that was to become fully absorbed in the task at hand. When I was fighting with Kaaliya, I was totally absorbed in the fight. Similarly, when I was immersed in Radha's love, I would become one with Radha. But now, the need of the hour was an ultimate form of concentration and that was 'total awareness'. At present, I had to assume multiple forms simultaneously. One was that of Krishna who had come from Vrindavan to Mathura, just to explore the city. I had to let this poor fellow enjoy the sights of the city. There was another Krishna who had to always be on guard against Kansa's possible plots. Then there was the third Krishna, who had to fulfill the expectations of Kansa and the people of Mathura. If they had believed in me as a force to be reckoned with, then it was imperative for my appearance and body language to project the requisite strength. There was yet another Krishna, on whom the people of Mathura had pinned their hopes, to free them from the atrocities of Kansa; so I had to play the part of a saviour as well. In short, Krishna was one but his forms were many. Truly, Uncle Akrura's provocative spiel had simultaneously created many different Krishnas from one Krishna of Vrindavan. And I must say that later on, I seemed to have developed an affinity for this particular skill, as life went on presenting such extraordinary circumstances that I was compelled to take on thousands of different forms. As a result, from then onwards, people saw me in a form that they desired to see.

While I was still engrossed in my world of thoughts, our chariot had already reached the main street of Mathura. So putting my thoughts to rest and casting all my worries aside, I was absorbed in feasting my eyes on the beautiful sights of the city of Mathura. The streets were bustling with people and it was becoming increasingly difficult for our chariot to move forward. Sitting in the chariot, I was watching the hustle-bustle on the street in utter amazement. At that time, I noticed one more thing; every passerby greeted Uncle Akrura with great reverence; the behaviour of the people made it amply evident that he was a highly respected man in Mathura. Some people were greeting us as well; perhaps they had recognised us⁴⁶. After all, the entire city of Mathura was aware that Akrura had gone to Vrindavan to fetch Devaki's eighth son. So there was no question of us not being recognised. In short, my initial assessment of the circumstances and people's expectations seemed to be accurate, as majority of the people who greeted us clearly had a glint of hope in their eyes. Few, who perhaps had high hopes from me, were even following the chariot. This

distracted my mind once again. Even as I continued enjoying the scenes of Mathura city, every now and then, I found myself absorbed in contemplation. And when everyone was greeting me with eyes glimmering with great hope, was it not my duty to toss a reassuring smile towards them as we moved ahead? So, I now became absorbed in this new game of returning greeting gestures with a reassuring, endearing smile, and surprisingly, I was performing this task flawlessly.

In the midst of all this, our chariot had already reached the main market of Mathura by afternoon. While I remained entangled in all these thoughts, reflections and watching the drama unfold, bhaiya was engrossed in feasting his eyes on the sights of the city. He was so engrossed in gazing at the city, that I do not think he had glanced at me even once, after we had entered the city limits. Good! At least somebody was enjoying himself. And in the midst of so much drama, our chariot had pulled up to the marketplace. As you very well know, the place that I was most eager to see in Mathura was its marketplace. And to tell you the truth, I was absolutely amazed, or rather thrilled beyond imagination. I was so fascinated by the marketplace, the gaiety, the grandeur, the goods on display and the atmosphere, that my fascination was driving me insane. I wanted to immediately alight from the chariot and explore the marketplace. Bhaiya's delight was no different; the moment he saw the marketplace, the radiance on his face far outmatched the glow of the sun. We immediately requested Uncle Akrura to stop the chariot as we realised it was best to go on foot in order to enjoy the sights of the marketplace. And since we had decided to go on foot, there was no point in making uncle walk with us and tire him unnecessarily. Anyway, dusk would set in by the time we were able to take in the sights of such a huge and grand marketplace to our heart's content. And it did not take long for Akrura to realise this; but even as he left, he did not forget to advise us to reach home on time. Without much deliberation, I nodded my head in agreement. I thought, 'Let me stave him off for now; the marketplace I yearned to see was in front of me, let me first enjoy that.' As soon as Akrura left, I was thoroughly engrossed in devouring the sights of the market. My euphoria was just inexplicable. Perhaps, I had not become so elated even when I had found Radha's love. There was a world of difference between the narrow, cow-dung strewn, earthy lanes of Vrindavan and these magnificent roads. And how do I even describe the marketplace! On both sides of these wide roads, countless shops could be seen, standing cheek by jowl, as soon as one entered the marketplace. Each shop had a small veranda made of stone at the entrance, where the shopkeepers and the customers could be seen sitting even from afar.

On the other hand, the crowds thronging the streets and the noisy bustle of customers were a sight to behold! Indeed, the marketplace was so crowded with people that hardly a chariot or two could be seen passing through these lanes. And, not only was every shop decked up and decorated like a newly wed bride, but all of them also had several beautiful items on display, each more gorgeous than the other. Needless to say, our joy knew no bounds as we feasted our eyes on all the finery around us. Our fascination aside, many hopeful Mathurawasis⁴⁷ influenced by Narada's prediction, were still walking behind us. Despite Akrura's absence, they clearly had no difficulty in identifying us; perhaps it was our clothes that were speaking volumes about our identity. However, this was not all; gradually, the news of our arrival was spreading like wildfire all over Mathura, and consequently, as we proceeded further through the marketplace, the crowd following us was also swelling. While some people had gathered to greet us, others seemed to have come just to catch a glimpse of me so as to keep their hopes alive. As a matter of fact, a few youngsters standing at a distance were ridiculing us too. Perhaps, they were laughing at our dressing style, rather than at us in particular! Fortunately, the people who had come to greet us were far greater in number.

Nevertheless, for now, I focused all my attention on the brightly decorated shops. What was not available in the marketplace? There were a number of cloth shops, jewellery shops, toy shops, sweet shops, snack shops, sandalwood shops and so on and so forth. It was all so magnificent that I was tempted to buy the entire marketplace in one go. But let alone the marketplace, we did not have the wherewithal to buy even a single item! We did not have even a single coin to spend; indeed, not having any money in hand rankled me a lot at present. Though we bore it quietly, when we passed by the sweets and savouries shop, the aroma of the delicacies made us, the two incorrigible gluttonous cowherd boys, truly realise our helplessness and poverty. Indeed, for the first time in life, I, Krishna was helpless. Or should I say, for the first time I had experienced what it meant to be helpless. Seeing the marketplace, it did not take me long to realise that we had been living a very primitive life in Vrindavan, similar to that of animals. Neither did we have any fine clothes, or jewellery, nor good food or comfortable houses. We toiled all day, only to fill our stomachs. And on top of that, we had newer and greater struggles to face and fight just to stay alive.

Well, these bitter realities were an integral part of cowherds' lives. However, at present, the crowd that was following us was gradually growing large in number. There could be two reasons behind this; first, I was not only a royal guest, but

was also the King's nephew, and the second more compelling reason could be, according to Narada's prediction, I was the saviour of Mathura, and in all likelihood, the nemesis of Kansa too. So these poor people were following me in the hope that they would soon be rid of Kansa's atrocities. If nothing else, these people were at least pumping up my confidence and giving me the notion of my being unique and valorous. Driven by these thoughts, I had just started strutting ahead, when a discussion among a few people in the crowd opened my mind to a host of new possibilities. I do not know who murmured, but I could hear, "Just see! How ungracious Kansa is! He has duly invited his nephews to participate in the festival, but has not even sent a chariot for them. The poor boys are walking on foot!" On hearing this, I was startled and my thought process, triggered. For, it was not Kansa's fault; it was our own decision to go on foot to see the marketplace. Then why was Kansa being criticised for our decision? This one remark changed the course of my thinking. My crafty mind did not take long to understand that if what was happening unwittingly till now was to be deliberately orchestrated, then perhaps, it would be called politics. And this seemed to be quite favourable at the very outset. For, the decision was mine, but Kansa was being blamed for it! The concepts of 'diplomacy' and 'politics' that emerged from this little reflection, fascinated me so much, that they eventually became an integral part of my personality. That is why I say, if a man closely observes and carefully analyses every occurrence and learns something from every experience, he can rapidly enhance his personality with great ease.

Anyway, now that I had found such a great and useful weapon, methods for its use too immediately cropped up in my mind. So far, I had been looking longingly at the small trinkets on display in the marketplace, and here I had stumbled on to a treasure trove! Now I would don a very sweet, diplomatic smile while looking towards the people who greeted me, and this worked wonders! This sweet, diplomatic smile enchanted the people so much, that its magic soon spread throughout the marketplace. I could clearly see that the smile, filled with self-confidence, not only managed to raise the hopes of the people, but it also convinced them that their hopes were well-founded. You can gauge the effect of my smile from the fact that now the crowd following us in the marketplace had increased exponentially.

I, too, was extremely delighted on having achieved such a fantastic result with the first strategic move of my life. Who would not be happy on becoming instantly popular in an unknown city? Now I was striding majestically through the marketplace. Self-confidence and enthusiasm radiated from every cell of my

being. Suddenly, my sight fell on a splendid cloth shop with many varieties of Pitambar⁴⁸ hanging outside. Some were even embellished and decorated with embroidery and pearls. Can Pitambar be so magnificent too?! I was agape with wonder! This shop also had a splendid array of jewellery on display. It seemed to be much larger and remarkably better stocked shop than the others. But surprisingly, it did not have a single customer! It was such a grand shop with such gorgeous clothes and jewellery, and it still had no customers? Well, how did it matter to me? Once again, I was lost in that yellow roll of fabric, as it was, Pitambars were my weakness. And that particular yellow silk embroidered with precious stones was indeed quite magnificent. I could not control myself. Already enthused and filled with renewed vigour, my feet simply dragged me to the shop as if they had a will of their own. I stepped into the shop and stood there, wistfully gazing at that Pitambar. The yellow silk hanging outside the shop was indeed so beautiful that I could not resist touching it. No sooner had I touched it than the shop owner rushed outside screaming loudly and began hurling abuses at me⁴⁹, “You country bumpkin, cowherd, beggar!” he raved. “Haven't you ever seen good clothes before? Before touching such fineries you should have at least considered your stature! You should at least have looked at yourself in the mirror before desiring to wear such fine clothes! This shop serves the royal family; it is meant for King Kansa and his ministers!” Saying thus, the shopkeeper very rudely pulled my hands off the Pitambar. All my self-esteem and joy evaporated into thin air! Not content with that, the shop owner also pushed me away, abusing me all the while. I was simply dumbfounded. Bhaiya's face too had gone red with rage. What could we do; this was our first encounter with any kind of humiliation in life. In fact, not just us, even the people in the crowd were stunned by the appalling rudeness of the shopkeeper. Indeed, I found myself in a strange predicament, completely clueless about what my next course of action should be.

The scenario had indeed turned bizarre. Bhaiya and I were standing silently in the veranda of the shop, with the shopkeeper still hurling abuses at us angrily, as the crowd watched this drama unfold from the street; the situation had turned very discomfoting indeed. Such bitter humiliation right on the day of our arrival in a new city, and that too, in front of the very people who regarded me as their ‘saviour’! I was deeply embarrassed. Extremely flustered, I glanced sideways at the crowd. My reputation had already taken a severe beating, and it was bound to. Anyway, this in itself was of no consequence but I was riled by the fact that I had been put to shame in front of those very people, who hailed me as supremely

powerful. In fact, was it any less of a wonder that they were not poking fun at me? I thought to myself, 'Hey, forget about others and think about your own self. Was the shopkeeper not wrong in behaving the way he did? Of course, he was. We were new in this city; we did not know that this shop was meant to cater only to the royal family; what was the need to demean us so gravely? And tell me, had the sky come falling down with my touching the Pitambar? What did we do, that called for such humiliation? It was with great difficulty that we had garnered some respectability in this new city and all of it had been wiped out. This was not just my defeat, but with this, the newly born 'saviour' in me had also died an untimely death. Thus, unless I immediately took an action to counter this embarrassing defeat, the fame that I had earned after killing Shatak and Keshi would soon be lost. Why just this, the impression that my fabled powers had etched on Kansa's mind too would be lost. When an ordinary servant of his had humiliated me so easily, why would Kansa fear me?' Indeed, the insult was grave and so was the muddle it created. My image of a saviour, a destroyer of evil, a redeemer and a powerful hero, had all been wiped off in one stroke by this boorish shopkeeper. No, no! I could not let this pass. These thoughts rushing through my mind had already triggered my anger, when another push by the shopkeeper raised it to its peak. And before all was lost, I thought it wise to put my newly acquired political skills to use. Without any hesitation, I instantly entered the shop, collared the witless shopkeeper, dragged him out and flung him on to the road. He sailed through the air and fell with a horrible thud on the road. In a fit of anger, I too leaped after him and stood over him. Dazed by the sudden attack, the shopkeeper tried to sit up when I landed a solid, bone-crushing punch on his pudgy face. His face caved in, with blood splattering out from his mouth and he fell dead in a heap on the ground. He was bound to be knocked out in a single blow. After all, it was a blow from a cowherd and a wrestler of Vrindavan. How could a city dweller, living in such comfort, take even a single blow rendered by a cowherd, who routinely fought with all kinds of ferocious wild animals?

The shopkeeper lay dead now, and certainly, I had killed him after duly considering the consequences. For, had I quietly tolerated the mortification he had meted out to me, it would have washed away the hopes that the people had placed in me. Besides, Kansa's self-confidence would have risen to unprecedented heights, and heaven knows what he would have deduced from this. Therefore, to keep the flame of hope burning in people's hearts as well as to ensure the relevance of my presence, it had become necessary to kill this foolish shopkeeper. Did you see? In such a short time, I had become an expert at the

newly-learned game of political intrigue! See how carefully I had calculated the political significance of killing the shopkeeper! To tell you the truth, it was this ability to grasp quickly that was perhaps my best quality. Now, irrespective of my reasons for killing him, I could see it having a different effect on different people in the crowd. For instance, the older people were happy to see the shopkeeper killed. But deep down, they were also afraid of the consequences ensued by the killing of a royal servant. The youth on the other hand, were thrilled to see that a royal underling was killed! And on seeing my display of strength, the same young people, who had laughed at my style of dressing earlier, had now become my ardent admirers. In short, one thing was plainly evident: older people, whether they were from Vrindavan or Mathura, they were all the same. Indeed, as soon as I had killed the shopkeeper, they had all slinked away quietly! In my opinion, it was nothing but the manifestation of their haggard, old mindset. Personally, I think the elders should be the braver lot. They should be the ones to come forward and fully take a stand in support of the truth. When they already have one foot in the grave; what do they stand to lose?

However, the mentality of the elders was beyond my comprehension. The experiences I had undergone later in life had made me a master of their psychology. You might remember that I had expounded the essence of my experiences in the Gita. I had said to Arjuna, “At the time of death, man remains engulfed in the same thoughts and feelings that he has harboured all through his life⁵⁰.” And this truth does not apply only to a person who is on the verge of death, but it includes the last few years of one's life too. This is primarily the reason why no significant changes take place in a person's consciousness in the final stage of his life. Only children and youngsters possess the intelligence and the grasping ability, which makes them capable of learning, changing and forging ahead in life. To tell you the truth, it was because of these frightened and listless people that cruel rulers such as Kansa still occupied the thrones. Well, the less said about these old people, the better. I did not get along with them in Vrindavan and clearly, the situation did not seem to be any different here either. Be that as it may; right now, one clear advantage of my killing the shopkeeper was that the youth had begun to see the Mighty Krishna in me. And consequently, their numbers began to grow rapidly. Bhaiya and I were standing outside the shop surrounded by the youth. The dead body of the shopkeeper was lying in front of us. And his corpse had filled the young crowd with enthusiasm. It seemed as if I had become the leader of the youth of Mathura right upon my arrival. Good; I liked leading the youth right from my childhood. Besides, after this instant success, I was beginning to enjoy putting my newly learned political

manoeuvres to use. Suddenly, another splendid political tactic came to my mind. I instantly entered the cloth shop and started tossing out the clothes to the youth who were gathered outside. I had already killed the owner of the shop, so now there was no one to stop me. And remarkably, I was throwing out the clothes with such magnanimity, as if I was distributing largesse from my father Vasudeva's very own shop! And what do I say about the youth? They were all quite thrilled on getting such beautiful garments for free, and were so elated that they began sloganeering in my praise! Wonderfully, I was being hailed as soon as I entered Mathura! I became even more enthusiastic, and one by one, I emptied out the entire shop. I did not even leave the jewellery. Well, if it was not father Vasudeva's shop, it at least belonged to my uncle. Finally, it was the turn of that particular Pitambar which was the cause behind this ruckus. I lovingly picked it up. This was the same fabric that the shopkeeper would not even let me touch until a few moments ago; and now, it was in my hands. However, it spelt trouble for me, as I had already fallen in love with this Pitambar. This gorgeous yellow silk fabric was so soft, so beautiful that I just could not bring myself to throw it; I wished that I could keep it for myself. But my newly acquired political acumen was just not permitting me to do so. To tell you the truth, this Pitambar had now become a fishbone stuck in my throat. Neither could I bring myself to throw it, nor could I muster the courage to keep it. If I gave it away, I would feel miserable and if I kept it, it would mean a failure of my political strategy. I, Kanhaiya was badly trapped; even Radha had never trapped me like this. Seeing me in this dilemma, one of the youngsters shouted from the crowd. "You should keep this for yourself. You are entitled to this garment!" This was just what I wanted too, but what could I do? Irrespective of the intensity of my desire to keep it, my political acumen was not permitting me to do so. For, if I chose to keep the garment for myself, it would have created a public perception that Krishna had killed that poor shopkeeper for the sake of a Pitambar. No way! This would spell disaster and ruin the impression I had made on the youth with my arduous manoeuvring. I was aware that this fabric could definitely prove a very expensive possession. So, after analysing all aspects of the matter, I finally exhibited courage and with a heavy heart, tossed the Pitambar to the waiting crowd. And although it meant a short-term loss for me, ultimately, in the long term, I could foresee nothing but the much greater gain accruing from this generous gesture. And just see, the first of these gains was accrued immediately; as soon as I flung the Pitambar into the crowd, the entire marketplace began to resound with applause and praises for me. Thus, in a matter of a few hours of entering Mathura, the simple Krishna from Vrindavan had established himself as a great politician. That is why it is said, "Krishna adapts himself seamlessly to

the environment around him."

So, not just Krishna, but now even his demeanour had changed. Needless to add, tearing through the crowd with double the pride, I now strutted around the marketplace. And my walk had a swagger which gave an impression as if my father Nanda or Vasudeva owned the entire marketplace! So what? Do you not see the profound respect this incident had accorded me? Besides, after seeing the fate of the shopkeeper, who would have had the courage to scorn me anyway? We had just moved a bit ahead with this smug notion, when we saw a beautiful jewellery shop. The ornaments here were not as exquisite as those in the royal shop but still, they were quite beautiful. Now, everybody is aware of my affinity for fine jewellery. So, naturally, I could not stop myself from entering the shop. The owner of the shop was a young and jovial man; as soon as we entered his shop, he began to show us his collection of necklaces and other ornaments with great affection. I was enjoying myself immensely, feasting my eyes on this opulent display spread out in front of me; but as you know, things could not move any further than that. So, after browsing through his collection for quite a while, I reluctantly stood up to leave. Truly, today Vrindavan's poverty was pinching me to the core. There were such exquisite ornaments and clothes on display that given a choice, I wished to possess them all; yet, I could not buy anything. Shame on such a life! Empty-handed, I had just come out of the shop with a heavy heart when the shopkeeper called out after me, "Will you not buy anything? Did you not like anything?"

Feeling quite ashamed, I replied, "Brother, we liked many things, but we do not have the money to buy anything." Now, I do not know whether he felt sorry for me or wanted to honour my bravery, but he very lovingly gifted me two white pearl necklaces. Naturally, I was extremely thrilled on receiving the glittering necklaces. He had given two necklaces, one for me and one for bhaiya. But as you are well aware, bhaiya was not overly fond of wearing jewellery and I did not have any objection to his disinterest in wearing it either! I wore both the necklaces even as I stepped out of the shop. But what can I say, as soon as I put them on, my mind swung back to the Pitambar that I had gifted away so reluctantly. How perfectly these necklaces would have matched with that golden-yellow silk fabric! I began to curse my new-found sense of politics, because of which I had been forced to toss that beautiful Pitambar to the crowd. This meant that politics could sometimes prove to be quite expensive too! Just then, another voice in my mind instantly corrected me, 'No, no Kanhaiya! In fact, this was just a short-term loss, in the long term, it will certainly prove to be very fruitful.' It is

said that an intelligent person should not be unduly worried about losses in the short-term but should always maintain his focus on the long-term gains. And as you know, I was intelligent! As soon as this positive thought crossed my mind, all the dejection I had endured on giving away the Pitambar vanished into thin air in an instant. And with that, I once again began to saunter happily around the marketplace.

I had just passed a couple of shops when the heady fragrance of sandalwood pervaded my entire being. In the very next shop, I saw a beautiful woman grinding sandalwood. She appeared to be hunchbacked but surprisingly, she was bewitchingly beautiful. Now here was a shop owned by a lovely maiden and on top of it, it sold the intoxicatingly fragrant sandalwood paste. It was a bounty indeed; both of Kanhaiya's weaknesses were present in one place. After I had received the necklace as a gift, my self-confidence was already at its zenith. I just could not resist myself, but walk up to her and express my desire to have some sandalwood paste applied by her.

On hearing my playful wish, she looked right into my eyes and spoke in a beguiling tone, "Oh handsome hero! First tell me, who are you and where have you come from?"

On one hand was the divine fragrance of sandalwood, and on the other, was her captivating style! And to top it, she was addressing me as a 'handsome hero'! I was so mesmerised that I seemed to lose all my senses! She appeared to be quite older than I was; she must have been around thirty years of age. But so what? Was Radha also not older than me? To tell you the truth, as soon as I saw her, I recalled my first encounter with Radha. But I immediately composed myself and said very courteously, "I am Krishna from Vrindavan. I am the nephew of King Kansa; in fact, he himself has invited me to Mathura to participate in the competition and festivities."

On hearing this, she chirpily said, "Oh! I was just going to your Uncle Kansa's royal palace with this sandalwood paste; only my sandalwood paste is used for his bath. You look so handsome at the first glance itself. Choose whichever fragrance you like, I will first apply it to you and then go to the palace."

For me, just these utterances from her mouth were enough. I was eagerly waiting to select a fragrance and let the sandalwood paste be smeared all over my body by her. She lovingly applied sandalwood paste on my entire body with her soft hands; needless to say, I thoroughly enjoyed it. My mind was just ecstatic; every

pore of my body was suffused with the sweet fragrance of sandalwood. This was all very well, but as soon as I was about to take her leave, she, for some reason, invited us to come and stay at her house. Her warm and friendly nature touched my heart strings, but I just smiled in response. This too was a tactic, I had learnt only recently. If one did not want to answer, one could just smile. Oh! Just see, I have narrated the entire account of this beautiful meeting but I forgot to tell you her name; she was called Kubja⁵¹.

However, evening had set in as we continued to saunter around the marketplace. I did not wish to leave the marketplace as yet, but we had to. And we were yet to decide the place where we were going to stay. We were so engrossed in roaming around the marketplace, that this thought had not even occurred to us so far, but now was the time to deliberate over it. Actually, we had been invited to stay at the royal palace itself, but after hearing all that Akrura had to say and seeing the atmosphere in Mathura, I did not think it safe to stay at the royal palace. And Kansa had openly declared in the assembly of the Yadavas that if the boys did not come of their own free will, he would forcibly drag them to Mathura. For someone as intelligent as me, his words clearly reflected his mala fide intentions. Hence, there was no question of staying at the royal palace. But then, where would we stay? Suddenly, I remembered mother and father. Yes, I had not even met them as yet, lost as I had been in devouring the sights at the marketplace. We could always stay with them, if we wanted to. But no, they too lived in the royal quarters. Besides, if I stayed with them and not in the royal palace, it would ultimately end up fuelling Kansa's anger against them. Had they not suffered enough on my account that I would spell greater trouble for them? Thus, this option was also cancelled. Then I thought, 'How about staying at Kubja's house?' She had invited us with so much love and affection! The sandalwood paste she had applied on me still had me enveloped in its heady fragrance; that beautiful experience was still fresh in my mind! As for my heart, it was indeed difficult for me to leave Kubja's shop. But staying at her place was next to impossible; in fact, it could even trigger a war! Oh yes, you heard me right; the dreaded affliction called bhaiya was with me! He would have flared up at the very idea of staying at Kubja's house, and would have instantly lashed out at me, saying, "It has hardly been a day since you parted from the gopis of Vrindavan, and now you are seeking gopis in Mathura!" Therefore, after careful consideration of all aspects of the situation, I realised that the only person, with whom we could stay, was Uncle Akrura. After spending three days in his company, we had already established a good rapport with him. Besides, it was he who had come to Vrindavan with an invitation for us. Hence, if we stayed with

him, the royal palace would have no objection to it, even if we go by the administrative protocol. And more importantly, even for security reasons, it was best to stay with Uncle Akrura. He was a distinguished citizen of Mathura and therefore, he would certainly not tolerate any harm being caused to us while we were his guests. For, it would not only tarnish his reputation in Mathura, but he would also be considered an co-conspirator in the conspiracy to kill me. Secondly, in the current political atmosphere, the royal palace could not afford to displease or annoy Uncle Akrura in any manner. In short, I had made the perfect decision as far as our stay at Uncle Akrura's house was concerned, and definitely, my freshly acquired political skills had a very important role to play in arriving at the right decision. My new-found skills had at least proved the maxim that, "the traits of a child are evident in the cradle itself." Think, if this was what I could do on my first day in politics, imagine, what all my political brain would cook up in the future! Providence alone knew that! Astonishingly, though I had learned this political and diplomatic manoeuvring just today, I had taken to it so naturally, that I had now begun to view everything from this perspective. I had never felt the need for these skills in Vrindavan. Perhaps, it was needed only in great cities and capitals where one has to deal with devious and manipulative people. This meant that I had acquired the right skill at the right time, at the right place, and that too, in the shortest possible time, i.e. in a matter of just a day. Would one need a greater proof of my inner intelligence and abilities?

As I had decided that we would be put up at Uncle Akrura's residence, he, a man of his word, had sent his chariot along with the charioteer. Thus, we began our journey towards his house; needless to add, bhaiya and I were majestically sitting in the back seat of the chariot, enjoying the sights of Mathura. Bhaiya was in very high spirits; he was a happy soul as he had always let himself be free of the constraints of thinking and analysis! As far as he was concerned, if I had decided to stay at the royal palace, he would have agreed to stay there as well. In short, he would never ever nurse the headache of reflecting upon 'actions and their consequences'. In fact, I never even discussed such issues with him; I would think and decide everything all by myself. Following my instincts and decisions, he would just come along with me. Just see, once again, bhaiya was happily engrossed in admiring the sights of Mathura and here I was, mired in thinking about all this, while we reached Akrura's house. Naturally, he was anxiously waiting for us and was certainly very happy when he saw us arriving at his house. His happiness could be gauged from the fact that he had laid out the *Chhappan Bhog*, a grand feast of fifty-six different kinds of delicacies. As for

the feast, what was it that this *Chhappan Bhog* did not have? Milk, curd, butter, buttermilk, various kinds of fruits, the pulp of several delicious flowers, all kinds of delectable dishes, many kinds of savouries and countless other sweet and spicy delicacies. The cowherd boys were on a roll; both bhaiya and I attacked the food as if we had been starving for years. Perhaps, we had never eaten so much in our lives before! We thoroughly relished the delicacies that were served; this was our first day in Mathura and it had proved to be a grand and memorable one. My world had changed so much in just a day, and so had I, along with it.

However, having overeaten, we woke up very late the next day. Without wasting any time, we immediately bathed and quickly got ready. My mind was insisting that we roam around in the marketplace, but first there was a duty I had to perform. Oh yes! Most importantly, first of all, I had to meet my mother and father. My poor parents! They had been waiting for me since the day before. Surely, they would have thought, 'What kind of offsprings are these two? An entire day has passed since they have arrived and they have still not come to meet their parents.' How could I explain to them that the marketplace of their city had drawn me like a flame draws a moth? But this was not the case today and both of us immediately set off to meet them. Finding us at their doorstep, naturally, both were elated beyond words; especially mother, who found it difficult to contain her joy. Both were so delighted that tears were continually streaming down their eyes. I began to wonder, 'What is the difference between sorrow and happiness? An excess of both invariably triggers a flow of tears.'

Heartily, we garnered loads of blessings from mother and father, who wished us well with all their heart. I lost count of the number of times mother had embraced me! My mind was riveted on father's grand house. His royal abode was definitely quite magnificent; it had a big veranda outside and also a beautiful garden attached to it. Indeed, I was thoroughly enchanted by it at the very first sight. All of us set up camp in the garden; bhaiya and I plopped on the ground while mother and father settled on the swing. You are all aware that this was just the second time that I was meeting my mother. Naturally, her joy knew no bounds and the unparalleled elation reflected on her face as well. But still, tears continued to pour out intermittently from her eyes. Women and their tears are so strange that they are always on the lookout for an opportunity to flow, whether it was happiness or sorrow. Well, after sitting with us for a while, she went in to prepare a feast for us. As soon as mother went in, father quietly cautioned us to always remain alert while in Mathura. And the matter did not

end there; finding an opportune time, he also strictly warned us to stay away from the bow that had been prepared for the archery competition. It was essential for us to seriously pay heed to father's advice; his instructions just could not be ignored. After all, he stood very high in the palace hierarchy, and so he must have been privy to many secrets of the palace.

However, after hearing father's advice, silence enveloped everyone; in this quietitude, I looked closely at father. Neither did he broach any other topic, nor did he say anything further; but his sombre eyes reflected the anguish that he had undergone and was still enduring. Indeed, ever since Narada had predicted my birth, a host of difficulties had cascaded into his blissful life. I thought, 'If he has to continue enduring such pain for the rest of his life, in spite of having an intelligent, brave and heroic son like me, then what is the use of my intelligence and bravery?' So true! But what could I do at present? And what was the point in pondering over issues which could not be resolved immediately? It would only cause more pain and difficulties, whereas my nature was to seek pleasure and happiness. I never liked to wallow in grief or indulge in strenuous, painful philosophising. I did not believe in ruining the joy of the present moment by getting caught up in needless angst. In short, turning a blind eye to his despondency for the time being, I immediately returned to my jovial state of mind. Meanwhile, mother had already served the food. Having gorged myself on food prepared by mother, I felt extremely content but I am sure she must have derived far greater satisfaction from feeding her darling son. That is why the food prepared and served lovingly by a mother, is in no way less than the best of *Chhappan Bhog* feasts. Now, having eaten to our fill, we took leave of our parents. But what can I say; as soon as I stepped out, a wave of emotion washed over me and my eyes were filled with tears. Thoughts of mother Yashoda suddenly began to trouble me. 'Poor thing! How would she have spent these two nights without me?' But very quickly, I forced myself out of this emotional turmoil. For, this too was unnecessary anguish that could ruin my present.

As we stepped out, father followed us; actually, he was accompanying us to fulfill his paternal duties. He wanted to get us some garments from a cloth merchant loyal to him. This was a great thought indeed; I do not know about his other son, but this one certainly welcomed the idea of strutting about through the streets of Mathura, dressed in glamorous attire. He certainly wanted to make an impression on not just the boys, but also on the girls of Mathura! Besides, moving about in the city in father's company had an immediate advantage too; we got the opportunity to ride in his chariot! Meaning, after our arrival in

Mathura, we had begun to live in style and luxury. The day before, it was Uncle Akrura who had sent a chariot for us and at present, we had set off on father's chariot. And now that we had a chariot, how long would it take for us to reach the shop? Fortunately, father had taken us to a shop that had all kinds of beautiful clothes and ornaments. And the best part was, father allowed us to shop to our heart's content and buy whatever caught our fancy, without worrying about the cost. Now, how could I resist this offer? I quickly selected four-five pairs of clothing; and yes, I did not forget to get myself a Pitambar, along with some exquisite jewellery. I was certainly not going to fritter away this wonderful opportunity that had fallen into my lap. Bhaiya too had selected two-three pairs of clothing, but he bought them as if he was buying under compulsion. But in my case, it was very different. I was so ecstatic to have this new set of clothes that my feet refused to touch the ground. And interestingly, I dressed myself in the Pitambar in the shop itself! Now that I had worn the Pitambar, why leave the jewellery behind? I adorned myself with jewels right there in the shop. Perhaps, the pain of not being able to take the Pitambar from the royal vendor was still fresh in my mind. Already excited by wearing the Pitambar and jewellery, what I did next was truly remarkable. I stuck peacock feathers in my hair and tucked my flute in my waist-belt! After all, fine clothes can change one's physical appearance, but how can they change his mind? Ultimately, I was just a cowherd boy from Vrindavan.

And the instant I wore these fancy new clothes, my persona was completely transformed. First of all, I looked myself over; I truly looked so charming and alluring, that I could fall in love with myself. Admittedly, the style of dressing was my own; the yellow garment, however, was an influence of Mathura, and the peacock feathers in my hair were an inseparable part of my style from Vrindavan. But still, let me tell you that I did not look less than any inhabitant of Mathura. And it was perhaps from here on in life, that my unique style of dressing had emerged. Well, every individual must have his own distinguished style. If one does not look different from others, then of what consequence is one's individuality? If one wears clothes according to the dictates of customs, then what is the point of one's existence as a human? If one does not break tradition, then what does one accomplish? If one does not set a new precedent, what is the purpose of his coming into this world? If one just follows others, of what use is one's life? And, if one is content with being merely a part of the herd, why choose to be a human being in the first place? In short, there could only be one Krishna, and only he could carry off such brilliant yellow garments topped with peacock feathers in his curls!

Once all this was done, I, Krishna, was dressed and ready in my unique style. But what next? This shop was not in the main marketplace, and now that I was wearing new clothes, I wanted to stroll around in the main market street where I could strut amongst the inhabitants of Mathura. Naturally, it was the people of Mathura whom I wanted to impress with my debonair look in my new clothes. Thus, bidding a goodbye to father with a ⁵²namaste, we set off for the main marketplace. For a while, we paraded around, but before I even realised it, my feet directed me to Kubja's shop, as if of their own accord. Perhaps, I was more than a little anxious to impress her with my looks. As it is, the pleasure of impressing the people known to you is indescribable. If you do not believe me, look within yourself and you will find how true it is. Interestingly, today too, she was sitting outside, grinding sandalwood. She was delighted to see me. Fluttering her eyelashes, she said, "Welcome, my hero Krishna! Today you are looking like a true Mathurawasi. Don't you want to get anointed with sandalwood today?"

Now, I had come to impress her, yet, compelled by my nature, I was lost in the magic of her captivating eyes. But, as soon as I regained my composure, I replied quickly, but somewhat nervously, "Why not?"

Hearing this, she replied with sheer delight, "Then come inside."

So, I stepped inside; today instead of the shop, she took us to her house. Her shop and house were in the same premises; the outer part of it was the shop and the inner part was her house. Bhaiya was not too happy about entering her living quarters; nevertheless, he reluctantly came along following me. I had to admit, her house was small but beautiful, and to tell you the truth, she seemed to be even more charming than her house. She not only welcomed us heartily, but also offered us to be seated with great respect. Indeed, Krishna could not contain his joy on receiving such great respect in an unknown city. I was lost in the euphoria of being honoured thus, and in the meantime, she brought us a cool rose drink which she had prepared herself. I was ecstatic the moment I drank the cool, fragrant drink. The greatest benefit of coming to Mathura was that ever since we had arrived here, we were discovering ever new, delicious foods and drinks, each one better than the other; and on top of it were all these novel experiences. To tell you the truth, when I saw Kubja, I was lost in the thought of the new and wonderful experience of being smeared with sandalwood paste. But the killjoy that bhaiya was, neither did he want to get sandalwood paste applied, nor was he

inclined to sit in her house for long. This was his individual prerogative, but he appeared quite displeased with me too for having come here! But this hardly made any difference to me. Had he ever liked my meeting Radha, or my playing with the gopis? Still, I had spent a major part of my life in their company. What I mean to say is, bhaiya was well-acquainted with my brazen nature. Seeing no solution in sight, he left in a huff for Uncle Akrura's house, to get some rest.

As soon as he left, Kubja came and sat very close to me as if she had just been waiting for such an opportunity. And as for me, how could I object to such sweet intimacy? For some time, it seemed as if the room was also quietly watching this silent intimacy. Then who knows what crossed her mind, but she gradually began to reveal everything about herself to me. Actually, her name was Malini. She had contracted this terrible condition, a hunched back, about five-six years ago; and it was because of this condition that people had begun to call her Kubja or the hunchbacked one. She was one of Kansa's special servants, and her father too was one of the principal servants of Kansa. The high position she enjoyed in Kansa's court could be gauged by the fact that Kansa had even got her treated by the royal physician. However, it was a different matter that the treatment had proven to be completely ineffective. The saddest part of her story was that according to the royal physician, she could never be cured of this handicap in her life. Kubja's story was indeed very sad, but my brain was able to dig out a politically advantageous piece of information from this story as well. And the information was, both Kubja and her father were intimate servants of Kansa. So, if I befriended them, I could get heaps of information about the royal palace without actually living there. Probably, this was the most important change that had come over me since the time we had arrived in Mathura. Now my focus tended to home in on matters which were important to me. In Vrindavan, we all lived together as a community, and thus there was no question of thinking of one's self-interest. But here, it was essential to know who your friends and foes were. Perhaps, this was the reason behind this change that had occurred in me. Besides, ever since we had arrived here, politics had begun to fascinate me; so all in all, wittingly or unwittingly, I had begun to view everything, each and every piece of information and situation solely from a political perspective. Without a doubt, this was the result of my new-found interest; but then, it was the need of the hour too!

However, the fact that greatly troubled me at present was, poor Kubja was not even able to stand or walk properly. The poor woman had to walk with her back bent. Now, you tell me, how could I, Krishna, an ardent lover of beauty, tolerate

seeing such a beautiful and affable lady in such a pathetic condition? All in all, I was so moved by Kubja's ailment that I wished to bring her a permanent relief from this suffering. To tell you the truth, I was longing to see her as Malini, her former self. She was such a beautiful young woman, and she had to endure so much suffering from such a debilitating disease! Just because the royal physician had declared that she could never be cured, did it really mean that she could not be cured? No! Her health would certainly be restored! I believed more in the curative power of the mind rather than the efficacy of medicines. It was because of the power of my mind that I had been able to kill the likes of Arishta and Kaaliya. It was Radha's love alone that had empowered me to eliminate a demon like Keshi. Then why would the magic of love not work on Kubja? In view of the facts stated above, I was convinced that the methodology I subscribed to was the only method which would be able to cure her. And based on this understanding, I advised her to not bother about the royal physician's opinion. I said, "If you concentrate the power of your mind and firmly resolve to get healed, then you can consider yourself cured. All you need to do is, focus all your will power on healing yourself, with full confidence of recovering. She listened to every word of mine with rapt attention, and to reawaken her self-confidence, I repeated my words a number of times. You will not believe but that day, I even gave Kubja a massage to make her feel the power of true love. Thus, not only did the 'healer' Krishna start her treatment, but this great physician was giving her a mixture of two powerful 'herbs', love and trust. And interestingly, I, Krishna, the healer, felt a thousand times more blessed on giving Kubja the massage than she felt on receiving it!

The day had passed but there was nothing for us to do in Mathura. So the next day, bhaiya and I again went sauntering around the marketplace. And after wandering about for a short while, we reached Kubja's shop once again. What could I do? After the sweet experience of the day before, my mind refused to dwell on anything else. Kubja too seemed to be anxiously waiting for me. On reaching there, we were all engaged in general conversations for a while, but how could bhaiya enjoy all this? This time too, he sat for a while and then decided to leave, but not before declaring, "If this is all you want to do, then I will not come with you from tomorrow." Of course, I would let tomorrow take care of itself. Today he had done me a great favour by leaving. Kubja seemed even happier than I was, to see bhaiya leave! Meaning, the fire was raging equally in at both ends; both of our hearts longed for some privacy. However, the truth was, we both had our own reasons to be happy. While Kubja wanted to take advantage of the solitude and come closer to me, I was anxious to glean some

secrets of the royal palace from her. Of course, I did want to enjoy the sights of Mathura and the company of Kubja as well but while indulging in all this, I certainly did not want to fall prey to Kansa's plot. In short, my primary concern was to be on guard. Thus, as she was applying sandalwood paste on my body, I quietly asked her if she could gather some information from her father about the bow that was to be used in the archery competition. My arrow had found its mark. She had fallen so madly in love with me that she happily agreed to do my bidding and support me in my mission. I knew that she would willingly help me. Could women ever refuse Krishna? Impossible! But the best part was, she had refrained from asking any probing questions such as 'why and how'. I was, in fact, astonished by her complete surrender and the immense trust she had placed in me.

This time too, I lovingly gave her a massage; when she was willing to do so much for me, I could at least give her a massage! And as you know, giving her a massage was a much more pleasurable experience for me than it was for her. Now, what to hide from you, this was gradually becoming our daily ritual. First, she would apply sandalwood paste on my entire body, then it would be my turn to give her a massage; and the days in Mathura were swiftly passing by thus. I had no other friend in Mathura and for some reason, the cowherd boys had not yet reached. There were still twenty more days to go for the festival. So in the meantime, Kubja was the only one I had found to keep me company. And to tell you the truth, by now the magic of Kubja's mesmerising eyes and her innocence had begun to enchant me. And as far as she was concerned, she was smitten by me from our very first meeting. So, how long could I resist her innocent surrender?

Interestingly, this was the story of the budding love between me and Kubja; but more importantly, the good news was, in the next few days, Kubja had obtained all the information about the bow from her father. The gist of information provided by her was, the craftsman called Lohita had made the bow, but ever since he had finished the job of making the bow, he had been found missing. This clearly implied that there was certainly some dark secret behind its making. Perhaps, this was the reason why the bow was kept in the main playground of Mathura under tight security. Though with Kubja's help, I had already obtained the vital information about the bow, so far I had not been able to discern whether there actually was some mystery behind it or not. But yes, one question that persistently troubled me was, where was Lohita and why was he missing? The fact that he was nowhere to be found was enough to raise my suspicion about the

entire episode. And on deeper analysis, the needle of suspicion for Lohita's disappearance pointed to none other than the royal palace! But then, the question was, why would the royal palace perpetrate such an act? Perhaps, it was done to maintain the secrecy of the conspiracy behind the bow! And, if this indeed was the case, then I definitely needed to be extremely cautious. Suddenly, this bow had surfaced in the form of a grave trouble in front of me. I had come to enjoy Mathura and now I was entangled in this plot, concerning the bow. What could I do? Strife and struggle just refused to stop hounding me!

Nevertheless, all this was gradually becoming an integral part of my life. But for now, the positive news was, with my love and the awakening of her will power, Kubja was fast recovering from her deformity. Meaning, my pure love had started showing its effect. It had barely been ten days that we had met, but as a result of my loving massages in this period, her posture had straightened considerably. She was once again looking like her previous self, Malini. Seeing this transformation, Kubja...or I should rather say, Malini, was so happy, that she seemed to dwell in heavenly bliss! Thrilled to the core, she had once again begun to adorn herself and dress as beautifully as she did before. To tell you the truth, I was as amazed as I was happy, to see her in her new, transformed self. This was because although I had given her a grand elucidation regarding the healing power of the mind, the fact that it would bear such results and that too so quickly, seemed incredible even to me. In fact, not just me, but everyone who saw her was astonished by her transformation. Malini's restored beauty was a pleasant surprise for one and all. On the other hand, our relationship was not hidden from anyone now. And as if this was not enough, Malini herself went about telling everyone that it was due to the magical effect of my love for her that she had recovered. The end result was, in Mathura's collective consciousness, an impression gradually began to take root that an illness declared incurable by the royal physician was cured by Krishna in a matter of days, and soon this news became the talk of the town. "A boy called Krishna, hailing from Vrindavan, has performed a miracle. The boy is more than a match even for the royal physician. He is truly a worker of miracles!" Thanks to this oft-repeated story, I became known as a 'miracle man' in all of Mathura. Well, at this point of time, any kind of support was more than welcome for me; in the present circumstances, I needed some support, even if it was based on something as absurd as this!

Even Kansa was very happy to see Malini in her improved condition. But when he came to know that Krishna had made this impossible task possible, he was

terrified. This is the attribute of a frightened person; he feels threatened at the slightest instance and looks for signs of danger even in the simplest of things. However, that was Kansa's problem, not mine. I was extremely delighted that Kubja had become Malini once again.

- End of CHAPTER 10 -

CHAPTER 11

Face Off with Kansa

Twelve days had elapsed since our arrival in Mathura, but during this time, neither did I visit the royal palace, nor did Kansa invite me to meet him. Not receiving an invitation from Kansa was not a good sign; on the contrary, it was indicative of a conspiracy being hatched. However, if you look at it from another perspective, Kansa's present nervousness was greatly advantageous to me, because even if he had actually hatched a plot against me, I expected his nervousness to bring the fact of the matter to the fore. For, nervousness often causes a person to falter and make mistakes. Be that as it may, at present, owing to these developments, my mind was pulled in two directions; on one hand, I was always on guard against the possibility of any ruse, and on the other, I was thoroughly engrossed in enjoying the city of Mathura. Thus, at present, two different forms of my personality were simultaneously functional. Well, no matter how badly I was divided within, or how many forms my personality had assumed, I was still just the same. And that 'I' was thoroughly absorbed in enjoying the city. Moreover, I had also succeeded in making a lasting impression on the people of Mathura. The credit for this certainly went to the killing of the shopkeeper and the curing of Kubja.

All in all, my days were being spent in bliss amidst Mathura's grandeur, Malini's love and Kansa's apparent plotting and scheming. In a way, I felt as if I had never been a Vrindavanwasi. In a matter of days, I had become a total Mathurawasi. Now, I do not know if I was adopting Mathura or whether Mathura was fast accepting me as her own. Whatever the case may have been, but as they say, 'It is better to wholeheartedly accept and adapt yourself to the place you live in'. Earlier, it was Vrindavan and now it was Mathura. The gopis were with me in Vrindavan, and in Mathura, there was Malini. What was the difference? Krishna was the the same; it was only the companions who had changed. Just then, a voice emerged from the depths of my heart, "And Radha!" The moment I thought of that bewitching enchantress, all the euphoria of being in Mathura just vanished into thin air; my mind plunged into sadness. I probed deeper and deeper into my heart; Radha was still there. She was my heartthrob; how could Radha be separated from Krishna? Then why did she unnecessarily trouble me? Amusingly, this is how I sometimes enjoyed playing with my heart

and mind, when alone. Ah! I enjoyed every bit of life, but bhaiya seemed to be a bit bored. However, he had soon chosen a different path for himself. When I was with Malini, he would wander about in the marketplace; and when bored with it, he would visit mother and father. So in a way, even he had chalked out a daily routine for himself.

One early morning, taking me by surprise, the group of cowherd boys from Vrindavan arrived in Mathura. But neither had Radha come with them, nor had any of the gopis. Naturally, I was eager to know the reason for this, and on enquiring, Shripad said, “The gopis were willing to come, but at the last moment, Radha brainwashed them against visiting Mathura. Although we tried to reason with Radha and convince her, she emphatically stated, “Unless Kanhaiya comes and personally takes us with him, we will not come”. Now, what sense did this make? Perhaps, she chose to stay the way she was. She did not know how to adapt to the changing circumstances, or maybe, she was doing all this just to trouble me. Whatever it was, in view of Radha’s naivety, I decided to keep quiet. My unusual silence compelled Uddhava to even ask me, “Will you not go and bring Radha?” But I thought it best not to answer this foolish question, so I just smiled. Using the smile as a weapon in such a situation was a newly acquired possession in my arsenal, so I thought let me impress these cowherd boys with it. And sure enough, my enchanting smile immediately showed its magical effect; the topic of conversation was soon forgotten; the naive cowherd boys forgot about Radha and were lost in admiring the magnificence of Mathura.

With the arrival of the cowherd boys, new floodgates to happiness had opened for me. And bhaiya too seemed to have got a new lease of life. For until now, Kubja had snatched me—his sole companion—away from him. But now, I was also with him and so were all his friends. Bhaiya and I went bounding along to show them the city of Mathura; this, too, had its own unique pleasure. But it did not take long for this pleasure to turn into pain. The poor cowherd boys were simply going berserk on seeing the marketplace and the innumerable beautiful things on display. I so wished that I could shower all the beautiful things of the marketplace on my cowherd friends, but my hands were tied. I did not have the wherewithal to buy even a Pitambar; what could I buy for these cowherd boys? Somehow, I managed to emerge from this whirlpool of emotions, but as the evening wore on, we had to decide where the cowherd boys would stay. We could not possibly accommodate them with us at Uncle Akrura’s house. And father’s house was also not big enough to shelter all of them. Thus, after due

consideration, it was decided that they would be put up at the rest house of the palace. After all, they too were royal guests; besides, I was the only one who was at risk from Kansa. The gopas did not face any danger from Kansa or the royal palace. Moreover, their stay at the royal rest house had another advantage; this would at least give them the opportunity to keep an eye on the activities at the royal palace. Amazing! I wonder what was so special about Mathura that I just could not stop giving a political twist to even the simplest of things! It was perhaps because of my new-found penchant for politics. Irrespective of the reason, without a doubt, I was fast growing into a seasoned politician. Be that as it may; right now, we had settled into a new daily routine. We would roam around all day with the cowherd boys and by evening, we would reach Uncle Akrura's house, and needless to say, the cowherd boys would go to the royal guest house. They were enjoying themselves immensely over there; they were bound to! The mud-brick houses of Vrindavan, were hardly a match for this stately rest house made of solid walls. Interestingly, despite the rough and primitive roads between Vrindavan and Mathura, it took just a day's travel from one place to another, even if one travelled by cart; meaning, the distance between the two was not much. However, in spite of Vrindavan's proximity to Mathura, I had been able to travel so far only when I was eighteen years old! Another point to note here was, the people in these two places, in spite of living within such a short distance of each other, were leading radically different lives. While the population of Vrindavan was not more than a thousand, Mathura's population was around sixty thousand. While our life in Vrindavan was driven by sheer hard work, life here was based on business. While we were absolutely clueless about any kind of food other than fruits, flowers, curd and butter, people in Mathura relished an astonishing array of dishes and delicacies. While we had to do all the work ourselves, in Mathura, there were skilled workers for everything, right from constructing a house to preparing dishes and delicacies. In short, we were very primitive and completely alienated from the race of life. I did not regret this at all, but yes, I had started enjoying life in Mathura. For, I had realised that this is how, life should be lived!

Amusingly, the day of the festival was fast approaching and princes from various states had begun arriving in the city with their families. The excitement about the festival was in the air but with their arrival, the reality of our life was thrust upon me that we were living a very primitive life. The princes had the best of chariots, one better than the other. And when they whizzed past us in their fancy chariots dressed in royal fineries, I would just stand there gazing at their splendid attire and regal demeanour. All in all, I was thoroughly enraptured by these royal

princes at the first sight itself. Moreover, their chariots were being escorted by armed soldiers. The princes, their grandeur and their majestic style had created such a lasting impression on my mind that I yearned to become a royal prince, one like them. Meaning, their influence had aroused in me an ambition to become a prince. You will not believe it, but I was so taken in by these princes and their chariots that when they passed by, I would keep staring even at the plume of dust that rose in its wake! I would stand rooted to the spot, as if I had turned into stone.

The arrival of the princes had certainly enhanced the regal quotient of the city and made Mathura a sight to behold. On the other hand, the people of Mathura had also begun to simmer with rage when there was no news of Lohita, the craftsman who had crafted the bow. There was a reason for this outpour of love; for, in spite of being a craftsman of the royal palace, he did not conduct himself haughtily like the other officials of the royal palace did. Unlike others, he had a helpful disposition towards the common folk of Mathura. Meaning, he was a simple and a friendly person by nature - the main reason for his popularity among the common folk. Gradually and quietly, the disquiet over the disappearance of Lohita was gathering momentum. These days, his strange disappearance was a topic of discussion in every nook and corner of the city. After all, where had Lohita vanished? Had he been swallowed by the earth or had he been devoured by the sky? Well, did the earth and the sky really care about swallowing Lohita? So naturally, the needle of suspicion ultimately pointed towards the royal palace. Consequently, public anger towards the royal palace was on the rise. It did not take long for my politically savvy intellect to realise the fact that the people of Mathura were displeased and enraged with the royal palace. So, I thought, why not take advantage of it and lead a rebellion against Kansa's misrule? Why not shift Kansa's attention from me and focus onto the people of Mathura? The direct benefit of this move would be, if there really was a secret behind the bow, it would come to light. Moreover, it might also reveal Kansa's evil intentions, and then, accordingly I could safeguard myself against Kansa forever. For, even though I was freely roaming around in Mathura, deep within, I knew that I was not safe from my uncle while I was in this city. I was being extremely cautious in this regard, still, I was quite at peace, for I knew that there was no possibility of a direct attack by him. Yet, the fact that my life was in danger could not be denied. Of course, having gained knowledge of these dangers and his malicious intentions, I could not flee to Vrindavan, because I would still be in the province of Kansa. On the contrary, if I fled, he would, in fact, get an excuse to arrest me and haul me here. If the King

had sent me an invitation to participate in the festival, there was no way I could leave Mathura without participating in it. In short, I was safe just for one reason: Kansa would never dare to kill me if it meant losing face in front of the people of Mathura! If he still did, it would spark such a rebellion that his reign itself would be in jeopardy. And for a King, sovereignty is much dearer to him than his life. However, all these matters were pertaining to the future. At present the truth was, I had begun to develop a penchant for diplomacy, leadership and politics. Suddenly an interest had kindled in me to make myself more relevant in the present political scenario. So keeping my own interests in mind and propelled by this new-found penchant, I decided to inflame the sentiments of the people of Mathura. And was it difficult to instigate people to revolt? It was just a matter of providing them with the requisite courage and provocation. On the other hand, the disappearance of Lohita had become such an intense issue that now even the royal palace was forced to dwell on the matter. Now, when I was being served a ready-made situation on a platter, why would I commit the stupidity of squandering away the opportunity to become a hero? So, I began to keep a close watch on this issue; I had to be prepared for action. For, the circumstances could change suddenly, and I could get an opportunity to manoeuvre the situation in my favour anytime.

In Mathura, I did not have the sources to keep a close watch over the situation. So, in the company of the cowherd boys, I started visiting the marketplace twice a day. For, any news regarding Lohita could be secured only from the crowd at the marketplace. While I remained engaged in these manoeuvres, bhaiya and the gopas, delightedly, roamed around the marketplace. Yes, I often felt dejected on seeing the helplessness of the gopas. The poor boys would yearn and wish to purchase so many things from the marketplace. But what could I do? I was helpless; I wanted to buy the entire marketplace and present it to my friends, but perhaps, enduring such pains and hardship is a fact of life for poor people, especially when they visit big cities. Even so, if there was a positive fallout of this, it was, for the first time in my life I had realised the value of money. And, now that I had seen the grandeur and pomp of the princes, it had kindled in me a deep desire to become a prince and attain wealth. But for a village boy, the ground reality was, this was a dream which probably every poor person nurtured. No one knew whether this dream would be fulfilled or not, but, now, with the arrival of the cowherd boys, I had been distanced even from my latest dream. Yes, with the arrival of my friends, my meetings with Kubja had become quite infrequent. It can be said that in the company of the gopas, the callous Krishna had forgotten the existence of Kubja.

One such day, in the afternoon, when I was visiting the marketplace with my gopa friends, suddenly, there was a commotion in the marketplace. Everybody was running towards the river Yamuna. When I enquired about the reason for the commotion, I was told that Lohita's body had been recovered on the banks of Yamuna. As soon as I heard this, my political brain swung into action, and do not even ask, how fast it was racing! This was precisely the opportunity I had been waiting for since long, so I ran after the crowd with bhaiya and the gopas. As stated earlier, Lohita was very dear to all the people of Mathura for his simplicity. Besides, everybody knew that he was the craftsman of the bow for the archery competition. Therefore, when his body was found, it was natural for it to cause a furore in Mathura. On the other hand, this was the only 'now-or-never' opportunity for me. Kansa had invited me, hosted an archery competition, had a mysterious bow made and now the craftsman who had crafted the bow had been killed! Meaning, without a doubt, the next turn would be mine! And if something was to happen to me, it was certain that this bow would be one of the instruments used as a medium to carry out the task. Hence, naturally, this bow was pricking me like a thorn! And, to save one's life is the greatest duty a man holds towards himself. Besides, to walk into a trap laid by someone is nothing but downright stupidity. Therefore, in order to save my life, it had become imperative for me to fuel public outrage against Kansa and to render the bow useless. And all the avenues towards achieving this goal could open, only if I made the political use of Lohita's dead body. Thinking thus, I too was running along with the crowd, towards the banks of the Yamuna. Though bhaiya and the gopas were unable to understand anything, they were just following me. Now, we were cowherds, after all; who could compete with us in running? We reached the banks of the Yamuna within minutes. The dead body of Lohita was lying before us and the crowd around the body was increasing in number. And with the crowd swelling speedily, the grief of the people was fast turning into rage. Standing by the river, I was quietly watching the events unfold. The murder of Lohita was the cause of immense grief for the inhabitants of Mathura, but for me, it was a subject of deep concern. And it was absolutely essential for me to rid myself of this worry. So, my shrewd political brain instantly conceived a plan, as the very essence of politics is to grab and exploit opportunities that come your way. And to create an opportunity when it is non-existent is the sign of a seasoned politician. Although I was not a seasoned politician, I had already become a good strategist. Therefore, I thought, why squander away this wonderful opportunity that had presented itself?

Thus, as per my plan, with the help of my gopa friends, I instantly placed Lohita's body on a cart and urged the crowd to hand it over to his family. That was it; Kanhaiya, the astute leader, took the lead with the cart and the crowd followed suit! Upon seeing Lohita's body, his wife and children began wailing disconsolately and the crowd went berserk on hearing their heartrending wails. This was exactly what I had planned; the stage was set, it was time to strike the final blow and so I was ready for it! Hence, to bring my plan to fruition, I decided to make a splendid political speech. However, Lohita was not my concern, my target was the bow. And with this goal in mind, I climbed up the cart and immediately began my address, "Dear Mathurawasis! Lohita was the finest craftsman we have ever known. He had certainly proved his mettle by crafting a magnificent bow. And we all know that his bow is the high point of the upcoming festival. And yet, the royal palace, instead of felicitating this wonderful craftsman, has..."

Marking an abrupt end to my speech, I suddenly became silent. My aim was sedition against the royal palace and I could clearly see it fructifying. Indeed, the crowd was instantly agitated; I had not explicitly mentioned the involvement of the royal palace in Lohita's death but yes, my statement clearly implied it. In short, for the crowd, I had said it and for the royal palace, I had not said anything as such. For, I did not want the royal palace to think that I had instigated the crowd. If the tables were turned on me, this political move could backfire at any time and prove hazardous to me and my life. And then, could I ever match up to the power of the royal palace? I was certainly not a fool to confront the royal palace for no reason.

As was expected, the crowd had now fully come under my control. Sighting the right opportunity, I made a final appeal to the irate crowd and said, "I think, when our dear friend Lohita is no more, of what use is his bow now? Why should we not destroy this bow?" A mob, is anyway, always ready for any kind of destructive act; all it really needs is someone to instigate it, in the right manner. And here I was, playing the role of a provocateur to the hilt. Bhaiya and the gopas were unable to understand what I was up to or why I was doing this. As far as they were concerned, I was unwisely interfering in Mathura's politics. Well, I do not blame them; how would they understand Kanhaiya's game plan? By now, the crowd had completely fallen under my hypnotic spell. Under my leadership, the crowd was surging towards the main playground. And why were they marching forward? They were marching to break the controversial bow that was perhaps intended to be the cause of my death! Meaning, the task was mine

and the fervour was that of the crowd! See, had I not performed a task, any seasoned politician would have, under the circumstances! The scene was truly spectacular! We had crossed the crowded road and were now moving towards the huge playground situated outside the city. The procession was led by the cart which carried Lohita's dead body; with his wife and children seated on it. I was moving in front of the cart and with me, were a few youths of Mathura, bhaiya and the gopas. Behind us was a crowd of around four hundred, comprising numerous relatives of Lohita. As for myself, thousands of thoughts were rushing through my mind at present, all revolving around the bow.

Just then, a number of chariots came racing towards us from a distance. I assumed that the royal guards were coming to disperse the crowd. I fervently hoped that the crowd, fearing the royal guards, would not run away leaving Krishna—trying his hands at being a politician—to get caught. But no! Actually, they were the princes from other Kingdoms who had been invited in Mathura for the festival, and they were probably returning after espying that bow. Now, what could I say? In their regal attire, they majestically rode past us in flashy chariots, crushing down my existence into a tattered remnant. Incredibly, I even forgot the bow and the milling crowd behind me, and was lost in their magnificent attire and splendour! After the chariots had passed, I snapped back to reality once again and even breathed a sigh of relief, for there was no impending danger to this new emerging leader. This thought had just flashed in my mind, when I spotted a slow moving chariot heading towards us. When it passed us, I saw a beautiful, gorgeously dressed princess seated in it. Around thirteen or fourteen years old, this young girl looked no less than a fairy from the tales mother Yashoda used narrate to me. Perhaps, the chariot was moving slowly to avoid raising dust on us. I was very impressed. Could a princess ever be so thoughtful, so considerate? On the other hand, the princes, ever since they had arrived in Mathura, had made it difficult for people to walk on the streets by raising dense clouds of dust with their fast-paced chariots. But this sweet little princess; see how considerate she was! Perhaps, this was the fundamental difference between the behaviour of a prince and a princess. Remarkably, this was the first time I had been privileged to see a real princess. When our eyes met, the experience drove me crazy with sheer joy. Even her cursory glance at me cast such a magical spell on me that I cannot describe it. Fortunately, today I was wearing the Pitambar that father had bought me. Meaning, I may have made a lasting impression on her too! Then another thought crossed my mind, 'But what about the peacock feather in my hair?' For, her glance had lingered on this feather for what seemed to be a long time. I hoped the peacock feather had not ruined

things. I did not know whether she had looked at me because the peacock feather suited well with the Pitambar or if she was staring at it because she found it weird. As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I plunged into deep anxiety and even felt a little disheartened. But at that very moment, a positive thought calmed my mind. 'No, no! It must have looked good, that's why she had glanced at it.' As it is, thinking positively about oneself helps one remain enthused and especially in such cases, one must think positively. In any case, I always liked to be energetic and enthusiastic as ever. This was the reason why I had been making myself special in some way or the other right from childhood. I was greatly overwhelmed by the panache of the princes already, and now this princess had made such an impact on me that my senses had ceased to function. To tell you the truth, at this time I had become so absorbed in the thoughts of the princess that she seemed to reverberate in every pore of my being. After all, I had heard countless tales of princes and princesses from mother Yashoda in my childhood. Fortunately, it was now that I had seen these princes and princesses in flesh and blood, so how could I contain myself? Truly, ever since I had stepped into Mathura, my list of dreams was growing bigger by the day! And now, along with the desires to earn wealth and become a prince, the wish to marry a princess was also added to the list!

So then, who was stopping me from dreaming? But amusingly, the scene my fantasising had created was such, that while I was still lost in these thoughts, we had already reached the main playground. Really, what a fine leader the crowd had chosen; the one who was immersed in reverie every now and then! Oh yes, they had not chosen a bad leader either; for, once we reached the ground, I was fully alert with absolute presence of mind; that is, my awareness was at its peak. You very well know my nature; as soon as I reached the ground, I immediately forgot all about the princess, and the bow became my only goal. This was the wonderful characteristic of my nature; within a moment, I could switch from one thought or issue to another, and that too with unwavering focus on it. Meaning, once I made the switch, there was no scope for anything else to remain in my mind. Perhaps, this was the characteristic of mine, which had caused quite a bit of misunderstanding about me. It was probably this special trait of mine that had earned me titles such as trickster, cheat, liar among others. However, at this moment, my target, meaning the bow, was kept high on a stage. Though there were steps leading to it, unfortunately, each step was closely guarded. In short, getting rid of this dangerous bow was not going to be an easy affair. Favourably, even the soldiers were a little disconcerted on seeing the huge, angry mob. But the very next moment, they had quickly regained their composure and cordoned

off the bow. Nevertheless, I felt, with this move made by them, one obstacle had been removed; at least there were no guards on the steps now. At this time, I was standing with the crowd, not too far from the first step. In front of me were about forty-fifty steps which were no longer guarded. Meaning, by climbing those steps, one could very easily reach the platform where the instrument of my potential death, the dangerous bow, was lying. I had to make an effort to destroy it at any cost and the steps in front of me were giving me an open invitation to climb them up. Sensing the opportunity, I fervently signaled the crowd to follow me up the steps. The crowd was ready and waiting, and as soon as I signaled them, everyone came charging over the steps. Seeing an angry mob rush towards the bow under my leadership, the soldiers were badly flustered. They were absolutely clueless about how to counter such a large, angry mob. They could not flaunt their strength in front of such a large crowd without any reason, and yet, they had to protect the bow. Their dilemma provided me the opportunity to reach right up to the bow. The bow⁵³ seemed huge, sturdy and heavy too. So what? I had to break it; I leaped on the platform where the bow was kept and surprisingly, no one stopped me. Perhaps on seeing such a furious mob, the guards thought it wise to merely stand by as spectators and watch the show. This was an unexpected surprise; now the object of my imminent annihilation lay before me, hopelessly unguarded. I did not have to wait for the right moment any longer! I immediately tugged at the bow string with great strength. But what was this? It too was made of iron. Kanhaiya was badly trapped! I tried with all my strength for quite some time, but alas, I was not able to break it. In my heart of hearts, I praised Lohita, the craftsman of this wonderful bow. Truly, what a bow he had crafted! But, no matter how strong the bow had been made, today's defeat could prove very expensive for me. Finally, fed up, I placed one foot on the bow and pulled the string with both hands, and it was only then that the bow broke with a loud, horrendous sound. Finally, a grave trouble had been averted from my life. On the other hand, as soon as the bow broke, the crowd cheered lustily. For them, this event marked the avenging of Lohita's murder. They began shouting slogans in my praise; the cries of, "All glories to Krishna!" resounded all around. And with this, my political journey in Mathura advanced a few more steps. The journey would continue at its own pace, but most importantly, at present, with the breaking of the bow, I was feeling thoroughly relieved. The manner in which the bow was crafted, it was clear that Kansa had got it made purely with the intention to get me killed. Thus, with the breaking of the bow, a grave danger—that had been hovering over my head—had been averted. Remarkably, the breaking of the bow was my personal victory, but the naive

public considered it to be their own victory and had turned hysterical with joy. This was the advantage of being a political leader - one could do self-service in the name of public service!

Surprisingly, while returning, the scene had become even more delightful. Everyone was celebrating the victory of my might, but I was walking lost in my own world, dreaming about the princess. As soon as my prime task was accomplished, the princess had once again gained prominence in my thoughts. Now all that my eyes could see was her face; I had become so infatuated with her that each and every cell of my body was under her spell. At present, my whole body had begun tingling; the mere thought of the princess was sending shivers down my spine. Such was my condition that I did not even realise when everyone parted ways with me and when I reached Akrura's house. Such being the case, there was no question of my being able to sleep tonight. All night long, the princess kept flitting in and out of my dreams.

But, this was about me. On the other hand, the breaking of the bow had shattered Kansa's expectations to bits and pieces. So, as soon as the rising sun cast its soft golden rays over Mathura, the spell of the princess faded away and I began to contemplate over King Kansa. I thought, 'What if he does something insane out of panic?' And that was precisely what happened. When a terrified Kansa heard the news that Krishna had broken the bow, he almost became hysterical. He felt as if Krishna had not broken the bow but his very neck. In sheer frenzy, the very next morning, he ordered his soldiers to arrest me. However on hearing this, the Principal Minister immediately jumped in to salvage the situation. He convinced Kansa that there were a number of inhabitants of Mathura who had accompanied Krishna on his bow-breaking venture. Thus, to arrest only Krishna in this connection would not be appropriate. Besides, Krishna was a royal guest as he had been invited by the palace to participate in the festival. Therefore, in view of the number of princes present in Mathura, extending such discourtesy to a royal guest would not be right. Secondly, at this time, Krishna had full support of the people as the whole of Mathura was raging with fury due to Lohita's death. Under the circumstances, he advised Kansa that if the royal palace initiated any action against Krishna, a rebellion could break out in Mathura. Another point to consider was, with the breaking of the bow, the image of the royal palace had already been tarnished, in front of the princes, who were our invitees from various Kingdoms. And now, if the people revolted, whatever remained of the royal palace's reputation would also be lost. As Kansa was an astute and experienced politician, it did not take him long to comprehend the import of the

Principal Minister's counsel. After he was convinced of the folly of taking an action against me at present, he withdrew his order, but his anger and fear were as intact as ever. Now, the Principal Minister was also helpless in this case; how could he help Kansa in this matter? I was happy, for, due to the prompt and wise intervention of the Principal Minister, at least an immediate threat to my life had been averted. Actually, this minister was Jarasandha's trusted political advisor and had been appointed from Magadha. In view of Kansa's present unstable condition, Jarasandha, had specifically deputed the minister to serve him, and clearly, the minister was fulfilling his duty commendably.

Now, the archery competition could not be held because the bow, which was at the centre of the competition, was broken, and as there were only four days remaining for the festival, neither a new bow could be made, nor could the date of the festival be postponed. For how long would the invitee princes be willing to wait? Consequently, the 'Archery Festival' had now been reduced to being merely a 'Wrestling Festival'- a face-saving attempt by the royal palace. On the other hand, Kansa's fears had crossed the limits of insanity⁵⁴. He feared that if I remained alive for long, sooner or later, I would become the shadow of death and eclipse his very being. At any rate, it was now plainly evident that his sole objective of inviting me to Mathura was to kill me. Ironically, ever since I had stepped in Mathura, I was causing him unending anxiety and creating troubles for him every day. And yet, more irksome for him was the fact that he was unable to cause me harm in any way. First there was the killing of the royal shopkeeper, then Kubja was cured, and now the great bow had been destroyed. And as if all this was not enough, my popularity among the inhabitants of Mathura was growing by leaps and bounds! Under the circumstances, how could Kansa maintain his composure? On the other hand, he was well aware that this festival was his last opportunity. If he failed to kill me now, he would never again get a chance to have me eliminated. And in accordance with this belief of his, my life spelt certain doom for him. Meaning, he had no other option but to have me eliminated during this festival, but how? Precisely, this was the dilemma he was caught in during these days. The fact that added fuel to the fire of Kansa's complexity was, in order to avoid losing face in front of the royal guests and to eradicate the possibility of an uprising among the people of Mathura, he wanted to make my killing look like an accident. Had it not been for all these complications, he would have had me disposed long back. Unfortunately, the problem was, in his frenzied state, Kansa was now unable to focus and hatch a plot to finish me off. But, as they say, when the shadow of death is hovering over one's head, one's alertness reaches its zenith. Finally, he

managed to conceive a plan to annihilate me; and to implement his plan, he called Chanoor and Mushtik, the two strongest wrestlers of Mathura, to the royal palace. It was afternoon and Kansa was frantically pacing back and forth in his own chamber, waiting for their arrival. His impatience was growing exponentially. Only three days remained for the grand festival to commence; and he felt, this was all the time he had left to live.

Chanoor and Mushtik were already his pampered acolytes, so there was no question of their getting late for a meeting and making Kansa wait. Expectedly, as soon as he saw them arrive, his face lit up. These two were undoubtedly the best wrestlers of Mathura, who needed no flattering. Still, to ensure their unquestioning compliance, Kansa began showering them with praises, saying, "You both are the greatest wrestlers of Mathura and also of the entire Aryavrata belt. This is the reason why I have honoured both of you time and again. And now I seek reciprocal favour from you both; you have to perform an important task for me. In the upcoming festival, I will organise a wrestling match between you and the two young boys from Vrindavan, Krishna and Balarama, who are merely eighteen and twenty years of age respectively. Do not take them lightly because of their age; bear it in mind that they are extremely strong and expert wrestlers as well. Even so, they are not as valorous as you both. Hence, not only do you have to defeat them in this fight, but you also have to kill them at any cost. And to accomplish this task, you need not even bother about observing the rules of wrestling." What more could they ask for? Hearing their King sing their praises with such glorious words, both of them spoke in unison, "O great King! You need not worry. You have commanded us; you might as well consider those two cowherd boys dead!" Needless to add, after being reassured by Chanoor and Mushtik, Kansa returned to normalcy to some extent. He was convinced that his plan would succeed and we would be killed. These two wrestlers had killed many opponents, throwing all the rules of wrestling to the winds. So, Kansa could certainly rely on their expertise in this sport to do his bidding. But Kansa, being who he was, was not satisfied with this arrangement alone. This time he did not want to take any chances, as naturally, he considered this to be his last opportunity. So, to ensure the certainty of my death, by evening he came up with an alternative plan as well. This second plan was even more dangerous than the previous one. It involved a mad elephant, named Kuvalyapeed. Suddenly, Kansa remembered the elephant and the very thought of this mad elephant sent his spirits soaring. He instantly summoned the elephant's mahout to the palace. Instead of relying just on the wrestlers, Chanoor and Mushtik, he also intended to let loose a mad elephant upon me! In short, it did not matter whether it was

the mad men or the mad elephant that killed me; I just had to be killed under any circumstances. The mahout also reached the palace by nightfall, and Kansa instructed him to station the mad elephant, at the entrance of the festival ground, on the day of the festival. He clearly instructed him to keep his strong, arrogant, mad and short-tempered elephant ready, and as soon as Krishna and Balarama, the savages from Vrindavan, tried to enter through the main gate, he was to unhesitatingly set the elephant free upon them. Moreover, Kansa also commanded the mahout to goad the elephant so much that it would finish us, the low-born cowherd boys off on the spot! Understanding the plan in detail, in deference to Kansa's wish, the mahout too assured the King that the boys would surely meet their end. Only after setting this two-pronged diabolic plan into motion, did Kansa feel reassured. And then, roaring and guffawing in this reassured state of mind, he moved out of the royal quarters. Perhaps, this was his way of expressing happiness.

Though, Uncle Kansa might have felt reassured, but, his frenzy had still not fully abated. He was so terrified of his own death, that in spite of devising not one, but dual plans to kill me, that night, he vented out his anger on the walls of his bed chamber! Addressing the walls, all night long he kept on ranting, "When this vile Vasudeva and his supporters, these low-class Yadavas who are unnecessarily pinning their hopes on Krishna, see him being killed right before their eyes, these foolish people will realise my power! First let me finish off Krishna! Then I will not spare even a single one of these wicked Yadavas! And Narada! Unless I get people all over the world to spit on your foul predictions, I will not call myself Kansa ever again!"

We, as always, were completely oblivious of Kansa's malicious intentions and the occurrences at the royal palace. Instead, all our attention was focused on exercising and preparing for the wrestling competition. After all, our performance at the wrestling match was a matter of prestige for Vrindavan; and also at stake was my own name and fame. I was definitely not going to lose the fight in just a couple of blows and ruin my hard-earned reputation in Mathura! All things considered, it was not just for Vrindavan's sake that I had to win this wrestling competition; but I also had to sustain the impression that I had made on the people of Mathura. And since there were just three days left for the wrestling competition, we were deeply engrossed in the preparations and had even stopped visiting the marketplace. We were in knowledge of the fact that as soon as the festival was over, we would have to return to Vrindavan and may never get a chance to see the fine marketplaces of Mathura ever again. Yet, the

need of the hour was compelling us to forget about the attractions of the marketplace and focus on our practice of wrestling skills, and that is exactly what we were doing.

We were progressing well, but the next day, a strange incident took place; I do not know whether to term it as inspiring or shameful. But, it so happened that after practicing wrestling all day, I had bathed and was resting in Uncle Akrura's veranda, when all of a sudden there was a loud commotion outside. Everyone was running towards the main marketplace. Suspecting that something unusual had occurred, I too ran behind the people. After all, any incident could either present me with a golden opportunity, or teach me a lesson. And if nothing else, it could at least be an entertainment! So, I continued to run swiftly. I had just gone ahead a short distance when I saw a person lying wounded and nearly unconscious on the road with his chariot standing close by. From his clothes and finery, it was amply evident that he was a prince. A huge crowd had also gathered at the spot. But what was this! Before I could fully comprehend the situation, my eyes fell on bhaiya, who was standing close to the chariot. So, my dear bhaiya had already reached the scene of action. And what was this? To my utter surprise, he seemed to be enraged as well. On one hand, there was this wounded prince lying on the ground and on the other, there was bhaiya! I still could not comprehend what exactly was going on. At that very instant, bhaiya started raining kicks and punches on the injured prince. As I watched the scene, the matter became clear. Bhaiya and this prince must have had a fight and now this poor prince was experiencing first-hand, the consequence of rubbing bhaiya the wrong way! I quickly ran and instantaneously stood by bhaiya's side. Oh, the poor prince! He was bleeding from his mouth and also groaning in intense pain. To tell you the truth, it did not seem right to me to beat him up any more. So, I somehow calmed bhaiya's frayed temper and stopped him from beating him up. But what can I say; I was so immature that I could not resist myself. "How dare you fight with my bhaiya!" I screamed, and landed a couple of kicks on the fallen prince. I was just about to kick him yet again, when a rumbling chariot pulled to a stop right next to the standing chariot. I looked up at it and was dumbfounded. Seated on the chariot was the same princess with whom my eyes were locked, while leading the procession to break the bow. I was stunned! The foot that I had raised to plant yet another kick froze in the air. Indeed, I was so taken aback that I continued to stand there on one leg, gaping at the princess for quite some time. Seeing the condition of the fallen prince, the princess lost her cool, and it was only when I saw her angrily alight from her chariot that I regained my senses. I immediately lowered my raised foot and set it back on the

ground. The princess, meanwhile, ran up to the wounded prince and placed his head on her lap. Still worried, she then began to lovingly stroke his head. It did not take me long to deduce the fact that the fallen prince ought to be her brother.

Without wasting a single moment, she asked the charioteer to seat the prince in her chariot. To win her favour, I too helped the prince climb into the chariot. The poor prince was still groaning and asking for water. The princess was standing close to him, leaning her back to the chariot; I also stood with her. Some other people also drew closer to the chariot. Undoubtedly, everyone's attention was centered on the pitiable condition of the prince. But my attention was fixated solely on the princess. I was repeatedly trying to look into her eyes. In other words, I was trying to somehow grab her attention, but to no avail. The princess was not paying any attention to Kishan, the darling of the gopis. Let alone paying any attention to me, so far she had not even looked in my direction for once! This was too much! In just a matter of moments, the pride of the hero of Vrindavan had been shredded to bits and pieces. So what? Would I, the shameless one, ever accept defeat? I was still focusing all my attention on the princess, thinking that I somehow might get a chance to catch her eye, but unfortunately, her attention still remained focused on her brother. She was in fact, shocked to see her brother in such a pitiable condition. The thirsty poor prince was still groaning and calling out for water. Finally, the princess could not contain herself and shouted out at the crowd, "If all you people have had your fill of watching this drama, then please bring some water for my brother!" Right away few people ran and brought some water for him. As soon as the prince drank some water, his agony seemed to abate considerably. I too heaved a sigh of relief. Just as there is no nectar better than water, there is no greater pleasure for Kanhaiya than to be bestowed with one glance by the princess. But when would that happen? However, I had not given up yet; meaning, I was still trying hard to grab her attention. As soon as the prince recovered a little, the princess, still heartlessly ignoring me, mounted the chariot and sat beside the prince. I continued standing next to the chariot with a forlorn look in my eyes. On the other hand, bhaiya, standing on the opposite side of the road was still furious. The anxiety of the princess or the pathetic condition of the prince did not seem to have even a sliver of effect on him. Now, their chariot was just about to move when suddenly, she glanced at me. Naturally, under the circumstances, I could hardly expect a glance brimming with love, and true to my hunch, it was angry and accusing. But despite this, my legs turned into jelly! Even her smouldering gaze managed to soothe this lover's burning heart! But the very next second, this relief evaporated, when while leaving, she addressed me very coldly and said,

“If you are such a hero, then you must be aware of the rules of warfare. Even on the battleground, a fallen soldier is never attacked!” Undoubtedly, her single barb of a sentence wiped out all of Krishna’s glorious feats in Mathura in the blink of an eye! With this, she smartly rode off and I just stood there, transfixed like a statue, who knows for how long! Oh! How adorable and beautiful she was and how gracefully she spoke! Her personality was so striking and her intelligence?! It was beyond my imagination. She even knew the rules of warfare! The sarcastic comment had come from the princess but astonishingly, my anger was directed at the gopis. Such silly things they talked about, like, ‘You know Kanhaa, today my cow, Kammo, did not give any milk!’ Now, what could Kanhaa do about that?! The crude creatures, ignorant of the ways of the world, had made me crude as well! As I was thinking all this, a voice from within reprimanded me, ‘Why are you cursing the poor gopis? If you consider yourself a big hero, then why are you so stunned by what the princess said?’ Perhaps, because a sudden exposure to such refined language, after being accustomed to the crudity of one’s past can shake anyone to the core. Oh! Now that I had realised where I stood in comparison to her, I was making lame excuses! Yes indeed, that was exactly what I was doing.’ However, at this moment, even this little conversation I was having with myself, was in no way, helping me bring myself back to normalcy. The crowd had anyway dissipated by now. Ignoring me, bhaiya too had left in a huff. Perhaps, he had not liked my sympathetic behaviour towards the prince. It did not matter, now I had also started walking back slowly to Uncle Akrura’s house. But the princess was still very much on my mind. Every act of her’s was imprinted on my mind. To tell you the truth, I was now feeling somewhat angry with bhaiya too. Why not? Of all people, he could find only this princess’ brother to pick a fight with? I was no less angry with myself either. Why did I kick him? This one kick had ruined my reputation in the princess’ eyes. You will not believe, but I was so angry, that I stomped that cursed foot a couple of times on the ground! I was also muttering away, “Kick! Kick! Kick some more!” I had to teach that foot a lesson so that it would not repeat the same mistake ever again! But my anger still refused to subside. “You like to beat up people without thinking and understanding? Kick! Kick again!” I shouted to myself and stomped my foot a couple of times yet again. Believe me, only after I had done this a couple of times, did some measure of sanity return to my mind. And as soon as I calmed down a little, I felt an urge to appreciate the princess’ keen sense of observation. If she had seen me planting the kick, then she certainly must have looked at me carefully. But I wondered, when and how, had she been able to make these observations.

With these thoughts still lingering on my mind, I somehow reached home and saw that bhaiya was sitting outside in the veranda. He still appeared to be in an angry frame of mind. As was his nature, once he was angry, his anger did not recede easily. I let him be as he was; but I was feeling very sad at present. The situation was, on one hand, bhaiya was angry, and on the other, I was sad. As a result, absolute silence prevailed for some time. But for how long could it continue thus? Suddenly, a thought crossed my mind. Everything else about the incident was clear, but I at least needed to find the reason that had triggered the fight. So, without worrying about his angry countenance, I asked him, “Bhaiya, what was the cause of the fight?”

Bhaiya seemed to be just waiting for a question of this nature. He immediately began to boil over, “That wicked prince was recklessly racing down the lanes in his chariot at top speed. He was driving so fast that many innocent people were getting hurt. As if this was not enough, to clear his way he was lashing out at people with his whip. He was raining blows on them. And when I tried to stop him, he began abusing me. Now, how could I tolerate such behaviour? So I lost my temper and beat him up!”

Hearing the facts of the incident from bhaiya, I fell silent. What could I possibly say? There was nothing that I could say to bhaiya and nothing to the princess either. Finding me so quiet, bhaiya could not contain himself. He must have clearly expected me to be supportive and appreciative of his stand. Consequently, he asked very angrily, “Did I do anything wrong?”

Hearing bhaiya’s question, I returned to my senses. I quickly replied, “No, no. You did nothing wrong!” But I thought to myself, ‘You may not have done anything wrong, but still everything has gone wrong!’ Anyway, the matter was cast aside but my condition was fast becoming like that of a distraught person. My mind refused to focus on anything else. When I closed my eyes, I would see the princess. When I opened my eyes, the princess was there again! I was neither able to exercise nor practice for the wrestling match. Indeed, I had forgotten everything in my attraction for her. I could only think of the princess, her eyes, her enchanting influence on me and how she had inexorably cited the rules of warfare. In a way, she had begun to reign over my entire being. Such was the extent of my madness that I was dying to meet her again. Perhaps, I was craving to win back my lost honour in her eyes. So much so, that although just two days had remained for the wrestling competition, I had skipped my practice and begun to frequent all those places where I thought I could possibly run into her. I searched for her in the marketplaces, playgrounds, on the banks of river Yamuna,

in the guest houses, everywhere. The only place I had not yet been to was the royal palace. For, there I faced a risk to my life and the princess was not yet dearer to me than my own life! Unfortunately, even after continually searching for two days, I had still not been able to spot her. The afternoon of the second day was also about to end, and quite depressed thus, I was aimlessly loitering around in the marketplace. Almost deranged by the thoughts of the princess, many a times, I even forgot to eat or drink. Indeed, I had become weak with anguish and heartache. The next day was the first day of the festival. I had to participate in the wrestling match and I was just not able to regain my focus and my composure. God alone knew how I was going to wrestle in such a state of mind, especially when I had not even practised my wrestling for the past two days! Fortunately, bhaiya was practising hard day and night. So, now the prestige of Vrindavan lay in his hands alone. I was already sealing my fate with my senseless activities. But, what difference was it going to make to me now? I had already lost face in front of the princess and tomorrow, I was quite likely to lose the respect of the people of Mathura and Vrindavan as well. It almost seemed as if I was bent on tarnishing my own reputation and honour. So what was new about this? This was the fate reserved for all those who are bound in blind love. However, the incident had not just a downside to it but an upside as well; for, deep within my mind, I was repeatedly resolving to become worthy of the princess. Meaning, while there was an embarrassing side to this whole affair, there was also a positive and inspiring side to it. And like a true optimist, I was strongly focusing on the inspiring side.

However, wandering along in this state of dejection, I found myself heading towards the main ground. It was nearly evening. Without a doubt, my misery was at its peak. At this time, there was not one, but several reasons to it. One, we had to return to Vrindavan right after the festival. This meant that I would be separated from Mathura and its fine marketplaces very soon. The second and most important reason was, I would naturally be separated from this princess forever, perhaps, never to see her again. Meaning, I would then be confined to just thinking of her and enduring separation from her all my life. But just as a ray of hope pierces through, when one is at the height of despair, I too could see a silver lining to it. I had just entered the ground when, from a distance, I saw the queens, that is, my aunts, approaching. Perhaps, they had come to check the arrangements for the festivities next day. They were accompanied by many other ladies and as luck would have it, one of them was that very same princess! For a moment I could just not believe the grace of Nature and how generous it had been to me. I blinked a couple of times to ensure that I was not in a dreamworld.

As soon as I realised that it was for real, I began to observe the scene closely. Even now, the aunts were at the forefront and the princess was walking along with them with the rest of the ladies following them. All of them were entering the main gate of the ground and their chariots were standing just a few steps away. I, who was standing at a distance from the chariots, swiftly reached close to the chariots. And then with a smile on my face, I began to gaze earnestly at the approaching princess. This was certainly my last opportunity. At this moment I had directed my entire energy on making my personality glow.

Amusingly, as soon as her eyes fell on me, not only did she recognise me, but she also looked at me up and down, as if sizing me up. I felt as if lightning was coursing through my entire body. Oh, she had recognised me! Meaning, there was something distinctive about me. With this thought, my heart skipped a beat. My hopes began to soar. But soon, my whole world came crashing down. While leaving, she made such a derisive comment, that all my esteem instantly vanished. Addressing me with a bright smile, she said, "O great hero! Do you exhibit your valour fighting only the dead and injured, or can you fight the living ones too?"

For her, this was just a snide remark made in her charming style, but for me, it was a flaming arrow pierced through my heart which almost killed me! She left after delivering this caustic comment, but she had rendered me unworthy of life itself. I just stood there staring at the festival ground. I became furious with myself. I was so anxious to meet her and what had I said? "The next time I meet her, see how I would impress her." Wow! See how I impressed her?! All I could do was keep staring at her with my mouth wide open and she had once again left me humiliated with her searing sarcasm. Now what was done was done, so I came home quietly with a forlorn look on my face and without having dinner, I went off to sleep. For a while sadness had engulfed me but then I engaged myself in restoring my self-confidence. Surprisingly, the situation was still the same; if only I could get one more opportunity, then I would show her what Kanhaiya was all about! But how was I to get such an opportunity? The festival was scheduled for tomorrow. Once the festival was over, I would have to return to Vrindavan and she would return to her Kingdom forever. Then I could meet her only in my dreams! Just then, a thought struck me; her visit to the festival ground with my aunts meant that she would surely be attending the festival the next day. That is to say, in all likelihood I would meet her again the very next day. As soon as this thought struck me, it charged me up. I said to myself, 'This time I will surely make an indelible impression upon her. Tomorrow is the

wrestling match; I will treat her to such a magnificent display of my prowess that it will simply astound her. Under all circumstances, I will win the wrestling competition. Then, she herself will realise that I do not use my strength only against fallen opponents, but I could defeat and bring down mighty wrestlers as well. But what if I lost?' Just then, an encouraging voice emerged from within, 'Think positively, Kanhaiya! If the princess is seated before you, how can you possibly lose the wrestling match?' Thus, on one hand, I was repeatedly pumping up my self-confidence, and on the other, I was dreaming about the princess.

Now how could I possibly sleep in this state of mind? So as soon as the day dawned, I finished off my daily routine in a flash and got ready. Bhaiya, brimming with excitement, was ready even before I was; fighting, after all, was his favourite sport. Moreover now, even I was determined to win. As we were getting ready, the gopas also arrived. Their enthusiasm was far greater in comparison to even that of bhaiya. Not only had they found an opportunity to see the bravery of their friends, but for the first time, they were also endowed with an opportunity to be a part of such a splendid festival. Meaning, on one hand, bhaiya was impatient, while I was full of enthusiasm, and on the other hand, the high spirits of the gopas were seemingly unbelievable. For some time, all of us stood outside Akrura's house and chattered away. Then, seeing everyone heading towards the festival ground, a thought flashed in my mind, 'What if the gopas did not get good places to sit because they had reached late? Moreover, upon reaching the ground, we anyway had to part ways. So why not do it now?' Thinking thus, I immediately asked them to proceed to the festival ground. As they left, bhaiya and I kept looking at the people walking towards the festival ground. By now, even Uncle Akrura was ready and had come outside dressed in his fineries. We sought his blessings, and after a while, we set off for the grounds in his chariot. Today, the streets of Mathura were indeed a sight to behold. The entire Mathura was invited for the festival; securing good seats could prove difficult for those reaching late. Consequently, the streets had started becoming crowded right since morning, as everybody obviously wanted to reach the festival ground as early as possible. A festive mood prevailed all over Mathura. As for me, a thousand storms were raging in my mind at this moment. Though our chariot was passing through streets that were swarming with people, I was busy talking to myself. Notwithstanding my confidence and firm resolve, Nature's grace was also extremely essential for me today. Already wounded by the princess and moreover overwhelmed by the pangs of separation from her, I had not been able to practice my wrestling skills for the past three-four days. And, as it is said, a wounded forlorn lover should never be sent to fight to the

battlefield. That indeed was true, but today, it had become essential for me to fight, not due to one but numerous reasons. Thus, from every which way you see, today I was heavily dependent on Nature's mercy.

The blessings of the elders are, in no way, less than the grace of Nature. So on our way to the ground, we informed Uncle Akrura, and went to take the blessings of mother and father. Upon reaching our parents' home, I was dumbfounded. Mother Yashoda and father Nanda had also arrived yesterday evening itself for the festival. Their surprise visit sent my self-confidence soaring to the skies. I had come to seek the blessings of one pair of parents, but I was fortunate enough to receive the blessings of two mothers and two fathers! And when I had garnered sufficient good wishes, I left for the battleground to determine their effect. The ground was filled to capacity. The excitement of the people was at its peak. The festival ground, thronging with people, looked huge and monumental. It was shaped like an octagon, and it had several entrances, each bound by a thick chain. Towards the western side, the royal women were seated on a beautiful podium. This seating area was decorated with scallops. Sheer curtains were draped over it, perhaps to protect the women of the royal household from the heat of the sun as well as the stares of the common populace. Towards the east, sat the King, courtiers and the royal guests. In this respect, this podium was the most important section of the seating area and its opulence and breathtaking beauty befitted the significance it held. It had pillars that glittered like gold. The countless high seats spread on all four sides of this dais could be seen clearly even from where I was standing. King Kansa's seating place was naturally the highest pedestal. A huge platform was constructed just below these two seating areas. This was the wrestling arena where the matches were to be held, that is to say, this was where our fate was to be sealed. The other six sides had arrangements for the common people to sit. One of these corners was exclusively decorated and reserved for the courtesans. The walls of this seating area were especially decorated with a variety of golden paintings. And the other five sides, where the common people were to be seated, were packed to capacity and it was impossible to find even a foothold. This octagonal ground looked like a giant lotus in full bloom, extending its petals in eight directions. As for the amenities, the royal gallery housed several decanters of wine, trays laden with fruits and many other delicacies. Arrangements for water and drinks were made all over the place even for the commoners. In short, the vast festival ground, gaily decorated and equipped with all amenities, was certainly a sight to behold. Even before the match began, there was considerable commotion in the stands of the common people. Their excitement truly deserved to be admired. So much so,

that people had come with trumpets and drums. In every corner of the ground, there were hordes of people singing, dancing and indulging in great revelry. Dance and music had so pervaded the atmosphere that I found myself unconsciously swaying to the music. What could I do? Ever since I had come to Mathura, I, the music lover, had completely lost touch with music and dance.

Mother Devaki and father Vasudeva had arrived, and several other important Yadavas had also begun to enter. My watchful eyes had already picked up mother and father from quite a distance. Bhैया and I were still standing close to the eastern entrance, gazing at the festive scene. Quite clearly, we could see the gopas seated in the side kept for the common people but I do not think we were visible to anyone in this crowd. With the arrival of mother and father, now my gaze was solely fixed upon them. Most importantly, mother and father were also seated in the royal gallery. Honestly, I felt a sense of pride on seeing my parents seated in the royal gallery. The parents who had raised me may be herdsmen, but at least the ones who had given birth to me belonged to the royal family. Was this fact alone not enough to make me feel proud? If mother was King Kansa's sister then father too hailed from a royal family. One of Vasudeva's wives, meaning Mother Rohini, was the sister of Vidur who was a prominent minister of the huge Kingdom of Hastinapur. Also, Vasudeva's own sister Pritha, popularly known as Kunti, who had been bequeathed by their father Shursen to his friend, the elderly King Kuntibhoj, was married to Pandu, the King of Hastinapur. As such, the greatest benefit derived from my visit to Mathura was a significant widening of my perspective and vision. After coming here, I had not only learnt the significance of wealth, but I had also learnt the importance of good food and grooming. Moreover, the grandeur and the powerful influence of the princes and the princesses had kindled a desire in me to become an important person. Had I remained in Vrindavan, I would have aspired to become the village headman at best. In other words, to achieve greatness, it is necessary to have a great vision, which can be acquired only in cities and capitals of Kingdoms. If viewed from this perspective, my visit to Mathura had opened up a new direction in my life and had shown me the path to achieve monumental greatness. And certainly, the entire credit for this went to Uncle Kansa. Irrespective of the intentions he might have harboured, it was he who was responsible for scaling up my aspirations, by sending me an invitation to visit the city.

Incredibly, the instant I thought of my Uncle Kansa, he stepped on to the main platform in the most majestic manner befitting a King. This showed how much

this uncle loved his nephew! The dazzling white crown which he wore over his white flowing robe, shone as if he was wearing the very moon on his head. His personality looked very impressive at the first glance itself. As soon as he ascended the dais, not only did everyone stand up as a mark of respect but as soon as he sat on his throne, cries hailing him resounded throughout the festival arena. In other words, the kind of welcome he received was by itself a distinct reflection of his influence. Most importantly, this was the first time I had set my eyes on Uncle Kansa, around whom my life had been revolving so far. As soon as Kansa was seated on his throne, the games were officially flagged off.

The festival began with the introduction of all the princes and princesses from various princely states. My eyes were fixated at the royal gallery as if nothing else existed. I had just begun gazing when my eyes suddenly fell on that princess. My ecstasy knew no bounds. I had anyway been dying to catch just one more glimpse of her and to impress her with my bravery as soon as possible. I do not know about bhaiya but I was standing in this corner of the festival ground just so that I could peek into the royal gallery. And having caught sight of my princess, my purpose of standing here was served. And to my advantage, the wall of curtains shielding the gallery was not at all proving to be an obstruction to my view of the princess. On the contrary, I was feeling as if the moon was hidden behind a sheath of clouds. I was staring fixedly at her beautiful, charming face. And truly speaking, the mere sight of her had elevated my mood and spirit to an altogether different level. As a matter of fact, my nature had always been fickle. In fact, it is necessary for a lover to have this kind of nature, for these beautiful creatures are quite deadly. So, it is aptly said that before falling in love, a person must learn to have control over oneself and be able to return to normalcy at any point in time, should any untoward thing happen to him, due to his lover.

Just look, on one hand I am talking about control and on the other, I had become all chirpy and excited at the mere sight of the princess! However, at present I was fully alert too, because the royal herald was making announcements, and it was imperative for me to prick my ears. Who knew when it would be the turn for the introduction of the princess! When the name of the princess of my dreams was called out, I was thrilled to bits. That princess' name was Rukmini and the prince whom bhaiya had beaten up was unfortunately her brother Rukmi. They were the prince and princess of Kundinpur. Rukmini! Wow! The name aptly suited her personality. Indeed, her name was as impressive as her personality. In fact, just as I had fallen in love with the princess at first sight, her name,

Rukmini, was etched in my heart the very instant it fell on my ears! While Kansa's welcome and other inaugural formalities were being conducted on the festival ground, my mind was ensnared by the thoughts of Rukmini. At this moment, I was completely enraptured by her enchanting beauty. Frankly, all I yearned for was to make her mine. My ardour had reached such heights that in my heart of hearts, I resolved to make her mine at any cost. But how? She was the Princess of Kundinpur and I was just an ordinary cowherd boy. What on earth did I have in common with her? Thinking thus, I felt a little dejected but I immediately consoled myself. 'So what? You too are the acclaimed prince of Vrindavan! Besides, you are still very young, you can anyway mould yourself in any manner you desire.' So, was there any doubt about that? As soon as this thought crossed my mind, I immediately became focused and filled my mind with positive, motivating thoughts. I resolved that to attain her I would not only transform my personality and conduct, but would also bring about a comprehensive, necessary change in my social standing and etiquette. I had decided, I would not remain a cowherd all my life. One day, I would definitely attain great stature. I would definitely make myself worthy of Rukmini at any cost.

Finally I happened to make a positive resolve, even if it was inspired by my attraction for someone. I had full faith in my capability and my resolve - once I was determined to achieve something, I would definitely do it. But still, the question whether Nature would favour me, that is, it would stand in my support or not, remained unanswered. If your resolve is strong and your thoughts, positive, then Nature does generally support you. Forget that for now, and let me ponder upon the amazing power of attraction. Truly, the power of love was so amazing that it had instantly elevated the level of my thinking to such heights. Oh! While I was immersed in these thoughts, the formalities were over. All the participants of the wrestling competition were summoned to assemble in the arena. Amusingly, most of the zealous participants were already in the arena. Bhaiya and I were also standing close to the main entrance. So as soon as we heard the announcement, we too ran towards the arena. At that moment, my exuberance was at its peak. It was bound to be, for now it had become imperative for me to win the wrestling match not just for the sake of Vrindavan, but also to gain respect in Rukmini's eyes. Bhaiya was all excited just at the thought of a fight, as was his nature. So, we quickly changed into our wrestling costume, the loincloth, and reached the main gate. But as soon as we entered through the main gate, all our enthusiasm deflated. No sooner had we stepped in than a mad elephant⁵⁵ emerged from nowhere and bore down heavily on us. In

the nick of time, I nimbly jumped out of its path towards the right. Similarly, bhaiya jumped towards the left and escaped unharmed. But we were completely bewildered; what had suddenly come over this mad elephant? Well, who knows what it was, but at the moment, dusting ourselves off, we both stood up. The situation was such that the mad elephant stood facing us boldly in front of the main entrance of the wrestling arena, as if challenging us to dare enter the ground without fighting with it. Honestly speaking, it was only then that for the first time, we had carefully looked at the elephant, and astonishingly, there was a mahout sitting on top of it. Clearly therefore, the attack was not accidental, but a planned one. But why attack us? Was this perhaps a plot by Uncle Kansa to do away with us? It was quite possible; but at present, standing before us was this mad elephant, ready to charge at us and kill us in an instant. Having no time to think of anything else, I immediately focused all my attention on assessing the situation. Without a doubt, we had to deal with the elephant somehow and reach the wrestling arena; as a way to impress the princess could only be found with the help of a spectacular performance in the wrestling competition. I glanced at bhaiya, he was fully alert; I immediately signaled him to attack the elephant. The entire crowd's eyes were now fixed on us. This entrance to the arena, was in fact, a part of the festival ground, and we too had all eight galleries in our view from here. Right next to this entrance on either side were the royal galleries, which meant this place was not far from the eyes of either Kansa or the princess. Meaning, now it was all the more necessary to somehow confuse the elephant and reach the arena. Quite evidently, it was the mahout who was instigating the elephant to attack. I instantly deduced that if the mahout could be killed, then we would have to only deal with this mad elephant and its strength. And to deal with an unintelligent giant would not be so difficult. So, if there was another attack, our target had to be the mahout, and not the elephant. I was considering all these possibilities, when the elephant veered around for a second attack. This time we were ready; not only did we sidestep the attack, but also reached up and grabbed the mahout. With a jerk, I pulled him down from the elephant and he dropped down heavily to the ground. Then holding him by the neck with one hand, I punched his face in with the other. He was out cold with a single blow. The poor mahout was from Mathura, how could he have survived a blow from a cowherd boy from Vrindavan? Now the man who controlled the elephant lay dead. Without the mahout, the elephant was directionless and in rage, it began to attack us blindly. But, now it was not very difficult to save ourselves from its wild, frenzied attacks. Sometimes we would pass between its legs and at times we would stand by the wall and instigate the elephant to attack us, only to step off at the end moment and see it crash heavily into the stone wall. Seeing

Kuvalyapeed, the mad elephant, attack us so fiercely, all hell broke loose in the stands. It had to, for the common people of Mathura were well aware of its strength. And this was the reason why mother Devaki and father Vasudeva also appeared extremely frightened. For that matter, on seeing this terrible scene, even the poor gopas were scared out of their wits. But contrary to all this, our uncle, the great King Kansa was observing the fight with a malicious intent. Seeing him observe the battle with such keen interest, both the plan and the objective of the attack had become clear to me. Yet, it did not change the situation in anyway. For, our lives were still at stake. But yes, the catalyst needed to boost my enthusiasm and sharpen my survival instincts, Rukmini, was close at hand, for even she was following the fight very closely, which meant, my display of courage was not being wasted. But perhaps, to my misfortune, she had not been able to recognise me, because bhaiya and I were wearing traditional wrestling outfits, the loincloth. So what? Sooner or later she would recognise me. At present, we were still busily engaged in saving ourselves from that mad elephant. What a spectacular sight it was! When the elephant came charging towards us, we would jump off from its path to evade the attack, and it would inevitably crash into the wall in an effort to gore us. Finally, the elephant became tired of its incessant, aimless attacks. It was badly injured too, and meanwhile, bhaiya found an opportunity to launch a counter-attack. In the first attack itself, bhaiya had succeeded in somehow catching hold of the elephant's tail. Although in an attempt to catch its tail, bhaiya almost hung on to the elephant, but still it was quite appreciable, for he had gripped the animal's tail so tightly, that the pain threshold of the elephant had been breached. The elephant had become furious on having its tail grabbed in a vice-like grip. Usually, the best way to fight with animals, is to first adroitly dodge the animal's repeated attacks and tire it out. Then, one should repeatedly harass it and infuriate it, until it is mad with anger. And a fierce counter-attack should be launched only when it is thoroughly drained of energy with its own repeated attacks. Otherwise, of what consequence is a human being's physical strength in comparison to these massive animals? Fortunately, both bhaiya and I had considerable experience in fighting with all kinds of wild animals and right now, we were definitely using our experience and expertise to the fullest. And soon our concerted attacks began to bear fruit too. The massive elephant was now too agitated, for even after charging at us a number of times, it had failed to cause us any harm. Moreover, we had managed to manoeuvre the elephant in such a manner that it had caused itself numerous injuries by now. Finally, insane by its rage, in an attempt to strike us with a deadly blow, it crashed heavily into the corner of the boundary wall. What a collision it was! Indeed, upon dashing into that corner, it staggered badly. This

was the opportunity for us; it was now or never. Immediately, bhaiya and I clambered on top of the elephant. As soon as we were on top of it, both of us simultaneously began raining a volley of kicks and blows upon its face. Already its face was bloodied and battered from having repeatedly crashed into the wall, and on top of it, with both of us continuously raining blows and kicks on its injured face, it was experiencing excruciating pain. Soon, the elephant was so brutally smashed that it was now unable to even stand up. Despite being unable to do anything, such was its arrogance and fury that it was trumpeting loudly. However, it did not matter to us as its tusks were also dislodged by now. That was it! Without wasting a moment, we pulled out its tusks and used their sharp points to violently attack the elephant. Our punches paled in comparison to this attack with tusks. Very soon, blood started to gush out profusely from the numerous wounds on its body. And soon, it began to violently convulse in the throes of death and died. With that, a grave danger looming over our heads was averted.

Fortunately for us, we had grown up in Vrindavan, where we had gained the invaluable experience of combating with wild animals. Were it not for that, our Uncle Kansa would have had us killed by that mad elephant. The elephant was killed, but both mine and bhaiya's body was covered with blood. We, who usually bathed in the cool and fresh waters of the Yamuna, had today bathed in an elephant's blood, thanks to our dear uncle! We, who played the festival of Holi with coloured water, had today played Holi with blood. This was as far as the equation between uncle and us was concerned. On the other hand, with the killing of the elephant, a wave of exultation swept through the crowd. The gopas had all begun to dance. Their elation knew no bounds; after all, heroes of their village had performed this daring feat. Mother and Father too seemed to have got a new lease of life. All in all, it can be said that a wave of happiness had swept across the crowd, so much so, that they all applauded our heroism and victory with a thunderous applause which reverberated all across the ground. And needless to say, Kansa, in stark contrast, appeared to be completely defeated and deflated. He could not believe that Kuvalyapeed, the elephant, had been killed; indeed he did not even think that it was possible to begin with! Of course, his regret was not for the death of the elephant, but for the fact that the person who was predestined to be the cause of his death had escaped alive. In fact, our condition too was not any less regretful. Bhaiya and I had escaped a certain death but we were drenched in the elephant's blood and were feeling very distraught. Thus, the first thing we did was to empty some pots of water on us to wash away the elephant's blood from our body. Fortunately, it washed away

easily since it was fresh and wet. And with this, we once again looked like decent humans to a large extent! But one thing was clearly evident now, the ones who had derived the greatest pleasure from our heroic fight with the mad elephant were the princes and princesses who had gathered for the event. For, unaware as they were of the circumstances, they could only assume that this terrible fight was a part of the prearranged programme and festivities. They assumed it to be a mere combat between two youngsters and an all-powerful, mad elephant. As they watched in amazement, the elephant was dramatically killed. Thus, for them, the entertainment provided by the programme was truly fantastic!

And how amazing I was; after washing the blood off my body, when I felt life return to my limbs, I immediately thought of my other lifeline, who had become the centre of my existence. Eyes filled with hope, I looked in Rukmini's direction with the demeanour of a victorious warrior, hungry for accolades. But alas, she had not yet recognised me; I was irritated. What could I do now? Should I place a peacock feather in my hair for her to recognise me? Surely, such opportunities to display my courage would not fall into my lap time and again. It seemed that my grand show of bravery had been in vain. I felt utterly depressed. Nevertheless, I had not surrendered yet, as I had kept my hopes alive. My attention continued to be focused on Rukmini. So much so, that I was constantly glancing at her and smiling, hoping that perhaps my smile would help her recognise me. Finally my efforts were rewarded. As her wandering gaze fell on me, she looked at me carefully and finally I saw the glimpse of recognition on her face. Needless to add, as soon as I noticed that she had recognised me, I began to sway with happiness. For, victory over the elephant was by itself of no great consequence. It was just the way to my princess's heart! And this meant a far greater victory for me than the killing of an elephant. At this time, the reality had hit me hard; here I was standing below in the arena whereas she was seated in the royal gallery. These were not just our physical positions at present; they accurately reflected our respective positions in life as well. Even in real life, I was just a simple cowherd boy who walked on earth, while she was the princess of Kundinpur who soared in the sky. Albeit, this difference was existent only in my mind, it did not seem as if Rukmini also felt the same. By nature, she seemed to be quite bashful and innocent. That is why, as soon as she recognised me, not only did she greet me with a smile, but also stood up and clapped her hands to encourage me. Fortunately, my bravery had engendered fruits; else what was the use of saving this life, if it had not won me favour in the eyes of my darling? And once she had glanced at me, do not even ask what my condition was. I was

already enraptured by the fact that she had recognised me. On top of that, when she clapped her hands to encourage me, I began to float in the seventh heaven of bliss! Suddenly, I was filled with the strength to face not just one mad elephant, but a thousand such elephants! I became desperate to demonstrate my strength and fighting prowess. A wave of courage and enthusiasm washed over me. I was gripped by an intense desire to accomplish a great task. I was brave and I had not only killed a powerful and mad elephant, but had also foiled Kansa's evil plans. And most importantly, the princess had stepped forward to applaud me. So, it had become difficult for Krishna to contain himself from going overboard with jubilation. Consequently, in order to bowl over the princess, Krishna was now ready to change the course of storms! And so enthused was I that I could hardly keep my feet on the ground.

And what was the need for it? The bane called the elephant had already been disposed off, so bhaiya and I straightaway marched towards the podium of the wrestling arena. This stage was set right in front of the royal gallery. This meant that Rukmini could directly view an act of our bravery being displayed over here. In that case, how could I ever contain my enthusiasm and joy? However, to Kansa, my growing happiness seemed to have become intolerable. How could he have tolerated it? How could a person eagerly waiting for my death bear to see me in such an exhilarated state? He was in the throes of frenzy by this time. And this was expected; for with the death of the elephant, his biggest ploy had miserably failed. As such, he still had one more opportunity in the form of the wrestling match, but this was his only hope now. And in keeping with his hopes, bhaiya and I had planted ourselves on seats built all around the podium, along with the other wrestlers. Although this stage was situated right in front of the royal gallery, the entire ground could be seen clearly from here. In other words, all the people seated in the ground would surely enjoy every fight that took place over here. The crowd, which was about two thousand people strong, was shouting at the top of its voice. The infuriated Kansa suddenly began to shout like a madman, and ordered everyone to become silent. What a powerful personality he had! Within moments, the entire gallery fell silent. Seeing his sway over the crowd, I too was cowed. My enthusiasm was bridled by itself. Momentarily, even I fell under the spell of my uncle's powerful personality. As soon as the crowd fell silent, Kansa formally inaugurated the wrestling competition. And, as was his plan, he himself announced that the competitors for the first round would be the wrestler Chanoor versus me and Mushtik versus bhaiya. This was extremely dangerous, for it could prove fatal. Both these wrestlers were acknowledged as the best wrestlers of Mathura. Talks of their

bravery were commonplace in Vrindavan too. So I became extremely cautious. With great difficulty, we had just overcome one major calamity in the form of the mad elephant, and now we were about to face yet another! Trouble and I were like inseparable twins, so what is the use of wasting time in talking about it? Still, the dreadful announcement by Kansa had a silver lining. Thanks to him, Rukmini had at least come to know me by my name!

As soon as the wrestling matches were announced, Chanoor and Mushtik immediately vaulted into the ring. It almost appeared as if they had just been waiting for this announcement. However, the announcement had infuriated the rest of the crowd. For, even when we had heard about their bravery, the people of Mathura were obviously well acquainted with their power and prowess. Now pitting such seasoned wrestlers against two ordinary cowherd boys was not fair in any way⁵⁶. Consequently, the voices of people's opposition began resounding in the entire arena. One strident voice rang out: "The wrestling in the arena is fought without any weapons, only by the manoeuvres of wrestling. So it is the rule that both the competitors should be of equal caliber and strength. Chanoor and Mushtik are by far the best, most experienced wrestlers of Mathura, whereas these two young boys are novices! Hence, this match cannot be called legitimate." That was it! This statement soon found many supporters. Voices of dissent could be heard all around. There was uproar across the ground. Just then, another voice rang out from the crowd, "Strength, moves, skill and stamina have to be examined before the fight and because this was not done prior to the announcement, it stands to reason that this match is rigged, it is not right!" Even as we watched, voices of opposition erupted in the entire festival ground. "Yes, yes! This match is rigged! It is not right! It has to be stopped!"

I was stunned. Had I actually won the hearts of the people of Mathura in just a few days that they were coming out in the open and supporting me and that too, in front of Kansa? Clearly, nothing is impossible; if one decides to do it, one can even breathe new life into a dead body! True, but naturally, Kansa's frenzied mind was unable to bear this opposition in his own Kingdom; his ego was badly bruised. Nevertheless, he somehow controlled himself and in order to justify his move, began to put forward logical arguments in his favour. Pacifying the crowd, he said, "These two young boys are also the best wrestlers of Vrindavan. This competition is between the best wrestlers of Mathura versus the best wrestlers of Vrindavan. And as for their strength, did you all not see, they just killed the incredibly strong and mad elephant Kuvalyapeed right in front of our eyes?! Hence this competition can certainly not be called rigged and the match will

most certainly take place!”

Seeing Kansa’s presence of mind in coming up with this most irrefutable argument, I could not help but be impressed. I admired his eloquence and presence of mind. Really, in spite of all the adverse circumstances, he was exercising so much self-control. On the other hand, I did not have control even over my heart! It was a question of my survival, and yet, I could not stop myself from following the instincts of my heart and its whimsical desires! While Kansa was speaking, there was chaos in the ground and still my eyes were fixated only on Rukmini. Actually she too was not the one to lag behind; she was egging me on to fight and win the match. And what would a blind man want? Two eyes! For me, Rukmini’s encouragement was enough. Upon receiving such inspiration, I could simultaneously fight thousands of wrestlers like Chanoor. Now I do not know whether Rukmini was egging me on to fight because she wanted to see a display of my bravery, or she just wanted to watch the ensuing drama. Irrespective of her intent, her encouragement had surely been a great source of motivation for me, and consequently, now I was fully prepared for the fight. As a result, I, who until now had been standing outside, jumped into the wrestling arena. Bhaiya was already prepared for the fight; he too followed me to the ring. Inside, the two wretched wrestlers were anxiously waiting for us and soon the fight commenced. I took on Chanoor and bhaiya attacked Mushtik; on first appraisal, both of them appeared very strong and extremely brave. The fight was certainly proving to be much tougher than we had anticipated. Fortunately, we had grown up in Vrindavan and thankfully, Acharya Shrutiketu had trained us well in all aspects of wrestling, otherwise we would have definitely fallen prey to Kansa’s flawless planning.

Rukmini was anxiously watching this match from the gallery. When the attack of our opponents appeared to be overpowering us, Rukmini’s heartbeats would increase along with that of people in the gallery, but when we seemed to be gaining the edge, along with the others, even she would clap to encourage us. Curiously, we were the ones fighting but it was Kansa who appeared to be more stressed and anxious. In fact, his anxiety was a mere reflection of his own fearful state of mind. He was fully convinced that if I came out of this ground alive, then his death was certain.

However, for now, let me return to the fight taking place in the arena. Our wrestling match was still in progress, and after the initial stage, the competition was now on an equal footing. Now, we were thrashing them as much as they were battering us. I had my courage, and also the enthusiastic support of

Rukmini along with my natural, spontaneous temperament to help me sail through the fight. Thus, throwing all the rules of wrestling to the wind, I soon succeeded in killing Chanoor, whereas bhaiya was still fighting Mushtik. There were two reasons for this; firstly, Mushtik was stronger, and secondly, bhaiya was abiding by the rules of wrestling. This was the difference between me and bhaiya. He believed in following all the rules whereas I believed, only in the result. I was always focused on the result, and then did, whatever was required to achieve it. My thinking was clear; if rules came in the way of attaining the desired result, then those rules were worse than immoral principles and needed to be disregarded. At any rate, bhaiya finally succeeded in throwing Mushtik down to the ground. And this was what really mattered; we could discuss rules and principles some other time!

Needless to say, as soon as Chanoor and Mushtik were defeated, the entire gallery rose as one, to applaud us. On one hand, the gopas went berserk with joy, and on the other, mother and father too breathed a huge sigh of relief. But for me, what mattered more than victory or people's happiness, was Rukmini's reaction, which was truly heartening. She even stood up, clapping and applauding my victory. To me, Rukmini's applause provided an experience of conquering the whole world in a single moment. Her claps were making me go wild with joy. Fortunately, the princess was evidently impressed, and that too, not in ordinary measure, but immensely! This cowherd boy was soaring to the skies in heavenly bliss! The fire raging in my heart could be understood only by someone who had experienced stars fall into his lap from the skies! There was a mounting roar from the people on the ground. On the podium, bhaiya was standing with his chest puffed out in the stance of a conquering hero. Close to him lay the dead bodies of Chanoor and Mushtik, and I, kneeling on the floor, had eyes set only on Rukmini. She was so elated that she had even waved at me two or three times, making me almost swoon with delight. I was astonished that I was still alive, wondering why I had not dropped down dead like Chanoor and Mushtik, on seeing her charming gesture!

However, I quickly composed myself and brought my hopes and aspirations in control. I still had to be careful, lest I stayed absorbed in enjoying my victory and Kansa unleashed a third attack on me. After all, I could do something only if I stayed alive! So I immediately turned to look at Kansa. Naturally, his reaction was far different from all the others in the gallery. At present, it looked as if he had lost control over his mind, intelligence as well as his sensibilities. His heart seemed to have stopped beating. Evidently, he saw me as a huge beast of death

standing before him, about to swallow him down. He was glaring at me as if he would eat me alive, there and then. Truly speaking, for a moment, I too was afraid on seeing him in such a furious form. To cut a long story short, Kansa did not appear to be in any mood to spare me. And, after fighting two fierce battles, I did not have any energy left to face a third one, however small it may be. But how was Uncle Kansa to understand this? He was so frenzied by the outcome of the fight that he immediately gave his guards a strange command. Actually, he was right on his part, for this was his last desperate attempt to save his life. Man lives his life according to his thinking and in Kansa's thinking, my life spelt his death. Meaning, he just had to kill me. If plots and politics had failed, he still had the option of blatantly finishing me off in the open. So, like a madman, he shouted to his soldiers, "Remove these uncouth cowherd boys from the ground! Arrest them! Finish them off! I do not want to see these sinners before my eyes even for a moment! Along with them, arrest all the other cowherd boys who have come here with them, and also, take away all their cows and wealth. Arrest their well-wisher, Nanda, put him in chains and throw him in the dungeon. His wicked father Vasudeva should also be treated very harshly, without any considerations for his age and relationship he shares with the palace. And, if anybody comes forward to help them, then they too should be crushed!"

What kind of an order was this? On hearing this command from Kansa, Mother Devaki fainted. Everybody present in the festival ground also began to tremble with fear because of these vitriolic orders from Kansa; the gopas nearly died of fright. It was the most unfortunate turn of events and even I could see that for no rhyme or reason, a great disaster was about to take place. Kansa, who had till now, harboured personal animosity towards me, had now suddenly begun baying for the blood of my beloved cowherd boys, both my fathers and everybody who was dear to me. I felt deeply responsible for this unjust treatment meted out to all my near and dear ones as they were being targeted and put in this dreadful predicament just because of me. Not only that, if Kansa succeeded in implementing his terror tactics, then in the future, he would wreak havoc on Mathura too, as the people here had openly pledged their support in my favour, right before his eyes.

The fact was, so many innocent people were put in this perilous situation just because of me, and deep down, I was suddenly beginning to hold myself responsible for their misfortune. I was so stressed by this sudden turn of events that I even began to think that all this was transpiring only because of my obstinate desire to live. Had Kansa succeeded in one of his previous attempts to

finish me off, then all these people would not have been in such a grave danger. The problem would have been nipped in the bud itself. Moreover, I certainly could not bear to see these people now lose their lives, just because of me! Even the thought of all these people being sacrificed for my sake was beyond my tolerance. 'So, should I sacrifice myself instead? And even if I did do so, would Kansa spare these people?...No...He would definitely kill them all! And anyway, why should I give up my life?' I had to do something and do it soon!

One's awareness reaches its peak, when faced with extreme danger, so the answer that came to me was clear: The malefactor should die! At that very instant, I decided to openly challenge and thwart Kansa. If he survived, then we would face a certain death, and even if I died, all of us would still die!

Although my thinking at present made perfect sense, the ground reality was, after fighting two battles, neither did I have the physical stamina nor the mental strength for yet another battle. However, at this moment, the situation had not left me with any other alternative; the only option was to try and kill Kansa. There was no time to either deliberate upon the issue or worry about the consequences. The matter was simple; the problem had to be nipped in the bud. That was the only way to stop it from turning into a bigger menace! Once Kansa was killed, all his orders would be annulled. My fate would take its own course but all others would certainly be saved. It was incredible! Such a long progression of thoughts had flashed through my mind within a fraction of a second! Nevertheless, could I even hope to get another second to think? By then, the soldiers would have marched forward to obey Kansa's orders. Here, bhaiya and I were still standing shell-shocked on the podium. Bhaiya was completely clueless about what the next course of action should be. Whereas, I, on the other hand, was constantly observing Kansa's expressions and the commands he was releasing, and was in no doubt about the plan of action.

The royal gallery was right in front of our podium. Kansa was still standing there, screaming like a madman. Enough was enough! Now that I had analysed the situation and had reached a firm decision, what was the need for further delay? 'Gather your strength and attack!' In one mighty leap, I vaulted over the barrier walls and landed on Kansa's dais⁵⁷. The distance was very short; it was just a question of displaying my wall-climbing prowess. And then why forget that despite being exhausted at this point of time, I still had the energy of two battles coursing through me? Besides, Kansa's wild commands had driven me up the wall and within moments, I was standing right behind him. Consequently,

before Kansa or his bodyguards could react, I dragged him by the hair and pulled him down from his throne. With the pull, his crown adorned with precious stones flew off his head. And because I had approached and attacked from the rear, Kansa could neither see me nor could he quite comprehend the situation. For your information, Kansa was extremely strong and was certainly not someone to be knocked out in one blow, but perhaps the circumstances had hollowed him out. Truly, where did he have any strength left in him now? For, with the death of each of his pawns, such as Putana, Trinavrata, Keshi, Kuvalyaped, Chanoor and Mushtik, he too had died bit by bit. And whatever little energy was left in him had also been sapped by his anger, fear and frenzy. As a result, with just a single blow of mine, he fell to the ground and began twitching uncontrollably. He was gasping for breath. He could just not comprehend what was happening. As far as I was concerned, my anger was at its peak. Now I was not prepared to leave the battle midway. I was certainly not going to spare him. I pulled his hair, placed my foot on his chest and began pummeling his face open-handed. Indeed, at this moment, in a murderous mood, I screamed, "Were you not satisfied with killing my seven innocent brothers and sisters that you now gave orders to kill all my dear gopa friends also? Without any reason, you became an enemy of my fathers; now suffer!" You will not believe it but my attacks were so fierce that this uncle of mine, however strong he might have been, could not stand the avalanche of blows from his cowherd nephew for long. As a result, within moments, without any great counter-attack or resistance, his life force left his body. But I was not content with this, the root had been plucked out, but I was transfixed by the thought of the poisonous plant it had once represented.

With the death of Kansa, naturally, a pall of deathly silence had pervaded the ground. Everybody was stunned. Kansa was dead but no one could believe it. What could anybody do? In a matter of moments, such a calamitous event had taken place. Although there was no adverse reaction from any corner, my anger refused to be quelled. It was still at its peak. I do not know why I was still mad with fury, which was now directed at Kansa's royal guards and the courtiers and princes who were sitting next to his throne. I was pacing up and down and glaring at them like an angry lion. The people in this section were stunned as well as frightened. The killing of the King by an ordinary wrestler, during an ongoing festival, was absolutely beyond their comprehension. Rukmini too was flabbergasted on seeing this fierce and furious facet of my personality. Naturally, she had not expected such superhuman acts of heroism from me. Obviously, the sarcastic comment she had passed on me was now proving to be deeply embarrassing for her. Had she not said, "Do you only beat up the dead, or are

you capable of fighting the living ones too?" You silly girl! You dare ridicule the cowherds! Did you not just see? First I fought a mad elephant, then Chanoor and now I had even killed the extremely powerful King of Mathura, Kansa himself! That is three big killings in just a span of a few hours. And yes, if you continue inspiring me thus, see what all I will do! But then, the very next instant, a wave of apprehension swept over me. Stop inspiring me so much, my dear! Now, we need peace, not fights. It was uncanny, but surprisingly, as soon as I set my eyes on Rukmini, I would become completely absorbed in thinking about her. Did you not see? I even forgot about the situation I was in and began to converse with her in my mind!

However, for an alert person like me, even this was a matter of a moment or two. Once again I shifted my attention from her and focused on analysing the situation. Fortunately, while silence continued to prevail in the ground, Kansa's killing did not seem to have evoked any particular opposition from any quarter. To tell you the truth, this fear was also lurking at the back of my mind. I had to kill Kansa and that I had done. But this certainly was not the same as killing a wild animal or some inconsequential demon in the forest. He was the great King Kansa. He had been killed in his own Kingdom and that too, in front of all his courtiers and royal soldiers. If the soldiers were to retaliate, then definitely it would have spelt certain death for me. But seeing my furious form and the shock and silence that pervaded in the arena, the soldiers had stepped back of their own accord. Now that the King was dead, where was the question of obeying his command? However, to my utter surprise, such a powerful King had been killed right before his people and his own soldiers, and yet, there was no opposition from any quarter! However, if one carefully examined the situation, then one could easily discern the reasons behind this. After all, the soldiers were also the citizens of Mathura. They were also human. They may have perpetrated cruelty in the past, compelled by the order of their despotic King, but in their hearts of hearts, they might not have approved of his atrocities. Perhaps, they would have felt a sense of freedom from Kansa's fearful regime. Actually, the most surprised of all was bhaiya. To his utter shock, I had just been wrestling by his side a moment back! And what was it that I had suddenly done now? Nevertheless, he instantly recognised the sensitivity of the situation, and without a moment's delay, he quietly came and stood by my side. Certainly, he too had sensed the impending danger. Though quite some time had elapsed since Kansa's killing, there was still no opposition from any quarter. In the name of opposition, Sunama, Kansa's brother had certainly come forward to fight but bhaiya had killed him with a single blow. With no more opposition in sight, my rage was

also gradually subsiding. Returning to my normal self, I drank an urn full of water, and only then could I heave a huge sigh of relief! But then...something happened that I had never even imagined...

- End of CHAPTER 11 -

Releasing Soon...

Rise to Eminence

Notes

[[←1](#)]

Veena - An Indian single-stringed musical instrument.

[[← 2](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 1, Verse - 16-19; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 1, Verse 34.

[[← 3](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 53.

[[← 4](#)]

Classic Indian Proverb: '*char din chale adhai kos.*' '*Kos*' is an old world Indian measure and is approximately 2 miles.

[[← 5](#)]

Bhado - The sixth month of the Hindu Lunar Calendar.

[[← 6](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 4, Verse - 11; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 3, Verse 8; Garga Samhita, Part - Goloka, Chapter 11, Verse -23-24; Kurma Puran, Chapter 24, Verse 70; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 3, Verse 2.

[← 7]

Shesha Naga - A multi-headed serpent. According to Vedic literature, *Shesha Naga* is thought to be an extension of the Supreme God.

[←8]

Gopa and Gopi - Both of these are words of Sanskrit origin signifying the herdsmen community. *Gopa* means a herdsman while *gopi* means a milkmaid.

[←9]

Krishna – In Sanskrit, Krishna means the dark one.

[[← 10](#)]

Chandamama – In hindi, ‘chandamama’ means moon.

[[← 11](#)]

Baal Brahmastra – In Hindi, *Baal* means child and *Brahmastra* means ultimate weapon; thus *Baal Brahmastra* means ultimate weapon of children.

[[← 12](#)]

Maa – In Hindi, Maa means mother.

[[← 13](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 7, Verse 20; Garga Samhita, Part - Goloka, Chapter 14, Verse -27.

[[← 14](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 6, Verse - 22-23; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 6, Verse 2;
Garga Samhita, Part - Goloka, Chapter 13, Verse -25; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 5, Verse 27.

[[← 15](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 43.

[[← 16](#)]

Karma – In hindi, the word '*karma*' means action.

[[← 17](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 47.

[[← 18](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 8, Verse 29.

[[← 19](#)]

Hindola - A traditional festival celebrated in India where decorative swings are prepared with colourful items such as cloth, fruit, dry fruits ,etc.

[[← 20](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 8, Verse - 2-7

[[← 21](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 8, Verse - 8-21

[[← 22](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 8, Verse - 36-38

[[← 23](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 9, Verse - 9; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 11, Verse 27;
Garga Samhita, Part - Vrindavan, Chapter 1, Verse -6; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 6, Verse 21.

[[← 24](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 9, Verse - 20; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 11, Verse 35;

Garga Samhita, Part - Vrindavan, Chapter 4, Verse -8; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 6, Verse 30.

[[← 25](#)]

Ashtavakra - one with eight different types of deformities in his body.”

[[← 26](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 11, Verse 50; Garga Samhita, Part - Vrindavan, Chapter 5, Verse 1-24.

[[← 27](#)]

Tamala- Indian bay leaf, also known as tejpatta

[[← 28](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 22, Verse 9

[[← 29](#)]

Raag - One of the melodic modes used in Indian classical music.

[[← 30](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 21, Verse - 1-25; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 36, Verse

1-2; Garga Samhita, Part - Madhurya, Chapter 24, Verse -15; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 14, Verse 1-6.

[[← 31](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 15, Verse - 19; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 20, Verse 3,28;

Garga Samhita, Part -Vrindavan, Chapter 17, Verse -19-22; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 10, Verse 1.

[[← 32](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 11, Verse - 44-60; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 16, Verse

1; Garga Samhita, Part - Vrindavan, Chapter 9, Verse -1-33; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 7, Verse 1-8.

[[← 33](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 15, Verse - 1-19; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 24, Verse

1-15; Garga Samhita, Part - Giriraj, Chapter 1, Verse -1-14; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 10, Verse 16-33.

[← 34]

Yagya - Ritual where offerings are made to a consecrated fire.

[[← 35](#)]

Puja - Any kind of reverence, honour, homage, adoration or worship, done alone or in a group in order to please God.

[[← 36](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 12, Verse 18, Chapter 14, Verse 25.

[[← 37](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 22, Verse 4-5.

[[← 38](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 20, Verse - 15-24; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 29, Verse 3-8;

Garga Samhita, Part - Vrindavan, Chapter 16, Verse 1-40; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 13, Verse 14-23.

[[← 39](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 10, Verse 36.

[[← 40](#)]

Yadavas - A name used for the local inhabitants of Mathura

[[← 41](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 22, Verse -1-103; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 39, Verse

8-9; Garga Samhita, Part -Mathura, Chapter 1, Verse -1-8; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 15, Verse 4-6.

[[← 42](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 23, Verse -1-40

[[← 43](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 24, Verse -6-16; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 37, Verse

1-2; Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 2, Verse -1-3; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 16, Verse 1-3.

[[← 44](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 25, Verse -14-20; Bhagqvad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 38, Verse
24; Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 3, Verse -6; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 17, Verse 18.

[[← 45](#)]

Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 39, Verse 22.

[[← 46](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 27, Verse -1-13; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 41, Verse

7; Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 5, Verse -15-17; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 19, Verse 9-11.

[[← 47](#)]

Mathurawasis - The inhabitants of the city Mathura.

[[← 48](#)]

Pitambar: A yellow fabric made of silk.

[[← 49](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 27, Verse - 10-14; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 41, Verse 32-36;

Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 5, Verse -35-39; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 19, Verse 14-17.

[[← 50](#)]

Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 8, Verse 6.

[[← 51](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 27, Verse -25-32; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 42, Verse

1-5; Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 6, Verse -9-13; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 20, Verse 1-5.

[[← 52](#)]

Namaste - ***Namaste*** or *Namaskar* is the Hindu way of greeting each other.

[[← 53](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 27, Verse -43-48; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 42, Verse 15-18;

Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 6, Verse -27-30; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 20, Verse 14-15.

[[← 54](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 28, Verse -1-38; Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 7, Verse -1-5; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 20, Verse 18-24.

[[← 55](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 29, Verse -22-41; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 43, Verse 2-15;

Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 7, Verse -18-31; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 20, Verse 32-41.

[[← 56](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 30, Verse -11-17.

[[← 57](#)]

Harivansh Puran, Vishnu Parva, Chapter 30, Verse -65-85; Bhagavad Puran, Part 10, Chapter 44 Verse 31-38;

Garga Samhita, Part - Mathura, Chapter 8, Verse -18-34; Vishnu Puran, Part 5, Chapter 20, Verse 82-89.

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